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How the Communication Styles Adopted by Brands Affect Their Relationships with Consumers

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More Than Just Words:
How the Communication Styles Adopted by Brands Affect Their Relationships with Consumers

Anaïs Grétry

Joint supervision with double degree between:

- Radboud University Nijmegen (The Netherlands) 

- University of Liège (Belgium) 

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More Than Just Words:
How the Communication Styles Adopted by Brands Affect Their Relationships with Consumers

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op gezag van de rector magnificus prof. dr. J.H.J.M. van Krieken,
volgens besluit van het college van decanen
en aan de Universiteit van Luik
op gezag van de rector magnificus prof. dr. A. Corhay,
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door

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geboren op 5 oktober 1989
te Verviers (België)

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Doctoral Thesis

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from Radboud University Nijmegen
on the authority of the Rector Magnificus prof. dr. J.H.J.M. van Krieken,
according to the decision of the Council of Deans
and from the University of Liège
on the authority of the Rector Magnificus prof. dr. A. Corhay,
to be defended in public on Monday, May 8, 2017
at 16.30 hours

by

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—Anaïs Gretry

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Motivation

For as long as I can remember, my family has used Colgate toothpaste for our morning and evening brushing routine. It got the job done; our teeth were in good health. My parents bought Colgate mechanically every time we ran out of toothpaste. They spent a large amount of money on Colgate over the years; they were satisfied with the brand. Then a few years ago, my parents entered the amazing world of the Internet and social media. In addition to becoming friends with me on Facebook and following each other on Twitter, my parents also became Facebook friends with Colgate and follow it on Twitter too. Would I ever have imagined that one day my parents would become friends with Colgate? I mean—it's just toothpaste, right? Yet as I write these lines, 2,797,529 people like the Colgate brand page on Facebook. On Twitter, Colgate's account has 51,945 followers, and it features 4,309 tweets, mostly customer service information or oral care tips. Other brands are even more popular on social media, such that more than 65 million consumers like branded Facebook pages, such as those for McDonald's, Pepsi, Starbucks, Disney, KFC, Oreo, and Red Bull. In addition, more than 12 million consumers follow brands on Twitter, such as Chanel, Samsung, Victoria's Secret, and Microsoft. Social media use is exploding, and consumers use these platforms massively to interact with brands on a daily basis.

These examples illustrate how the Internet and social media have revolutionized how consumers relate to and interact with brands. Unlike traditional media (e.g., television, billboard, radio), through which brands unilaterally push information to consumers, the Internet and social media have given rise to bidirectional interactions between consumers and brands. As a result, consumers interact with brands through many more channels and more intensively than they ever did before (Forrester, 2014), which also leads to heightened expectations of how brands should communicate with them (Labrecque, 2014). For example, 63 percent of consumers indicate that they want brands to treat them like a friend instead of a consumer (Cummings, 2015). In this context, building and preserving strong relationships with consumers is the Holy Grail for brand managers, who must focus more than ever on the ways they communicate with consumers. Brand communication has always been a critical element of marketing, but increased interactivity makes it an even more valuable element of consumer–brand relationships. This new context raises an important question: How does the two-way, interactive nature of modern consumer–brand interactions require brands to rethink the type of communication that will be effective in building strong relationships?

A fundamental consideration in this regard is the brand's communication style, or how brands articulate their messages to consumers. Formally, communication style is "the way one verbally or paraverbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood" (Norton, 1978, p. 99). The concept includes all aspects of brand communication, which can vary independently of the content of the message (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999). Communication style represents an important issue, because consumers' responses

to a brand message are driven by not just its content but also the subjective feelings that it evokes in them (Lee & Aaker, 2004). These subjective feelings are especially sensitive to contextual cues, such as communication styles (McElroy & Seta, 2003).

Although the communication style employed by a brand strongly shapes relationships with consumers (Labrecque, 2014), a thorough understanding of its effects on consumer–brand relationships is lacking. This dissertation seeks to address that critical gap by investigating how, when, and why consumers engage in a relationship with brands in response to the communication style employed by those brands.

This chapter introduces the basic idea behind the research project that underlies this thesis. Following this outline of the motivation for the dissertation, Section 1.2 provides a brief overview of the current state of knowledge in the field of brand communication. Section 1.3 introduces the research question and provides an overview of the empirical studies included in this thesis. In Section 1.4, I discuss the managerial and societal relevance of my dissertation. Finally, Section 1.5 contains a short outline of the content to follow.

1.2 Short Overview of Brand Communication Literature

1.2.1 From Message Content to Message Style

In early advertising research, under the influence of the theory of reasoned action and related notions (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953), marketing researchers were prone to assume that the purpose of brand communication was to convey information about positive brand attributes. This theory enhanced understanding of the types of content in brand communication that can elicit more positive consumer responses. Yet it remained unclear why consumers sometimes were persuaded by a message claim, even if they did not elaborate on the message content. This observation suggested multiple mechanisms, and other routes, through which persuasion occurs. Accordingly, Petty and Cacioppo (1983) introduced the elaboration likelihood model, which identifies two routes to successful advertising outcomes. When consumers evaluate a brand message, they might experience a positive response due to their extensive, critical elaboration of the arguments presented (central route) or because they rely on superficial cues, such as the attractiveness of the spokesperson or the style of his or her communication (Petty & Cacioppo, 1983). This latter, peripheral route does not depend on the message content. As a result, some marketing researchers shifted their focus from *what* branded content said to *how* it was said (i.e., message style).

1.2.2 From Advertising Message Style to Brand Communication Style

Before 2000, brands mostly communicated with consumers through advertisements on television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and direct mail. These media follow a passive, one-to-many communication model: The brand pushes a message to many consumers and allows very little feedback. Communication through these media often resemble works of art, reflecting the carefully deliberated, step-by-step process of design, copywriting, and production (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013). Accordingly, marketing research pertaining to message styles mainly focused on rhetorical figures in advertising (e.g., Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011; Kronrod & Danziger, 2013; McQuarrie & Mick, 1996; 1999; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2009), defined as "an

artful deviation from expectation in the style of an ad that is also not judged as an error by consumers" (Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011, p. 122). Typical examples of rhetorical figures include rhyme (i.e., "Today's Slims at a very slim price" vs. "Today's Slims at a very low price"), metaphor (i.e., "Tropicana, your daily ray of sunshine"), and figurative language (i.e., "The view blows your mind away!" vs. "The view is excellent!"). This research stream demonstrated that messages using rhetorical figures elicit more positive attitudes toward the advertisement and the product, compared with advertising that does not employ them (Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011; Kronrod & Danziger, 2013; McQuarrie & Mick, 1999; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2009).

Around 2000, the advent of the Internet and social media dramatically altered this traditional view on advertising and brand communication. New media gave rise to a two-way, one-to-one communication model, in which individual consumers engage in dialog with brands. The option for consumers to converse with brands prompted a fundamental change in brand communication practices, such that brands had to adapt and coordinate their communication with previous messages received from individual consumers. As a result, brand communication in social media settings is more spontaneous, resembling interpersonal communication.

The increasing prevalence of more interpersonal exchanges between consumers and brands added a new dimension to research on brand communication. The focus was no longer a simple matter of message style; it included the whole communication style employed by a brand in all its conversations with consumers. This new dimension required researchers to account for interpersonal relationship theories if they hoped to understand how brand communication style affected consumer responses and consumer–brand relationships. Modern consumers can interact with brands, just like they interact with other people, so they tend to use social relationship norms as guiding principles in their interactions with brands (Aggarwal, 2004; Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Fournier, 1998). In line with this observation, recent research on brand communication style shows that consumers respond more positively to social, "humanlike" communication styles than to communication styles that use a traditional, persuasive advertising tone (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Schamari & Schaefers, 2015; Stephen, Sciandra, & Inman, 2015). For example, a personalized communication style (e.g., using the consumer's name vs. using the generic term "fans") fosters consumer–brand relationships (Labrecque, 2014). Similarly, brands that communicate in a narrative manner (i.e., telling a story) are perceived as more honest than those that communicate in an analytical manner (i.e., following a logical line of argument), which reduces consumers' intentions to switch to competitors (van Laer & de Ruyter, 2010).

Prior research on brand communication styles thus provides some guidelines regarding the choice of an appropriate brand communication style in two-way communication settings. However, extant literature is still relatively nascent and fragmented. More research is needed to advance knowledge of the impact of brand communication styles on consumer responses, as well as how consumers' relationships with brands evolve.

1.3 Research Question, Design, and Contributions

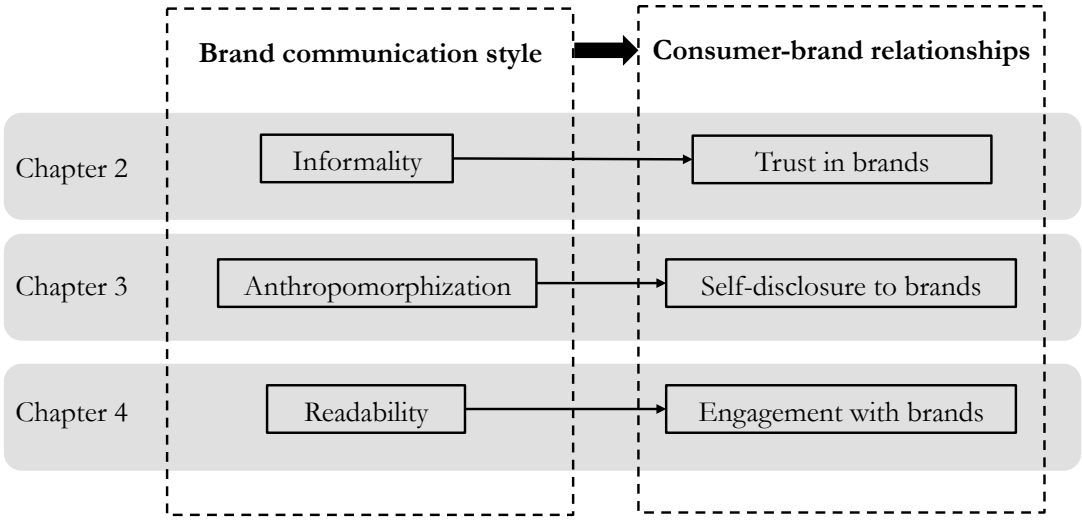
The critical question addressed by this dissertation is:

How, when, and why does the communication style employed by a brand affect consumer–brand relationships?

To address this question, I conducted three sets of empirical investigations, exploring the

relationship between brand communication style and consumer–brand relationships (see Figure 1-1). I focus on three key aspects of communication style: informality (Chapter 2), anthropomorphism (Chapter 3), and readability (Chapter 4).

Figure 1-1: Overview of the Dissertation



Examining these three aspects is essential, because they reflect two critical shifts in the communication style adopted by brands on two-way communication platforms. First, brands increasingly employ communication styles that evoke closeness. They address consumers more informally (informality) or personify their communication (anthropomorphism), in their attempts to facilitate relationship development. Yet no evidence confirms whether using these styles is the optimal means to communicate with consumers in all circumstances. Second, brand communication on social media increasingly is characterized by the use of abbreviations, acronyms, and social media–specific features such as hashtags, at-mentions, and emojis. As a result, brand messages have grown more complex and difficult to read (Davenport & DeLine, 2014; Temnikova, Vieweg, & Castillo, 2015). This issue of readability is important; in traditional advertising and marketing communications settings, messages that are more difficult to read and comprehend tend to be less persuasive (Lee & Aaker, 2004).

I therefore investigate how these three stylistic aspects affect fundamental dimensions of consumer–brand relationships. The focal relationship dimensions, which are likely to be affected by the respective communication style, include consumers' trust in brands that use informal versus formal styles (Chapter 2), consumers' self-disclosure to brands in response to an anthropomorphized versus non-anthropomorphized style (Chapter 3), and consumers' engagement with brands in response to message readability (Chapter 4). The next subsections offer a more detailed overview of each chapter and definitions for the key concepts.

1.3.1 Chapter 2: "Don't Pretend to Be My Friend!" When an Informal Brand Communication Style Backfires on Social Media

Chapter 2 focuses on how message informality affects consumers' trust in brands in a social

media context. Starting from the observation that brands increasingly employ an informal style of communication in their social media interactions with consumers, I examine whether and how the adoption of such a communication style influences consumer–brand relationships and, specifically, the extent to which consumers trust a brand. An informal communication style is defined as "common, non-official, familiar, casual, and often colloquial, and contrasts in these senses with formal" (McArthur, 1992). For example, it is common for brands to refer to their consumers by their first name (e.g., "Hi John!") and use emoticons (e.g., ☺) or abbreviated expressions (e.g., "Thanks"). Brands employ this informal style in the belief that it conveys closeness and fosters consumer–brand relationships.

Drawing on role theory however (Sarbin & Allen, 1968; Schewe, 1973; Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985), we posit that the effect of an informal style on brand trust may differ, depending on the consumer's degree of familiarity with a brand. Prior research in an interpersonal domain shows that people interact differently, depending on the degree to which they are familiar with each other, because they experience different social norms (Little, 1965; Willis, 1966). For example, whereas people regard the use of an informal style as appropriate when they are relatively familiar with each other, they generally employ and expect a more formal communication style when they have just met. These differences in expectations regarding appropriate communication in turn influence the levels of trust in the relationship (Mandler, 1982; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989). Because consumer–brand interactions on social media have come to mirror interpersonal interactions, we propose that consumers respond to brand communication in ways that parallel their reactions to interpersonal interactions.

Across three experimental studies, we demonstrate that the relationship between an informal communication style and brand trust differs, depending on whether consumers are familiar or unfamiliar with the brand. The use of an informal style (decreases) increases consumers' trust in (un)familiar brands. These effects arise because consumers expect brands to behave according to social norms, so the use of an informal style appears appropriate for familiar brands but inappropriate for unfamiliar ones.

Our research thus cautions relationship-seeking marketers to be careful about systematically using informal communication styles with consumers. These communication styles convey perceptions of closeness and might facilitate some increase in trust in consumer–brand relationships, but their use by brands that consumers are unfamiliar with also may be harmful.

1.3.2 Chapter 3: "That's Embarrassing!" Effects of Brand Anthropomorphism on Intimate Disclosure

Chapter 3 focuses on how brand anthropomorphism, or imbuing a brand with human characteristics (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007), affects a consumer's propensity to disclose intimate information to that brand. Following the same reasoning we used in Chapter 2 regarding the informal communication style, we posit that marketers frequently anthropomorphize brands and their respective communication to foster consumer–brand relationships. Prior research also suggests that brand anthropomorphism facilitates relationship development (e.g., Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Chandler & Schwarz, 2010; Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011), yet we argue that it may be less successful as a communication approach for obtaining personal or intimate information from consumers. This proposition stems from a major barrier to the disclosure of intimate information, namely, the fear of embarrassment or being negatively evaluated by others (DePaulo et al., 1996; White, 2004). When brands are anthropomorphized, they are perceived as

having humanlike characteristics, which may include mindfulness, effortful thinking, or the capacity to judge others (Epley & Waytz, 2009). Accordingly, rather than facilitating consumer–brand exchanges, brand anthropomorphism could exert negative effects on consumers' disclosures of intimate information.

Across three experimental studies, we provide strong evidence that brand anthropomorphism negatively influences consumers' disclosures of intimate information. These effects occur because anthropomorphized brands elicit higher levels of consumer embarrassment associated with intimate self-disclosure. However, asking for intimate information in an indirect manner (i.e., asking questions from the perspective of another person) can offer a good tactic to mitigate the negative effects of brand anthropomorphism on self-disclosure, because it reduces consumer embarrassment.

This chapter thus shows that brand anthropomorphism, a communication tactic commonly employed by marketers to connect with consumers, has an unintended, adverse effect on consumers' disclosures of intimate information. In addition, these results offer marketers guidance regarding how the use of indirect questioning can help overcome the negative effects of brand anthropomorphism and more efficiently grasp the benefits of this communication tactic.

1.3.3 Chapter 4: "Say What?" How the Interplay of Tweet Readability and Brand Hedonism Affects Consumer Engagement

Chapter 4 moves beyond relationship-seeking communication styles, such as informality and anthropomorphism, to a more subtle and basic aspect of brand communication: the ease with which a brand message can be read. In particular, we examine how message readability affects consumer engagement with brands on social media. Brand communication on social media tends to be more sophisticated and thus more difficult to read and comprehend than communication through other media (Davenport & DeLine, 2014; Temnikova, Vieweg, & Castillo, 2015). This observation of the lower readability of brand communication motivates our research, because the ease with which information can be read and understood significantly affects consumers' responses (e.g., Lee & Aaker, 2004; Lee & Labroo, 2004; Song & Schwarz, 2008), ultimately including whether they engage in further relationships with brands. Literature on processing fluency (Lee & Aaker, 2004; Lee & Labroo, 2004) suggests that message readability positively influences consumer engagement with brands. Prior research also has shown that ease of reading conveys a sense of familiarity with the message (Pocheptsova, Labroo, & Dhar, 2010; Schwarz, 2004) and that consumers prefer stimuli that are familiar (Lee, 2001). However, the positive effect of message readability on consumer engagement may depend on specific brand characteristics, such as the level of hedonism associated with the brand. In particular, we expect this positive effect to reverse for highly hedonic brands.

This expectation builds on the notion that a sense of familiarity elicited by higher readability does not always result in more positive consumer responses, especially in the case of highly hedonic brands. For those brands, consumers believe that a sense of exclusivity and uniqueness (vs. sense of familiarity) signal higher value. Hedonic brands are expected to offer more unique and exclusive experiences, so branded messages that are less readable may enhance consumer engagement, because they create an impression of novelty and exclusivity.

To test these predictions, we develop a hierarchical linear model and estimate it using a unique data set of 24,960 social media messages from the 96 most valuable brands (*Forbes*, 2016).

As expected, the relationship between message readability and consumer engagement with brands differs depending on the level of brand hedonism; more (less) readable messages elicit higher levels of consumer engagement with brands for low (high) hedonic brands.

Our research thus offers useful insights into how marketers should compose their branded messages on social media sites to foster greater consumer engagement with their brand. In particular, we inform marketers of the importance of message readability, an issue that largely has been overlooked thus far in the social media context.

1.4 Managerial and Societal Relevance

Social media and other two-way communication platforms are fast-growing marketing communication channels; most consumers turn to them to interact with brands (Stephen, Sciandra, & Inman, 2015). Some marketing practitioners might still believe that "content is king" (Rooney, 2014), but it is never just what they say but also how they say it that matters. In this context, it is crucial for practitioners to identify specific aspects of a communication style that are more effective for strengthening consumer–brand relationships. Because communication is governed by a set of complex rules, deciding how to communicate with consumers in brand messages is neither easy nor straightforward. Consequently, the adoption and use of a brand communication style often constitutes a trial-and-error process. In this dissertation, I aim to provide marketers with new insights into consumers' perceptions of and responses to important aspects of brand communication style.

Beyond making important contributions to the marketing field, this dissertation has also relevance for society in general. First, the findings are pertinent to both for-profit and non-profit organizations, which need a better understanding of how to connect with their beneficiaries. The influence of brand communication might be particularly important for life-saving health messages and other public service announcements. In addition, by investigating the impact of brand communication style on consumer self-disclosures in Chapter 3, we provide important implications related to consumer well-being. Technological advances have enhanced consumers' ability to communicate and interact with brands, but they have also raised novel and troubling issues about divulging personal information. It may not be possible for marketers to request personal information without eliciting negative emotions, including embarrassment, but an option available to them is to interact with consumers in a way that minimizes their negative reactions to these requests. This research suggests that humanizing brand communication, as a tactic to connect with consumers, can have adverse effects on consumers' disclosure of more personal information, by increasing the embarrassment they feel. However, this negative effect can be mitigated by using projective methods, such as indirect questioning.

1.5 Dissertation Outline

Table 1-1 provides an overview of the chapters, in terms of their objectives, theoretical focus, research designs, and the analyses used to address the respective research objectives.

Table 1-1: Overview of the Chapters

Chapter	Study	Objective	Theoretical Focus	Research Design	Analysis
1	Introduction				
2	*Don't Pretend to Be My Friend!* When an Informal Brand Communication Style Backfires on Social Media	Examine the effect of an informal brand communication style on consumers' trust in brands	– Communication style and informality – Role theory and brand familiarity – Brand trust	– Qualitative and quantitative – Qualitative pilot study – Three experiments – Explicit measures	– Analysis of variance – Ordinary least squares regression (mediation analysis)
3	*That's Embarrassing!* Effects of Brand Anthropomorphism on Intimate Disclosure	Examine the effect of brand anthropomorphism on consumers' propensity to disclose intimate information	– Anthropomorphism – Self-disclosure – Social presence and embarrassment – Questioning method	– Quantitative – Three experiments – Explicit and implicit measures	– Negative binomial regression – Analysis of variance – Ordinary least squares regression (mediation analysis)
4	*Say What?* How the Interplay of Tweet Readability and Brand Hedonism Affect Consumer Engagement	Determine how the interplay of message readability and brand hedonism affects consumer engagement with brands	– Message readability and processing fluency – Brand hedonism	– Quantitative – Two survey pretests – Hierarchical linear model – Implicit measures	– Hierarchical linear model
5	Conclusions				

Chapter 2

"Don't Pretend to Be My friend!" When an Informal Brand Communication Style Backfires on Social Media*

2.1 Introduction

More than a billion consumers worldwide are using social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Facebook, 2016; Twitter, 2016). Consumers spend most of their online time on social media sites (The Economist, 2015). This massive adoption of social media represents a great opportunity for brands to connect, interact, and build relationships with consumers. As a result, most brands now use social media for marketing communications (Simply Measured, 2015), and the number of daily consumer-brand interactions on these platforms is exploding (Forrester, 2014).

Although social media have become major communication platforms for both consumers and brands, marketers struggle to develop sustainable consumer-brand relationships on these platforms. Recent research suggests that marketers' attempts to nurture relationships with their consumers through social media are far from effective (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Not only do consumers resist brand advertising in their social spaces, but they also use these platforms as a convenient place to attack brands on a massive scale (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2011). In this context, building brand trust with existing and potential consumers has been identified as a crucial first step in fostering relationships on social media (Gleeson, 2012; Porter & Donthu, 2008), and brands apparently continue to fall short in this regard (Gleeson, 2012). In the absence of brand trust, consumers feel vulnerable and are reluctant to open up to brands (Schoenbachler & Gordon, 2002).

Developing brand trust is especially crucial when interacting with consumers who are unfamiliar with the brand because these consumers usually have little upon which they can base their expectations of the brand's trustworthiness (Sparks & Areni, 2002). These initial encounters become quite prominent as consumers increasingly look to social media to form opinions about new and unfamiliar brands (Knowledge Networks, 2011). In such situations, non-verbal cues, such as communication style, play a central role in reducing uncertainties and influencing assessments of the brand's trustworthiness (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Keeling, McGoldrick, & Beatty, 2010). The way brands communicate with consumers is thus decisive in shaping brand trust and, subsequently, determining whether the relationship will progress beyond the initial encounters (Keeling et al., 2010). However, few researchers have examined how communication style affects brand trust, and even fewer have done so in the context of social media.

* This chapter is based on: Grétry, A., Horváth, C., Belei, N., and van Riel, A.C.R. (2017). "Don't pretend to be my friend! When an informal brand communication style backfires on social media," *Journal of Business Research*, 74, 77–89.

Notably, brands appear to employ a predominantly informal style in their social media communications (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, & de Vries, 2015). An informal communication style is defined as "common, non-official, familiar, casual, and often colloquial, and contrasts in these senses with formal" (McArthur, 1992). It is common, for example, for brands to refer to their consumers by their first name (e.g., "Hi John!") and to use emoticons (e.g., "☺") and/or abbreviated expressions (e.g., "Thanks"). Brands employ an informal style because they believe that it conveys closeness and fosters consumer-brand relationships. However, there is no evidence that using an informal style is the optimal way to communicate with all consumers. Given the prevalence of the informal communication style, the lack of research on its effects on key aspects of consumer-brand relationships, such as brand trust, is striking.

Thus, in this paper, we investigate how employing an informal (vs. formal) communication style affects brand trust in a social media context. Across three experiments, we demonstrate that the effects of an informal style on brand trust depend on whether consumers are familiar with the brand, such that the use of an informal style increases (decreases) trust in brands with which consumers are familiar (unfamiliar). In addition, we investigate the mechanism underlying the observed effects and show that the perceived appropriateness of the communication style mediates these effects. Specifically, whereas consumers regard the use of an informal style as more appropriate when they are familiar with a brand, they expect a more formal communication style when the brand is new to them. Our research offers marketers theoretical guidance for interacting with consumers in social media settings and, ultimately, for fostering consumer-brand relationships.

2.2 Theoretical Background

2.2.1 Brand Communication Style and Consumer Behavior

Although research on how marketers communicate with consumers on social media is limited, considerable prior research has examined how particular aspects of brand communication (e.g., figurative language, assertive language, or language that implies closeness) in an advertising context affect consumer behavior (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013; Kronrod, Grinstein, & Wathieu, 2012; Sela et al., 2012). These studies demonstrate that the way a message is communicated considerably affects consumer response and provide some guidelines regarding the choice of an appropriate communication style. However, all these studies are set in an advertising context and might not apply to social media settings. The key difference between advertising and social media communication is the directionality of communication (i.e., bi-directional vs. uni-directional). In social media settings, brands and consumers engage in conversations via two-way communication. Conversations involve communicational rules that differ from one-way communication in two major ways. First, conversation is a process of interpersonal turn taking. Participants in a conversation exchange messages that are linked sequentially (Thomas, 1992). This type of exchange implies that brands on social media need to adapt and coordinate their communication based on prior messages from individual consumers. Second, an advertisement is the result of a carefully deliberated, step-by-step process, including design, copywriting, and production. In contrast, brand communication in social media settings is much more spontaneous and strongly resembles interpersonal communication. As a result, findings from

advertising research might not directly transfer to social media settings, and the effects of brand communication style need to be explicitly investigated in this new context.

Among the few researchers who have studied brand communication style in two-way communication settings, Kelleher (2009) examined how consumers perceive brand communication via online blogs and introduced the concept of the "conversational human voice". Conversational human voice is defined as "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" (Kelleher, 2009). The author found that frequent visitors to a brand's online blog were more likely to perceive the brand to be communicating with a conversational human voice, which, in turn, was related to trust, satisfaction and commitment (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Although conveying perceptions of conversational human voice seems to be a promising way of communicating with consumers on social media, the concept suffers from a lack of conceptual clarity and does not provide precise operational guidelines for how a brand can articulate such a communication style. It thus remains unclear which specific communication style a brand should best use in a social media context and, in particular, which aspects of language (such as vocabulary, punctuation, use of pronouns, etc.) result in the most favorable consumer response.

The current research addresses this issue by focusing on an informal communication style, a style that brands predominantly employ in their social media communications. While an informal style might share some similarities with the concept of conversational human voice, as they both aim to convey openness to dialog, the two also differ in many aspects. An informal communication style reflects a more objective, concrete, and operationalizable communication style rather than subjective perceptions. Consequently, compared to the concept of conversational human voice, the study of an informal style offers firmer guidance on how marketers can best compose their messages to consumers. The present research thus extends the limited literature on brand communication in two-way communication settings by investigating how the use of an informal communication style in a social media context influences brand trust. In doing so, we provide a clearer and more thorough understanding of which communication style brands should employ when interacting with consumers in social media settings.

2.2.2 Informal Communication Style and Brand Trust

An informal communication style is characterized by the use of common, non-official, casual, and often colloquial language (McArthur, 1992). Unlike a formal style, which reflects written language, an informal style is generally associated with spoken language (Biber, 1986) and involves the use of linguistic features generally associated with a conversation (Fairclough, 1994). For example, saying, "Great! Thanks. That's what we like to hear." is more informal than saying, "Thank you for the comment. It is appreciated."

Due to the lack of research on the informal style in the brand communication literature, we base our conceptualization on prior research in critical discourse analysis that highlighted a shift toward informalization of public discourses (e.g., Fairclough, 1992, 1994, 1996). In his pioneering and influential work, Fairclough (1992, 1994, 1996) observed that contemporary societal changes (e.g., globalization, democratization, and informatization) have influenced public discourse. He identified a key discursive effect: discourses are becoming more informal. Specifically, speakers strategically use an informal style to convey perceptions of closeness with their audience. This

style softens hierarchical relationships of power, reduces social distance between interlocutors and, hence, is likely to foster trusting relationships (Delin, 2005).

Trust is a fundamental dimension on which the quality of relationships is assessed (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Trust has been shown to be the sine qua non condition for brand loyalty, behavioral intentions (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and long-term orientation (Geyskens, Steenkamp, & Kumar, 1998). Furthermore, more recent research emphasizes that gaining consumers' trust is especially crucial for successful consumer-brand interactions in the social media context (Gleeson, 2012; Porter & Donthu, 2008). Therefore, we focus on brand trust when investigating the effect of an informal communication style on consumers' responses to brands in a social media context. We define brand trust in terms of the perceived predictability of the brand's behavior: it is the consumer's confidence that the brand will act as expected (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985; Scanzoni, 1979).

Based on the aforementioned research, marketing managers might conclude that the use of informal language should generally improve consumer-brand relationships, as reflected by higher brand trust. However, drawing on role theory (Sarbin & Allen, 1968; Schewe, 1973; Solomon et al., 1985), we propose that this strategy might not always be effective and that consumers' familiarity with the brand plays an important role in this sense.

2.2.3 Role Theory

Role theory posits that successful social interaction depends on whether relationship partners behave appropriately according to their specific social role in a relationship (Sarbin & Allen, 1968; Schewe, 1973; Solomon et al., 1985). That is, when interacting with each other, individuals must understand the nature of their relationship, locate themselves in this relationship, determine the role appropriate to that location in that type of relationship, and behave accordingly (Schewe, 1973). Successful interactions thus depend on a shared understanding of behavioral norms, and social partners evaluate the degree to which the behavior of the other partner is (in)appropriate given their relationship (Sarbin & Allen, 1968; Schewe, 1973; Solomon et al., 1985). If the adopted behavior is consistent with social expectations, it increases trust in the relationship; if not, trust is reduced (Mandler, 1982; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989).

A critical role is whether someone is familiar or unfamiliar with the other person, for example, whether he or she is a stranger, an acquaintance, or a friend. Specifically, prior research suggests that different degrees of acquaintance between people entail different social norms; hence, people interact differently depending on the degree to which they are familiar with each other (Little, 1965; Willis, 1966). For example, research on interpersonal distance in face-to-face interactions has revealed that strangers stand farther apart than acquaintances (Little, 1965; Willis, 1966) and acquaintances stand farther apart than friends (Little, 1965). The appropriate distance between communicators plays a significant role in shaping the quality and tone of their interaction and helps maintain a level of intimacy that is comfortable, appropriate, and safe (Kaitz, Bar-Haim, Lehrer, & Grossman, 2004).

From a communication style perspective, the adoption of a formal style is perceived as more appropriate for people who are unfamiliar with each other, whereas an informal style is preferred for more acquainted people. Specifically, the literature on politeness suggests that polite, formal language signifies interpersonal distance (Stephan, Liberman, & Trope, 2010). People address

strangers more formally than friends, and the use of polite, formal language helps maintain a certain distance (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

2.2.4 The Moderating Effect of Brand Familiarity

We propose that this interpersonal theory also applies to consumer-brand relationships. Prior research has shown that consumers tend to relate to brands in ways that mirror their interpersonal relationships and that they use norms of social relationships as guiding principles in their interactions with brands (Aggarwal, 2004; Fournier, 1998). This tendency to attribute and apply social, human beliefs to brands is known as brand anthropomorphism (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). Prior work on consumer-brand relationships demonstrated that brand anthropomorphism often underlies consumers' responses to brand communication; that is, consumers often act towards brands as they would towards people (e.g., Aggarwal, 2004; Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Sela et al., 2012). While these findings on brand anthropomorphism have been demonstrated mainly in a one-way communication (advertising) context, brand anthropomorphism is even more likely to naturally occur in the context of social media, where brands' communication is much more similar to human communication. Accordingly, because consumer-brand interactions on social media mirror interpersonal interactions, consumers will expect brands to also respect social norms and to behave in accordance with these expectations. Specifically, depending on whether consumers are familiar or unfamiliar with a brand, they will expect the brand to adopt an informal or a formal communication style, respectively. If the brand does not communicate appropriately, it will likely reduce consumers' trust in that brand.

This idea that brand familiarity affects consumers' judgment and evaluation of brands has also been shown in the marketing literature (Aggarwal, 2004; Aggarwal & McGill, 2012). For example, Campbell and Keller (2003) showed that consumers respond differently to the repetition of an advertisement sponsored by a familiar vs. an unfamiliar brand. They found that repetition of an advertisement from an unfamiliar brand decreases consumers' attitudes towards the brand more quickly than when the ad is from a familiar brand. In a similar vein, Sela et al. (2012) demonstrated that customers and non-customers of a brand react differently to pronoun variations (i.e., "we" vs. "you and the brand") used in advertisements of that brand. Specifically, they showed that existing customers, but not noncustomers, have more favorable attitudes toward a brand when the message referred to the brand and the consumer as "we" rather than as "you and the brand". Although these studies were not conducted in the context of social media, they shed light on the importance of brand familiarity as a relational aspect that is likely to influence consumers' response to the brand's communication style. Brand familiarity is defined as the extent of a consumer's direct and indirect experience with a brand (Kent & Allen, 1994) and therefore reflects the consumer's degree of acquaintance with the brand.

Taken together, the above-mentioned studies suggest that the degree of familiarity with a brand is an important moderator that is likely to influence consumers' responses to the use of an informal communication style. Specifically, whereas consumers may regard the use of an informal style as more appropriate when they are relatively familiar with the brand, they should generally expect a more formal communication style when the brand is new to them. This is because, when one partner feels some distance from the other, which is usually the case in a first encounter, behavior that is more formal in nature is considered more appropriate and comfortable (Kaitz et al. 2004). These differences in expectations of appropriate communication, in turn, are likely to

influence brand trust. Brand trust reflects the consumer's confidence that the brand will act as expected (Rempel et al., 1985). Because trust is based on consistency with expectations, we expect that a brand communication style that is (in)consistent with consumers' expectations should (decrease) increase their brand trust (Mandler, 1982; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989). Building on the literature above, we hypothesize that the relationship between an informal communication style and brand trust differs depending on whether consumers are familiar vs. unfamiliar with the brand, such that the use of an informal style (decreases) increases consumers' trust in (un)familiar brands. 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.

H1. For brands with which consumers are familiar, the adoption of an informal (vs. formal) communication style on social media increases consumers' brand trust.

H2. For brands with which consumers are unfamiliar, the adoption of an informal (vs. formal) communication style on social media reduces consumers' brand trust.

H3. In a social media context, informal communication style and brand familiarity jointly impact consumers' brand trust such that an informal communication style increases consumers' trust in familiar brands. In contrast, an informal communication style decreases consumers' trust in unfamiliar brands.

H4. In a social media context, the perceived appropriateness of the communication style mediates the interaction effect of an informal communication style and brand familiarity on brand trust.

Three experiments test these hypotheses. A pilot study provides a robust operationalization of an informal (vs. formal) communication style within the specific context of social media. Experiments 1 and 2 then examine the effect of the use of an informal communication style on trust in the case of familiar and unfamiliar brands, respectively. Experiment 3 directly examines the joint impact of communication style and brand familiarity within the context of one brand and tests the mediating role of the perceived appropriateness of the communication style.

2.3 Pilot Study

To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to manipulate informal communication style. Therefore, we conducted a pilot study to determine what, exactly, an informal style conveys in terms of linguistic features and to operationalize this concept in our experimental studies. Based on a review of prior research on communication and critical discourse analysis, we identified 14 important linguistic features of the informal style (see Table 2-1 for details; Biber, 1986; Delin, 2005; Pearce, 2005). Because prior research exclusively concerned communication in an offline context, we also conducted a qualitative pretest to gain further insight into the operationalization of an informal (vs. formal) style in the specific context of social media. Sixty-three undergraduate students (64% female, M_{age}= 21 years) were asked to (1) describe what informal and formal communication styles meant to them and (2) provide examples of informal and formal brand communication in social media settings. We found that the informal style was most often

described as being "personal" (13%), "not distant" (16%), and "friendly" (11%) and that it entails the use of first names, abbreviations, and emoticons. A formal style, by contrast, was associated with the observance of strict language rules (e.g., correct grammar and spelling; 34%). No other description was used frequently (all other frequencies < 8%).

Table 2-1 provides the list of linguistic features that we used to manipulate an informal/formal style in our subsequent studies. In a pretest, we examined participants' perceptions of the level of informality of this manipulation. We exposed 29 undergraduate students to a fictitious brand's social media page that featured interactions between the brand and six consumers (see Appendix A). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions (informal style vs. formal style), after which they responded to a four-item measure concerning the degree to which the brand communicates in an informal way (i.e., "communicates in an informal/unofficial/casual/easygoing way"; 7-point scales; $\alpha = .95$). Participants in the informal condition indicated that the communication style was significantly more informal than did the participants in the formal condition ($M_{Informal} = 6.15$, $M_{Formal} = 3.51$; $F(1,27) = 11.66$, $p = .00$). The results of the pilot study thus indicate successful manipulation of an informal/formal communication style.

Table 2-1: List of the Linguistic Features Used to Manipulate Informal Style

Linguistic features	*References*	*Examples from existing brand messages on social media*
Informal vocabulary	Survey study; (Biber, 1986; Delin, 2005)	"Great", "Awesome"
Informal punctuation	Survey study; (Delin, 2005)	"…", "!"
Contraction	Survey study; (Biber, 1986; Delin, 2005; Pearce, 2005)	"Thanks", "That's", "We're"
Use of first name	Survey study; (Pearce, 2005)	"Hi John"
Emoticons	Survey study	";-)", "☺", "☹"
Lexical bundles	(Pearce, 2005)	"That's what we like to hear", "That's awesome"
Common verbs	(Pearce 2005)	"Check out" vs. "Visit"
First- and second-person pronouns	(Biber, 1986; Pearce, 2005)	"You", "we", "us"
Sound mimicking	(Biber, 1986; Delin, 2005)	"Awww", "soooo"
Active vs. passive voice	(Biber, 1986; Pearce, 2005)	"More information can be found on" vs. "You can find more information on"
Verb omission	(Biber, 1986)	"There are no hotels in" vs. "No hotels in"
Common expression vs. formal expression	Survey study; (Pearce, 2005)	"Waiting for you" vs. "Looking forward to hosting you"
Adverbial expressions of stance	(Biber, 1986; Pearce, 2005)	"Sure"
Discourse markers	(Biber, 1986; Pearce, 2005)	"And", "So"
Present tense vs. conditional tense	(Pearce, 2005)	"Do" vs. "Would"

2.4 Experiment 1

The objective of the first experiment was to test whether the use of an informal style positively affects brand trust when consumers are familiar with the brand (Hypothesis 1). We employed an existing hotel brand and examined participants' brand trust when the brand interacts with consumers through either an informal or formal style on a popular social networking site, Facebook.

2.4.1 Method

In Experiment 1, we employed a one-factor between-subjects design, with communication style (informal vs. formal) serving as manipulating factor. A total of 79 US residents (36.7% female, M_{Age}= 32 years) recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk* online panel participated in an online experiment for payment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions (informal vs. formal style) and were told that they would be reading an excerpt from the Facebook fan page of a popular hotel brand, Hampton. Participants then viewed an excerpt from a simulated Hampton Facebook page that featured interactions between the brand and six consumers (see Appendix B). While the actual brand presents itself on their Facebook page as "Hampton by Hilton", we purposefully chose to use the brand name "Hampton" without reference to Hilton to avoid confounding effects of preexisting perceptions of the parent brand, Hilton. The manipulation of the informal communication style was based on the results of the pilot study. We manipulated the style such that content across scenarios was not influenced. We also ensured that our communication style manipulation was consistent with existing brand communication practices on social media by using expressions from real brand posts on social networking sites. Participants then completed a questionnaire that included measures of brand trust, manipulation checks, and control variables. The study concluded with a brief demographic section.

2.4.2 Measures

We assessed brand trust using the commonly employed scale developed by Morgan and Hunt (1994): "I feel that I can trust Hampton/I feel that Hampton can be counted on to help me and other consumers/Hampton appears reliable" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Participants rated their trust in the brand both before (α = .92) and after (α = .94) being exposed to the communication style stimulus. As a manipulation check, participants rated the informality of the employed communication style on three items: "formal/informal" (7-point semantic differential scales), "Hampton communicates in a casual way", and "Hampton communicates in an easygoing way" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). We averaged the three items to form an informality index (α = .93). Participants also indicated how familiar they were with the brand prior to being exposed to the communication style stimulus (i.e., 1 = not at all familiar, 7 = very familiar). In addition to the primary measures of interest, we also asked participants to indicate their initial attitudes toward the brand (i.e., 1 = "dislike/unfavorable/bad," and 7 = "like/favorable/good"; α = .93) and their involvement with the product (i.e., "important/of concern to me/useful to me"; α = .94; Zaichkowsky, 1985) as control variables. Product involvement yielded no significant effects ($p > .10$), and including this covariate in the analysis did not influence the results. We therefore do not discuss this variable further. The study concluded with a brief demographic section.

* Amazon Mechanical Turk is a crowdsourcing marketplace for simple tasks such as data collection, surveys, and text analysis. It has now been successfully leveraged in many academic papers for online data collection and classification (e.g., Kim, Chen, & Zhang, 2016; Kronrod & Danziger, 2013; Stephen, Sciandra, and Inman 2015).

2.4.3 Results

Manipulation checks. As intended, participants were very familiar with the brand (M = 5.59). Brand familiarity did not differ across the two conditions ($M_{Informal}$ = 5.66, M_{Formal} = 5.53; p = .65), and including it in the analysis as a covariate did not influence the results. To increase the reliability of the data, 15 participants who were unfamiliar with the brand (i.e., brand familiarity < 4) were eliminated from the dataset, leaving a final sample of 64 participants (40.6% female, M_{Age}= 32 years). In addition, we conducted an ANOVA with the perceived informality of the communication as a dependent variable and the style manipulation as an independent variable. Participants in the informal condition indicated that the communication style was significantly more informal than did those in the formal condition ($M_{Informal}$ = 6.05, M_{Formal} = 4.07; F(1,62) = 32.51, p = .00).

Brand trust. To test the effect of an informal style on brand trust, we conducted an ANOVA with brand trust serving as the dependent variable, the style manipulation as an independent variable, and initial brand trust and attitudes (i.e., brand trust and attitudes before being exposed to the communication style stimulus) as covariates. The results revealed that the informal style had a significant effect on brand trust. Specifically, when controlling for initial brand trust and attitudes[1], participants in the informal condition had more trust in the brand than did those in the formal condition ($M_{Informal}$ = 6.01, M_{Formal} = 5.47; F(3,60) = 4.60, p = .04). This result supports Hypothesis 1.

2.4.4 Discussion

Consistent with prior research, Experiment 1 demonstrates that the use of an informal style (vs. a formal style) in the social media context increases trust in brands with which consumers are familiar (Hypothesis 1). We expect that the informal style will have the opposite effect on brand trust if consumers are unfamiliar with the brand (Hypothesis 2). Experiment 2 tests this prediction.

2.5 Experiment 2

The second experiment was designed to examine how an informal brand communication style influences consumers' trust in unfamiliar brands. We employed a fictitious hotel brand and examined participants' brand trust when the brand interacts with consumers in either an informal or formal style on a popular social networking site, Facebook.

2.5.1 Method

In Experiment 2, we employed a one-factor between-subjects design, with communication style (informal vs. formal) serving as manipulating factor. Seventy-six US residents (43.4% female, M_{Age}= 49 years) recruited from Qualtrics participated in an online experiment for payment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions (informal style vs. formal style) and were asked to imagine that, while searching for a hotel for a vacation trip, they came across a

[1] This effect remains statistically significant when not controlling for initial brand trust and attitudes ($M_{Informal}$ = 6.00, M_{Formal} = 5.47; F(1,62) = 6.15, p = .02).

new hotel chain, Silver Hotel, and decided to visit its social media page to find out more about the hotel. Participants then viewed an excerpt from a simulated Silver Hotel Facebook page that featured interactions between the brand and six consumers (see Appendix A). We employed the fictitious Silver Hotel brand to ensure brand unfamiliarity and to maximize internal validity. The manipulation of the informal communication style was identical to that of Experiment 1. Participants then completed a questionnaire that included measures of brand trust, manipulation checks, and control variables. The study concluded with a brief demographic section.

2.5.2 Measures

We used the same brand trust measures as in Experiment 1 (α = .95). As a manipulation check, participants rated the informality of the communication style (α = .60) and their familiarity with the brand on the same measures as in Experiment 1. Finally, product involvement was used as a control variable, and we measured it with the same items as in Experiment 1 (α = .91). Product involvement did not influence the results, and we therefore do not discuss it further.

2.5.3 Results

Manipulation checks. As intended, participants were very unfamiliar with the brand (M = 1.12). Brand familiarity did not differ across the two conditions ($M_{Informal}$ = 1.15, M_{Formal} = 1.08; p = .59). In addition, we conducted an ANOVA with the perceived informality of the communication as the dependent variable and the style manipulation as an independent variable. Participants in the informal condition indicated that the communication style was significantly more informal than did those in the formal condition ($M_{Informal}$ = 4.41, M_{Formal} = 3.39; F(1,74) = 9.43, p = .00).

Brand trust. To test the effect of an informal style on brand trust, we conducted an ANOVA with brand trust serving as the dependent variable and the style manipulation as an independent variable. The results revealed a significant effect of the informal style on brand trust. Participants in the informal condition had less trust in the brand than those in the formal condition ($M_{Informal}$ = 5.05, M_{Formal} = 5.70; F(1,74) = 5.66, p = .02), thus supporting Hypothesis 2.

2.5.4 Discussion

The results of the second experiment show that, for unfamiliar brands, the use of an informal style decreases a consumer's brand trust. Establishing brand trust is crucial in the early stages of a relationship, as consumers' propensity to trust an unfamiliar brand determines whether their relationship with the brand will extend beyond the initial interaction.

These results, together with those from Experiment 1, suggest that the distinction between informal and formal language is important because it influences the development of consumers' trust in brands. The effect has been shown to be either positive or negative, depending on whether consumers are familiar (Experiment 1) or unfamiliar (Experiment 2) with the brand. We propose 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 brands (Hypothesis 4). Experiment 3 was designed to test this prediction.

2.6 Experiment 3

In Experiment 3, we directly examined the interaction effect of an informal communication style and brand familiarity within the context of one brand, thereby testing Hypothesis 3. In addition, we investigated the process underlying this effect. Specifically, we tested whether the perceived appropriateness of the style mediates the interaction effect of an informal style and brand familiarity on brand trust (Hypothesis 4). That is, depending on the degree of familiarity with a brand, consumers expect the brand 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 brands. Finally, Experiment 3 further extended our findings to a more utilitarian, low-involvement domain, the toothpaste category. We employed an existing toothpaste brand and examined participants' brand trust when the brand interacts with consumers on a popular social networking site, Facebook.

2.6.1 Method

The experiment was a 2 (communication style: informal vs. formal) x 2 (brand familiarity: familiar vs. unfamiliar) between-subjects design. A total of 152 Dutch individuals (54.6% female, M_{Age} = 26 years) participated in the experiment. We manipulated brand familiarity by employing a toothpaste product made by Procter and Gamble that is marketed in different countries under several brand names (Procter & Gamble, 2015). We used two different existing brand names, one with which the participants were familiar and one with which they were unfamiliar. A pretest confirmed that participants in the high-familiarity condition were significantly more familiar with the brand than were participants in the low-familiarity condition ($M_{Familiar}$ = 5.12, $M_{Unfamiliar}$ = 1.42; $F(1,40) = 71.48$, $p < .00$). Participants were informed that they would be reading an excerpt from the Facebook fan page created by the respective toothpaste brand. Participants then viewed an excerpt from a simulated brand Facebook page that featured interactions between the brand and four consumers (see Appendix C) and were asked to report their trust in the brand. The manipulation of the informal communication style was similar to that in the previous studies.

2.6.2 Measures

We used the same brand trust measures as in our previous studies (α = .89). As manipulation checks, participants rated the informality of the communication style on the same measures as in our previous studies (α = .90). We measured brand familiarity with a two-item scale: "I am very/not at all familiar with the brand"; "I am very/not at all knowledgeable about the brand" (7-point semantic differential scales; α = .95). For the mediating variable, participants rated the appropriateness of the brand communication style on three items: "meets my expectations"/ "corresponds to how I expect it to communicate with me"/ "is appropriate" (7-point scales; α = .93). In addition to the primary measures of interest, we also asked participants to indicate their attitudes toward the brand (α = .88) and their involvement with the product (α = .82) as control variables using the same items as in our previous studies. We conducted a 2 (communication style: informal vs. formal) x 2 (brand familiarity: familiar vs. unfamiliar) between-subjects ANOVA on brand trust with brand attitudes and product involvement as covariates. Including

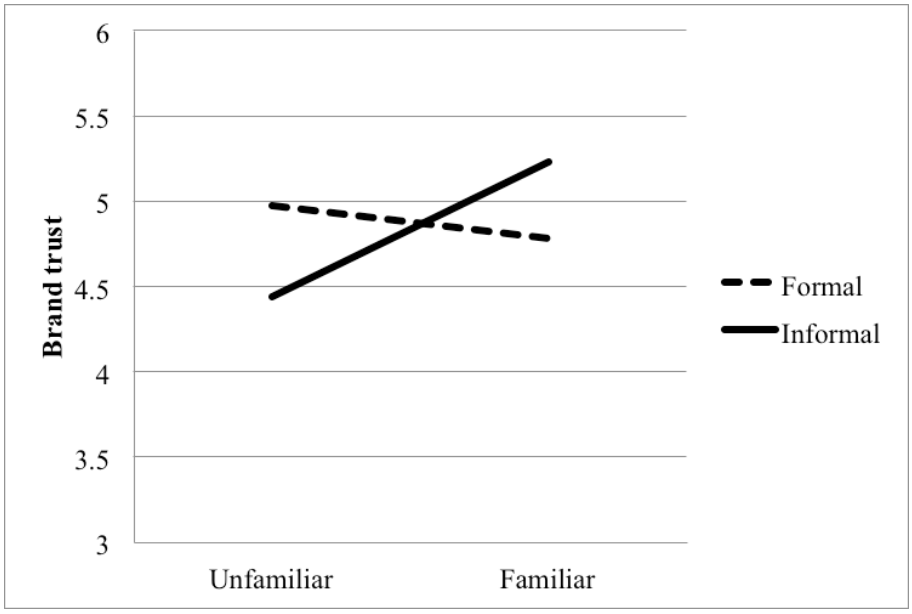
these covariates in the analysis did not dilute the focal two-way interaction ($p = .01$). As a result, this variable will not be discussed further. Finally, to verify that our manipulations of the informal and formal styles did not differ in terms of perceived realism, we included a realism check in the study. The results revealed that participants perceived our manipulation of brand communication style to be realistic ($M = 4.53$ on a seven-point scale anchored by 1 = "Not realistic at all"; 7 = "Very realistic"; $t(151)_{\text{diff from 4}} = 4.64$, $p = .00$) and that the perceived realism did not differ between the formal and informal conditions ($M_{\text{Informal}} = 4.68$, $M_{\text{Formal}} = 4.37$; $F(1,148) = 1.91$, $p = .17$). The study concluded with a brief demographic section.

2.6.3 Results

Manipulation checks. As we intended, participants in the informal condition indicated that the communication style was significantly more informal than did those in the formal condition ($M_{\text{Informal}} = 5.09$, $M_{\text{Formal}} = 3.21$; $F(1,151) = 113.73$, $p < .00$). Similarly, participants in the high-familiarity condition were significantly more familiar with the brand than were participants in the low-familiarity condition ($M_{\text{Familiar}} = 5.22$, $M_{\text{Unfamiliar}} = 1.53$; $F(1,151) = 263.46$, $p < .00$).

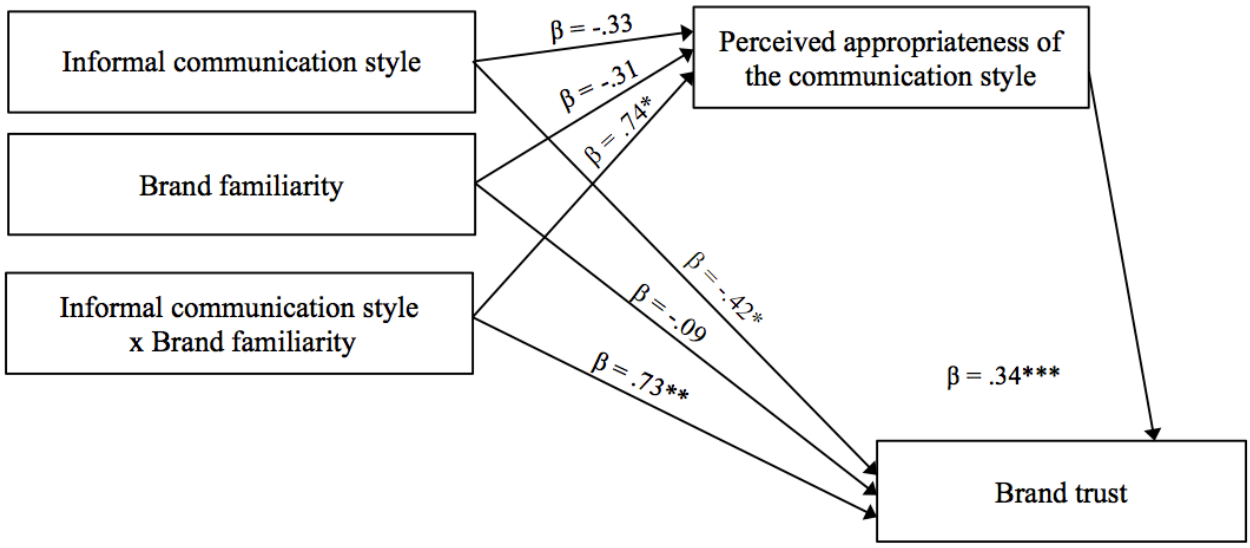
Brand trust. We conducted a 2 (communication style: informal vs. formal) x 2 (brand familiarity: familiar vs. unfamiliar) between-subjects ANOVA in which brand trust served as the dependent variable. The results revealed a marginally significant effect of brand familiarity on brand trust ($F(1,151) = 3.45$, $p = .06$), such that participants in the familiar condition had more trust ($M_{\text{Familiar}} = 5.00$) in the brand than those in the unfamiliar condition ($M_{\text{Unfamiliar}} = 4.71$), which is consistent with past research that indicates that the better we know a person, the better we can predict that person's future behavior and, hence, the more we trust that person (Doney and Cannon 1997). There was no significant main effect of the communication style on brand trust ($F(1,151) = 0.68$, $p = .80$). Importantly and more interestingly, there was a significant two-way interaction effect of communication style and brand familiarity on brand trust ($F(1,151) = 9.25$, $p < .00$). Figure 2-1 depicts these findings. Specific planned contrasts revealed that, while participants in the familiar condition had more trust in the brand when exposed to the informal (vs. formal) style ($M_{\text{Informal}} = 5.23$, $M_{\text{Formal}} = 4.78$; $F(1,151) = 3.92$, $p = .05$), participants in the unfamiliar condition had less trust in the brand when exposed to the informal (vs. formal) style ($M_{\text{Informal}} = 4.44$, $M_{\text{Formal}} = 4.97$; $F(1,151) = 5.38$, $p = .02$).

Figure 2-1: Effect of Informal Style and Brand Familiarity on Brand Trust (Experiment 3)



Mediation analysis. Hypothesis 4 stated that the interaction effect of informal communication style and brand familiarity on brand trust is mediated by the perceived appropriateness of the brand's communication style. In line with recent research (Kim, 2013; Kim & Kramer, 2015), we tested this mediation hypothesis following the steps suggested by Hayes (2013). Specifically, we used PROCESS Model 8 with perceived appropriateness of the brand communication style as the mediator (5000 resamples; Hayes, 2013). First, the model regressed perceived appropriateness of the style on informal style, brand familiarity, and their interaction. The informal style x brand familiarity interaction predicted the perceived appropriateness of the style ($\beta = .74$, $t = 1.95$, $p = .05$). Second, the model regressed brand trust on perceived appropriateness of the style, informal style, brand familiarity, and the interaction of the last two factors. Perceived appropriateness of the style predicted brand trust ($\beta = .34$, $t = 5.31$, $p = .00$). Third, and most important, bootstrapping analysis revealed that perceived appropriateness of the style mediated the interactive effect of informal style and brand familiarity on brand trust, as the 95% confidence interval (CI) did not include zero (effect = .25, 95% CI = .01 to .57). Figure 2-2 depicts the results of the mediation analysis.

Figure 2-2: Results of Mediation Analysis (Experiment 3)



Note: *p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001.

2.6.4 Discussion

In Experiment 3, we brought together the findings of Experiments 1 and 2 by investigating the interaction effect of communication style and brand familiarity on brand trust within the context of one brand and using a different brand category. The results again demonstrate that the use of an informal brand communication style increases (reduces) consumers' trust in familiar (unfamiliar) brands. We thereby provide evidence in support of our theorizing that communication style interacts with brand familiarity to impact consumers' trust in the brand (Hypothesis 3). Furthermore, we found evidence that the effect of an informal style on trust was mediated by the perceived appropriateness of the brand communication style, thereby supporting Hypothesis 4.

2.7 General Discussion

Social media use has been exploding, and social networking sites have become essential platforms for marketing communications (Simply Measured, 2015). The sheer volume of daily consumer-brand interactions on these platforms has highlighted the need for guidance concerning how brands should communicate with consumers to foster relationships and, in particular, to gain their trust. However, little academic research is available to help marketers understand the best practices for communicating with consumers through such platforms. The present research takes a first step toward addressing this issue and offers some guidelines for communicating with consumers in social media environments. Specifically, across three experiments, we investigated the role of informal communication style on brand trust. Brand trust is considered a milestone in building consumer-brand relationships in social media environments (e.g., Gleeson, 2012; Porter & Donthu, 2008). Experiment 1 provides evidence that, when communicating to consumers who

are already familiar with a brand, the use of an informal style increases trust in that brand. Experiment 2 shows the opposite effect on brand trust for consumers who are unfamiliar with the brand. Experiment 3 jointly tests these two findings within the context of one brand and provides evidence for the moderating role of brand familiarity on the effect of an informal style on brand trust. In addition, Experiment 3, which explored an underlying mechanism as well, shows that the effects of the informal style on brand trust are mediated by the perceived appropriateness of the brand communication style.

2.7.1 Theoretical Implications

Our research contributes to current marketing research in a number of ways. First, we extend the emerging body of work on brand communication on social media (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, & de Vries, 2015; Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Schamari & Schaefers, 2015; van Noort & Willemsen, 2011) by studying the effects of an informal communication style on brand trust in a social media context. We contribute to this stream of literature by providing a clearer and more precise understanding of how brands should communicate when interacting with consumers in social media settings.

In addition, in contrast with prior research suggesting that an informal style has a positive influence on consumer-brand relationships (Delin, 2005; Fairclough, 1992, 1994, 1996), including brand trust, the present work indicates that use of an informal communication style can actually harm a brand if this style is inconsistent with recipients' expectations. Indeed, we find that the effects of an informal style on brand trust depend on whether consumers are familiar with the brand, such that the use of an informal style increases (decreases) trust in brands with which consumers are familiar (unfamiliar). Finally, although prior studies on this topic have been conducted exclusively with well-known brands (Beukeboom et al., 2015; Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Schamari & Schaefers, 2015; van Noort & Willemsen, 2011), the current research examines both familiar and unfamiliar brands and shows that the degree of acquaintance with a brand moderates the relationship between an informal communication style and brand trust.

The present study also contributes to the literature on consumers' relationships with brands and their reactions to expectation-(in)congruent brand behaviors (e.g., Aggarwal, 2004; Sela et al., 2012). Specifically, in a social media context, we validate and illustrate the notion that people tend to relate to brands as they relate to people in general (Aggarwal, 2004; Fournier, 1998). Consumers appear to apply their social expectations to brands and expect brands to respect behavioral social norms. Relying on role theory (Sarbin & Allen, 1968; Schewe, 1973; Solomon et al., 1985), we demonstrate that, whereas consumers regard the use of an informal style as more appropriate when they are relatively familiar with a brand, they generally expect a more formal communication style from a brand that is new to them. By adopting socially expected communication styles in different situations – namely, an informal communication style with familiar consumers and a formal communication style with unfamiliar ones – brands are likely to increase consumers' (initial) trust in the brand. Although we focused on social media as a specific two-way communication context, we believe that our results are applicable to other two-way communication contexts (e.g., e-mails) for which consumer-brand interactions mirror interpersonal relationships.

Finally, our research contributes to the literature on language by being the first to experimentally manipulate an informal style. We offer a robust operationalization of an informal

(vs. formal) communication style within the new context of social media, an operationalization that can be used for further research on this topic. In a pilot study, we identified 15 linguistic features for the operationalization of an informal communication style. We then tested the proposed operationalization in our experiments and demonstrated a successful manipulation of the informal communication style.

2.7.2 Managerial Implications

Our research informs marketers of the importance of the style of a message, beyond its content. We thus challenge the conventional wisdom that "content is king" (Rooney, 2014) and argue that it is not merely what we say but also how we say it that matters. Specifically, we offer useful insights into how brands could best converse with consumers on social media. For many brands, the adoption and use of social media constitute a trial-and-error process. Our research shows that people respond differently to the same brand communications depending on how they relate to brands. The efficiency of communications will be significantly enhanced if marketers adhere to conversational norms consistent with the expectations of their audience.

Accordingly, our findings suggest that, while using an informal brand communication style is likely to be successful among existing customers, consumers who are unfamiliar with that brand might perceive it to be overly personal because they find an informal style inappropriate. Therefore, brands interacting with consumers who are relatively new to them (e.g., a new brand or an existing brand addressing a new market segment) are advised to use a more distant and formal communication style. A considerable number of consumers have their first encounter with a brand via social media (Knowledge Networks, 2011). This first encounter can take place in two major ways: the brand may be new to the market, or the brand may have been available on the market for a while, but many consumers may have yet to encounter it. Considering the first scenario, many new businesses (and, hence, new brands) enter the market every year. In the US, 730,632 new businesses were registered in 2012, and the number of new businesses that register is increasing every year (The U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). In addition, approximately 23.1 million consumers use social media to discover new brands or products (Knowledge Networks, 2011). Concerning the second scenario, a considerable segment of consumers (22.5 million) are relatively new to a brand (e.g., have never seen or used it) when visiting the brand's social media page (Knowledge Networks, 2011). In addition, the effects of a brand communication style are particularly salient during the initial contact between a brand and a consumer, which is when first impressions are made (Sparks & Areni, 2002). During initial contacts, consumers have little upon which to base their expectations of the brand's trustworthiness. In the absence of concrete, experience-based information, the brand's communication style plays a crucial role in determining brand trust and, subsequently, whether the relationship with the brand will progress beyond the initial contact.

Our research is especially relevant to community managers, who are typically responsible for managing communications on social media. Developing insights into how consumers respond to specific communication styles is crucial, as the survival of a social media strategy depends on the community manager's ability to acquire new members and to transform them into contributors and ambassadors of the brand's online community. We advise community managers to employ an informal (vs. formal) communication style when conversing with consumers who are familiar with (vs. new to) the brand. Our findings are especially relevant to community managers who are

responsible for new brands. Given their limited resources and the absence of brand equity, it is important to pay attention to details (such as communication style) that can have significant effects on the initial market response. Our findings can thus help community managers fine-tune their dialogue with consumers to engage in natural and appropriate conversations with them. By gaining insight into how to successfully converse with consumers, community managers can establish a foundation for longer-lasting relationships with them.

2.7.3 Limitations and Directions for Further Research

This research also has certain limitations that offer avenues for future investigations. First, in our studies, we instructed participants to read some consumer-brand interactions on social media to form a perception of a new brand. This might be considered goal-directed behavior, as it is extrinsically and instrumentally motivated. However, consumers may end up on a brand community page with different goals; some may be more focused on the production than on the consumption of content (e.g., expressing a complaint), while others may be more hedonic (Novak, Hoffman, & Duhachek, 2003). For example, consumers with a hedonic goal might base their perception of the brand primarily on its ability to provide a pleasurable experience. In this case, an informal style might be appreciated. An exploration of consumers' goals when interacting with a brand through its online community and how these goals alter the effect of brand communication style on consumer-brand relationships (e.g., brand trust) is therefore an important avenue for further research. A related area of future investigation would be to allow participants to explore how it feels to interact with brands instead of passively reading consumer-brand interactions. We expect that such a setup would provide even stronger evidence of the joint impact of brand familiarity and informal communication style on brand trust.

Second, the present research focuses on brand familiarity to examine how the ways consumers relate to brands influence their expectations regarding the brand's language. We chose to focus on brand familiarity because it constitutes a central dimension on which representations of social relationships vary (Little, 1965; Willis, 1966). Of course, consumers may relate to brands in many different ways beyond this taxonomy (familiar vs. unfamiliar). For example, consumers may conceive of brands as committed partners, casual friends, or flings (Fournier, 1998). They may also form communal relationships with some brands and exchange relationships with others (Aggarwal, 2004). More recently, Aggarwal and McGill (2012) suggested that they might think of brands as partners, whereby brands coproduce benefits with consumers, or as servants, whereby brands work for consumers to create benefits. In addition, the expected communication style is also likely to differ depending on the brand's personality. Consumers might expect brands with different personalities to use language with different levels of informality. For example, consumers might expect brands with a competent or efficient personality (e.g., Tiffany & Co) to use a more formal communication style, whereas brands with a more cheerful or exciting personality (e.g., Toys R Us) might be expected to employ a more informal communication style. However, in the case of unfamiliar brands (the focus of our research), brand personality is not strongly present in the mind of the consumer (Johar, Sengupta, & Aaker, 2005) and, thus, is less likely to influence consumers' expectations regarding communication style. Thus, there seems to be no shortage of research opportunities to investigate the different ways in which consumers relate to brands and how they influence consumers' expectations regarding brand communication style.

Third, several factors may moderate the effects of brand communication style and warrant additional research. Prior research has shown that consumption context (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013; Krondrod et al., 2012), product category, people's affiliation with the brand (Sela et al., 2012), and communication style congruence (Ludwig et al., 2013) all moderate the relationship between language use and consumer behavior. For example, research drawing on Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles & Smith, 1979) posits that greater congruence in communication styles leads individuals to perceive a common social identity and elicits more credibility and trust (Chung, Pennebaker, & Fiedler, 2007; Pickering & Garrod, 2004). If so, the negative effect of an informal style on brand trust is likely to be mitigated when consumers find this style congruent with their internal attitudinal or emotional standards. Future research should also investigate how other individual differences influence consumers' responses to a brand's informal communication style. For example, the need for affiliation is an individual's desire for social contact or belongingness (Veroff & Veroff, 1980). It would be worthwhile to examine how the distinction between a high versus low need for affiliation influences individuals' responses to an informal style employed by familiar vs. unfamiliar brands. For example, we could reasonably expect that for individuals with a high need for affiliation, the warmth and closeness induced by the use of an informal style would result in a positive consumer response toward unfamiliar brands.

Finally, in our studies, we manipulated communication style as a binary variable (very informal vs. very formal). People who are exposed to a communication style that is very informal or very formal are more likely to respond strongly to (in)congruent language in brand communications compared with people who are exposed to moderate language variations (Sela et al., 2012). Future research could explore the effects of an informal style by operationalizing it as a continuous variable. It would be particularly interesting to investigate the effect of using a moderate informal/formal style on brand trust and determine the level of informality resulting in the most favorable consumer response.

Chapter 3

"That's Embarrassing!" Effects of Brand Anthropomorphism on Intimate Disclosure[*†]

3.1 Introduction

The rapid change occurring in marketing practices can best be seen in the plethora of new types of data and approaches to gain consumer insights. Brands are now massively engaging with consumers on a one-to-one basis. In this context, information gathering is a key component of marketing endeavors aimed at developing close consumer-brand relationships (Deighton, 1996; Moon, 2000; White, 2004). The more information marketers obtain about their consumers, the better they can meet their needs, customize offerings, and explore opportunities for new product or service development. Moreover, when consumers reveal personal information to marketers, they tend to respond more positively to subsequent marketer actions, for example, with greater product liking and purchase intentions (Im, Lee, Taylor, & D'Orazio, 2008; Moon, 2000).

Despite the potential mutual gains, consumers are generally reluctant to disclose personal information to brands, especially when this information is intimate (White, 2004). They report deep concern about their privacy and discomfort with brands possessing their intimate details (White, 2004). These concerns commonly include fear that personal information will get into the wrong hands (e.g., identity theft) or that information will be used for unwanted mail or phone intrusion. In addition to the widely studied privacy concerns (Acquisti, John, & Loewenstein, 2012; John, Acquisti, & Loewenstein, 2011; Norberg & Horne, 2014), embarrassment may also play an important role in consumer reluctance to self-disclose: consumers may avoid revealing personal information because they are concerned about being negatively evaluated by others (White, 2004). Such concerns for embarrassment are likely to increase as the questions consumers are asked become more intimate, resulting in a higher reluctance to disclose information.

In light of consumer disclosure reluctance, several studies have investigated the factors influencing disclosure behavior (Acquisti et al., 2012; John et al., 2011; White, 2004). White (2004) looked at consumers' perceived relationship with a brand and showed that consumers who perceive a relatively deep relationship are less likely to reveal intimate information (e.g., condom purchase history). More recent research has focused on contextual cues and, in particular, on how framing the disclosure request (e.g., elicitation form and sequence of requests) affects disclosure intentions and behaviors (Acquisti et al., 2012; John et al., 2011; Moon, 2000;

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[*] Grétry, A., Horváth, C., Belei, N. (2016), "That's embarrassing! Effects of brand anthropomorphism on intimate disclosure," paper under review at *International Journal of Research in Marketing* since February 2017.

[†] Parts of this chapter were presented at the Brands and Brand Relationships Conference 2016 (Toronto). The authors received the Best Paper Award, sponsored by GFK and the Brands and Brand Relationships Institute, for outstanding research.

Norberg & Horne, 2014). Contextual cues were found to affect consumer disclosure by heightening or lessening privacy concerns.

Although these findings offer insights into the conditions under which consumers are more likely to self-disclose, a thorough understanding of how particular brand positioning strategies might affect consumer propensity to reveal information to the brand is still missing from the literature. One positioning strategy that marketers frequently use to establish and strengthen relationships with their consumers is brand anthropomorphization, the act of endowing the brand with humanlike characteristics. Approximately 31% of the brands in the IRI marketing dataset pursue an anthropomorphization strategy (see Kwak, Puzakova, & Rocereto, 2015). Anthropomorphized brands are usually given faces and names and employ brand communications using first-person language, as if the brand were its own spokesperson (e.g., Michelin Man, the Green Giant, M&M candies). Given the high prevalence of such anthropomorphic positioning strategies, the lack of research about their effects on self-disclosure is striking.

Anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized) brands facilitate consumer-brand relationships because they provide quasi-social experiences (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012). Once a brand is anthropomorphized, it becomes possible for consumers to enter into a quasi-social relationship with it. Social interaction is pleasurable, and imbuing a brand with anthropomorphic cues leads consumers to experience more positive affect when interacting with it (Wang, Baker, Wagner, & Wakefield, 2007). However, research has begun to illuminate potential unexpected drawbacks of employing an anthropomorphic strategy and has shown that, in specific contexts such as product wrongdoing (Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocereto, 2013), this positioning strategy leads to negative consumer response because anthropomorphized brands are perceived as being mindful. Specifically, brand anthropomorphism leads consumers to perceive the brand as having humanlike characteristics, including mindfulness, effortful thinking, and the capacity to evaluate others (Epley & Waytz, 2009). Considering that people are generally reluctant to engage in intimate self-disclosure because of fear of embarrassment (White, 2004) and that brand anthropomorphization leads to the perception that the brand is capable of evaluating others (Epley & Waytz, 2009), we expect that rather than facilitating consumer-brand exchanges, an anthropomorphic brand positioning strategy might have a negative effect on consumer intimate self-disclosure. In this research, we fill this gap in the literature by investigating the effect of brand anthropomorphism on consumers' propensity to disclose intimate information.

Across three experiments, we provide evidence that brand anthropomorphism negatively influences consumers' disclosure of intimate information. These effects stem from the perception that anthropomorphized brands are mindful and capable of evaluating others, thereby eliciting higher consumer embarrassment associated with intimate self-disclosure. We further demonstrate that indirect questioning (i.e., asking respondents to answer questions from the perspective of another person) offers a good tactic to mitigate the negative effects of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure, because it reduces consumer embarrassment.

This research contributes to the marketing literature in four important ways. First, we are the first to demonstrate that brand anthropomorphization has important implications for consumers' self-disclosure to the brand, an issue that currently receives considerable attention in both the marketing literature and in practice. In doing so, the present work extends the recent line of research that shows negative effects of brand anthropomorphization in diverse domains, such as computer games, product wrongdoing, price fairness, and risk perception (Kim, Chen, & Zhang,

2016; Kim & McGill, 2011; Kwak et al., 2015; Puzakova et al., 2013). Second, we investigate the moderating effect of the questioning method (direct vs. indirect) and show that indirect questioning mitigates the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure. In doing so, we offer the marketers of anthropomorphized brands guidance on how to overcome the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure and more efficiently capture its benefits. Third, we elucidate the mechanism underlying these effects. Specifically, we demonstrate that embarrassment mediates the interactive effect of brand anthropomorphism and questioning method on intimate self-disclosure. Fourth and importantly, most consumer research focuses on one side of the consumer-brand relationship: how consumers perceive a brand. In contrast, the current paper taps into the other side of the relationship: the inference made by the consumer about how the brand might perceive him or her. We thus provide a more complete picture of the relationship between a brand and a consumer and, in particular, of the consumer-brand dialogue occurring inside the consumer's mind (Blackston & Lebar, 2015).

3.2 Theoretical background

3.2.1 Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure refers to the act of communicating personal information to another person (Collins & Miller, 1994; Cozby, 1973). Self-disclosure is usually studied in the context of intimate disclosures, as they reflect less superficial and more meaningful interpersonal interactions (Moon, 2000). Intimate self-disclosures are defined as those "that contain high-risk (as opposed to low-risk) information that makes the discloser feel vulnerable in some way" (Moon, 2000, p. 323). Prior research on interpersonal relationships has established that intimate disclosures play a central role in developing and maintaining close relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Collins & Miller, 1994). In fact, many researchers contend that the best predictor of the strength of a given relationship between two parties is their history of information exchange (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). More specifically, intimate information exchanges tend to lead to long-lasting relationships in which both parties experience strong feelings of commitment and loyalty (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Derlega et al., 1993). While disclosing personal information may be rewarding, it also entails social risks, such as losing control of ones' information and potential embarrassment (White, 2004). Prior research has explained individual decisions to self-disclose using the theory of social exchange (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). This theory suggests that people actively weigh the benefits and costs of disclosing and then disclose only to the extent that a net benefit is expected. In a consumer-brand relationship, the costs of self-disclosing to marketers are often perceived as being much higher than the benefits. Concerns for privacy (i.e., concern over who has information and what is done with this information) have been identified as the major cost (Acquisti et al., 2012; John et al., 2011; White, 2004). In addition to the widely studied privacy concerns, the threat of embarrassment has also been shown to lead to greater disclosure reluctance: consumers avoid revealing personal information because they are concerned about being negatively evaluated by others (White, 2004). As a result, consumers are generally unwilling to self-disclose to brands (Acquisti et al., 2012; John et al., 2011; White, 2004), making marketers' attempts to foster consumer-brand relationships significantly harder.

Despite the clear importance of the conflict in marketers' need to collect information about consumers and consumers' reluctance to provide such information, little systematic research has examined the factors influencing consumers' willingness to self-disclose to marketers. A first line of research examined how others' disclosure behavior influences a consumer's own self-disclosure (Acquisti et al., 2012; Moon, 2000). Findings showed that the propensity to self-disclose is comparative in nature, that is, consumers are more likely to disclose information about themselves if they first become the recipient of such a disclosure (i.e., reciprocal disclosure; Moon, 2000) or if they are told that previous respondents have made such disclosures (i.e., herding effect; Acquisti et al., 2012). A second line of research examined how contextual cues, such as the survey interface, influence willingness to self-disclose (John et al., 2011). For example, people are more willing to disclose intimate information to an unprofessional-looking (vs. professional-looking) website because they judge the questions to be less intrusive. A third stream of research examined the influence of consumer-brand relationships on the consumer's willingness to self-disclose to a brand. White (2004) found that consumers who consider their relationship with a brand to be deep (vs. shallow) are more likely to reveal privacy-related information (i.e., address and phone number) but less likely to divulge more intimate information (i.e., purchase history of Playboy/Playgirl magazines and condoms). The present research extends and contributes to this third stream of research by investigating how a specific brand positioning strategy – namely, brand anthropomorphization – influences consumers' propensity to self-disclose to marketers. Thus, instead of varying the depth of a consumer-brand relationship, we keep it constant and vary the extent to which a brand is perceived as human[*]. Specifically, we examine whether imbuing a brand with humanlike features affects the extent of information consumers reveal about the self to the brand. While the consumer-brand relationship literature has predominantly focused on the positive side of brand anthropomorphism, we propose that brand anthropomorphism has a negative effect in the context of intimate self-disclosure.

3.2.2 Effects of Brand Anthropomorphism on Self-Disclosure

Anthropomorphism refers to the individual's tendency to attribute humanlike characteristics, mind, effortful thinking, emotions, and behavior to nonhuman agents (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo, 2008). This tendency to apply human beliefs to the nonhuman is pervasive. Nonhuman entities, ranging from pets to products, are commonly seen as having consciousness and intentions or as experiencing emotions. Most studies to date suggest that anthropomorphizing a nonhuman entity has a positive effect on judgments. According to those studies, anthropomorphism can enable a sense that nonhuman entities will be efficacious, or it can increase emotional bonding with them (Epley & Waytz, 2009; Epley et al., 2008), making anthropomorphic strategies especially interesting for brand managers. In particular, previous studies on product and brand anthropomorphism have shown that perceiving a product or a

[*]Whereas one might reasonably expect that brand anthropomorphism leads to a perceived deeper relationship (characterized by higher brand trust, higher brand liking, and a more positive brand personality; White, 2004), recent research has shown that anthropomorphism does not necessarily lead to greater liking or perceptions of a more positive brand personality (Kwak, Puzakova, & Rocereto, 2015; Nenkov & Scott, 2014; Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocereto, 2013). We provide further evidence in Study 1 that our manipulation of brand anthropomorphism does not affect brand trust, brand liking, or brand personality perceptions. Our research thus differs from that of White (2004), as it examines consumer propensity to self-disclose to brands with varying degrees of perceived humanness while keeping constant consumer-brand relationship perceptions.

brand in human terms results in greater brand liking and positive emotional responses (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Chandler & Schwarz, 2010; Delbaere et al., 2011; Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016). Anthropomorphism has also been found to affect behaviors beyond mere judgments and liking. For example, Aggarwal and McGill (2012) found that consumers engage in behaviors in line (contrasting) with a partner brand they like (dislike), but they only observed these effects with anthropomorphized brands. Specifically, consumers who anthropomorphized a brand associated with healthfulness behaved in an assimilative (contrasting) manner by displaying a greater (lower) likelihood of engaging in healthy behaviors when they liked (disliked) the brand. This effect occurred because when people anthropomorphize a brand, they apply their social beliefs to the brand and thus behave towards it as they would towards a human under the same circumstances (Kim & McGill, 2011). Anthropomorphism has also been shown to increase the liking of interacting with an anthropomorphized entity (Burgoon et al., 2000; Kim & McGill, 2011; Sproull, Subramani, Kiesler, Walker, & Waters, 1996). Adding anthropomorphic cues to a brand makes the consumer-brand interaction feel more natural, as if consumers were interacting with a social actor. For instance, Wang et al. (2007) found that interacting with an anthropomorphized character increases the pleasure and arousal experienced. In the context of our research, this increased liking of interacting might be reflected in a higher consumer propensity to self-disclose to brands.

Based on the existing studies, one might conclude that brand anthropomorphization positively influences consumer self-disclosure. However, the literature on social presence (Dahl, Manchanda, & Argo, 2001; Latané, 1981) suggests that this strategy might not always be effective, especially in the case of intimate disclosure. Prior research has shown that fear of embarrassment is one of the key factors behind consumer reluctance to self-disclose in an interpersonal context (White, 2004). Embarrassment is a self-conscious emotion that results from a threat to the individual's presented self (Dahl et al., 2001). People are reluctant to divulge information about themselves to others because they are concerned with communicating unwanted impressions of themselves that would lead to embarrassment (DePaulo et al., 1996; White, 2004). This reluctance intensifies as embarrassment increases, namely when more intimate topics are discussed. Brand anthropomorphism leads consumers to perceive brands as social actors capable of forming impressions and evaluating others (Epley & Waytz, 2009). Accordingly, we expect consumers to be particularly reluctant to engage in intimate self-disclosure with an anthropomorphized (as opposed to a non-anthropomorphized) brand because of the fear that it may evaluate them negatively.

H1. Consumers will disclose less intimate information to an anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized) brand.

H2. Embarrassment mediates the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on consumer disclosure of intimate information.

3.2.3 The Role of Indirect Questioning

The notion that brand anthropomorphism might negatively affect consumer propensity to engage in intimate disclosure raises an important question: how can marketers pursuing anthropomorphization as a tool to foster consumer-brand relationships overcome this

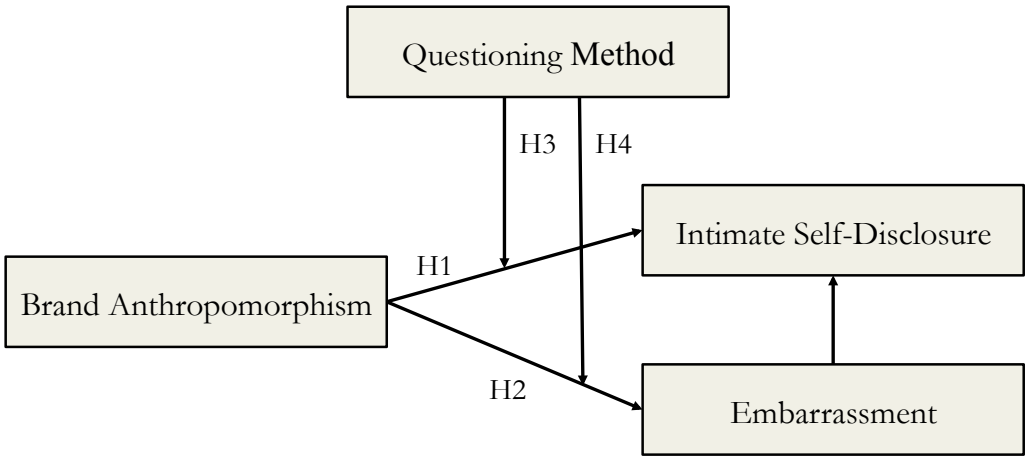
unintended negative effect? Research in marketing and social science suggests that indirect questioning is particularly useful in the investigation of intimate topics, for which direct questioning may provoke consumer reluctance to disclose (Fisher, 1993; Fisher & Tellis, 1998; John et al., 2011; Sengupta, Dahl, & Gorn, 2002). Indirect questioning, defined as "a projective technique that asks respondents to answer structured questions from the perspective of another person or group" (Fisher, 1993, p. 303), is often used for sensitive topics by researchers in marketing and other social sciences (Fisher & Tellis, 1998; Sengupta et al., 2002). By allowing respondents to project their own beliefs and behaviors onto the referent person without putting their presented self at risk, indirect questioning enables the researcher to overcome the social barriers (i.e., embarrassment) that inhibit the respondents' self-disclosure (Fisher, 1993). Considerable evidence in the literature validates the methodology of indirect questioning by showing that participants successfully project themselves onto the referent person rather than simply answering from a third-person perspective (e.g., Fisher, 1993; Sengupta et al., 2002). For example, (Fisher & Tellis, 1998) tested the effectiveness of indirect questioning by asking student participants to describe how a "typical college student" would respond to a set of questions. These responses were then compared to answers obtained through direct questioning. Findings demonstrated that indirect questioning is an effective technique for removing social barriers (such as embarrassment) when the questions asked are socially sensitive in nature while also appropriately measuring the truth.

These studies thus suggest that the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate disclosure is likely moderated by the questioning method (direct vs. indirect) employed by the brand and that embarrassment mediates this effect. In other words, when consumers anthropomorphize a brand, the use of the indirect (vs. direct) questioning method should decrease embarrassment and, ultimately, positively influence consumer disclosure of intimate information. Figure 3-1 depicts our conceptual model.

H3. The questioning method (direct vs. indirect) moderates the relationship between brand anthropomorphism and consumer disclosure of intimate information such that consumers will disclose relatively less (more) to an anthropomorphized brand when asked directly (indirectly).

H4. Embarrassment mediates the interaction effect of brand anthropomorphism and questioning method on consumer disclosure of intimate information.

Figure 3-1: Conceptual Model



We conduct three experiments to test our hypotheses. All three experiments examine actual consumer disclosure to a brand rather than mere disclosure intentions, thereby obtaining data most closely resembling real consumer behavior. In Experiment 1, we test Hypothesis 1 and provide an initial demonstration that anthropomorphizing a brand decreases consumer disclosure of intimate information. In Experiment 2, we replicate this finding and provide evidence for the mechanism of the backfiring effect: an anthropomorphized brand increases individuals' embarrassment when they disclose intimate information (Hypothesis 2). In addition, in Experiment 2, we demonstrate the downstream consequences of the backfiring effect by examining individuals' purchase intentions for the anthropomorphized brand. In Experiment 3, we examine the moderating effect of the questioning method (Hypothesis 3), showing that indirect questioning counteracts the detrimental effect of brand anthropomorphism. In addition, we provide additional evidence for the proposed mechanism by showing that embarrassment mediates the joint effect of brand anthropomorphism and indirect questioning on intimate disclosure (Hypothesis 4).

3.3 Experiment 1

The main purpose of our first experiment was to test Hypothesis 1 and thus to investigate whether brand anthropomorphism negatively influences the consumer disclosure of intimate information. We employed a fictitious online dating brand and examined the extent to which participants self-disclose to the brand when the brand is anthropomorphized versus when it is not. We used a fictitious brand to avoid confounding by preexisting perceptions of, and relationships with, an existing brand. Online dating websites commonly ask would-be members to respond to surveys that include intimate questions (e.g., feelings about relationships and sex) to customize offerings and build relationships with their consumers, thereby providing an ideal context to investigate the research question at hand.

3.3.1 Method

We employed a 2 (brand: anthropomorphized vs. non-anthropomorphized) × 2 (question: intimate vs. non-intimate) between-subjects experiment. One hundred fifty participants recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk online panel (females = 69, males = 80, unspecified = 1; M_{Age} = 32 years) participated in the study in exchange for $1.20. All participants were U. S. residents and were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

We gave participants the cover story that they would be participating in two related studies. The first study was a brand survey that contained the anthropomorphism and intimacy manipulations, as described later. Participants received information on the fictitious brand *Boost*. They learned that *Boost* was a European dating site that planned to expand to North America and that, as part of the expansion strategy, *Boost* had designed a survey to gain insight into how North Americans feel about themselves and about romantic relationships. Participants were then asked to complete *Boost*'s survey. They were always allowed to not answer a question. The second study was a questionnaire from the experimenters in which participants were asked to provide their reactions to the brand survey they had just completed and their general beliefs about the brand; this included the manipulation check questions. The study concluded with a brief demographic section.

Brand anthropomorphism manipulation. Consistent with prior research (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Puzakova et al., 2013), we manipulated anthropomorphism by depicting the brand with a human face and by using first (vs. third) person language so that the brand would be seen as its own spokesperson (see Appendix D; Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Puzakova et al., 2013). To ensure that participants were constantly exposed to the brand anthropomorphism stimulus, on each page of the brand's survey, a miniature-sized logo of the brand was reproduced on the top (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). The results of a pretest conducted with 40 participants recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk online panel confirmed the success of our manipulation. Pretest participants in the anthropomorphized brand condition perceived the brand as being more human than did participants in the non-anthropomorphized condition (M_{Anthro} = 3.40, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 2.29, p = .02).

We employed an anthropomorphism manipulation in which the brand was presented in a positive light (i.e., smiling face). We used a smiling face for two reasons. First, this is the common way marketers anthropomorphize brands in real life. Second, prior research on anthropomorphism (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007) suggests that the use of a smiling face enhances consumers' ability to anthropomorphize a given brand because a smile is typically more congruent with the general human schema. To rule out an explanation that such brand anthropomorphization might have inadvertently created more positive consumer responses and that this in turn might have affected self-disclosure, we included measures of brand personality (i.e., "sincere", "caring", and "considerate"; seven-point scale; α = .95), brand attitudes (i.e., "dislike/like", "unfavorable/ favorable", "bad/good"; seven-point scale; α = .97), brand trust (i.e., "*Boost* appears reliable", "I feel that I can trust *Boost*", "I feel that *Boost* can be counted on to help me and other consumers"; seven-point scale; α = .93), and mood (i.e., "I feel happy", "I feel in a good mood"; α = .93). We found no significant differences in brand personality (M_{Anthro} = 4.67, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 4.45, p > .10), brand attitudes (M_{Anthro} = 4.94, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 4.69, p > .10), brand trust (M_{Anthro} = 4.73, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 4.42, p > .10), or mood (M_{Anthro} = 5.41, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 5.46, p > .10) between the anthropomorphized and non-anthropomorphized conditions. Additionally, when including these variables in our main analysis as covariates, they yielded no significant

effects (*p values* > .10), and they did not dilute the focal two-way interaction. Thus, our effects cannot be attributed to differences in brand personality, brand attitudes, brand trust, or consumers' mood. These results are consistent with recent research that finds that anthropomorphism does not affect mood (Kim et al., 2016), brand personality or brand liking (Kwak et al., 2015), even when the product is advertised in a positive light (e.g., a cute and smiling product; Nenkov & Scott, 2014).

Intimacy of questions manipulation. To ascertain whether brand anthropomorphism negatively influences self-disclosure only in the case of intimate questions, we also included a baseline condition in which participants answered relatively non-intimate questions. Consistent with prior research (Jourard & Jaffe, 1970; Moon, 2000), the brand survey consisted of three questions on romantic relationships that were either low or high in intimacy. The questions are presented in Table 3-1. To test the effectiveness of our intimacy manipulation, we conducted another pretest (n = 40), in which participants evaluated how intimate they found the brand's questions. Pretest participants in the intimate condition found the questions more intimate than participants in the non-intimate condition ($M_{Intimate} = 5.65$, $M_{Non\text{-}Intimate} = 3.05$, $p = .00$), confirming the success of our manipulation.

Table 3-1: Intimacy of Questions Manipulation (Experiment 1)

Non-intimate condition	**Intimate condition**
What do you think is the most important value in a relationship?	What is the biggest disappointment you have experienced with the opposite sex?
What are some of the things you would definitely try to avoid on your first date?	What arouses you the most?
What makes you feel bored in a relationship?	What can make you feel uncomfortable during a sexual experience?

3.3.2 Measures

The degree of self-disclosure has typically been measured along two dimensions, namely depth and breadth (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Collins & Miller, 1994; Moon, 2000). Depth refers to the quality of information disclosed, whereas breadth refers to the quantity of information disclosed.

Depth of disclosure. Social penetration theory suggests that the quality of information disclosed between individuals is a strong indicator of the strength of their relationship (Altman & Taylor, 1973). As the relationship develops, individuals reveal increasingly intimate information about themselves. Accordingly, and in line with prior research (Moon, 2000), we measured depth of disclosure using independent judges. Specifically, two judges (interrater reliability = .94) who were blind to the experimental hypotheses and the experimental conditions independently rated the intimacy of the participants' disclosures. The judges based their ratings on the definition of intimate disclosure mentioned in the theoretical background. The ratings were on a five-point scale (1 = "low intimacy"; 5 = "high intimacy"). The two judges' ratings were averaged to form the intimacy measure.

Breadth of disclosure. Similarly to the depth of disclosure, the amount of information exchanged between individuals also determines whether their relationship develops (Altman & Taylor, 1973; McCroskey & Richmond, 1979). When individuals converse with each other, they cooperate to ensure that each understands the other's intended meaning (Grice, 1975). The more words someone uses to communicate, the more effort he or she is investing in being understood, indicating higher motivation to open the self to the other. We thus measured self-disclosure using a simple word count (Collins & Miller, 1994; Moon, 2000); the self-disclosure score represented the total number of words in a given participant's responses to the three brand questions.

Manipulation checks. For the manipulation check on anthropomorphism, participants indicated the extent to which they felt that *Boost* seemed to be like a human: "looks like a person"/"seems almost as if it had come alive"/"seems almost as if it has intentions"/"seems almost as if it has a mind of its own"/"seems almost as if it has consciousness"/"seems almost as if it has desires and beliefs" (Waytz et al. 2010; 1 = "Strongly disagree"; 7 = "Strongly agree"; α = .96). Participants also indicated how intimate they found the brand's questions on a three-item, seven-point scale ("not intimate at all/very intimate", "not intrusive at all/ very intrusive", "not sensitive at all/very sensitive"; α = .95).

Control variables. In addition to the primary measures of interest, we asked participants to indicate their general propensity to self-disclose (i.e., "My statements of my feelings are usually brief", "Only infrequently do I express my personal beliefs and opinions", "My conversation lasts the least time when I am discussing myself"; seven-point scale; α = .88; Wheeless, 1978), their involvement with online dating sites (i.e., "important"/ "of concern to me"/ "useful to me"; seven-point scale; α = .96; Zaichkowsky, 1985), and their gender as control variables. These variables yielded no significant effects (*p values* > .10); including them in the main analysis did not dilute the focal two-way interaction. As a result, these variables will not be discussed further.

3.3.3 Results

Manipulation checks. To test the effectiveness of the anthropomorphism manipulation, we conducted a 2 (brand: anthropomorphized vs. non-anthropomorphized) × 2 (question: intimate vs. non-intimate) between-subjects ANOVA in which anthropomorphism perception served as the dependent variable. As we intended, participants in the anthropomorphized brand condition perceived the brand as being more human than did participants in the non-anthropomorphized condition (M_{Anthro} = 4.11, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 2.60; F(1,149) = 44.15, p = .00).

Similarly, an analysis of the perceived intimacy of the brand's questions revealed that participants in the intimate condition perceived their questions as being more intimate than participants in the non-intimate condition ($M_{Intimate}$ = 5.55, $M_{Non\text{-}intimate}$ = 2.85; F(1,149) = 124.48, p = .00).

Depth of disclosure. We performed an ANOVA analysis with brand anthropomorphism and intimacy of questions as independent variables and disclosure depth as the dependent variable. The results revealed a significant two-way interaction of brand anthropomorphism and intimacy of questions on disclosure depth (F(1,149) = 4.02, p = .047), whereas the main effects were not significant (p > .10). Specifically, planned contrasts revealed that answers in the intimate condition were less intimate in the anthropomorphized than in the non-anthropomorphized condition (M_{Anthro} = 2.42, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 2.77; F(1,146) = 3.91, p =.05). However, in the non-

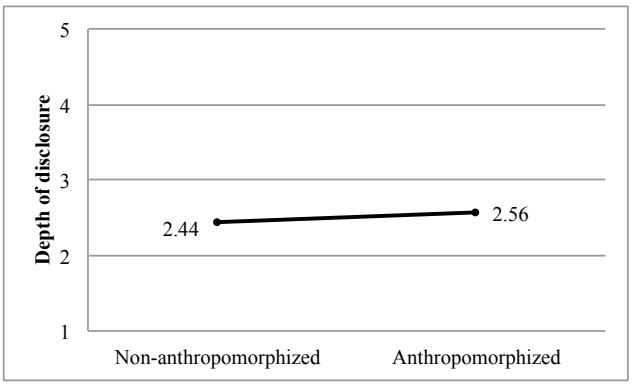
intimate condition, there was no significant difference in the answers' intimacy between the anthropomorphized and non-anthropomorphized conditions (M_{Anthro} = 2.56, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 2.44; p > .10). These results support Hypothesis 1.

Breadth of disclosure. Given that our dependent variable value is a count variable where its variance exceeds its mean (M = 24.56, SD = 23.89), we used a negative binomial regression model (Chen & Berger, 2013; Greene, 2008). We regressed self-disclosure on brand anthropomorphism, question intimacy, and their interaction term. The results revealed a marginally significant two-way interaction (Wald χ^2 = 3.09, p = .079), whereas the main effects were not significant (p values > .10). In line with our expectations, participants in the intimate condition disclosed less information when the brand was anthropomorphized (M_{Anthro} = 20.09, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 31.48; Wald χ^2 = 2.99, p = .08). However, there was no difference in self-disclosure between the anthropomorphized and non-anthropomorphized brands in the non-intimate condition (M_{Anthro} = 23.33, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 19.90, p > .10). Because question content differed between the intimate and non-intimate conditions and was thus likely to intrinsically elicit different amounts of disclosure, we do not compare consumer self-disclosure between these two conditions. The main objective of this study was to demonstrate that brand anthropomorphism negatively affects self-disclosure when intimate (vs. non-intimate) questions are asked. Figure 3-2 depicts the key results.

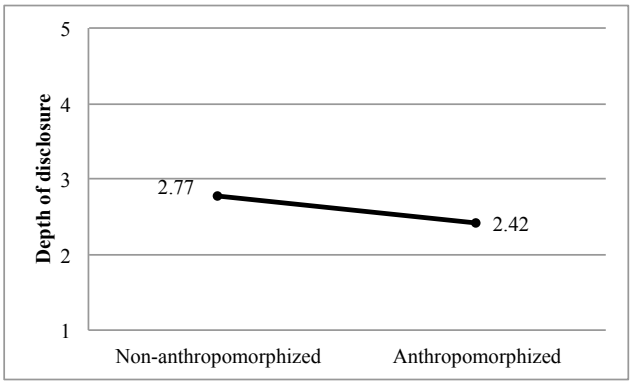
Figure 3-2: The Effect of Brand Anthropomorphism on Self-Disclosure (Experiment 1)

Depth of disclosure

A. Non-intimate questions (baseline condition)

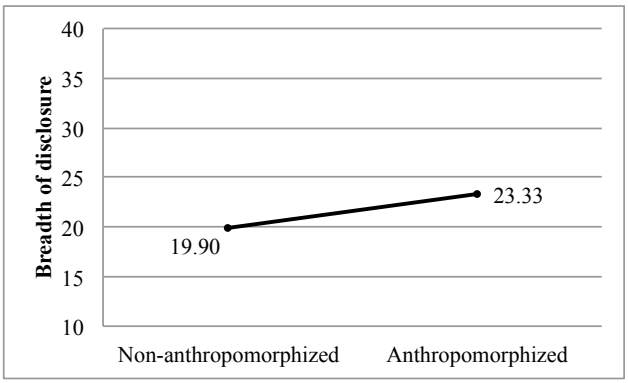


B. Intimate questions

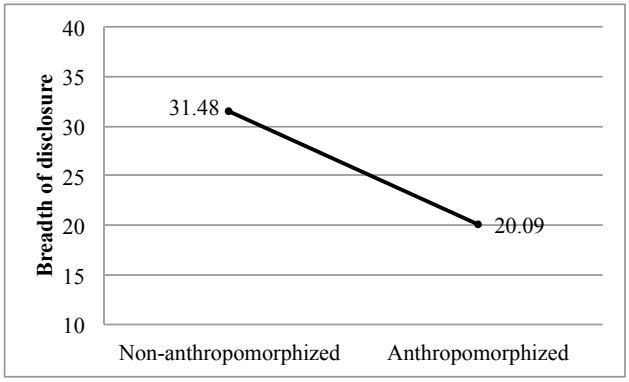


Breadth of disclosure

A. Non-intimate questions (baseline condition)



B. Intimate questions



3.3.4 Discussion

The results of Experiment 1 provide initial evidence that brand anthropomorphism has a negative impact on consumers' disclosure of intimate information, thereby supporting Hypothesis 1. Participants disclosed less intimate information to the anthropomorphized brand than to the non-anthropomorphized one. These effects occurred both in terms of the degree of intimacy in the disclosure (i.e., disclosure depth) and the amount of information disclosed (i.e., disclosure breadth). As such, our findings extend prior research and indicate that brand anthropomorphism does not always result in the desired consumer response. While brand anthropomorphism facilitates the development of consumer-brand relationships by offering a quasi-social experience, it also might increase consumers' perceptions of the brand as being capable of evaluating them, thereby decreasing their disclosure of intimate information. Importantly, this negative effect of brand anthropomorphism is demonstrated via actual consumer disclosure to a brand and not with stated intentions.

For the non-intimate questions, brand anthropomorphism did not affect consumer self-disclosure. While it was not the focus of our research, it is worth mentioning that we were not able to replicate prior research (Burgoon et al., 2000; Kim & McGill, 2011) that suggests that in the non-intimate condition, anthropomorphism would increase self-disclosure (because of an increase in the liking of interacting). Although people indeed disclosed more non-intimate information to the anthropomorphized brand, this effect was not significant. This could be explained by the fact that revealing information about the self – whether this information is intimate or not – systematically induces a risk of embarrassment (i.e., a risk of being negatively evaluated by others). Such perceived risk could offset the social interactive vibe supposedly triggered by brand anthropomorphism. This perceived risk of embarrassment intensifies as the degree of intimacy of the requested information increases.

Building on the intriguing finding of Experiment 1, the next study further examines the effect of anthropomorphizing a brand on consumers' self-disclosure. Importantly, the next study tests whether this effect occurs because brand anthropomorphism increases the embarrassment felt when facing intimate questions (Hypothesis 2).

3.4 Experiment 2

Experiment 2 served four purposes. First, we wanted to replicate the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate disclosure that we observed in Experiment 1. This replication is important because this negative effect achieved marginal significance for disclosure breadth in the prior study. Second, we sought to gain insight into the process underlying the effect. Specifically, we tested Hypothesis 2, which predicted that embarrassment mediates the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on consumers' disclosure of intimate information. We also examined an alternative account according to which consumers are less likely to trust an anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized) brand, feeling that it might have a humanlike mind with an evil intention to misuse intimate information (Puzakova et al., 2013). Third, we sought to explore the downstream consequences of self-disclosure. In particular, we measured participants' intentions to purchase products from the brand. We expected that the less information consumers reveal to a brand, the lower their willingness to develop a relationship with the brand, and therefore, the lower their purchase intentions. Fourth, we aimed to generalize our findings to a different product category and to a different disclosure topic. Specifically, we employed a fictitious brand that produces sanitary napkins and tampons and asked participants (all women) to complete a survey about feminine hygiene.

3.4.1 Method

We employed a 2 (brand: anthropomorphized vs. non-anthropomorphized) × 2 (question: intimate vs. non-intimate) between-subjects experiment. One hundred eighty-four participants, recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk online panel (All women; M_{Age} = 33 years), participated in the study in exchange for $1.10. All participants were U. S. residents and were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

We gave participants the cover story that they would be participating in a brand survey. Participants received information on the fictitious brand *Libresse*. They learned that *Libresse* was a brand producing sanitary napkins and tampons and that, as part of its research and development

program, *Libresse* was conducting a survey to gain insight into feminine hygiene issues. Participants were then invited to complete the brand survey. They were always allowed to not answer a question. The brand survey consisted of two parts, namely the self-disclosure questions and then questions to capture the consumers' general beliefs about the brand, including the manipulation check questions. The study concluded with a brief demographic section.

Brand anthropomorphism. We manipulated brand anthropomorphism with a combination of visual and verbal humanlike elements, similar to that in Experiment 1 (see Appendix E). To test the effectiveness of our manipulation, we ran a pretest with 40 participants recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk online panel. As expected, the pretest participants in the anthropomorphized brand condition perceived the brand as being more human than did participants in the non-anthropomorphized condition ($M_{Anthro} = 3.30$, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro} = 2.25$, $p = .03$).

Intimacy of questions manipulation. The brand survey consisted of four questions on feminine hygiene issues that were either low or high in intimacy. The questions are presented in Table 3-2*. To test the effectiveness of our intimacy manipulation, we conducted another pretest ($n = 40$) in which participants evaluated how intimate they found the brand's questions. Pretest participants in the intimate condition found the questions to be more intimate than participants in the non-intimate condition ($M_{Intimate} = 5.54$, $M_{Non\text{-}Intimate} = 2.33$; $p = .00$), confirming the success of our manipulation.

Table 3-2: Intimacy of Questions Manipulation (Experiment 2)

Non-intimate condition	**Intimate condition**
What would be your ideal packaging for sanitary napkins and/or tampons?	Please describe your period in a few sentences
In your opinion, what would be the ideal sanitary napkin be like?	Please recall and describe an embarrassing accident you had with your period
Are wings important in a sanitary napkin? Why or why not?	How do you deal with your pubic hair and why do you do so?
What are your dressing habits like during your period? To what degree does it differ from normal days?	Please describe your libido during your period

3.4.2 Measures

We used the same measures seen in the previous study for self-disclosure (depth and breadth) and manipulation checks on brand anthropomorphism and question intimacy. Again, for the depth of self-disclosure, two independent judges (interrater reliability = .96) independently rated the intimacy of the participants' disclosures.

We measured participants' feelings of embarrassment on a four-item, seven-point embarrassment scale ("Not embarrassed at all/Very embarrassed", "Not uncomfortable at

* A complete overview of the questionnaire is available upon request.

all/Very uncomfortable", "Not awkward at all/Very awkward", and "Not self-conscious at all / Very self-conscious"; $\alpha = .92$; Dahl et al., 2001).

To test the alternative explanation that consumers are less likely to trust an anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized) brand, we included a measure of brand trust using the commonly employed scale developed by Morgan and Hunt (1994): "I feel that I can trust Libresse/I feel that Libresse can be counted on to help me and other consumers/Libresse appears reliable/Libresse appears honest and truthful" (1 = "Strongly disagree"; 7 = "Strongly agree"). Participants rated their trust in the brand both before ($\alpha = .94$) and after ($\alpha = .95$) being exposed to the disclosure questions.

In addition, participants indicated their likelihood of purchasing products from the brand Libresse: "If they were on sale in the local area, how likely would you be to buy sanitary napkins or tampons from the brand Libresse? / If available, how likely would you be to try a sample sanitary napkin or tampon from Libresse?" (1 = "Extremely unlikely"; 7 = "Extremely likely"; $\alpha = .91$).

Control variables. We asked participants to indicate their mood ($\alpha = .91$) as well as their involvement with feminine hygiene ($\alpha = .91$) and sanitary napkins and tampons ($\alpha = .94$) as control variables using the same measures as in previous studies. Mood and involvement with sanitary napkins and tampons yielded no significant effects (p values > .10); including them in the main analysis did not dilute the focal two-way interaction. In contrast, involvement with feminine hygiene was a significant covariate (Wald $\chi^2 = 4.36$, $p = .04$). Thus, the subsequent analyses are reported with this variable included as covariate.

3.4.3 Results

Manipulation checks. As we intended, participants in the anthropomorphized brand condition perceived the brand as being more human than did participants in the non-anthropomorphized condition ($M_{Anthro} = 3.67$, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro} = 3.06$; $F(1,183) = 6.64$, $p = .01$). Similarly, an analysis of the perceived intimacy of the brand's questions confirmed that participants in the intimate condition perceived their questions as being more intimate than participants in the non-intimate condition ($M_{Intimate} = 5.58$, $M_{Non\text{-}intimate} = 3.46$; $F(1,183) = 76.62$, $p = .00$).

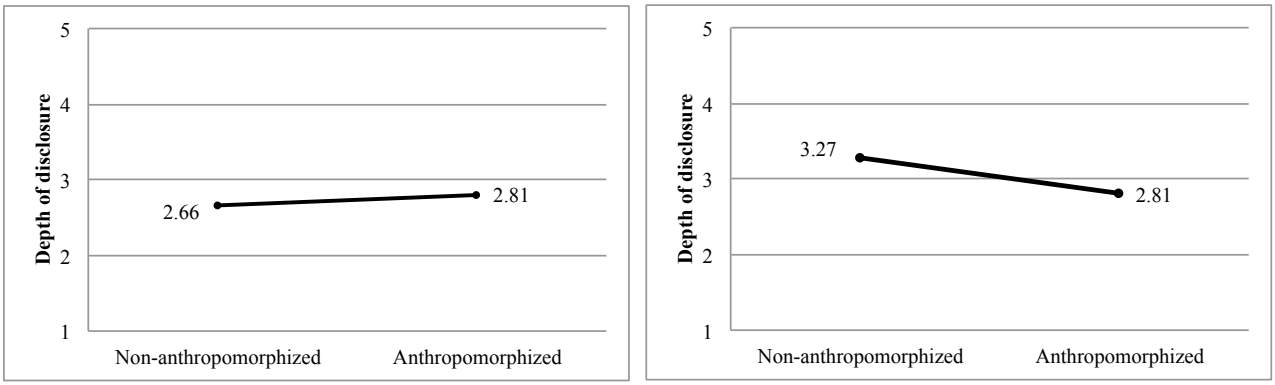
Depth of disclosure. We performed an ANOVA analysis with brand anthropomorphism and intimacy of questions as independent variables, disclosure depth as the dependent variable, and involvement with feminine hygiene as covariate. The results revealed a significant effect from the intimacy of questions on disclosure depth ($F(1,183) = 6.65$, $p = .01$), such that answers were more intimate in the intimate condition ($M = 3.04$) than in the non-intimate condition ($M = 2.73$). The main effect of brand anthropomorphism on disclosure depth was not significant ($p > .10$). Importantly, there was a significant two-way interaction of brand anthropomorphism and the intimacy of questions on disclosure depth ($F(1,183) = 6.76$, $p = .01$). Specifically, planned contrasts revealed that answers in the intimate condition were less intimate in the anthropomorphized than in the non-anthropomorphized condition ($M_{Anthro} = 2.81$, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro} = 3.27$; $F(1,179) = 7.37$, $p = .01$). However, in the non-intimate condition, there was no significant difference in the answers' intimacy between the anthropomorphized and non-anthropomorphized conditions ($M_{Anthro} = 2.81$, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro} = 2.66$; $p > .10$). These results support Hypothesis 1.

Breadth of disclosure. As in the previous study, our dependent variable value is a count variable, and its variance exceeds its mean (M = 56.96, SD = 45.93); we therefore used a negative binomial regression model (Chen & Berger, 2013; Greene, 2008). We regressed disclosure breadth on brand anthropomorphism, intimacy of questions, their interaction term, and involvement with feminine hygiene (covariate). The results revealed a marginally significant two-way interaction (Wald χ^2 = 3.29, p = .07), whereas the main effects were not significant (p values > .10). Specifically, participants in the intimate condition disclosed significantly less information when the brand was anthropomorphized (M_{Anthro} = 42.32, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 65.38; Wald χ^2 = 4.03, p = .04). However, participants in the non-intimate condition disclosed an equal amount of information to the anthropomorphized and non-anthropomorphized brands (M_{Anthro} = 60.53, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 53.55; Wald χ^2 = .35, p > .10). Again, these results support Hypothesis 1. Figure 3-3 depicts the key results.

Figure 3-3: The Effect of Brand Anthropomorphism on Self-Disclosure (Experiment 2)

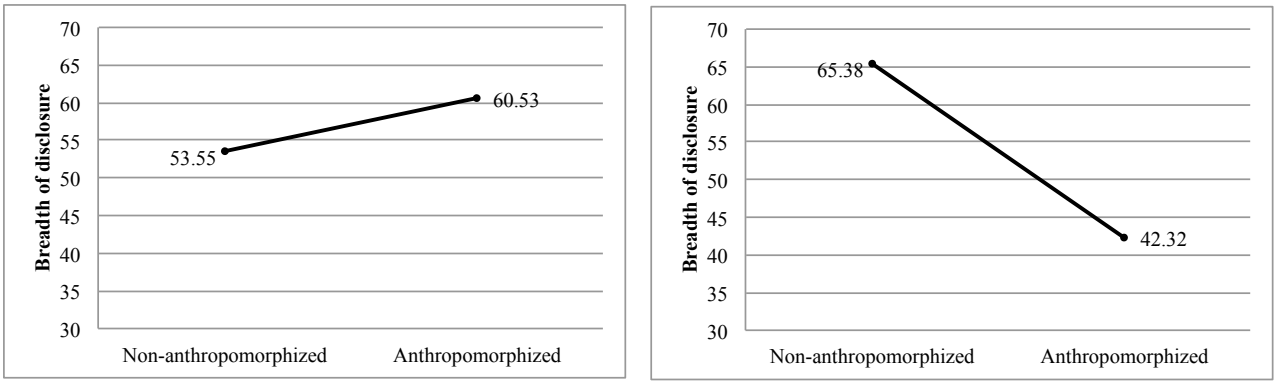
Depth of disclosure

A. Non-intimate questions (baseline condition) B. Intimate questions



Breadth of disclosure

A. Non-intimate questions (baseline condition) B. Intimate questions



Mediating role of embarrassment. To test whether embarrassment mediated the effect of brand anthropomorphism on self-disclosure (Hypothesis 2), we employed the bootstrap PROCESS

macro method (with 5,000 samples) suggested by Hayes (2013). PROCESS Model 8 estimates the conditional (i.e., moderated by the intimacy of questions asked) indirect effects of a causal variable (i.e., brand anthropomorphism) on an outcome variable (i.e., self-disclosure) through a proposed mediator (i.e., embarrassment). In the next paragraphs, we provide the results for depth and breadth of disclosure, respectively.

Depth of disclosure. First, the model regressed perceived embarrassment on brand anthropomorphism, intimacy of questions, their interaction, and involvement with feminine hygiene (covariate). The interaction of brand anthropomorphism x intimacy of questions predicted embarrassment (β = 1.29, t = 2.32, p = .02). Second, the model regressed disclosure depth on embarrassment, brand anthropomorphism, intimacy of questions, the interaction of the last two factors, and involvement with feminine hygiene (covariate). Embarrassment predicted disclosure depth (β = -.15, t = - 5.06, p = .00). Third, and most importantly, bootstrapping analysis revealed that embarrassment mediated the interactive effect of brand anthropomorphism and intimacy of questions, as the 95% confidence interval (CI) did not include zero (effect = -.19, 95% CI = -.44 to -.04).

Breadth of disclosure. We conducted the same mediation analysis with disclosure breadth as the dependent variable. Consistent with the previous results, we found that the brand anthropomorphism x intimacy of questions interaction predicted embarrassment (β = 1.29, t = 2.32, p = .02). Furthermore, embarrassment predicted disclosure breadth (β = -5.86, t = - 3.35, p = .00). Finally, bootstrapping analysis revealed that embarrassment mediated the interactive effect of brand anthropomorphism and intimacy of questions, as the 95% confidence interval did not include zero (effect = -7.66, 95% CI = -18.32 to -1.56). Thus, the results support the role of embarrassment as an underlying mechanism for the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure (Hypothesis 2).

Brand trust. Casting doubt on an alternative account based on brand trust, an examination of brand trust ratings before and after exposure to the self-disclosure questions suggested that our manipulation of brand anthropomorphism did not influence participants' trust in the brand. An ANOVA analysis with brand anthropomorphism and intimacy of questions as independent variables, brand trust as the dependent variable, and initial brand trust (i.e., brand trust before being exposed to the anthropomorphism and intimacy of questions stimuli) as covariate revealed a significant effect of the intimacy of questions on brand trust ($F(1,183) = 4.11$, $p = .04$), such that participants had less trust in the brand in the intimate condition (M = 4.88) than in the non-intimate one (M = 5.25). However, the main effect of brand anthropomorphism and the interaction term of brand anthropomorphism and intimacy of questions were not significant (p values > .10). In addition, bootstrapping analysis (PROCESS Model 8; Hayes, 2013) confirmed that brand trust did not mediate the interactive effect of brand anthropomorphism and intimacy of questions on intimate self-disclosure, as the 95% confidence interval included zero (for depth: 95% CI = -.17 to .04; for breadth: 95% CI = -8.43 to 2.44). Thus, the alternative account based on brand trust was not supported.

Purchase intentions (Downstream consequence). We performed an ANOVA analysis with brand anthropomorphism and intimacy of questions as independent variables and purchase intentions as the dependent variable. The results revealed a significant two-way interaction of brand anthropomorphism and intimacy of questions on purchase intentions ($F(1,183) = 7.37$, $p = .01$),

whereas the main effects were not significant (p values > .10). In line with our expectations, planned contrasts revealed that, in the intimate condition, participants were less willing to buy products from the brand when the brand was anthropomorphized than when it was not (M_{Anthro} = 4.56, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 5.28; F(1,180) = 5.02, p =.03). However, in the non-intimate condition, there was no significant difference in purchase intentions between the anthropomorphized and non-anthropomorphized conditions (M_{Anthro} = 5.50, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 5.02; p > .10).

To test whether the interaction effect of brand anthropomorphism and intimacy of questions on purchase intentions was mediated by self-disclosure, we conducted two mediation analyses using the bootstrap PROCESS macro method (with 5,000 samples; Hayes, 2013). Specifically, PROCESS Model 8 estimated the conditional (i.e., moderated by the intimacy of questions asked) indirect effects of a causal variable (i.e., brand anthropomorphism) on an outcome variable (i.e., purchase intentions) through two proposed mediators (i.e., depth and breadth of self-disclosure). We found that the brand anthropomorphism x intimacy of questions interaction predicted self-disclosure (for depth: β_{Depth} = -.61, t_{Depth} = -2.58, p_{Depth} = .01; for breadth: $\beta_{Breadth}$ = -28.88, $t_{Breadth}$ = -2.14, $p_{Breadth}$ = .03). Furthermore, self-disclosure predicted purchase intentions (for depth: β_{Depth} = .28, t_{Depth} = 2.11, p_{Depth} = .04; for breadth: $\beta_{Breadth}$ = .005, $t_{Breadth}$ = 2.24, $p_{Breadth}$ = .03). Finally, bootstrapping analysis revealed that self-disclosure mediated the interactive effect of brand anthropomorphism and intimacy of questions, as the 95% confidence interval did not include zero (for depth: $effect_{Depth}$ = -.18, 95% CI_{Depth} = -.52 to -.02; for breadth: $effect_{Breadth}$ = -.15, 95% $CI_{Breadth}$ = -.45 to -.01).

3.4.4 Discussion

Employing a different product category and a different disclosure topic, the results of Experiment 2 replicate the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure (Hypothesis 1). These effects again occurred both in terms of the degree of intimacy in the disclosure (i.e., disclosure depth) and of the amount of information disclosed (i.e., disclosure breadth). Importantly, Experiment 2 provides insight into the process through which brand anthropomorphism affects intimate self-disclosure via embarrassment. In addition, we strengthen our theorization by ruling out an alternative account according to which consumers are less likely to trust an anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized) brand. Prior research suggests that when people anthropomorphize a brand, they are more likely to perceive the brand as having reasoned thought and intentions (Puzakova et al., 2013), and therefore, they might have less trust in the brand. However, we showed that our manipulation of anthropomorphism did not affect brand trust. Finally, Experiment 2 demonstrates a downstream consequence of the backfiring effect of anthropomorphism. We found that the less consumers self-disclosed to a brand, the lower their intentions to buy products from that brand.

As in Experiment 1, question content differed between the intimate and non-intimate conditions, which did not permit comparison of consumer self-disclosure between these conditions. We address these issues in Experiment 3 by asking identical questions to all participants and only varying the questioning method.

Having established that brand anthropomorphism negatively influences intimate self-disclosure and that embarrassment mediates this effect, the next study focuses on intimate self-disclosure and examines a tactic that anthropomorphized brands can employ to mitigate this negative effect.

3.5 Experiment 3

In Experiment 3, we examined whether indirect questioning mitigates the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure (Hypothesis 3). In addition, we aimed to further reveal the role of embarrassment as an underlying mechanism by showing that the moderating effect of indirect questioning on self-disclosure occurs through embarrassment (Hypothesis 4). The rationale for this study was that if an anthropomorphized brand decreases the disclosure of intimate information because it elicits higher embarrassment, then the negative effect should be reduced when the consumer's self is perceived as less threatened, that is, when consumers are asked intimate information in an indirect way. We employed a fictitious brand in the clothing product category and examined the extent to which participants engage in self-disclosure with the brand.

3.5.1 Method

We employed a 2 (brand: anthropomorphized vs. non-anthropomorphized) × 2 (questioning method: direct vs. indirect) between-subjects experiment. Ninety-five undergraduate students from a North American university (females = 59, males = 36) participated in the study in exchange for CAD $10. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and followed procedures identical to those reported in previous studies. Participants received information on the brand *Carmi*. They learned that *Carmi* is a European clothing brand that plans to expand to North America and that, as part of the expansion strategy, *Carmi* had designed a survey to gain insight into North Americans consumers.

Brand anthropomorphism and questioning method manipulations. The manipulation of brand anthropomorphism was similar to that of the previous studies (see Appendix F). To test the effectiveness of our manipulation, we ran a pretest with 100 participants recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk online panel. As expected, the pretest participants in the anthropomorphized brand condition perceived the brand as being more human than did participants in the non-anthropomorphized condition ($M_{Anthro} = 3.89$, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro} = 3.04$; $p = .01$).

The questioning method was manipulated between participants. As a cover story, we told participants that the brand was planning to create an advertising campaign aimed at North American consumers. The campaign would aim to illustrate very intense romantic relationships. For this reason, information about how North Americans feel about very intense romantic relationships was sought. Insights from people's real life experiences would provide inspiration for the advertisements. Accordingly, *Carmi*'s survey consisted of four questions on consumers' sexual behavior (see Table 3-3). The content of the questions was intentionally kept identical, and only the style of questioning differed. Consistent with prior research (Fisher, 1993; Fisher & Tellis, 1998; Sengupta et al., 2002), we asked participants to answer the questions from their own perspective (direct condition) versus from the perspective of the average North American (indirect condition). We used "the average North American" as the referent person to enable participants to relate to, and project themselves onto, a person similar to themselves.

Table 3-3: Questioning Method Manipulation (Experiment 3)

Direct condition	Indirect condition
How would you let a potential romantic partner know you would like to have sex with them?	According to you, how would a typical North American let a potential romantic partner know they would like to have sex with them?
Can you describe a sexual fantasy that you have?	What do you think is the most common sexual fantasy that North Americans have?
What can make you feel uncomfortable during a sexual experience?	In your opinion, what can make a typical North American feel uncomfortable during a sexual experience?
What arouses you the most?	In your opinion, what arouses a typical North American the most?

3.5.2 Measures

We used the same measures seen in the previous two studies for self-disclosure (depth and breadth) and embarrassment (α = .92). Regarding depth of disclosure, we again asked two independent judges (interrater reliability = .97) to independently rate the intimacy of the participants' disclosures.

Control variables. We asked participants to indicate their general propensity to self-disclose (α = .58); their involvement with clothes (α = .88); their mood (α = .92), and their gender as control variables on the same measures used in the previous two studies. We additionally measured consumers' self-image concerns (i.e. "I'm concerned about the way I present myself", "I'm concerned about what other people think of me"; seven-point scale; α = .83). These variables yielded no significant effects (p values > .10); including them in the main analysis did not dilute the focal two-way interaction. As a result, these variables will not be discussed further.

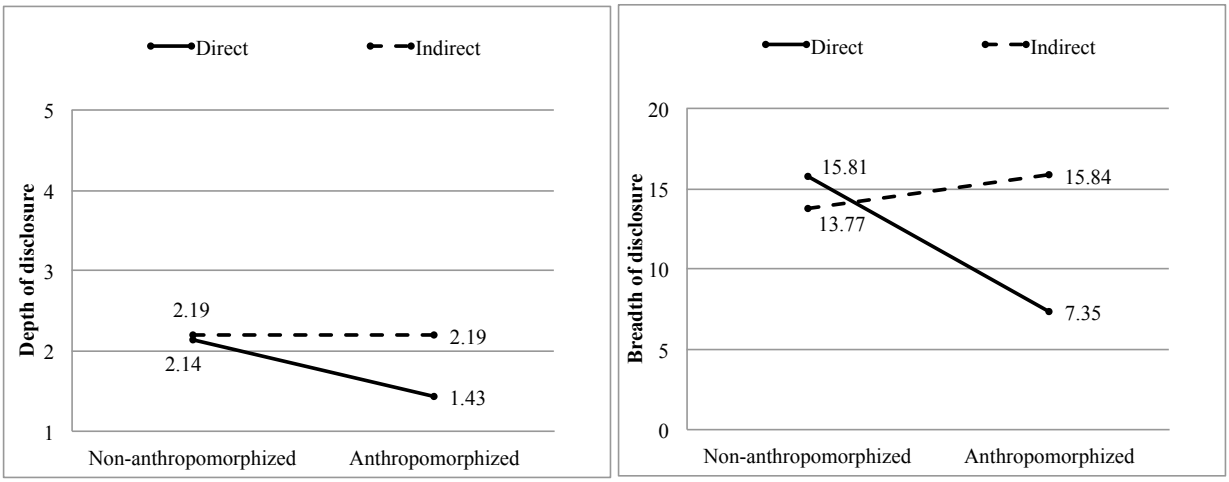
3.5.3 Results

Depth of disclosure. We performed an ANOVA analysis with brand anthropomorphism and questioning method as independent variables and depth of disclosure as the dependent variable. The results revealed a significant effect of brand anthropomorphism on depth of disclosure ($F(1,91) = 4.46$, $p = .04$), such that answers were less intimate in the anthropomorphized condition ($M_{Anthro} = 1.81$) than in the non-anthropomorphized condition ($M_{Non\text{-}anthro} = 2.16$). We also found a significant effect of the questioning method on depth of disclosure ($F(1,91) = 5.89$, $p = .02$), such that answers were more intimate in the indirect condition ($M_{Indirect} = 2.19$) than in the direct condition ($M_{Direct} = 1.79$). There was also a significant two-way interaction of brand anthropomorphism and questioning method on disclosure depth ($F(1,91) = 4.65$, $p = .03$). Specifically, planned contrasts revealed that answers in the direct condition were less intimate in the anthropomorphized than in the non-anthropomorphized condition ($M_{Anthro} = 1.43$, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro} = 2.14$; $F(1,91) = 8.48$, $p = .00$). However, in the indirect condition, there was no significant

difference in the answers' intimacy between the anthropomorphized and non-anthropomorphized conditions (M_{Anthro} = 2.195, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 2.188; p > .10). These findings are in line with our Hypotheses 1 and 3.

Breadth of disclosure. As in the previous two studies, our dependent variable value is a count variable where its variance exceeds its mean (M = 13.21, SD = 12.68), we therefore used a negative binomial regression model (Chen & Berger, 2013; Greene, 2008). We regressed disclosure breadth on brand anthropomorphism, questioning method, and their interaction term. The results revealed a significant two-way interaction (Wald χ^2 = 4.47, p = .03), whereas the main effects were not significant (p values > .10). Specifically, participants in the direct condition disclosed significantly less information when the brand was anthropomorphized (M_{Anthro} = 7.35, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 15.81; Wald χ^2 = 5.87, p = .01). However, participants in the indirect condition disclosed an equal amount of information to the anthropomorphized and non-anthropomorphized brands (M_{Anthro} = 15.84, $M_{Non\text{-}anthro}$ = 13.77; Wald χ^2 = .23, p > .10). These results support Hypotheses 1 and 3. Figure 3-4 depicts the key findings.

Figure 3-4: The Effect of Brand Anthropomorphism on Self-Disclosure (Experiment 3)



Mediating role of embarrassment. Hypothesis 4 stated that the interaction effect of brand anthropomorphism and questioning method on the disclosure of information is mediated by embarrassment. We tested this hypothesis by using the bootstrap PROCESS macro method (with 5,000 samples; Hayes, 2013). Specifically, we estimated the conditional (i.e., moderated by the questioning method) indirect effects of a causal variable (i.e., brand anthropomorphism) on an outcome variable (i.e., intimate self-disclosure) through a proposed mediator (i.e., embarrassment). In the next paragraphs, we provide the results for our depth and breadth of self-disclosure, respectively.

Depth of disclosure. First, the model regressed perceived embarrassment on brand anthropomorphism, questioning method, and their interaction. The brand anthropomorphism x questioning method interaction predicted embarrassment (β = 1.36, t = 2.00, p = .05). Second, the model regressed depth of disclosure on embarrassment, brand anthropomorphism, questioning method, and the interaction of the latter two factors. Embarrassment predicted disclosure depth (β = -.18, t = - 3.83, p = .00). Third, and most importantly, bootstrapping

analysis revealed that embarrassment mediated the interactive effect of brand anthropomorphism and questioning method, as the 95% confidence interval did not include zero (effect = -.25, 95% CI = -.58 to -.01).

Breadth of disclosure. We conducted the same mediation analysis with breadth of disclosure as the dependent variable. Consistent with the previous results, we found that the brand anthropomorphism x questioning method interaction predicted embarrassment (β = 1.36, t = 2.00, p = .05). Furthermore, embarrassment predicted disclosure breadth (β = -2.47, t = - 3.29, p = .00). Finally, bootstrapping analysis revealed that embarrassment mediated the interactive effect of brand anthropomorphism and questioning method, as the 95% confidence interval did not include zero (effect = -3.35, 95% CI = -8.51 to -.38). Thus, the results support the role of embarrassment as an underlying mechanism for the interaction between brand anthropomorphism and questioning method on intimate self-disclosure (Hypothesis 4).

3.5.4 Discussion

The results of Experiment 3 provide support for Hypothesis 3, that the questioning method (direct vs. indirect) moderates the effect of brand anthropomorphism on consumers' disclosure of intimate information. These results underscore our key assertions that brand anthropomorphism negatively affects intimate self-disclosure (both in terms of depth and breadth) when questions are asked in a direct style and that indirect questioning mitigates this negative effect. More importantly, Experiment 3 provides further evidence for the mechanism of the backfiring effect of anthropomorphizing a brand. Specifically, we show that when consumers are asked for intimate information in a direct way, brand anthropomorphism increases embarrassment and consequently lowers self-disclosure, in line with Hypotheses 1 and 2. In contrast, when consumers are asked for intimate information in an indirect way (i.e., about a typical other), the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on embarrassment and subsequently on disclosure disappear, supporting Hypotheses 3 and 4.

3.6 General Discussion

Marketers typically strive to collect information about their consumers in an attempt to foster consumer-brand relationships. However, research has revealed that consumers are generally reluctant to divulge information about themselves to brands, especially when the information requested becomes intimate. The current research examines how brand anthropomorphization affects consumer propensity to engage in intimate self-disclosure with brands. The results of three experiments provide robust evidence that brand anthropomorphization can have a negative effect on consumers' propensity to disclose intimate information within the context of both service brands (Experiment 1) and product brands (Studies 2 and 3). This effect occurs because an anthropomorphized brand is perceived as being mindful and capable of evaluating others, thereby increasing the level of embarrassment consumers experience when disclosing intimate information. Specifically, our three studies consistently show that consumers disclose less intimate information when a brand is anthropomorphized (vs. not anthropomorphized). Importantly, the results are demonstrated using actual self-disclosure – and not stated intentions – both in terms of the degree of intimacy in the disclosure as well as the amount of information disclosed. Experiment 2 also tests the proposed mechanism for the backfiring effect of brand

anthropomorphism. Specifically, we demonstrate that consumers experience more embarrassment when revealing intimate information to an anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized) brand. In addition, in Experiment 2, we explored a downstream consequence of self-disclosure by measuring participants' intentions to purchase products from the brand. This variable provides additional important marketing implications by showing that the detrimental effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure subsequently negatively affects consumers' purchase intentions. Experiment 3 investigates a theoretically and practically meaningful moderator of the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure. We shed light on indirect questioning as a tactic that anthropomorphized brands can employ to mitigate this negative effect. Finally, Experiment 3 further explores the underlying mechanism and shows that consumers' embarrassment mediates the joint effects of brand anthropomorphism and questioning method (direct vs. indirect) on intimate self-disclosure.

3.6.1 Theoretical Implications

This research makes several contributions to the literature on anthropomorphism. First, we contribute to the emerging body of work on the negative consequences of anthropomorphism (Kim et al., 2016; Kim & McGill, 2011; Kwak et al., 2015; Puzakova et al., 2013) by challenging the general assumption that anthropomorphism elicits a positive consumer response (Chandler & Schwarz, 2010; Delbaere et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2007). That is, we find a negative effect of brand anthropomorphization in a new domain that is key to consumer-brand relationships: consumer self-disclosure. Importantly, most previous studies have examined consumers' perceptions and evaluations of anthropomorphized entities (e.g., products and brands) instead of examining their actual experience with these entities. The current research fills this gap by investigating actual consumer disclosure of intimate information to anthropomorphized brands.

Second, our research elucidates the underlying process and shows that when consumers anthropomorphize a brand, they can experience embarrassment, a self-conscious emotion that is normally experienced in an interpersonal context. A subtle difference in the appearance of a brand coupled with a branded message written in first person is sufficient to elicit the perception of the brand as being human and, thus, as capable of evaluating others. This perception in turn affects embarrassment and the propensity to engage in intimate disclosure. To the best of our knowledge, this research is the first to demonstrate the effect of brand anthropomorphism on consumer embarrassment.

Third, we deepen understanding of how people rely on social beliefs and perceptions when an inanimate brand is anthropomorphized. Specifically, while prior studies exploring the effect of brand anthropomorphism mainly focused on how consumers evaluate a brand (e.g., brand attitudes; Puzakova et al., 2013) or a brand's actions (e.g., price fairness; Kwak et al., 2015), our work adopts a contrasting perspective and shows how brand anthropomorphism affects the extent to which consumers perceive a brand as evaluating them. In doing so, we show that brand anthropomorphism gives rise to a bi-directional dynamic between consumers and brands in which the consumer is not the only one capable of evaluating the other. Traditionally, most consumer research elicits and measures only one side of the consumer-brand relationship: the consumers' perceptions of the brand. In the current paper, we tap into the other side of the relationship: the inference made by the consumer about how the brand might perceive him or her. Understanding this side of the relationship is important because it provides a more complete

picture of the relationship between a brand and a consumer and, in particular, of the dialogue between the brand and the consumer occurring inside the consumer's mind (Blackston & Lebar, 2015).

Our research also provides guidance for how the use of indirect questioning can mitigate the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure. We thus contribute to research on projective methods, which has primarily been examined in an interpersonal context. We demonstrate that anthropomorphized brands can successfully employ the indirect questioning technique for intimate topics. By showing that indirect questioning plays a moderating role only when a brand is anthropomorphized, our results further support the premise that brand anthropomorphism offers a quasi-interpersonal experience (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012).

Finally and importantly, our research contributes to prior work on consumer self-disclosure. Prior research examined how the disclosure behavior of others (Acquisti et al., 2012; Moon, 2000), contextual cues (John et al., 2011), and consumers' perceived relationship with a company (White, 2004) influence consumer propensity or willingness to engage in relatively intimate self-disclosure. However, prior research is silent as to how the type of brand positioning affects the way that consumers reveal intimate information to marketers. The current study contributes to this line of work by identifying a brand positioning strategy, i.e., anthropomorphization, that has a negative effect on consumer self-disclosure. Importantly, and unlike prior research (White, 2004), we examine actual consumer disclosure to a brand beyond mere disclosure intentions. Furthermore, we show that even in an anonymous setting, such as an online survey, brand anthropomorphism elicits feelings of embarrassment, thereby reducing consumer self-disclosure. These findings contrast with those of Fisher (1993), who showed that respondents are unlikely to feel threatened or embarrassed when self-disclosing in an anonymous context.

3.6.2 Managerial Implications

The present research has several practical implications for marketers. We provide answers to the following major managerial question: How does the adoption of a brand anthropomorphization strategy affect consumers' propensity to divulge information about themselves, intimate information in particular, to marketers? Our research shows that brand anthropomorphization, a positioning strategy commonly employed by marketers to better connect with consumers, has an unintended and adverse effect on consumers' disclosure of intimate information. Specifically, consumers disclose less intimate information to anthropomorphized than to non-anthropomorphized brands. This difference in consumers' self-disclosure to a brand, additionally, affects their intention to purchase products from the brand. We do not suggest that marketers should avoid the use of anthropomorphic strategies but rather that they should be aware of the negative consequences of these positioning strategies.

Furthermore, our results offer marketers guidance as to how to overcome the unintended negative effect of brand anthropomorphism and to more efficiently grasp the benefits of this positioning strategy. Specifically, we show that indirect attempts to obtain intimate information facilitate consumers' propensity to self-disclose. We find that consumers are more prone to disclose intimate information to anthropomorphized brands when questions are asked indirectly (i.e., about a typical other).

In addition, the current research has been conducted with consumers from Western countries (i.e., U.S. and Canada). However, the degree to which certain types of information are perceived as intimate is likely to vary between countries and, in particular, to be influenced by cultural differences (Aaker & Lee, 2001). Specifically, information that is perceived as barely or moderately intimate in Western cultures is likely to be felt as highly intimate in Eastern cultures. Therefore, consumers' embarrassment and reluctance to disclose intimate information to anthropomorphized brands might be much higher in those countries. This cultural factor is especially important for Western brands entering Eastern markets and interested in collecting information about consumers. Questioning methods such as indirect questioning should be particularly helpful for gaining insights into the minds of Eastern consumers.

Finally, it is not uncommon for marketers to ask consumers to engage in relatively intimate self-disclosure. For example, online dating sites typically ask (potential) members to respond to surveys regarding their feelings about relationships and sex. Online dating sites are extremely popular among consumers; brands such as Match.com, eHarmony, or OkCupid gather more than 30 million users who produce an unprecedented amount of data (Statistic Brain, 2016). Similarly, the condom brand, Durex, regularly conducts sex surveys as part of their research program by asking thousands of adult consumers how they feel about sex and what impact this has on other aspects of their lives (Durex, 2012). Beyond relationship-related and sexual information, asking consumers about their income, food habits, alcohol consumption, body type, medical information and even their age is also likely to be perceived as intimate. Thus, our findings have relevance to many sectors, including the banking, food, beverage, clothing, and very importantly, public health industries. For example, the National Center for Health Statistics recently asked 103,798 people to provide a range of health-related information such as level of obesity, leisure-time physical activity, psychological distress, and alcohol consumption (Ward, Clarke, Nugent, & Schiller, 2016). By gaining insight into how to successfully motivate consumers to open themselves to anthropomorphized brands, marketers of these brands can develop deeper relationships with them.

3.6.3 Limitations and Directions for Further Research

This research has certain limitations that offer avenues for future investigations. First, in our studies, we employed positive anthropomorphism manipulations (e.g., a smiling face) to better match the way that marketers often anthropomorphize brands in real life. Consistent with prior research (Puzakova et al., 2013), we demonstrated that the positive valence of our manipulation did not affect the perceived brand personality, brand attitudes, brand trust, or mood (Experiment 1). It would be worthwhile, however, to examine whether we observe the same effects when the brand's anthropomorphization is more neutral or even negatively valenced. We expect that such brand anthropomorphization would result in a higher reluctance to engage in intimate disclosure with the brand.

Second, future research should also examine the extent to which the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure occurs if the brand gradually escalates from superficial to intimate questions. In our studies, participants were immediately asked intimate questions. However, Moon (2000) found that consumers are more likely to disclose intimate information to a computer when they have first been "warmed" up through introductory questions. In contrast, Acquisti et al. (2012) found that a question appears to be more (less)

intimate if preceded by a more innocuous (a more intimate) question, which ultimately affects a respondent's propensity to answer the question (Acquisti et al., 2012). An exploration of the order in which questions of varying intimacy are asked and how this order alters the effect of brand anthropomorphism on consumer self-disclosure is therefore an important avenue for further research.

Third, another area of future investigation would be to examine the truthfulness of respondents' disclosures. Because it was not the focus of our research, we did not design our studies to validate the truthfulness of disclosures. Prior research has found that when the disclosure request is not forced (as was the case in our studies), people choose to omit responses rather than falsify them whenever they are not willing to answer (Norberg & Horne, 2014). To verify that the truthfulness of responses did not differ across conditions, we included a measure of truthfulness at the end of Experiment 1. The results revealed that participants answered the brand's survey truthfully ($M = 6.65$; $t(149)_{\text{diff from } 6} = 9.44$, $p = .00$). We also found that brand anthropomorphism had no effect on the extent to which consumers were truthful in their disclosures. However, consumers were marginally less tempted to tell the truth when asked intimate (vs. non-intimate) questions ($M_{\text{Intimate}} = 6.52$, $M_{\text{Non-intimate}} = 6.77$; $F(1,146) = 3.45$, $p = .07$), irrespective of whether the brand was anthropomorphized or not. An exploration of the factors that could facilitate the truthful disclosure of intimate information (e.g., indirect questioning) is an important topic for future research. But regardless of the truthfulness of consumer disclosure, we believe that the degree of intimacy and the amount of information exchanged (our measures of self-disclosure) are strong indicators of the consumer's willingness to interact with and open the self to the brand, establishing a foundation for longer-lasting relationships.

Finally, we conducted our studies using fictitious brands. This allowed us to cleanly manipulate brand anthropomorphism while controlling for preexisting perceptions of and relationships with an existing brand across conditions. A limitation, however, of using hypothetical brands is that we investigated the effects of brand anthropomorphism on self-disclosure for brands that consumers have no relationship with. Further research could delve deeper by employing existing brands with which consumers have developed a relationship. White (2004) explored the impact of consumers' relationship perceptions on willingness to self-disclose and showed that consumers with relatively deep (vs. shallow) relationship perceptions were more reluctant to divulge relatively intimate information. We therefore expect that employing existing brands would further enhance the negative effect of brand anthropomorphization on intimate self-disclosure.

Chapter 4

"Say What?" How the Interplay of Tweet Readability and Brand Hedonism Affect Consumer Engagement*

4.1 Introduction

The unprecedented potential of social media to create and leverage consumer engagement with brands has generated considerable excitement among marketers (Borah & Tellis, 2016; Homburg, Ehm, & Artz, 2015; Kumar et al., 2016; Kumar et al. 2013; Ma, Sun, and Kekre 2015; Naylor, Lamberton, and West 2012; Schulze, Schöler, & Skiera, 2014; Schweidel & Moe, 2014; Stephen & Galak, 2012; Toubia & Stephen, 2013; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013). Social media accounted for 10.6% of marketing budgets in 2016—a percentage that is expected to double in the next five years (Simply Measured, 2016). In their attempts to increase consumer engagement with their brands, marketers usually post brief messages on their social media pages. Consumer engagement, or a consumer's "behavioral manifestations that have a brand focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers" (van Doorn et al., 2010, p. 254), is a key measure of consumer–brand relationships, associated with strong self–brand connections, loyalty, and brand usage intentions (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). In a social media context, measures of engagement usually involve consumer acts such as liking or sharing (e.g., re-tweeting) a brand's message (Stephen, Sciandra, & Inman, 2015); encouraging consumers to share branded messages with friends can help bolster the impact of those messages through word of mouth in social networks (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009).

Such networks and social media platforms derive much of their appeal from their short formats, which enable quick and easy consumption, anywhere (Lee, 2014), and makes users more likely to read and share branded messages, especially through their mobile devices. For example, Twitter's popular microblogging services constrain users to messages (i.e., "tweets") that consist of no more than 140 characters. Such length restrictions require brands to craft their communication artfully (e.g., use abbreviations and acronyms) and rely on various social media–specific features (e.g., hashtags, at-mentions, emojis) to convey short, but appealing messages. Such efforts in turn can make tweets relatively complex and difficult to read and comprehend though (Davenport & DeLine, 2014; Temnikova, Vieweg, & Castillo, 2015), and this complexity of Twitter messages motivates our research.

Despite rich research on brand communication in social media, we lack a clear understanding of how the readability of messages disseminated by brands on social media affects consumer responses. On social media, consumers generally spend little time reading and processing branded messages (Lee, 2014), so they devote fewer mental resources to elaborating

* Grétry, A., Davis, S. W., Horváth, C., Belei, N. (2016), "Say what? How the interplay of Tweet readability and brand hedonism affect consumer engagement," paper under review at *Journal of Marketing* since January 2017.

on these messages and are more likely to rely on contextual cues rather than the content when evaluating them (i.e., peripheral route to persuasion in the elaboration likelihood model; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). The ease of reading a branded message may be a key determinant. If consumers experience difficulties reading branded messages to which they are exposed, the power of social media communication to leverage engagement would decrease significantly. We address this critical gap by examining two important questions: How does the ease of reading branded tweets affect consumer engagement with brands? Are there specific brand characteristics for which the effects differ?

To answer these questions, we draw on literature pertaining to processing fluency (Lee & Aaker, 2004; Lee & Labroo, 2004), which is a person's subjective feeling about how easy it is to process information. Substantial research shows that consumers respond more positively to messages that feel easy to process, and message readability contributes to processing ease (Rennekamp, 2012). Therefore, tweets that are easy to read seemingly might increase consumers' propensity to engage with the brand, whereas tweets perceived as hard to read should deter engagement. However, it is unclear whether such predictions, based on findings from existing research, apply to all types of brands. For example, the level of hedonism associated with a brand might moderate the effect of readability on consumer responses, such that easy-to-read tweets negatively (positively) influence consumer engagement with more (less) hedonic brands. Hedonic brands already are expected to be unique, uncommon, and exclusive (e.g., Mantonakis et al., 2013; Pocheptsova, Labroo, & Dhar, 2010), so an inference that a message from a more hedonic brand is uncommon and exclusive might invoke positive consumer responses (Mantonakis et al., 2013). Consumers might draw such inferences if a message is more difficult to read, which signals that it is less familiar (Pocheptsova, Labroo, & Dhar, 2010; Song & Schwarz, 2009). That is, we anticipate that reading difficulty might enhance consumer engagement for more hedonic brands but decrease it for less hedonic brands. To test these predictions, we examine various linguistic features that determine message readability and thereby classify a unique set of 24,960 branded tweets by 96 valuable brands (*Forbes*, 2016). At the time of our data collection, their Twitter audiences ranged from approximately 12,000 to 26 million followers. With these data, we can estimate the joint effects of message readability characteristics and brand hedonism on Twitter's metrics of consumer engagement.

In turn, this study offers three important contributions. First, we advance social media literature (e.g., de Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; van Laer & de Ruyter, 2010) by deepening understanding of how message style affects consumer engagement with brands through microblogging services such as Twitter. This first empirical investigation of message readability on Twitter reveals the nuanced effects of a tweet's readability, according to the hedonic nature of a brand. Second, this research contributes to message readability (Sawyer, Laran, & Xu, 2008; Venturi et al., 2015) and processing fluency (Lee & Aaker, 2004) literature, in that it challenges the conventional wisdom that clearer, more fluent, and easier-to-read communication universally results in more positive consumer responses. The level of brand hedonism is one important brand characteristic that moderates the impact of message readability on consumer brand engagement. Third, we contribute to readability research by examining various readability characteristics and determining how they interact with brand hedonism to affect consumer engagement. Specifically, we consider traditional readability characteristics (e.g., raw text, lexical and grammatical features), as well as characteristics specific to social media, such as hashtags (#), at-mentions (@), and emojis (i.e., small digital image used to express an idea or emotion).

Marketing managers thus can use these results to guide their efforts to write impactful, engaging tweets. In combination, our contributions advance understanding of brand communication through social media, a topic with growing importance in both marketing literature and practice.

4.2 Research Context: Twitter

Since its founding in 2006, Twitter has been growing steadily and globally, such that it counts more than 313 million active monthly users and 1 billion visits per month (Twitter, 2016a). It is thus among the most popular social media platforms in terms of usage and marketer interest, as compellingly demonstrated by its use for the unprecedented spread of information during notable events, including the U.S. presidential election (#PresidentTrump), terror attacks in Paris (#JeSuisParis), and activism against police violence (#BlackLivesMatter). Accordingly, marketing practitioners and researchers alike consider its implications carefully (e.g., Hennig-Thurau, Wiertz, & Feldhaus, 2015; Ma, Sun, & Kekre, 2015, Toubia & Stephen, 2013). Researchers even have determined that Twitter hosts more brand-central content than other social media platforms (Smith, Fischer, & Chen, 2012), so it provides an ideal context for investigating consumer- and brand-related research questions.

A key characteristic of Twitter is its provision of microblogging services. Twitter allows users to produce and share short-form messages (maximum 140 characters) with audiences. Twitter users (including brands) thus tend to use abbreviations, acronyms, and social media–specific features (e.g., hashtags, at-mentions, emojis) to shorten their messages. Such writing shortcuts can reduce readability though, prompting some complaints that the platform is too difficult to use (*The Telegraph*, 2015) because tweets are difficult to read and comprehend (Davenport & DeLine, 2014; Temnikova, Vieweg, & Castillo, 2015)[*]. Such readability concerns likely affect consumers' perceptions and subsequent reactions to short messages, but we lack sufficient insights, because most studies of readability investigate long texts. This gap is surprising, considering recent acknowledgements that readability issues are important for the short messages that dominate modern social media communication (Davenport & DeLine, 2014; Risius & Pape, 2015; Temnikova, Vieweg, & Castillo, 2015).

4.3 Conceptual Framework

4.3.1 Readability, Processing Fluency, and Consumer Response

Readability is "the ease of understanding or comprehension due to the style of writing" (Klare, 1963, p. 15) and "the extent to which readers understand [a text], read it at an optimal speed, and find it interesting" (Dale & Chall, 1949, p. 19). The concept evolved primarily in relation to student literacy, through evaluations of textbooks (DuBay, 2004), which could be assessed in terms of their reading difficulty for specific grade levels. This research stream relied almost

[*] This readability issue is likely to apply to all short-form communications, including those on social media platforms such as Facebook, Google Plus, and LinkedIn. Most platforms encourage the dissemination of short messages, and an industry report indicated that the ideal character count is around 70 characters for Twitter, 40 for Facebook, and 60 for Google Plus (Lee 2014). This trend toward short-form communications applies to branded communications; with a large-scale study on Facebook, Lee, Hosanagar, and Nair (2014) reveal that branded posts comprise 157.41 characters on average—not much longer than the Twitter limit of 140 characters.

exclusively on linguistic studies, giving rise to a plethora of readability formulas for determining difficulty levels (for a summary, see DuBay, 2004). Notably, most of these studies focus on long texts, such as books and articles with multiple pages (e.g., Dale & Chall, 1949; François & Miltsakaki, 2012; Klare, 1963; Venturi et al., 2015). The readability of short messages, comprising just a few sentences, has received scarce attention.

Furthermore, readability topics have been far more extensively studied in the linguistic field than in marketing. Empirical investigations into the readability of brand communication are particularly scant. Marketing researchers instead tend to address the broader concept of processing fluency, or the ease with which people process information (e.g., Lee & Aaker, 2004; Lee & Labroo, 2004; Novemsky et al., 2007; Song & Schwarz 2008). Whereas the literature on processing fluency does not focus on reading ease per se, it provides an important foundation for our research. We use processing fluency as a theoretical lens to predict how message readability might affect consumer engagement with brands.

Prior research investigates processing fluency in various ways. For example, previous studies have altered visual processing fluency by presenting materials in easy- or difficult-to-read font (e.g., Arial vs. Mistral; Novemsky et al., 2007; Song & Schwarz, 2008), or else manipulated linguistic processing fluency through the inclusion of easy- or hard-to-pronounce terms (e.g., Clearman vs. Ightsbry; Alter & Oppenheimer, 2006), simple versus complex synonyms (e.g., well vs. satisfactorily; Oppenheimer, 2006), and rhyming (e.g., "What sobriety conceals, alcohol reveals" vs. "What sobriety conceals, alcohol unmasks," McGlone & Tofighbakhsh, 2000).

Despite this variety of techniques, the corresponding consumer responses remain remarkably similar. That is, consumers respond more positively to messages that feel easy to process, signaling more favorable evaluations and greater liking (Lee & Aaker, 2004; Lee & Labroo, 2004), greater belief in the truth of the statement, and greater willingness to engage in the recommended behavior (Song & Schwarz, 2008). This positive effect reflects the naïve theories that consumers use to interpret their fluency experiences (Schwarz, 2004). In particular, the ease of processing information leads to inferences that the information is more familiar (Lee, 2001; Schwarz, 2004). For example, Whittlesea, Jacoby, and Girard (1990) find that consumers perceive unfamiliar words as more familiar if those words appear with higher visual clarity. Similarly, Pocheptsova, Labroo, and Dhar (2010) report that consumers exposed to product descriptions in easy-to-read (difficult-to-read) fonts misattribute processing ease (difficulty) to a sense of (un)familiarity with the product. People seem to perceive fluent information as more familiar, and this feeling of familiarity then enhances positive evaluations of the information (Lee, 2001). Because message readability increases feelings of processing fluency (Rennekamp, 2012), and processing fluency leads to more positive consumer responses, messages that are easy to read seemingly may result in more consumer engagement with the brand. We hypothesize:

H1. More readable messages from a brand lead to higher consumer engagement with that brand.

4.3.2 Moderating Role of the Brand's Hedonic Nature

This research tradition might lead marketers to conclude they should always make their branded messages easy to read. However, we caution that there may be brand characteristics for which low, rather than high, message readability increases consumer engagement. In particular, a recent

line of research emphasizes the importance of examining brand-level differences (Lovett, Peres, & Shachar, 2013; Sundar & Noseworthy, 2016), because consumer responses to marketing stimuli differ depending on the brands' specific characteristics. Lovett, Peres, and Shachar (2013) find that brands perceived as premium generate more online word of mouth than do non-premium ones; similar effects stem from other brand characteristics too, such as level of differentiation, excitement, and complexity. Although brands vary along many characteristics, a popular distinction classifies them into hedonic versus utilitarian categories (Chitturi, Raghunathan, & Mahajan, 2008; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Hedonic brands are associated with pleasurable, gratifying experiences and are evaluated primarily according to their benefits related to enjoyment and symbolic meaning; utilitarian brands are associated with instrumental, goal-oriented experiences and are evaluated on the basis of their functionality and practicality benefits (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). This difference suggests that social media communication practices might prompt different responses across the two types of brands. For example, Schulze, Schöler, and Skiera (2014) study viral marketing campaigns on Facebook and find that the same sharing mechanisms that make less utilitarian products successful are the worst mechanisms for promoting utilitarian products. Similarly, Roggeveen et al. (2015) show that presenting products and services using a dynamic, rather than static, visual format enhances consumer preference and willingness to pay for more (vs. less) hedonic options.

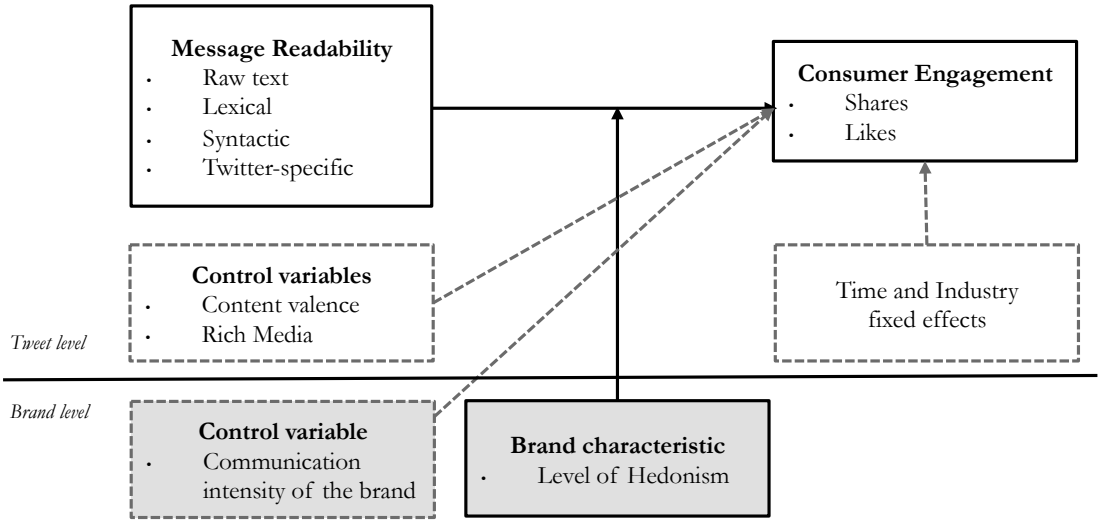
Consistently, we predict that the hedonic nature of a brand represents an important brand characteristic that may moderate the impact of message readability on consumer engagement with brands. A feeling of familiarity elicited by higher message readability might be detrimental for more hedonic brands, compared with their less hedonic counterparts. Whereas consumers generally prefer stimuli that are familiar, in some specific situations, unfamiliarity is preferred. Specifically, Pocheptsova, Labroo, and Dhar (2010) find that for special occasion products, for which lower familiarity and uniqueness provide consumers with signals of higher value, product information that is easier to process decreases the attractiveness of the product, by making it appear familiar and less unique. In other words, when consumers pursue exclusivity-related goals in consumption domains, they respond more positively to messages that are less easy to process, because these messages create a perception of exclusivity (vs. familiarity).

Just like special occasion products, hedonic brands generally seek to evoke novelty and exclusivity (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Sung & Kim, 2010). Consumers pursue different goals, depending on the type of brand (Botti & McGill, 2011; Chernev, 2004), such that they tend to express enjoyment, novelty, and exclusivity-related goals when interacting with hedonic brands (Chernev, 2004; Mantonakis et al., 2013). In such contexts, consumers may respond more positively to stimuli, such as branded messages, that evoke exclusivity but regard stimuli that elicit a feeling of familiarity as less valuable, because it would be inconsistent with their hedonic goals. Such perceptions of exclusivity might be elicited subtly, through the ease with which consumers can read a branded message, so messages that are easier (more difficult) to read appear more (less) familiar. Because hedonic brands generally are expected to offer more exclusive experiences, branded messages associated with lower readability may enhance consumer engagement by creating an impression of exclusivity.

H2. The level of brand hedonism moderates the relationship between message readability and consumer engagement with a brand, such that more readable messages from a more (less) hedonic brand lead to lower (higher) consumer engagement with that brand.

Figure 4-1 depicts our conceptual model. We define the central variables in the next section.

Figure 4-1: Conceptual Model



4.4 Empirical Studies

4.4.1 Data Collection

To investigate empirically how message readability and brand hedonism jointly affect consumer engagement with branded social media posts, we used Twitter's publicly available application programming interface (API) to collect a sample of branded tweets. The final data set of 24,960 branded tweets covers the period from January 1, 2015, to March 25, 2016. We selected brands from *Forbes*'s list of the 100 most valuable brands but excluded 4 brands that did not have a Twitter account, had not tweeted in the past three years, or did not tweet primarily in English. The complete list of brands, with additional brand information, is in Appendix G.

The 96 valuable brands (*Forbes*, 2016) represent 19 broad industry categories, such as technology (e.g., IBM), automotive (e.g., Mercedes-Benz), consumer packaged goods (e.g., Danone), and financial services (e.g., Goldman Sachs). For each brand, we collected the last 3,200 tweets it posted, which is the maximum number of tweets that can be retrieved per account with Twitter's API. Of these 3,200 tweets per account, we filtered out replies to specific consumers (which are visible only to the consumer and accounts that follow both the brand and the consumer), such that we retained tweets intended for all consumers and visible to the brand's entire audience. Next, we limited the number of tweets to the most recent 300 per brand, to ensure balanced repartition across brands. Finally, we limited our data set to tweets from 2015 and beyond, to diminish the potential noise resulting from Twitter's updates to its platform over time.

4.4.2 Key Variables and Measures

There are two main levels of analysis for this study: tweet and brand levels. Message readability and consumer engagement are tweet-level variables; brand hedonism is a brand-level variable.

Message readability. Message readability usually is measured according to a series of linguistic features that increase or decrease the text's readability and reading comprehension (Sawyer, Laran, & Xu, 2008). The choice of those linguistic features is not always straightforward, and there is an ongoing debate about which linguistic features best predict message readability (DuBay, 2004). Consistent with recent research (Venturi et al., 2015), we examined a set of eight stylistic features as proxies for readability measures: (1) tweet length (number of words per tweet), (2) average word length (characters per word), (3) frequency of non-words (number of words not found in the lexicon), (4) noun-to-verb ratio, (5) average parse tree depth (syntactic measures reflecting sentence complexity), (6) frequency of hashtags, (7) frequency of at-mentions, and (8) frequency of emojis. The last three features are Twitter-specific and not considered by Venturi et al. (2015); we added them for this research specifically. By extending the assessment beyond traditional readability measures that rely exclusively on raw text features, such as sentence and word length, we provide a more comprehensive view of a tweet's overall readability and thus seek to address concerns about the effectiveness of traditional measures for capturing linguistic factors related to more complex texts (François & Miltsakaki, 2012; Venturi et al., 2015). We collected the measures using a part-of-speech (POS) tagger that can deal with the linguistic conventions of Twitter communications (Gimpel et al., 2011). In addition, for each frequency measure, we used relative rather than absolute frequencies to control for the length of the tweet, which likely correlates with the absolute frequencies. That is, we divided the absolute frequencies within each tweet by its total number of words (tweet length; Homburg, Ehm, & Artz, 2015). Consistent with prior research (e.g., Venturi et al., 2015), we treated the eight readability variables independently, to gauge the individual effect of each readability variable on consumer engagement[*].

As Table 1 depicts, we also classified the eight readability variables into four broader readability categories (Venturi et al., 2015): (1) raw text features (tweet length and average word length), (2) lexical features (frequency of non-words), (3) syntactic features (noun-to-verb ratio and average parse tree depth), and (4) Twitter-specific features (frequency of hashtags, at-mentions, and emojis). According to prior literature, the first three broad categories all decrease the ease with which people read messages. First, longer messages are grammatically more complex than shorter ones, and longer words are less comprehensible than shorter ones (Temnikova, Vieweg, & Castillo, 2015; Venturi et al., 2015). Second, the internal composition of the vocabulary of the text might feature unfamiliar non-words, which are more difficult to understand (Temnikova, Vieweg, & Castillo, 2015; Venturi et al., 2015). Third, syntactic complexity is associated with delayed processing and more time required to gain understanding (Gibson 1998), which decreases readability (Venturi et al., 2015).

Virtually no empirical research has investigated the effect of Twitter-specific features on message readability though (cf. Davenport & DeLine, 2014; Temnikova, Vieweg, & Castillo, 2015), so predictions about their effects on perceived reading ease are less straightforward. On the one hand, the use of hashtags, at-mentions, and emojis increases the visual complexity of a

[*] We considered combining the eight readability variables, but a factor analysis supported the idea of treating them separately.

tweet and might distract readers from the words, making it harder to read and comprehend. On the other hand, they provide structure to a tweet and establish its context, which might facilitate processing. For example, brands use hashtags to highlight key terms within their tweets (e.g., "#HSBC decides to remain headquartered in the UK"). Similarly, at-mentions typically function to draw attention to a particular user or entity (e.g., "Happy birthday, @DisneyPixar!"). Brands use emojis to depict a specific object, sport, or place but also to convey specific emotions (e.g., humor, anger, smiling).

Consumer engagement with brands. For the measure of consumer engagement with brands on social media, we used standard social media metrics, such as sharing and liking a branded tweet. That is, we measured the number of shares (users clicking "retweet") and likes (users clicking "like") that each tweet received. We used the total counts of shares and likes at the time the data were collected. Each engagement measure for each tweet thus reflected the final value of the underlying time series, that is, the maximum cumulative level reached for that tweet, assuming no future retweets of the messages in our data set (Stephen, Sciandra, & Inman, 2015). We downloaded the data one week after the observation window, so our engagement data should represent the final levels of those variables achieved by each tweet during its run on Twitter. Twitter presents the newest tweets first, as they happen in real time, and thus users are unlikely to be served tweets more than a week old (Twitter, 2016b). In addition, tweets posted by brands with more followers may achieve higher levels of consumer engagement, so we use a relative rather than an absolute engagement measure to ensure that the results are not driven by audience size. The relative consumer engagement variable thus is an absolute engagement measure divided by the number of brand followers.

Level of brand hedonism. For each brand, we measured the level of hedonism by relying on ratings from human judges, 200 participants whom we recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk online panel (39% female, 61% male; M_{Age} = 35 years) and who participated in exchange for US$.85. All participants were U.S. residents. Each judge saw a random set of 10 brands and evaluated each brand in terms of how fun, exciting, thrilling, and pleasurable the brand was, on a 7-point scale anchored by "not at all" (1) and "extremely" (7). Each brand was evaluated by 10 judges. Next, we calculated an average brand hedonism index (α = .97) for each brand, then averaged this index across the 10 judges who evaluated that particular brand (Stephen, Sciandra, & Inman, 2015). The results of this procedure are in Appendix H. We mean-centered the variable to ensure our analyses were interpretable.

Control variables. The control variables help rule out alternative explanations and confounding effects. Our choice of these controls was inspired by prior social media research. First, we considered the valence of the tweet (i.e., whether a tweet is positive or negative; Berger & Milkman, 2012), using automated sentiment analysis to quantify the degree of positivity of each tweet. The sentiment classifier relied on a dictionary of words, categorized as positive, negative, or neutral (Wilson, Wiebe, & Hoffmann, 2005), and a naïve Bayes algorithm. More positive content seemingly should lead to higher consumer engagement (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Second, we considered whether the tweet comprises only text or also includes rich media, such as images or videos, according to data collected from Twitter. We created a dummy variable to categorize tweets accordingly, in line with research that indicates that branded messages with rich media can enhance consumer engagement (de Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012). Third, we controlled for brand communication intensity, or the frequency of tweets posted by the brand. Because we did not have daily measures for this variable, we collected total counts of tweets

posted by each brand—that is, the total number of tweets posted by each brand between the creation of the brand's Twitter account and the time we downloaded the data. We expect that the more active the brand is, in terms of tweet posts, the higher the level of consumer engagement (Kumar et al., 2016). Content positivity and rich media are control variables at the tweet level; brand communication intensity is a control variable at the brand level.

Finally, we employed time and industry fixed effects. The data spanned two years, so the time fixed effects control for the respective year of branded tweets, consistent with prior research (e.g., Homburg, Ehm, & Artz, 2015). We created a dummy variable for 2015, with 2016 as the referent. As we noted previously, the 96 brands cover 19 industrial sectors (*Forbes*, 2016), so we rely on industry fixed effects to control for industry-level unobserved heterogeneity. We created 18 dummy variables representing each industry category, with "transportation" as the referent. Communication from some industrial sectors, such as apparel and automotive, likely is more engaging than communication from other sectors, such as aerospace and oil/gas. Table 4-1 contains the variables, their operationalizations, and their data sources; Table 4-2 provides the descriptive statistics.

Table 4-1: Variables, Measures, and Data Sources

Variable	Notation	Operational Measure	Variable Type	Variable Level	Data Source
Consumer Engagement					
Shares	*SHARE*	Number of shares (retweets) received, divided by the number of followers of the corresponding brand, multiplied by 10,000	Continuous	Tweet	Twitter
Likes	*LIKE*	Number of likes received, divided by the number of followers of the corresponding brand, multiplied by 10,000	Continuous	Tweet	Twitter
Message Readability					
Tweet length	$READ_1$	Number of words (tokens) per tweet	Continuous	Tweet	Twitter; POS
Average word length	$READ_2$	Number of characters per tweet, divided by the number of words per tweet	Continuous	Tweet	Twitter; POS
Non-words	$READ_3$	Number of words that are not recognized by the POS tagger, divided by total number of words within the tweet	Continuous	Tweet	Twitter; POS
Noun-to-verb ratio	$READ_4$	Number of nouns divided by the number of verbs per tweet	Continuous	Tweet	Twitter; POS
Average parse tree depth	$READ_5$	Syntactic measure reflecting sentence complexity	Continuous	Tweet	Twitter; POS
Hashtags	$READ_6$	Number of hashtags divided by total words in the tweet	Continuous	Tweet	Twitter; POS
At-mentions	$READ_7$	Number of at-mentions divided by total words in the tweet	Continuous	Tweet	Twitter; POS
Emojis	$READ_8$	Number of emojis divided by total words in the tweet	Continuous	Tweet	Twitter; POS
Moderator					
Brand hedonism	*HED*	Level of hedonism of the brand (mean-centered)	Continuous	Brand	Amazon Mechanical Turk
Controls					
Content positivity	*POS*	Degree of positivity of a tweet	Continuous	Tweet	Sentiment classifier
Rich media	*MEDIA*	Tweet contains rich media such as images and/or videos	Dummy	Tweet	Twitter
Brand communication intensity	*FREQCOM*	Number of tweets posted by each brand between the creation of its Twitter account and the time the data were downloaded	Continuous	Brand	Twitter
Time fixed effects	*Y2015*	Tweet posted in 2015 (with year 2016 serving as the referent year)	Dummy	Tweet	Twitter
Industry fixed effects	$INDUSTRY_1$	Tweets posted from a brand belonging to the aerospace industry (transportation as the referent industry category)	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_2$	Alcohol	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_3$	Apparel	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_4$	Automotive	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_5$	Beverage	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_6$	Business service	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_7$	Consumer packaged goods	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_8$	Diversified	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_9$	Financial services	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_{10}$	Heavy equipment	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_{11}$	Leisure	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_{12}$	Luxury	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_{13}$	Media	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_{14}$	Oil/Gas	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_{15}$	Restaurants	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_{16}$	Retail	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_{17}$	Technology	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)
	$INDUSTRY_{18}$	Telecom	Dummy	Tweet	Forbes (2016)

Notes: POS = part-of-speech tagger specific to Twitter (Gimpel et al. 2011).

Table 4-2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Notation	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Consumer Engagement					
Shares	*SHARE*	.00	5,022.55	1.63	32.54
Likes	*LIKE*	.00	4,595.58	2.94	33.26
Message Readability					
Tweet length	$READ_1$	2.00	34.00	19.69	4.57
Average word length	$READ_2$	3.44	15.56	5.96	.74
Non-words	$READ_3$	.00	.44	.00	.01
Noun-to-verb ratio	$READ_4$	.00	9.00	1.63	1.33
Average parse tree depth	$READ_5$	.00	21.63	5.97	2.26
Hashtags	$READ_6$	.00	.50	.06	.06
At-mentions	$READ_7$	.00	.62	.02	.04
Emojis	$READ_8$	.00	1.44	.01	.04
Moderator					
Brand hedonism (mean-centered)	*HED*	-2.05	1.86	.00	.92
Controls					
Content positivity	*POS*	.06	.97	.40	.13
Rich media	*MEDIA*	0	1	.70	.46
Brand communication intensity	*FREQCOM*	35.00	403,354.00	20,232.13	30,577.66

4.4.3 Pilot Study

With a pilot study, we attempted to determine the effect of our eight readability proxies on perceived reading ease. We randomly selected 200 tweets from our data set and asked 200 human judges to assess their readability. These participants, all U.S. residents recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk online panel (39% female, 61% male; M_{Age} = 33 years), participated in exchange for US$1.20. Each participant saw 10 randomly selected tweets and rated how difficult or easy it felt to read each tweet (1 = "Very difficult"; 7 = "Very easy").

We ran regression analyses with actual reading ease as the dependent variable and our eight readability proxies as independent variables. The findings supported the expected negative impacts of the raw text (tweet length and average word length), lexical (frequency of non-words), and syntactic (noun-to-verb ratio and average parse tree depth) features on consumers' reading ease (see Table 4-3). In addition, the Twitter-specific features negatively influenced reading ease. The only variable with a non-significant effect was emojis, which might reflect the very small number of tweets in our sample (16 of 200) that contained them.

Beyond these primary measures of interest, we asked participants to indicate their level of familiarity with Twitter ("I am not at all/very familiar with Twitter," "I am not at all/very knowledgeable about Twitter," and "I have no/much experience with Twitter"; 7-point semantic differential scales; α = .94). Thus we could check whether our results varied, depending on the consumer's level of familiarity with Twitter. We reran the regression analyses with only

participants who were very familiar with Twitter (i.e., Twitter familiarity > 4) and found the same pattern of results.

Table 4-3: Message Readability Variables and Impacts on Perceived Reading Ease

Readability Categories	Variable	Expected Impact on Message Readability	Impact on Message Readability (Amazon Mechanical Turk Study)	
			β	*p*-Value
Raw text	Tweet length	−	-.13	.00
	Average word length	−	-.07	.03
Lexical	Non-words	−	-.08	.00
Syntactic	Noun-to-verb ratio	−	-.04	.08
	Average parse tree depth	−	-.06	.05
Twitter-specific	Hashtags	?	-.15	.00
	At-mentions	?	-.09	.00
	Emojis	?	-.01	.80

4.4.4 Empirical Considerations and Model Specification

Before we present the model we used to investigate the effects of message readability and brand hedonism on consumer engagement, we address some pertinent issues. First, the two dependent variables (i.e., share and like) were highly skewed (see the descriptive statistics in Table 4-4), so we used their logarithmic transformations to approximate a normal distribution, consistent with extant research on engagement in social media (e.g., Hennig-Thurau, Wiertz, & Feldhaus, 2015; Stephen, Sciandra, & Inman, 2015). The transformation is Ln(1 + variable), where we add 1 to prevent taking logs of 0.

Table 4-4: Consumer Engagement Descriptive Statistics

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Skewness
Share	0	5,022.55	1.63	32.54	147.41
Like	0	4,595.58	2.94	33.26	109.22
Ln(1+Share)	0	8.52	.55	.56	2.93
Ln(1+Like)	0	8.43	.80	.70	2.26

Second, because tweets were nested within brands, we applied hierarchical linear modeling (Hayes, 2006) to account for possible interdependence among tweets within a brand. We estimated the degree of non-independence in the share and like dependent variables across tweets. This intra-class correlation (ICC) measure revealed that less than half of the variance could be explained by between-brand variance, relative to the total variance (ICC_{Share} = .46; ICC_{Like} = .45; Hayes 2006). That is, 46% and 45% of the total variance in the number of shares and likes, respectively, was accounted for by differences between brands. These results affirm the need to estimate a hierarchical structure that can account for non-independence between tweets

produced by the same brand (Bliese & Hanges, 2004; Hayes, 2006; Kenny & Judd, 1986). Thus, to separate the within- and between-level effects, we followed Hayes's (2006) recommendation and added group mean-centered predictors to Level 1 (tweet level) and the means of these predictors to Level 2 (brand level). The coefficients of the group mean-centered variables at Level 1 determined within-group effects, and the coefficients of the means of these variables at Level 2 determined between-group effects.

We estimated a model for each dependent variable separately. Equations 1–8 provide an overview of our statistical model for the share dependent variable for tweet *i* by brand *j*:

Tweet Level 1:

$$(1)\ LN(SHARE_{ij} + 1) = \beta_{0j} + \Sigma_{m=1\ to\ 8}\beta_{mj}(READ_{mij}\_GMC) + \beta_{9j}MEDIA_{ij} + \beta_{10j}POS_{ij} + \beta_{11j}Y2015_{ij} + \Sigma_{n=1\ to\ 18}\beta_{(11+n)j}INDUSTRY_{nij} + \varepsilon_{ij}.$$

Brand Level 2:

$$(2)\quad \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \Sigma_{m=1\ to\ 8}\gamma_{0m}\overline{READ_{mJ}} + \gamma_{09}FREQCOM_j + \gamma_{010}HED_j + \Sigma_{m=1\ to\ 8}\gamma_{0(10+m)}(\overline{READ_{mJ}} \times HED_j) + \mu_j.$$

$$(3)\quad \beta_{mj} = \gamma_{m0} + \gamma_{m1}(HED_j), \text{ with } m \text{ ranging from 1 to 8.}$$

$$(4)\quad \beta_{9j} = \gamma_{90}.$$

$$(5)\quad \beta_{10j} = \gamma_{100}.$$

$$(6)\quad \beta_{11j} = \gamma_{110}.$$

$$(7)\quad \beta_{(11+n)j} = \gamma_{(11+n)0}, \text{ with } n \text{ ranging from 1 to 18.}$$

Then the final model can be written as follows:

$$(8)\ LN(SHARE_{ij} + 1) = \gamma_{00} + \Sigma_{m=1\ to\ 8}\gamma_{0m}\overline{READ_{mJ}} + \gamma_{09}FREQCOM_j + \gamma_{010}HED_j + \Sigma_{m=1\ to\ 8}\gamma_{0(10+m)}(\overline{READ_{mJ}} \times HED_j) + \Sigma_{m=1\ to\ 8}\gamma_{m0}READ_{mij}\_GMC + \Sigma_{m=1\ to\ 8}\gamma_{m1}(READ_{mij}\_GMC \times HED_j) + \gamma_{90}MEDIA_{ij} + \gamma_{100}POS_{ij} + \gamma_{110}Y2015_{ij} + \Sigma_{n=1\ to\ 18}\gamma_{(11+n)0}INDUSTRY_{nij} + \varepsilon_{ij} + +\mu_j,$$

where

$LN(SHARE + 1)$ =	logarithm transformation of the share variable.
$READ_m\_GMC$ =	group-mean centered measure of the m^{th} readability variable.
MEDIA =	rich media variable.
POS =	content positivity variable.
Y2015 =	time fixed effects (whether tweet was posted in 2015, with 2016 as the referent year).
$INDUSTRY_n$ =	industry fixed effects (whether tweet was posted from a brand belonging to the n^{th} industry, from $Industry_1$ = aerospace to $Industry_{18}$ = telecom, and with transportation as the referent industry category).
FREQCOM =	brand communication intensity.
HED =	brand hedonism.

m = number of readability variables.
n = number of industry categories.
γ_{00} = brand-level intercepts.
γ = parameters to be estimated in the models.
ε_{ij} = random error at the tweet level (i.e., Level 1 residual variance; assumed normally distributed with a mean of 0 and a variance of σ_ε).
μ_j = random error at the brand level (i.e., Level 2 residual variance; assumed normally distributed with a mean of 0 and a variance of σ_μ).

4.4.5 Model Fit

Before reporting the results of the model, we present several model comparisons to demonstrate the value of our model specification. We considered a set of three nested models to assess the importance of including the various model components. Model 1 is the baseline model with only control variables, time effects, and industry fixed effects. In Model 2, we added message readability variables. Then in Model 3, we included the brand hedonism variable and its interaction with the message readability variables. Model 3 is the full model, containing all the variables in our conceptual framework (Figure 1). We evaluated the fit of the models using three fit statistics: (1) deviance (–2 log-likelihood ratio), (2) Akaike information criterion (AIC), and (3) Bayesian information criterion (BIC) (see Table 4-5). When we compared models, we observed a unanimous increase in model fit for the full model compared with the other two models in the share and like variables. The model comparison thus underscores the value of including brand hedonism and message readability variables.

Table 4-5: Model and Fit Measures for Three Models

		Share			**Like**		
	Model	-2 LL	AIC	BIC	-2 LL	AIC	BIC
1	Baseline	31,609.19	31,613.19	31,629.44	41,127.47	41,129.47	41,145.71
2	No hedonism effects	28,252.42	28,256.42	28,272.41	36,757.41	36,761.41	36,777.40
3	Full model	28,240.95	28,244.95	28,260.94	36,732.33	36,736.33	36,752.32

Notes: -2LL = -2 log likelihood, AIC = Akaike information criterion, BIC = Bayesian information criterion.

4.4.6 Model Results

The results in Table 6 reveal that many message readability characteristics significantly affect consumer engagement, and the level of hedonism moderates most of them. We organize the discussion of these findings into three parts: the effects of message readability on consumer engagement, the moderating role of brand hedonism, and the control variables and fixed effects. Because we focus on effects at the tweet level, we primarily discuss the findings for the within-group effects. The effects at the brand level (between-group effects) are all non-significant; the relationship between consumer engagement and message readability is more relevant at the individual tweet level than at the brand level.

Table 4-6: Effects of Message Readability and Brand Hedonism on Consumer Engagement

Variables	Share			Like		
	γ	SE	*p*-Value	γ	SE	*p*-Value
Intercept	-.20	2.30	.93	.89	2.78	.75
Within-group effects (tweet-level)						
Control variables						
POS	-.01	.02	.58	.03	.03	.30
MEDIA	.14***	.01	.00	.24***	.01	.00
Message readability						
$READ_1$_GMC (Tweet length)	.01***	.00	.00	.00	.00	.58
$READ_2$_GMC (Average word length)	.00	.01	.57	-.01	.01	.34
$READ_3$_GMC (Non-words)	-.57*	.33	.09	-1.05***	.41	.01
$READ_4$_GMC (Noun-verb ratio)	-.01***	.00	.00	-.01***	.00	.00
$READ_5$_GMC (Average parse tree depth)	-.01***	.00	.01	.00	.00	.31
$READ_6$_GMC (Hashtag)	.26***	.07	.00	.24***	.09	.01
$READ_7$_GMC (At-mentions)	-.30***	.10	.00	-.22*	.12	.07
$READ_8$_GMC (Emojis)	.90***	.10	.00	1.13***	.12	.00
Message readability × brand hedonism						
$READ_1$_GMC (Tweet length) * HED	-.01***	.00	.00	-.01***	.00	.00
$READ_2$_GMC (Average word length) * HED	-.02***	.01	.00	-.02**	.01	.03
$READ_3$_GMC (Non-words) * HED	.81**	.35	.02	1.05***	.43	.01
$READ_4$_GMC (Noun-verb ratio) * HED	.00*	.00	.06	.00	.00	.20
$READ_5$_GMC (Average parse tree depth) * HED	.01***	.00	.01	.01**	.00	.02
$READ_6$_GMC (Hashtag) * HED	.02	.08	.82	-.23**	.10	.02
$READ_7$_GMC (At-mentions) * HED	.12	.11	.25	-.22*	.13	.10
$READ_8$_GMC (Emojis) * HED	-.38***	.13	.00	-.54***	.16	.00
Between-group effects (Brand-level)						
Control variables						
FREQCOM	.00	.00	.09	.00	.00	.16
Message readability						
$\overline{READ_1}$ (Tweet length)	-.02	.05	.68	-.05	.06	.38
$\overline{READ_2}$ (Average word length)	.27	.35	.45	.21	.43	.62
$\overline{READ_3}$ (Non-words)	38.94	25.29	.13	31.99	3.54	.30
$\overline{READ_4}$ (Noun-verb ratio)	-.19	.20	.35	-.16	.25	.51
$\overline{READ_5}$ (Average parse tree depth)	.03	.09	.77	.07	.11	.56
$\overline{READ_6}$ (Hashtags)	-5.05	2.39	.04	-4.68	2.88	.11
$\overline{READ_7}$ (At-mentions)	-4.57	5.11	.38	-6.08	6.18	.33
$\overline{READ_8}$ (Emojis)	-1.35	4.95	.79	.24	5.98	.97
Brand hedonism						
HED	.79	2.74	.77	1.38	3.31	.68
Message readability × brand hedonism						
$\overline{READ_1}$ (Tweet length) * HED	.00	.05	.94	.00	.07	.96
$\overline{READ_2}$ (Average word length) * HED	-.22	.46	.64	-.30	.56	.59
$\overline{READ_3}$ (Non-words) * HED	-22.17	25.60	.39	-15.09	3.92	.63
$\overline{READ_4}$ (Noun-verb ratio) * HED	-.37	.24	.12	-.39	.29	.18
$\overline{READ_5}$ (Average parse tree depth) * HED	.13	.11	.24	.16	.14	.25
$\overline{READ_6}$ (Hashtags) * HED	.48	2.91	.87	.50	3.52	.89
$\overline{READ_7}$ (At-mentions) * HED	2.69	5.78	.64	3.14	6.99	.66
$\overline{READ_8}$ (Emojis) * HED	.04	1.19	1.00	-1.90	12.31	.88
Fixed effects						
Y2015	-.11***	.01	.00	-.20***	.01	.00
$INDUSTRY_1$ (Aerospace)	.63	.53	.24	.41	.64	.53
$INDUSTRY_2$ (Alcohol)	.82	.49	.10	.59	.60	.33
$INDUSTRY_3$ (Apparel)	.25	.42	.54	.15	.50	.77
$INDUSTRY_4$ (Automotive)	.29	.35	.41	.18	.42	.67
$INDUSTRY_5$ (Beverage)	.18	.40	.66	-.01	.49	.98

$INDUSTRY_6$ (Business service)	-.42	.52	.43	-.80	.63	.21
$INDUSTRY_7$ (Consumer packaged goods)	.21	.33	.53	.13	.40	.76
$INDUSTRY_8$ (Diversified)	-.04	.41	.92	-.23	.49	.65
$INDUSTRY_9$ (Financial services)	-.18	.33	.58	-.29	.40	.47
$INDUSTRY_{10}$ (Heavy equipment)	-.02	.46	.97	.13	.55	.81
$INDUSTRY_{11}$ (Leisure)	.92*	.50	.07	.89	.60	.14
$INDUSTRY_{12}$ (Luxury)	.76**	.38	.05	.63	.45	.17
$INDUSTRY_{13}$ (Media)	-.36	.39	.35	-.68	.47	.15
$INDUSTRY_{14}$ (Oil/Gas)	-.26	.54	.63	-.49	.65	.46
$INDUSTRY_{15}$ (Restaurants)	-.05	.42	.90	-.04	.50	.94
$INDUSTRY_{16}$ (Retail)	-.08	.38	.83	-.10	.46	.83
$INDUSTRY_{17}$ (Technology)	-.07	.33	.83	-.40	.40	.32
$INDUSTRY_{18}$ (Telecom)	-.11	.45	.81	-.11	.55	.84

*$p \leq .10$.
**$p \leq .05$.
***$p \leq .01$.

Effects of message readability on consumer engagement. Our findings mainly support our expectations. The results for the share and like variables are in line with each other too. Nevertheless, our analysis also provides some notable insights. In particular, in support of H1, we find that for an average level of hedonism (mean-centered hedonism variable equals 0), the lexical and syntactic features negatively influence consumer engagement (share $\gamma_{READ3\_GMC} = -.57$, $p < .10$, $\gamma_{READ4\_GMC} = -.01$, $p < .01$, $\gamma_{READ5\_GMC} = -.01$, $p < .01$; like $\gamma_{READ3\_GMC} = -1.05$, $p < .01$, $\gamma_{READ4\_GMC} = -.01$, $p < .01$, $\gamma_{READ5\_GMC} = .00$, $p > .10$). Whereas tweet length, a raw text feature, exerts a significant, positive effect on the share variable ($\gamma_{READ1\_GMC} = .01$, $p < .01$), the effects of the other two raw text features (tweet length and average word length) on other consumer engagement measures are not significant (all $p > .10$). Among the Twitter-specific features, our results indicate mixed effects. The use of at-mentions negatively influences consumer engagement, but hashtags and emojis have positive effects on both consumer engagement variables (share $\gamma_{READ6\_GMC} = .26$, $p < .01$, $\gamma_{READ7\_GMC} = -.30$, $p < .01$, $\gamma_{READ8\_GMC} = .90$, $p < .01$; like $\gamma_{READ6\_GMC} = .24$, $p < .01$, $\gamma_{READ7\_GMC} = -.22$, $p < .10$, $\gamma_{READ8\_GMC} = 1.13$, $p < .01$). In terms of effect sizes, non-words and emojis exert the strongest effects (share $\gamma_{READ3\_GMC} = -.57$ and $\gamma_{READ8\_GMC} = .90$; like $\gamma_{READ3\_GMC} = -1.05$ and $\gamma_{READ8\_GMC} = 1.13$).

Moderating role of brand hedonism. Brand hedonism significantly moderates the effect of all readability measures on consumer engagement. The results for the lexical and syntactic features support H2 (share $\gamma_{READ3\_GMC*HED} = .81$, $p < .05$, $\gamma_{READ4\_GMC*HED} = .00$, $p < .10$, $\gamma_{READ5\_GMC*HED} = .01$, $p < .01$; like $\gamma_{READ3\_GMC*HED} = 1.05$, $p < .01$, $\gamma_{READ4\_GMC*HED} = .00$, $p > .10$, $\gamma_{READ5\_GMC*HED} = .01$, $p < .05$). When brand hedonism is low, a tweet with greater lexical and syntactic complexity receives fewer shares and likes (though the moderated effect of the noun-to-verb ratio is not significant for the like variable). We observe opposite effects for brands with high levels of hedonism.

The moderating effect of brand hedonism on the raw text features (tweet length and average word length) also is unexpected (share $\gamma_{READ1\_GMC*HED} = -.01$, $p < .01$, $\gamma_{READ2\_GMC*HED} = -.02$, $p < .01$; like $\gamma_{READ1\_GMC*HED} = -.01$, $p < .01$, $\gamma_{READ2\_GMC*HED} = -.02$, $p < .05$). Specifically, longer tweets and longer words in a tweet increase consumer engagement with less hedonic brands, but they reduce it for more hedonic brands.

Finally, brand hedonism significantly moderates the effects of two Twitter-specific readability features on consumer engagement: the use of hashtags and the use of emojis (share $\gamma_{READ6\_GMC*HED} = .02$, $p > .10$, $\gamma_{READ8\_GMC*HED} = -.38$, $p < .01$; like $\gamma_{READ6\_GMC*HED} = -.23$, $p < .05$, $\gamma_{READ8\_GMC*HED} = -.54$, $p < .01$). For a low level of brand hedonism, more hashtags and emojis increase consumer engagement (though the moderated effect of hashtags is not significant for the share variable). At a high level of brand hedonism though, these two Twitter-specific features reduce consumer engagement. We find no significant moderating effect of brand hedonism for the use of at-mentions ($p > .10$).

Control variables. To rule out possible alternative explanations, we controlled for the effects of several variables. First, more positive content might lead to higher consumer engagement, yet our results show that the effect of content positivity on consumer engagement is not significant ($p > .10$). Second, we controlled for whether the tweet included rich media, such as images and/or videos. We find a significant positive effect; the use of rich media in a tweet increases consumer engagement (share $\gamma_{MEDIA} = .14$, $p < .01$; like $\gamma_{MEDIA} = .24$, $p < .01$). Third, we considered brand communication intensity, but this variable has only a marginally significant effect on the number of shares a tweet receives ($\gamma_{FREQCOM} = .00$, $p < .10$). Fourth, time fixed effects show that older tweets trigger significantly less engagement, probably due to the progressive popularity of social media (share $\gamma_{Y2015} = -.11$, $p < .01$; like $\gamma_{Y2015} = -.20$, $p < .01$). Fifth, industry fixed effects show that the leisure and luxury industries positively influence the number of shares a tweet receives ($\gamma_{IDUNSTRY11} = .92$, $p < .10$, $\gamma_{IDUNSTRY12} = .76$, $p < .05$).

4.4.7 Additional Analyses and Robustness Checks

We conducted several additional analyses and robustness checks (see Appendix I for detailed results), using some alternative measures and samples.

Alternative engagement measure. We used relative consumer engagement measures as our independent variable. As an alternative, we reran the main analyses with absolute values for the consumer engagement measures. The pattern of results was the same as in our main analyses.

Alternative measure of lexical readability. For the message readability assessment, we used the frequency of non-words (i.e., number of words not found in the lexicon) as the lexical feature. We obtained this measure from a POS tagger designed specifically for Twitter data (Gimpel et al. 2011). As an alternative, we reran the main analyses with a traditional, non–Twitter-specific variable (Dale and Chall 1948). The Dale-Chall word list contains 3,000 simple, familiar words, which more than 80% of fourth grade students can understand. Therefore, the related variable counts the number of words not on the list, which would imply greater comprehension difficultly. We confirmed the main study relationships with the Dale-Chall variable.

Wider sample. Because consumer behavior on social media is changing rapidly, we disregarded tweets made by brands during the years 2013 and 2014 for our main analyses. But we reran the analyses including those older tweets; the results confirmed our main analyses.

4.5 General Discussion

The present research investigates the joint effect of a set of readability features and brand hedonism on consumer engagement with brands. Specifically and consistent with linguistic research (Venturi et al., 2015), we look at four message readability categories: raw text features

(i.e., tweet length and word length), lexical features (i.e., non-words), syntactic features (i.e., noun-to-verb ratio and average parse tree depth), and Twitter-specific features (i.e., hashtags, at-mentions, and emojis). We also examine whether the hedonic nature of a brand moderates how readability features affect consumer engagement.

We consistently find that message readability characteristics significantly affect consumer engagement actions, such as liking and sharing a branded tweet. Specifically, consumers appear to respond more favorably to longer tweets, including longer but simpler words and a simpler syntactic structure that facilitates message processing. In terms of Twitter-specific features, consumers engage more with tweets containing hashtags and emojis, but they engage less with tweets containing at-mentions. In addition, brand hedonism moderates consumers' responses to message readability. These message characteristics work best for less hedonic brands, but they appear to undermine engagement with more hedonic brands. That is, more hedonic brands elicit greater consumer engagement if they post short messages that include short and fancy words and feature a more elaborated sentence structure, which makes the message more unique and novel.[*] In terms of Twitter-specific features, the use of hashtags and emojis in messages diminish consumer engagement with hedonic brands.

4.5.1 Discussion of Findings and Theoretical Implications

The present study is among a small set of research that examines the effect of branded message style on consumer engagement with brands through social media. It addresses recent calls for more research on consumer responses to social media marketing actions (e.g., Stephen 2016). In particular, it contributes to nascent literature on consumer responses to the language style of social media branded messages (e.g., de Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Labrecque, 2014; van Laer & de Ruyter, 2010) by showing how consumer engagement with brands depends on the ease with which a message can be read. More important, this study is the first to investigate message readability empirically on Twitter and to show the nuanced effects of tweet readability due to the high versus low hedonic nature of a brand.

This research also contributes to processing fluency literature (Lee & Aaker, 2004), demonstrating that some hallmarks of conventional marketing communications—namely, clear, fluent, and easily understood messages—need to be adapted to social media. The conventional set of readability characteristics have mixed effects on consumer engagement in this setting. Consistent with processing fluency literature (Lee & Aaker, 2004), branded social media messages that are more readable at the lexical (familiar words) and syntactic (simple sentence structure) levels elicit higher consumer engagement. However, in contrast with what processing fluency literature might suggest, greater message readability at the raw text level (shorter sentences and words) results in lower consumer engagement. A possible explanation for this finding is that, in the specific context of social media, branded messages are short. Even if longer messages might take more effort to read, they provide additional information that facilitates message processing.

[*] Since our data collection, Twitter made marginal adjustments to its character limit restriction. Specifically, media attachments such as photographs and videos no longer count toward the 140-character limit (Wong 2016). Tweets containing media attachments thus can be a bit longer. In light of our findings, these adjustments may favor less hedonic brands, for which longer tweets increase consumer engagement.

We also contribute to readability literature (Sawyer, Laran, & Xu, 2008; Venturi et al., 2015) by providing insights beyond traditional readability features (i.e., raw text, lexical, and syntactic categories) and showing how Twitter-specific stylistic devices, such as hashtags, at-mentions, and emojis, affect consumer response. Consumers tend to engage more with tweets containing hashtags and emojis, but they engage less with tweets containing at-mentions. The effects of hashtags and emojis can be explained by contrasting effects: Their use increases the visual complexity of a tweet and makes it harder to read, but they also provide structure to the tweet and help set its context, which likely facilitates the comprehension of the tweet. By investigating a larger set of readability proxies, we offer a more complete assessment of a tweet's overall readability and address recent concerns about the effectiveness of traditional measures for capturing linguistic factors related to more complex texts (François & Miltsakaki, 2012; Venturi et al., 2015). A comparison of model fit measures confirmed that considering the eight readability variables (vs. traditional readability measures) significantly improved model fit (e.g., for the share variable, -2 $LL_{TraditionalVariables}$ = 31,629.55, -2 $LL_{EightVariables}$ = 28,240.95; $AIC_{TraditionalVariables}$ = 31,633.55 , $AIC_{EightVariables}$ = 28,244.95; $BIC_{TraditionalVariables}$ = 31,649.80, $BIC_{EightVariables}$ = 28,260.94).

Our research contributes as well to a recent line of studies that show that consumer responses to brand communication are contingent on the hedonic nature of the brand (Roggeveen et al., 2015; Schulze, Schöler, & Skiera, 2014). In support of Pocheptsova, Labroo, and Dhar's (2010) findings that processing fluency increases perceived familiarity with a product, which makes it appear more (less) attractive for everyday (special occasion) products, we demonstrate that the level of brand hedonism is an important brand characteristic that moderates how various message readability features affect consumer engagement with brands. Specifically, readability features that drive higher consumer engagement with less hedonic brands are detrimental for more hedonic brands. These effects likely occur because consumers interpret the experience of reading difficulty (ease) as a signal of brand exclusivity (familiarity), which is a desirable brand characteristic for more (less) hedonic brands. The results regarding the moderating effect of brand hedonism on raw text features did not match these expectations though: Longer tweets and longer words in a tweet increase consumer engagement with less hedonic brands but reduce it for more hedonic brands. We believe these findings may be specific to the short format of social media communication, in that a longer tweet provides more substantive, meaningful information that facilitates message processing. Accordingly, for less hedonic brands (e.g., Wells Fargo), consumers might prefer longer, more informative tweets with highly descriptive, longer words. They instead may prefer shorter tweets with shorter, catchier words for hedonic brands such as Prada.

4.5.2 Managerial Implications

Several actionable implications emerge from these findings for managers interested in improving consumers' engagement with brands through short-form communications. The competition for consumer attention across social media platforms is high, requiring effective communication tactics, and consumers may be overwhelmed by the proliferation of online messages issued by brands. They typically pay little attention to most of these messages, such that they scan them rather than read them carefully. In turn, consumers likely form evaluations and react to such messages according to contextual, style-related cues rather than the content itself (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). To create content and ensure the effectiveness of branded short-

form messaging, marketers have various tools at their disposal. For example, most platforms provide free scheduling options to help brands separate the creation and delivery time for messages. Analytical dashboards and tools can help marketers gauge the performance of messages individually and on an aggregate level. Unfortunately though, we find little evidence that managers take these additional steps to assess the relationship between the style of the message and consumer actions in practice.

Thus, there is ample opportunity to fine-tune social media messages to achieve the biggest possible impact among the target group. Marketers should analyze and compare the stylistic features of messages to understand what works best for their specific brands, products, and campaigns. Crafting effective messages is not a straightforward task; there is no one-size-fits-all solution for brands that seek to engage their audience. In particular, our findings suggest that even before they start crafting a specific message, marketers should account for the hedonistic nature of their brands. Less hedonic brands will tend to benefit from clearer, more readable messages, but brands that are more hedonic require less readability (and perhaps more fun, novelty, and eccentricity). Such insights are particularly relevant for brands such as Google, which fulfills a rather functional task for consumers (i.e., search for information online) but also is perceived primarily as hedonic. Thus, it likely benefits from short, fancy, eccentric messages, rather than more elaborate ones that use simple language. For example, when Google tweeted an article link with the text "Joining 30+ publishers & tech companies in the Accelerated Mobile Pages project to make the mobile web great again," it received 196 retweets and 295 likes, whereas overall in our data set, Google received 430 retweets and 686 likes on average. Stylistically, the example tweet had 16 more characters and a longer dependency tree (8.47 versus 5.65) than Google's average tweet. Would a shorter, more appealing tweet have created more engagement and more exposure? Our findings suggest it would have. At the same time, and somewhat counterintuitively, a brand such as Google could enhance its chances of garnering shares and likes if it refrains from using too many social media–specific features (e.g., at-mentions, hashtags, emojis), which result in less engagement among consumers in our study.

Our findings thus provide brands that are positioned and perceived to be highly or minimally hedonic with clear and actionable suggestions; they also give managers of brands with a more ambiguous nature license to use any of the investigated message styles. In this case, an a priori analysis of the potential goals that consumers pursue when exposed to a branded message might help determine which style will facilitate the most engagement. For example, a brand such as Canon, which received a mean hedonism rating of 4.13 (SD = 1.54) in our survey, might be well advised to use rather long, simple messages that include hashtags and emojis for functional products (e.g., printers) but issue messages that feature novel, fun, and unusual language to enhance engagement with products such as digital cameras, for which consumers generally shop with hedonic, leisure-oriented goals in mind. Similar strategic advice also applies to brands seeking to deviate from their conventional hedonic nature. For example, for a promotion that is unusually novel or adventurous for a less hedonic brand, managers might craft messages that deviate strategically from the recommendations derived from our findings for less hedonic brands.

4.5.3 Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The scale of our study (96 brands, more than 24,000 messages) supports the generalizability and broad applicability of our results. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize several limitations. First, we focused on consumer engagement on Twitter, a popular social media platform that offers an effective research context. Brands generally conduct social media strategies across a range of platforms though, including Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube. Our findings should hold in other social media platforms that allow brands to post short text messages and encourage consumers to engage with those messages, but additional research could seek to replicate our findings on other social media platforms.

Second, we used two metrics for consumer engagement, namely, shares and likes, which are prevalent metrics and marketing objectives in social media settings, with widely available data. But other measures also are worth considering, such as whether consumers comment on messages, visit the websites of the brands that post messages, or buy more products from these brands. Several prior studies examine the link between consumer engagement and sales and find that social media can generate growth in sales and returns on investment (Kumar et al., 2013; Kumar et al., 2016). Additional studies that evaluate other measures of interest could add value and help validate our findings.

Third, fully addressing all potential endogeneity concerns is a difficult issue in a field setting. We applied a rigorous set of control variables, but we did not test explicitly for some other factors (e.g., whether a message evokes high or low arousal; Berger & Milkman, 2012). Studies that examine these and other potential drivers of consumer engagement offer promising avenues for further research.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

5.1 Introduction

The overall aim of this dissertation has been to examine how specific aspects of brand communication style affect the ways in which relationships between brands and consumers form and evolve. A central research question has guided this dissertation: *How, when, and why does the style of communication employed by a brand affect consumer–brand relationships?* I have addressed this question with three sets of empirical investigations, exploring the links between brand communication style and consumer–brand relationships. Each essay contained herein examines a different aspect of brand communication style: the use of an informal style (Chapter 2), anthropomorphism (Chapter 3), and readability (Chapter 4). In turn, I consider how these stylistic aspects affect fundamental dimensions of consumer–brand relationships, such as consumers' trust in brands (Chapter 2), self-disclosure to brands (Chapter 3), and engagement with brands (Chapter 4). In addition, I have identified and investigated the circumstances in which these effects vary, as well as their underlying mechanisms. These analyses have been conducted using varied data sets (e.g., students, MTurk workers, real Twitter data), methods (e.g., experimental and field studies), product/service categories (e.g., hotels, clothing, dating websites, entertainment), and brands (e.g., fictitious and existing).

This concluding chapter accordingly summarizes the key findings (Section 5.2), which suggest some implications for theory and practice (Section 5.3). Finally, I present some directions for further research in the domains of brand communication style and consumer–brand relationships (Section 5.4).

5.2 Summary

5.2.1 Effects of an Informal Communication Style on Consumers' Trust in Brands

In Chapter 2, I investigated whether and how the adoption of an informal (vs. formal) communication style by a brand affects consumers' trust in the brand. To that end, we exposed participants to conversation threads on social media between brands and several consumers and then examined their brand trust. In the experiments, brands interacted with consumers with either an informal or formal communication style. The participants exhibited different trust patterns toward the two communication styles, depending on whether they were familiar with the brand or not. Specifically, the adoption of an informal (vs. formal) brand communication style increased participants' trust in brands with which they were familiar. However, this communication style decreased their trust when they were interacting with an unfamiliar brand. These effects occurred because participants expected the brand to behave according to social norms, such that the use of an informal style was perceived as appropriate for familiar brands but inappropriate for unfamiliar brands.

5.2.2 Effects of Brand Anthropomorphism on Consumers' Self-Disclosure to Brands

The objective of Chapter 3 was to examine the effect of brand anthropomorphism on consumers' propensity to disclose intimate information to brands. To that end, we exposed people to either an anthropomorphized or a neutral version of a brand, then asked them to complete a survey distributed by the brand. In the survey, the brand asked intimate questions. The participants disclosed less intimate information to anthropomorphized brands than to the neutral ones, and these effects were observable in both the amount of information disclosed and the degree of intimacy associated with the disclosure. The reason that participants disclosed less to anthropomorphized brands was because they perceived these brands as mindful and capable of evaluating others, which increased their sense of embarrassment when disclosing intimate information. Furthermore, with this study we have demonstrated that asking for intimate information in an indirect manner—such that participants can answer intimate questions from the perspective of a referent person—the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure disappears.

5.2.3 Effects of Message Readability on Consumers' Engagement with Brands

In Chapter 4, we studied a more subtle yet still central aspect of brand communication style: the ease with which a message can be read. In particular, we examined how message readability affects consumers' engagement with brands. We moved from experimental work, in which we manipulated communication style, to a field study that used real-world data to investigate the effects of message readability on consumer engagement. From an analysis of 24,960 social media messages produced by the 96 most valuable brands (*Forbes*, 2016), we determined that the effect of message readability on consumer engagement with brands differed depending on the level of hedonism associated with the brand. Specifically, messages that were easier to read engendered higher brand engagement for less hedonic brands, but this effect did not hold or even reversed for more hedonic brands. In line with prior literature (Pocheptsova, Labroo, & Dhar, 2010), we argue that these effects occur because reading ease leads to the perception that the message is more familiar. This perceived familiarity in turn increases brand engagement. However, in the context of hedonic brands, for which consumers generally value exclusivity and uniqueness, message readability may decrease brand engagement by making messages appear more familiar and less exclusive.

5.3 Implications

In addition to the specific theoretical and managerial contributions detailed at the end of Chapters 2–4, the following sections provide an overarching view of how this dissertation contributes to extant literature on brand communication and consumer–brand relationships.

5.3.1 Theoretical Implications

The findings in this dissertation consistently show that the effects of brand communication style on consumer responses are not straightforward, requiring careful consideration of the specific context in which consumer–brand interactions occur. Consumers respond in opposite ways to a

similar communication style according to various relational and contextual cues, such as the way consumers relate to a brand (Chapter 2), how they are asked to report personal information (Chapter 3), and the goals they pursue while interacting with a brand (Chapter 4). Chapter 2 sheds light on the importance of brand familiarity as a relational aspect that moderates consumers' responses to a brand's informal communication style. Chapter 3 demonstrates that the method of questioning—that is, asking consumers to adopt the perspective of a referent person instead of themselves—moderates the extent to which people reveal intimate information to a humanized brand. Finally, Chapter 4 shows that consumers' responses to easy-to-read branded messages vary depending on the level of hedonism associated with the brand. Together, these findings challenge the conventional wisdom that certain communication styles have an unequivocally positive effect on consumer responses, and they emphasize the importance of identifying circumstances that can add nuance to those effects.

For communication style research, this dissertation provides insights into the psychological processes that underlie the effects of communication style on consumer responses. According to Chapter 2, consumers evaluate the degree to which a brand communication style is appropriate and consistent with their expectations (e.g., Sela et al., 2012), and that evaluation subsequently influences their brand trust. Chapter 3 shows that when a brand communicates in the first person, consumers apply their social beliefs to that brand and behave as they would toward a human subject in similar circumstances (e.g., Kim & McGill, 2011). In particular, the anthropomorphism of a brand triggers consumers' perceptions that it is capable of evaluating them, so they become more reluctant to reveal intimate information to it. The ease with which a branded message can be read and processed also elicits perception of familiarity with the message (e.g., Pocheptsova, Labroo, & Dhar, 2010; Schwarz, 2004), and this perception affects how consumers engage with the message, as Chapter 4 shows.

This dissertation also offers important contributions to literature on consumers' relationships with brands. Modern brands interact with consumers in ways that mirror their interpersonal communications, and this dissertation demonstrates that they behave toward and respond to brands as they do toward other people (Fournier, 1998). In two-way communication contexts, consumers apply their social beliefs to evaluate brands' communications with them. In Chapter 2, we show that consumers expect a more formal communication style if they are unfamiliar with the brand, just as they might expect strangers to use a formal communication style when addressing them. In Chapter 3, we find that when consumers anthropomorphize a brand, they feel embarrassed to reveal intimate information, an emotion that is normally experienced in an interpersonal context.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to social media literature (e.g., De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Labrecque, 2014; van Laer & de Ruyter, 2010) by deepening understanding of how a brand communication style affects consumer responses on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. In so doing, I address recent calls for more research on social media marketing actions (e.g., Stephen, 2016) and show how consumer–brand relationships are affected by the informality (Chapter 2) and readability (Chapter 4) of branded social media messages. In Chapter 2, consumer–brand interactions on social media resemble interpersonal interactions and are thus governed by norms of interpersonal communication; in Chapter 4, brand communication on social media that is more difficult to read, due to its short communication format, also affects consumer responses.

5.3.2 Managerial Implications

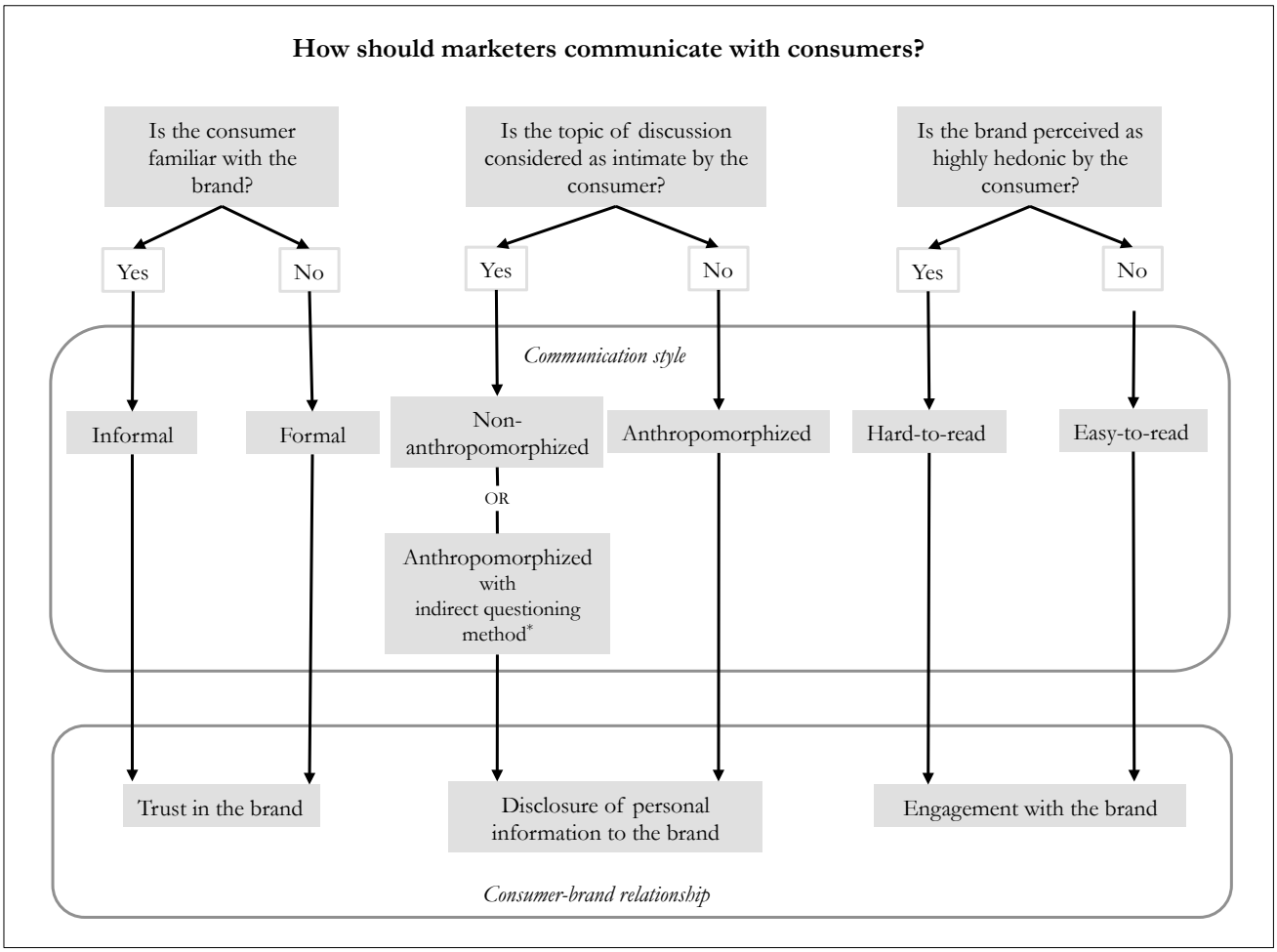
From a practical perspective, these results offer marketers concrete guidance for how to compose and manage brand communications to enhance the quality of their relationships with consumers. Notably, this research informs marketers of the importance of their communication style, beyond the content of their messages. In a clear challenge to the conventional wisdom that "content is king" (Rooney, 2014), this dissertation demonstrates that it is not merely what brands say but also how they say it that determines the strength of their relationships. Brand managers thus can fine-tune their dialogue with consumers to engage in appropriate (Chapter 2), comfortable (Chapter 3), and engaging (Chapter 4) conversations. By gaining insight into how to converse successfully with consumers, brand managers can establish a foundation for longer-lasting relationships.

This research is especially relevant to brand community managers, who typically are responsible for managing brand communications on social media. For many brands, the adoption and use of social media has been a trial-and-error process. Developing insights into how consumers respond to specific communication styles is imperative; the success of a social media strategy depends on the community manager's ability to acquire new members and transform them into contributors and brand ambassadors.

The same holds for managers of new brands. With their limited resources and the relative absence of brand equity, it is important to pay attention to details, such as communication style, that can have significant effects on the initial market response. Managers of new brands should not systematically imitate the communication practices of bigger and more established brands; as Chapter 2 shows, a communication style that improves consumer–brand relationships for established brands might be detrimental for new, unfamiliar ones.

Figure 5-1 provides a decision tree model, designed to guide managers in selecting which communication style to use, while accounting for relational and contextual factors. As Figure 5-1 shows, when the brand is familiar (unfamiliar) to consumers, managers should adopt an informal (formal) communication style to increase consumers' trust in the brand. When the topic of discussion is sensitive or intimate, according to consumers' perceptions, managers should avoid the use of an anthropomorphic communication style. If however anthropomorphism is an inherent positioning strategy of the brand, then managers should adopt an indirect questioning method to solicit more intimate information from consumers. Finally, managers in charge of a (more) less hedonic brand should favor (hard-) easy-to-read messages to stimulate consumers' engagement with the brand.

Figure 5-1: Decision Tree Model for Communication Style



* If managers pursue anthropomorphism as a positioning strategy for their brand, they should use indirect questioning about intimate information, to overcome the unintended negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure.

As an example of the application of this decision tree, consider Campbell's Soup Company. The brand's Facebook page is liked by 511,190 consumers, and it has 84,338 followers on Twitter. The brand also has a dedicated website (campbellideas.com) that invites consumers to submit ideas and respond to surveys, to help the brand innovate. By implementing the proposed decision tree, Campbell's Soup can make the most of its interactions with consumers.

First, the brand already communicates in a relatively informal way on Facebook (e.g., "So happy to hear you enjoyed it, Lauren. Thanks for letting us know! ☺"). Founded in 1869, Campbell's Soup is a very well-known brand, likely to be familiar to all of its social media followers. Therefore, its use of an informal communication style seems appropriate and is likely to reinforce consumers' trust in the brand.

Second, the brand does not pursue a specifically anthropomorphic positioning strategy. However, when visiting the innovation website (campbellideas.com), consumers are welcomed by three spokespeople who look and smile at visitors and invite them to collaborate on an innovation. Their presence is meant to trigger feelings of warmth and interpersonal interactions in consumers' minds. If, however, the brand were seeking to create innovative food products that

help consumers maintain a healthy weight, it would need to gather insights into people's eating habits and body types. Such information likely is perceived as deeply intimate by some consumers, especially those who are not proud of their eating habits or not comfortable with their body type. In that case, the presence of the three spokespeople may create consumer embarrassment and decrease their propensity to disclose the necessary personal information that would facilitate new innovations. Campbell's Soup thus might consider using a projective method, such as indirect questioning, to reduce consumer embarrassment when it solicits such sensitive information.

Third, Campbell's Soup's Twitter feed is relatively hard to read. The brand relies on abbreviations, acronyms, and social media features (hashtags, at-mentions) that hamper reading ease (e.g., "#CEODenise is in NY talking about the future of food and changing consumer tastes w/@panerabread CEO and WSJ's @murraymatt #WSJGlobalFood"). This poor readability might signal a trendy and exclusive image for a hedonic brand, but it likely results in less positive consumer responses for a less hedonic brand such as Campbell's Soup. Brand managers probably should favor simpler, branded tweets that are easier to read and understand, if they aim to increase consumers' engagement with their brand.

5.4 Suggestions for Research

Although this dissertation extends knowledge about the role of the brand communication style in strengthening relationships, much remains to be done to advance theoretical and practical understanding. Further research could explore other communication styles, other meaningful dimensions of consumer–brand relationships, and other relevant mechanisms and boundaries of the effect of brand communication style on consumer responses. This section is devoted to a discussion of those potential alternative mechanisms and boundaries.

5.4.1 Mechanisms Underlying the Effects of Brand Communication Style on Consumer Responses

Three major mechanisms help explain the effect of specific communication styles on consumer responses: perceived appropriateness of behavior (Chapter 2), embarrassment felt (Chapter 3), and processing fluency (Chapter 4). The first two mechanisms reflect the notion that consumers treat and react to brands as they would to other people; they are social mechanisms. The third mechanism instead represents a cognitive experience, namely, the amount of intellectual effort demanded by the branded communication. An interesting avenue for further research would be to examine other categories of mechanisms (beyond the social and cognitive ones), such as processes that pertain to the domain of affect and psychology. In particular, two important, underresearched processes that appear worthwhile to examine in the context of brand communication style are (1) pleasure and (2) psychological empowerment.

Pleasure is a fundamental component of consumption experiences and a critical mechanism underlying consumer behavior (Goulding et al., 2009), and it has been studied widely in consumption contexts (e.g., Cornil & Chandon, 2015; Goldsmith, Cho, & Dhar, 2011; Lee & Qiu, 2009). However, beyond consumption, other experiences with brands may trigger pleasure too, such as the pleasure consumers experience from interacting with brands. Specific communication styles, such as the use of metaphors in brand communication, increase consumers' enjoyment in processing an ad, which ultimately results in more favorable consumer

responses (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999); are there other brand communication styles that similarly might prompt pleasurable experiences? For example, a communication style that evokes closeness (Chapters 2 and 3) might provide greater pleasure to consumers. Goulding et al. (2009) argue that consumers experience more pleasure when they feel close and connected with others. Therefore, informality (Chapter 2) and anthropomorphism (Chapter 3) might increase consumers' pleasure. Furthermore, McQuarrie and Mick (1999) suggest that messages that are too simple or too difficult to decipher offer less pleasure to consumers, indicating a non-linear (i.e., inverted U-shaped) consumer response to message readability—which is contrary to the predictions in Chapter 4. It would be interesting to investigate the shape of the relationship between readability and consumers' responses and thereby identify which levels of readability elicit the greatest levels of pleasure.

Psychological empowerment is another important mechanism to examine in the context of consumer–brand interactions. The communication style employed by a brand when interacting with consumers might affect their feelings of empowerment. Psychological empowerment consists of an actual ability to control the environment, combined with the perception that the person can do so successfully (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005). Attaining a feeling that one can control his or her environment is a human basic need (Kelly, 1955; Lefcourt, 1973), with important consequences in the marketing domain (Cutright, 2012; Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2012; White, MacDonnell, & Dahl, 2011). For example, Cutright (2012) demonstrates that when psychological empowerment is threatened, consumers prefer logos and products that are bounded (e.g., postcard with a border framing the picture) over those that are unbounded, because they provide a sense of structure. Research on language also examines how psychological empowerment reflects or affects the way consumers frame their communication. For example, Patrick and Hagtvedt (2012) show that resisting temptation by using "don't" versus "can't" refusals signals consumers' degree of empowerment in achieving a goal, which then affects the likelihood that they will behave in line with their goal. Saying "I don't do X" is more empowering and more likely to lead to resistance to temptation than saying "I can't do X."

In light of these prior findings, how might the notion of psychological empowerment inform further research that extends on the findings in this dissertation? For example, how does the use of an informal communication style in brand communication (Chapter 2) affect consumers' feeling of empowerment? Fairclough (1992; 1994; 1996) argues that the use of an informal style conveys perceptions of closeness between communication partners and softens hierarchical relationships of power. If consumers feel equally empowered as a brand, it might affect their response toward this brand and its products too, though it is unclear whether they might resist the brand better or instead prefer such brands, because they grant them more personal control.

Similar questions apply for brand anthropomorphism (Chapter 3). Kim and McGill (2011) suggest that when consumers anthropomorphize a brand, they apply their feeling of social power to it. If people generally feel powerful, they transfer their feelings of mastery to the anthropomorphized brand and believe they have control over it. In contrast, people with generally low power feel at the mercy of the brand and believe they have less control over it. The notion of psychological empowerment is also very relevant to message readability (Chapter 4). Intuitively, the ease of reading a branded message facilitates message comprehension and therefore is more likely to trigger feelings of control over the environment. For example, the ease of processing information leads to perceptions of greater ease of engaging in a behavior and greater self-efficacy (Song & Schwarz, 2008; White, MacDonnell, & Dahl, 2011). Overall then,

psychological empowerment emerges as an important mechanism to consider when studying the relationship between brand communication styles and consumer responses.

5.4.2 Boundaries to the Effects of Brand Communication Style on Consumer Responses

Additional boundaries might limit the effects of brand communication styles on consumer responses. In particular, further research could examine the potential moderating roles of consumer, brand, and relationship characteristics.

Characteristics of consumers. Two individual differences seem likely to add nuance with regard to how the three communication styles affect consumer behavior. First, a need for affiliation is a person's desire for social contact or belongingness (Veroff & Veroff, 1980). It would be worthwhile to examine how a high versus low need for affiliation influences people's responses to an informal style (Chapter 2) or humanlike style (Chapter 3) of communication. For example, for consumers with a high need for affiliation, the closeness induced by those styles might result in more positive responses.

Second, literacy pertains to proficiency in using written language (Wallendorf, 2001). High levels of literacy reflect a greater capacity to draw logical inferences and think critically. It would be interesting to examine how consumers' literacy moderates the influence of message readability on consumer responses (Chapter 4). People with higher versus lower levels of literacy might respond differently to messages that are more sophisticated or more difficult to read, such as those posted on social media (Davenport & DeLine, 2014; Temnikova, Vieweg, & Castillo, 2015). For example, do more literate consumers appreciate the challenge of deciphering hard-to-read messages, or do they view those messages as the result of a brand's poor writing skills?

Characteristics of brands. Research also could explore the role of brand personality, defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). For example, consumers perceive Subaru as rugged, but they see Tiffany & Co. as sophisticated (Yorkston, Nunes, & Matta, 2010). These brand personality aspects likely have strong influences on consumers' evaluations of branded communication. For example, Kim and Sung (2013) find that brand personality significantly moderates the effect of message framing (promotion- vs. prevention-framed) on persuasion, such that for an exciting or sophisticated brand, a promotion-focused message is more persuasive. In contrast, consumers react more favorably to prevention-focused ads when the brand is perceived as competent or sincere. Accordingly, brand personality likely moderates the effect of an informal style (Chapter 2), brand anthropomorphism (Chapter 3), and message readability (Chapter 4) on consumer responses. Thus consumers might expect brands with a sophisticated personality (e.g., Tiffany & Co.) to use a more formal communication style, whereas brands with a more cheerful or exciting personality (e.g., Toys 'R Us) might be expected to employ a more informal style. Similarly, consumers might be less embarrassed to disclose intimate information to brands perceived as sincere and cheerful (e.g., Hallmark) but reluctant to do so with brands that evoke sophisticated or arrogant personalities (e.g., Guess). Finally, consumers likely expect competent brands to convey clear, easy-to-read messages; messages from exciting brands instead might be preferred when they are less readable, such that they seem unique and original. Considering the complex, multifaceted nature of brand personality, a careful investigation of how it affects consumer responses to specific brands is highly encouraged.

Characteristics of consumer–brand relationships. The effect of a brand's communication style is likely to differ, depending on how consumers relate to that brand. For example, Chapter 2 demonstrated that brand familiarity interacts with an informal communication style to affect brand trust. However, consumers may relate to brands in many different ways beyond this familiar versus unfamiliar taxonomy, such that they could conceive of brands as committed partners, casual friends, or flings (Fournier, 1998). Consumers also may form communal relationships with some brands and exchange relationships with others (Aggarwal, 2004).

Aggarwal and McGill (2012) suggest that consumers might think of brands as partners, who coproduce benefits with consumers, or else as servants, who work for consumers to create benefits. Consumers seemingly might prefer a formal communication style by servant brands but expect partner brands to be more informal (Chapter 2). It also would be interesting to investigate the extent to which a partner or servant anthropomorphized brand affects consumers' willingness to disclose intimate information (Chapter 3). Is it more embarrassing to share intimate information with a partner brand or a servant brand? A similar question applies for communal versus exchange relationships. Consumers may be more likely to divulge intimate information to an anthropomorphized brand with which they have a communal (vs. exchange) relationship. Regarding message readability (Chapter 4), the type of relation could affect responses to easy- versus hard-to-read messages. For example, consumers might want to retain control over servant brands, leading them to respond more favorably to more readable messages that facilitate their comprehension and control over the environment. As these various points indicate, there is no shortage of research opportunities to investigate the different ways consumers relate to brands and how those differences influence consumers' responses to brands' communication styles.

5.5 Concluding Remarks

The long-term survival of brands depends on the relationships they form with consumers. Understanding which aspects of brand communication help establish and maintain strong relationships is essential. Not only has brand communication always functioned to attract and keep consumers, but with technological advances and new media, the benefits of understanding the ways in which brands can successfully interact with consumers have never been greater.

Appendices

Appendix A: Communication Style Manipulation (Chapter 2; Pilot Study; Experiment 2)

Formal condition

Silver Hotel

Silver Hotel in Miami.

Rob This is cool! I want to go there!

Silver Hotel Thank you for the comment.

Emma I went to this hotel all the time when I went to Miami. I like to go to the Silver Hotel for a little pampering! Love the breakfast!

Silver Hotel Thank you for conveying this positive experience.

Elizabeth I've stayed in this hotel - one of my favorites. That was a few summers ago - I think you might have just opened this location - gorgeous hotel, and couldn't be a better location in Miami!

Silver Hotel Thank you. This comment is appreciated.

Paul Do you have hotels in Glasgow?

Silver Hotel There are no Silver Hotels in Glasgow.

Annouk Wooooooo... Lets go try there!

Silver Hotel Thank you for the comment. Silver Hotel is looking forward to hosting you.

Jill Staying this weekend at your hotel in Paris ... I hope they have croissants!

Silver Hotel Croissants are provided in the Silver Hotels.

Informal condition

Silver Hotel

Silver Hotel in Miami!!

Rob This is cool! I want to go there!

Silver Hotel Great! Thanks Rob. That's what we like to hear

Emma I went to this hotel all the time when I went to Miami. I like to go to the Silver Hotel for a little pampering! Love the breakfast!

Silver Hotel Thanks Emma for sharing your experience with us! That's cool you had a good time!

Elizabeth I've stayed in this hotel - one of my favorites. That was a few summers ago - I think you might have just opened this location - gorgeous hotel, and couldn't be a better location in Miami!

Silver Hotel Awww! Thanks Elizabeth! We're flattered!!

Paul Do you have hotels in Glasgow?

Silver Hotel Hi Paul! Soooo sorry, no hotels in Glasgow.

Annouk Wooooooo... Lets go there!

Silver Hotel Ahah Annouk! We're waiting for you

Jill Staying this weekend at your hotel in Paris ... I hope they have croissants!

Silver Hotel Hi Jill! That's awesome! Sure, we have croissants for you

Appendix B: Communication Style Manipulation (Chapter 2; Experiment 1)

Formal condition

Hampton

Hampton in Miami.

Rob This is cool! I want to go there!

Hampton Thank you for the comment.

Emma I went to this hotel all the time when I went to Miami. I like to go to Hampton for a little pampering! Love the breakfast!

Hampton Thank you for conveying this positive experience.

Elizabeth I've stayed in this hotel - one of my favorites. That was a few summers ago - I think you might have just opened this location - gorgeous hotel, and couldn't be a better location in Miami!

Hampton Thank you. The comment is appreciated.

Paul Do you have hotels in Glasgow?

Hampton There are no Hampton hotels in Glasgow.

Annouk Wooooooo... Lets go there!

Hampton Thank you for the comment. Hampton is looking forward to hosting you.

Jill Staying this weekend at your hotel in Paris ... I hope they have croissants!

Hampton Croissants are provided in Hampton hotels.

Informal condition

Hampton

Hampton in Miami!!

Rob This is cool! I want to go there!

Hampton Great! Thanks Rob. That's what we like to hear

Emma I went to this hotel all the time when I went to Miami. I like to go to Hampton for a little pampering! Love the breakfast!

Hampton Thanks Emma for sharing your experience with us! That's cool you had a good time!

Elizabeth I've stayed in this hotel - one of my favorites. That was a few summers ago - I think you might have just opened this location - gorgeous hotel, and couldn't be a better location in Miami!

Hampton Awww! Thanks Elizabeth! We're flattered!!

Paul Do you have hotels in Glasgow?

Hampton Hi Paul! Soooo sorry, no hotels in Glasgow.

Annouk Wooooooo... Lets go there!

Hampton Ahah Annouk! We're waiting for you

Jill Staying this weekend at your hotel in Paris ... I hope they have croissants!

Hampton Hi Jill! That's awesome! Sure, we have croissants for you

Appendix C: Communication Style Manipulation (Chapter 2; Experiment 3)

Unfamiliar condition:

Formal condition

**NOTE: Profile pictures and last names have been edited for privacy reasons.*

Informal condition

**NOTE: Profile pictures and last names have been edited for privacy reasons.*

Familiar condition:

Formal condition

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

Informal condition

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

Appendix D: Brand Anthropomorphism (Chapter 3; Experiment 1)

Non-anthropomorphized

Boost

Boost is a European dating site.

The brand's mission is to help people find love. The brand is dedicated to give its dating community the best possible chance of finding love online.

There are plans for expanding the brand to North America. Therefore, information about how North Americans feel about themselves and romantic relationships is sought.

Please have a look at the questions below and tell what you think.

Thank you.

Anthropomorphized

Hey, my name is Boost.
I'm a European dating site.

My mission is to help people find love. I'm dedicated to give my dating community the best possible chance of finding love online.

I'm planning to come to North America and I'm wondering how North Americans feel about themselves and romantic relationships.

Why don't you have a look at the questions below and tell me what you think.

Thank you.

Appendix E: Brand Anthropomorphism (Chapter 3; Experiment 2)

Non-anthropomorphized

Libresse is a brand that produces sanitary napkins and tampons.

As part of its research and development, the brand is conducting a survey to gain insight into feminine hygiene issues.

Your participation in this study will provide the brand with greater insight into how women feel about their feminine hygiene.

Thank you for participating.

Anthropomorphized

Hey! I'm Libresse. I'm a brand producing sanitary napkins and tampons.

As part of my research and development program, I'm conducting a survey to gain insight into feminine hygiene issues.

Your participation in this study will provide me with greater insight into how women feel about their feminine hygiene.

Thank you for participating.

Appendix F: Brand Anthropomorphism (Chapter 3; Experiment 3)

Non-anthropomorphized

Carmi is a European fashion brand.

Fashion clothing for men, women, teenagers, and children are sold under the brand Carmi.

Carmi is known in Europe for the design of trendy and high-quality clothing.

There are plans for expanding Carmi to North America. More information about how North American people think of clothes in general is sought.

Please look at the questions below and tell what you think.

Thank you.

Anthropomorphized

Hey! I'm Carmi. I'm a European fashion brand.

I sell fashion clothing for men, women, teenagers, and children.

I'm known in Europe for my design of trendy and high-quality clothing.

I'm planning to come to North America. I'm wondering what North American people think of clothes in general.

Why don't you have a look at the questions below and tell me what you think.

Thank you.

Appendix G: Brand Information (Chapter 4)

Brands	Number of tweets	Audience (number of followers)	Industry categories
Accenture	300	311,604	Business service
Adidas	191	2,620,110	Apparel
Allianz	300	18,814	Financial services
Amazon	300	2,276,748	Technology
American Express	300	870,566	Financial services
AT&T	226	747,255	Telecom
Audi	300	1,480,412	Automotive
Bank of America	299	435,712	Financial services
BMW	300	1,159,705	Automotive
Budweiser	298	143,477	Alcohol
Canon USA Corp.	300	83,112	Technology
Cartier	219	331,558	Luxury
Caterpillar Inc.	300	86,899	Heavy equipment
Chanel	240	11,657,858	Luxury
Chase	300	313,558	Financial services
Chevrolet	300	829,243	Automotive
Cisco	300	543,624	Technology
Citi	300	821,463	Financial services
Coach, Inc.	300	648,135	Luxury
Coca-Cola	58	3,205,777	Beverage
Colgate Smile	159	46,806	Consumer packaged goods
Danone	300	12,139	Consumer packaged goods
Disney	300	4,811,438	Leisure
eBay	300	574,172	Technology
ESPN	300	26,014,918	Media
Estée Lauder	300	279,975	Consumer packaged goods
ExxonMobil	300	180,939	Oil & Gas
Facebook	35	13,968,917	Technology
FedEx	300	231,778	Transportation
Ford Motor	300	862,237	Automotive
Fox	300	1,056,486	Media
Frito-Lay	137	266,820	Consumer packaged goods
General Electric	291	407,788	Diversified
Gillette	300	82,317	Consumer packaged goods
Goldman Sachs	300	488,780	Financial services
Google	300	14,333,080	Technology
Gucci	300	3,182,134	Luxury
H&M	298	7,686,386	Retail
Heineken	300	135,427	Alcohol
Hermès Paris	26	20,489	Luxury
HERSHEY'S	224	149,300	Consumer packaged goods
Honda	242	740,167	Automotive
HP	300	988,692	Technology
HSBC	300	72,199	Financial services
Hyundai USA	300	276,623	Automotive
IBM	300	285,775	Technology
Ikea USA	300	361,246	Retail
Intel	300	4,495,482	Technology
J.P. Morgan	254	240,759	Financial services
John Deere	300	118,890	Heavy equipment
Kellogg's	215	54,340	Consumer packaged

			goods
Kia Motors America	300	266,457	Automotive
Kraft Foods	300	195,811	Consumer packaged goods
L'Oréal Paris USA	295	360,153	Consumer packaged goods
Lancôme USA	300	266,622	Consumer packaged goods
Lego	297	347,768	Leisure
Lexus	299	802,014	Automotive
Louis Vuitton	300	5,485,954	Luxury
MasterCard	300	444,263	Financial services
McDonald's	14	3,169,923	Restaurants
Mercedes-Benz	300	1,555,497	Automotive
Microsoft	300	7,572,692	Technology
MTV	300	13,607,055	Media
Nescafé Coffee	251	58,054	Beverage
Nestlé	300	147,402	Consumer packaged goods
Nike	34	5,874,588	Apparel
Nissan	300	681,408	Automotive
Oracle	300	404,087	Technology
Pampers	300	145,374	Consumer packaged goods
Panasonic Corp.	300	50,755	Consumer packaged goods
Pepsi	300	2,972,825	Beverage
Philips	300	277,756	Diversified
Porsche	300	1,236,959	Automotive
Prada	300	689,575	Luxury
Ralph Lauren	300	1748,393	Apparel
RBC	300	76,217	Financial services
Red Bull	300	2,122,380	Beverage
Samsung USA	300	561,597	Technology
SAP	300	181,898	Technology
Siemens	300	84,980	Diversified
Sony	300	4,024,465	Technology
Sprite	300	261,512	Beverage
Starbucks Coffee	79	11,667,602	Restaurants
Subway	79	2,347,276	Restaurants
Target	79	1,806,934	Retail
Boeing	215	303,577	Aerospace
The Home Depot	300	322,332	Retail
Thomson Reuters	300	123,207	Media
Toyota USA	300	573,685	Automotive
UPS	300	150,856	Transportation
Verizon	45	1,703,098	Telecom
Visa	58	327,731	Financial services
Volkswagen USA	300	466,739	Automotive
Walmart	3	772,108	Retail
Wells Fargo	300	225,514	Financial services
ZARA	300	1,107,615	Retail
Total	**24,960**	**188,584,837**	

Appendix H: Level of Brand Hedonism (Chapter 4)

(1 = "not at all" and 7 = "extremely")

Brands	Mean	SD
Accenture	3.55	1.21
Adidas	5.06	1.23
Allianz	3.46	1.13
Amazon	5.41	1.59
American Express	3.43	1.55
AT&T	3.28	1.53
Audi	5.36	1.23
Bank of America	2.18	1.58
BMW	5.34	1.59
Budweiser	4.68	1.78
Canon USA Corp.	4.13	1.54
Cartier	4.86	1.48
Caterpillar Inc.	3.51	1.24
Chanel	4.40	1.26
Chase	2.57	1.45
Chevrolet	4.68	1.18
Cisco	3.17	1.41
Citi	3.16	1.60
Coach. Inc.	4.53	1.60
Coca-Cola	4.95	1.02
Colgate Smile	3.15	1.85
Danone	3.77	1.08
Disney	5.75	1.48
eBay	4.97	.94
ESPN	4.75	1.93
Estée Lauder	4.22	1.11
ExxonMobil	2.43	1.35
Facebook	4.93	1.48
FedEx	3.37	1.28
Ford Motor	4.25	1.70
Fox	4.28	1.78
Frito-Lay	4.85	1.71
General Electric	3.25	1.70
Gillette	3.93	1.54
Goldman Sachs	2.14	1.23
Google	5.92	.95
Gucci	5.29	1.13
H&M	4.54	1.48
Heineken	5.35	1.70
Hermès Paris	3.49	1.54
HERSHEY'S	5.38	1.45
Honda	4.81	1.55
HP	3.86	1.75
HSBC	2.89	1.35
Hyundai USA	4.12	1.45
IBM	3.45	1.47
Ikea USA	4.41	1.45
Intel	4.28	1.22
J.P. Morgan	3.11	1.47
John Deere	3.82	1.65
Kellogg's	4.05	1.59
Kia Motors America	3.82	1.24
Kraft Foods	4.01	1.51
L'Oréal Paris USA	4.59	1.40
Lancôme USA	4.34	1.19
Lego	5.71	1.56
Lexus	5.56	1.15
Louis Vuitton	5.12	1.00

MasterCard	3.85	1.60
McDonald's	4.11	1.54
Mercedes-Benz	5.68	1.13
Microsoft	4.75	1.59
MTV	4.50	2.24
Nescafé Coffee	4.35	1.48
Nestlé	4.21	1.50
Nike	5.05	1.40
Nissan	4.46	1.32
Oracle	3.19	1.48
Pampers	2.36	1.24
Panasonic Corp.	4.41	1.27
Pepsi	5.00	.99
Philips	3.79	1.11
Porsche	6.05	1.26
Prada	5.32	1.07
Ralph Lauren	4.11	1.35
RBC	3.36	1.41
Red Bull	4.89	1.41
Samsung USA	5.34	1.02
SAP	3.58	.94
Siemens	2.84	1.64
Sony	5.17	1.46
Sprite	4.80	1.53
Starbucks Coffee	4.89	1.19
Subway	3.75	1.67
Target	4.41	1.55
Boeing	4.27	1.77
The Home Depot	3.55	1.67
Thomson Reuters	3.20	1.31
Toyota USA	4.48	1.28
UPS	3.64	1.51
Verizon	3.75	1.36
Visa	4.35	1.64
Volkswagen USA	4.63	1.23
Walmart	3.15	1.39
Wells Fargo	2.64	1.55
ZARA	4.09	.91

Appendix I: Detailed Results for Robustness Checks (Chapter 4)

Alternative Engagement Measure

Rerunning the main analyses with absolute consumer engagement measures produced the same pattern of results as in our main analyses, as detailed in Table A1.

Table I1: Analysis with Alternative Engagement Measure

Variables	Share			Like		
	γ	SE	*p*-Value	γ	SE	*p*-Value
Intercept	3.22	5.27	.54	6.10	5.84	.30
Within-group effects (tweet-level)						
Controls						
POS	-.04	.05	.35	.07	.04	.12
MEDIA	.41***	.02	.00	.53***	.02	.00
Message readability						
$READ_1$_GMC (Tweet length)	.01***	.00	.00	.00	.00	.88
$READ_2$_GMC (Average word length)	.02**	.01	.05	.00	.01	.68
$READ_3$_GMC (Non-words)	-.93	.64	.15	-1.86***	.64	.00
$READ_4$_GMC (Noun-verb ratio)	-.02***	.00	.00	-.01***	.00	.01
$READ_5$_GMC (Average parse tree depth)	-.01	.00	.19	.00	.00	.88
$READ_6$_GMC (Hashtag)	.42***	.14	.00	.45***	.14	.00
$READ_7$_GMC (At-mentions)	-1.32***	.19	.00	-.65***	.19	.00
$READ_8$_GMC (Emojis)	2.05***	.20	.00	2.19***	.19	.00
Message readability × brand hedonism						
$READ_1$_GMC (Tweet length) * HED	-.01***	.00	.00	-.01***	.00	.00
$READ_2$_GMC (Average word length) * HED	-.04***	.01	.00	-.03***	.01	.01
$READ_3$_GMC (Non-words) * HED	1.00	.68	.14	1.33**	.67	.05
$READ_4$_GMC (Noun-verb ratio) * HED	.01*	.01	.08	.00	.00	.33
$READ_5$_GMC (Average parse tree depth) * HED	.00	.00	.76	.01	.00	.11
$READ_6$_GMC (Hashtag) * HED	-.06	.15	.69	-.44***	.15	.00
$READ_7$_GMC (At-mentions) * HED	-.12	.21	.56	-.54***	.20	.01
$READ_8$ (Emojis) * HED	-.73***	.25	.00	-1.04***	.24	.00
Between-group effects (brand-level)						
Controls						
FREQCOM	.00	.00	.78	.00	.00	.55
Message readability						
$\overline{READ_1}$ (Tweet length)	.06	.12	.59	.00	.13	.97
$\overline{READ_2}$ (Average word length)	-.35	.81	.67	-.61	.89	.50
$\overline{READ_3}$ (Non-words)	54.41	58.02	.35	37.69	64.24	.56
$\overline{READ_4}$ (Noun-verb ratio)	-.33	.47	.48	-.29	.52	.58
$\overline{READ_5}$ (Average parse tree depth)	.14	.21	.51	.23	.24	.34
$\overline{READ_6}$ (Hashtags)	-3.21	5.47	.56	-1.95	6.05	.75
$\overline{READ_7}$ (At-mentions)	3.52	11.73	.77	6.20	12.99	.64
$\overline{READ_8}$ (Emojis)	7.94	11.36	.49	12.29	12.58	.33
Brand hedonism						
HED	5.96	6.28	.35	7.57	6.96	.28
Message readability × brand hedonism						
$\overline{READ_1}$ (Tweet length) * HED	.14	.41	.74	-.01	.14	.94
$\overline{READ_2}$ (Average word length) * HED	1.97	3.56	.58	-.96	1.18	.42
$\overline{READ_3}$ (Non-words) * HED	21.50	217.83	.92	18.69	65.07	.78
$\overline{READ_4}$ (Noun-verb ratio) * HED	-1.54	1.72	.38	.43	.60	.48
$\overline{READ_5}$ (Average parse tree depth) * HED	.61	.83	.47	-.19	.29	.51
$\overline{READ_6}$ (Hashtags) * HED	1.13	22.51	.65	-3.81	7.38	.61

$\overline{READ_7}$ (At-mentions) * HED	51.04	43.12	.24	-12.75	14.70	.39
$\overline{READ_8}$ (Emojis) * HED	-2.19	82.63	.81	4.36	25.90	.87
Fixed effects						
Y2015	-.21***	.02	.00	-.34***	.02	.00
$INDUSTRY_1$ (Aerospace)	1.35	1.23	.27	.76	1.36	.58
$INDUSTRY_2$ (Alcohol)	.39	1.13	.73	-.40	1.25	.75
$INDUSTRY_3$ (Apparel)	2.19	.95	.03	1.92	1.06	.07
$INDUSTRY_4$ (Automotive)	.62	.80	.44	.25	.88	.78
$INDUSTRY_5$ (Beverage)	.30	.92	.75	-.09	1.02	.93
$INDUSTRY_6$ (Business service)	-.18	1.20	.88	-.85	1.32	.53
$INDUSTRY_7$ (Consumer packaged goods)	-.78	.77	.32	-1.03	.85	.23
$INDUSTRY_8$ (Diversified)	-.39	.94	.68	-.66	1.04	.53
$INDUSTRY_9$ (Financial services)	-.27	.76	.73	-.29	.84	.73
$INDUSTRY_{10}$ (Heavy equipment)	-.40	1.05	.71	-.12	1.16	.92
$INDUSTRY_{11}$ (Leisure)	1.82	1.14	.12	1.29	1.26	.31
$INDUSTRY_{12}$ (Luxury)	1.71	.86**	.05	1.50	.96	.12
$INDUSTRY_{13}$ (Media)	.62	.89	.49	.33	.98	.74
$INDUSTRY_{14}$ (Oil/Gas)	.58	1.24	.64	.43	1.37	.76
$INDUSTRY_{15}$ (Restaurants)	1.79	.95	.07	2.07*	1.06	.06
$INDUSTRY_{16}$ (Retail)	.40	.88	.65	.72	.97	.46
$INDUSTRY_{17}$ (Technology)	.36	.75	.64	-.15	.84	.86
$INDUSTRY_{18}$ (Telecom)	.06	1.04	.95	.35	1.15	.76

*$p \leq .10$.
**$p \leq .05$.
***$p \leq .01$.

Alternative Measure of Lexical Readability, "Non-Word"

For the message readability assessment, we reran the main analyses with the more traditional, but less specific to Twitter, Dale-Chall variable (Dale and Chall 1948). The relationships were confirmed for the Dale-Chall variable, as detailed in Table A2.

Table I2: Analysis with Dale-Chall Variable as Lexical Readability

Variables	Share			Like		
	γ	SE	*p*-Value	γ	SE	*p*-Value
Intercept	.09	2.31	.97	1.12	2.75	.69
Within-group effects (tweet-level)						
Controls						
POS	-.02	.02	.49	.02	.03	.41
MEDIA	.14***	.01	.00	.23***	.01	.00
Message readability						
$READ_1$_GMC (Tweet length)	.00***	.00	.00	.00	.00	.65
$READ_2$_GMC (Average word length)	.00	.01	.74	.00	.01	.61
$READ_3$_GMC (Dale-Chall)	-.13**	.06	.03	-.26***	.07	.00
$READ_4$_GMC (Noun-verb ratio)	-.01***	.00	.00	-.01***	.00	.00
$READ_5$_GMC (Average parse tree depth)	-.01**	.00	.02	.00	.00	.52
$READ_6$_GMC (Hashtag)	.25***	.07	.00	.20**	.09	.03
$READ_7$_GMC (At-mentions)	-.32***	.10	.00	-.26**	.12	.03
$READ_8$_GMC (Emojis)	.90***	.10	.00	1.13***	.12	.00
Message readability × brand hedonism						
$READ_1$_GMC (Tweet length) * HED	-.01***	.00	.00	-.01***	.00	.00
$READ_2$_GMC (Average word length) * HED	-.02***	.01	.00	-.02**	.01	.03
$READ_3$_GMC (Dale-Chall) * HED	.13**	.06	.04	.10	.07	.19
$READ_4$_GMC (Noun-verb ratio) * HED	.00*	.00	.08	.00	.00	.25
$READ_5$_GMC (Average parse tree depth) * HED	.00**	.00	.03	.01**	.00	.03
$READ_6$_GMC (Hashtag) * HED	.03	.08	.70	-.22**	.10	.02
$READ_7$_GMC (At-mentions) * HED	.13	.11	.21	-.21	.13	.10
$READ_8$ (Emojis) * HED	-.37***	.13	.00	-.53***	.16	.00
Between-group effects (brand-level)						
Controls						
FREQCOM	.00	.00	.27	.00	.00	.25
Message readability						
$\overline{READ_1}$ (Tweet length)	-.02	.05	.71	-.06	.06	.36
$\overline{READ_2}$ (Average word length)	.20	.35	.57	.15	.42	.73
$\overline{READ_3}$ (Dale-Chall)	.77	3.79	.84	-1.40	4.51	.76
$\overline{READ_4}$ (Noun-verb ratio)	-.15	.23	.52	-.08	.27	.77
$\overline{READ_5}$ (Average parse tree depth)	.01	.11	.93	.08	.13	.56
$\overline{READ_6}$ (Hashtags)	-3.40	2.16	.12	-3.37	2.57	.20
$\overline{READ_7}$ (At-mentions)	-5.42	5.15	.30	-6.74	6.14	.28
$\overline{READ_8}$ (Emojis)	-1.21	5.14	.81	.94	6.13	.88
Brand hedonism						
HED	.59	2.79	.83	1.06	3.32	.75
Message readability × brand hedonism						
$\overline{READ_1}$ (Tweet length) * HED	.00	.05	.95	.00	.06	.94
$\overline{READ_2}$ (Average word length) * HED	-.20	.48	.68	-.25	.57	.66
$\overline{READ_3}$ (Dale-Chall) * HED	-1.11	3.39	.74	-1.22	4.04	.77
$\overline{READ_4}$ (Noun-verb ratio) * HED	-.33	.31	.29	-.37	.37	.33
$\overline{READ_5}$ (Average parse tree depth) * HED	.16	.12	.19	.17	.14	.23
$\overline{READ_6}$ (Hashtags) * HED	.23	3.02	.94	-.03	3.60	.99
$\overline{READ_7}$ (At-mentions) * HED	3.55	6.16	.57	3.39	7.35	.65
$\overline{READ_8}$ (Emojis) * HED	.62	1.37	.95	-1.10	12.37	.93

Fixed effects						
Y2015	-.11	.01	.00	-.20	.01	.00
$INDUSTRY_1$ (Aerospace)	.63	.54	.25	.39	.65	.55
$INDUSTRY_2$ (Alcohol)	.79	.51	.13	.60	.60	.33
$INDUSTRY_3$ (Apparel)	.27	.42	.53	.18	.51	.73
$INDUSTRY_4$ (Automotive)	.24	.35	.49	.14	.42	.74
$INDUSTRY_5$ (Beverage)	.14	.41	.74	-.05	.49	.92
$INDUSTRY_6$ (Business service)	-.44	.55	.43	-.86	.65	.19
$INDUSTRY_7$ (Consumer packaged goods)	.23	.34	.50	.12	.41	.76
$INDUSTRY_8$ (Diversified)	.00	.42	1.00	-.21	.50	.68
$INDUSTRY_9$ (Financial services)	-.16	.34	.64	-.26	.40	.51
$INDUSTRY_{10}$ (Heavy equipment)	-.03	.46	.94	.12	.55	.83
$INDUSTRY_{11}$ (Leisure)	.95	.52	.07	.96	.62	.13
$INDUSTRY_{12}$ (Luxury)	.71	.39	.07	.63	.46	.18
$INDUSTRY_{13}$ (Media)	-.35	.40	.38	-.64	.47	.18
$INDUSTRY_{14}$ (Oil/Gas)	-.28	.55	.62	-.51	.66	.44
$INDUSTRY_{15}$ (Restaurants)	-.07	.42	.87	-.06	.51	.91
$INDUSTRY_{16}$ (Retail)	-.02	.39	.96	-.08	.46	.87
$INDUSTRY_{17}$ (Technology)	-.07	.33	.83	-.40	.40	.32
$INDUSTRY_{18}$ (Telecom)	-.10	.46	.83	-.12	.55	.84

$^{*}p \leq .10$.
$^{**}p \leq .05$.
$^{***}p \leq .01$.

Whole Sample

To address the effects of Twitter updating its platform, we initially disregarded tweets by brands during 2013 and 2014; when we included the older tweets, the results aligned with the main analyses, as Table A3 shows.

Table I3: Analysis with Four Years' of Tweets

Variables	Share			Like		
	γ	SE	*p*-Value	γ	SE	*p*-Value
Intercept	.34	2.34	.88	1.72	2.86	.55
Within-group effects (tweet-level)						
Controls						
POS	-.03	.02	.27	.01	.03	.67
MEDIA	.16***	.01	.00	.25***	.01	.00
Message readability						
$READ_1$_GMC (Tweet length)	.00**	.00	.05	.00	.00	.34
$READ_2$_GMC (Average word length)	-.01	.01	.33	-.01	.01	.26
$READ_3$_GMC (Non-words)	-.53	.34	.12	-1.06***	.41	.01
$READ_4$_GMC (Noun-verb ratio)	-.01***	.00	.00	-.01***	.00	.01
$READ_5$_GMC (Average parse tree depth)	.00*	.00	.09	.00	.00	.75
$READ_6$_GMC (Hashtag)	.25***	.07	.00	.18**	.09	.05
$READ_7$_GMC (At-mentions)	-.34***	.10	.00	-.22*	.12	.08
$READ_8$_GMC (Emojis)	.97***	.10	.00	1.21***	.13	.00
Message readability × brand hedonism						
$READ_1$_GMC (Tweet length) * HED	-.01***	.00	.00	-.01***	.00	.00
$READ_2$_GMC (Average word length) * HED	-.02**	.01	.02	-.01*	.01	.07
$READ_3$_GMC (Non-words) * HED	.71**	.36	.05	.96**	.44	.03
$READ_4$_GMC (Noun-verb ratio) * HED	.00	.00	.15	.00	.00	.37
$READ_5$_GMC (Average parse tree depth) * HED	.01***	.00	.00	.01***	.00	.01
$READ_6$_GMC (Hashtag) * HED	.05	.08	.51	-.21**	.10	.03
$READ_7$_GMC (At-mentions) * HED	.16	.11	.15	-.20	.13	.13
$READ_8$ (Emojis) * HED	-.38***	.13	.00	-.54***	.16	.00
Between-group effects (brand-level)						
Controls						
FREQCOM	.00*	.00	.08	.00	.00	.15
Message readability						
$\overline{READ_1}$ (Tweet length)	-.03	.05	.59	-.06	.06	.31
$\overline{READ_2}$ (Average word length)	.18	.36	.62	.08	.44	.86
$\overline{READ_3}$ (Non-words)	35.02	25.75	.18	26.30	31.52	.41
$\overline{READ_4}$ (Noun-verb ratio)	-.18	.21	.39	-.15	.25	.56
$\overline{READ_5}$ (Average parse tree depth)	.04	.10	.66	.09	.12	.44
$\overline{READ_6}$ (Hashtags)	-4.73	2.43	.06	-4.18	2.97	.17
$\overline{READ_7}$ (At-mentions)	-4.88	5.21	.35	-6.25	6.37	.33
$\overline{READ_8}$ (Emojis)	-.87	5.04	.86	.82	6.17	.90
Brand hedonism						
HED	.35	2.79	.90	.74	3.41	.83
Message readability × brand hedonism						
$\overline{READ_1}$ (Tweet length) * HED	.01	.06	.90	.00	.07	.99
$\overline{READ_2}$ (Average word length) * HED	-.15	.47	.75	-.21	.58	.72
$\overline{READ_3}$ (Non-words) * HED	-2.34	26.07	.44	-12.30	31.91	.70
$\overline{READ_4}$ (Noun-verb ratio) * HED	-.41	.24	.09	-.43	.30	.15
$\overline{READ_5}$ (Average parse tree depth) * HED	.15	.12	.21	.18	.14	.21
$\overline{READ_6}$ (Hashtags) * HED	.30	2.97	.92	.19	3.63	.96
$\overline{READ_7}$ (At-mentions) * HED	2.84	5.89	.63	3.47	7.21	.63
$\overline{READ_8}$ (Emojis) * HED	-.13	1.38	.99	-1.92	12.71	.88

Fixed effects						
Y2013	-.02	.10	.88	-.28	.12	.02
Y2014	-.09***	.02	.00	-.30***	.03	.00
Y2015	-.11***	.01	.00	-.20***	.01	.00
$INDUSTRY_1$ (Aerospace)	.57	.54	.30	.31	.67	.65
$INDUSTRY_2$ (Alcohol)	.77	.50	.13	.51	.61	.41
$INDUSTRY_3$ (Apparel)	.21	.42	.62	.07	.52	.90
$INDUSTRY_4$ (Automotive)	.24	.35	.49	.12	.43	.79
$INDUSTRY_5$ (Beverage)	.14	.41	.74	-.08	.50	.88
$INDUSTRY_6$ (Business service)	-.41	.53	.45	-.79	.65	.23
$INDUSTRY_7$ (Consumer packaged goods)	.19	.34	.59	.09	.42	.83
$INDUSTRY_8$ (Diversified)	-.04	.41	.92	-.23	.51	.66
$INDUSTRY_9$ (Financial services)	-.15	.34	.65	-.24	.41	.57
$INDUSTRY_{10}$ (Heavy equipment)	-.07	.46	.89	.06	.57	.92
$INDUSTRY_{11}$ (Leisure)	.89*	.51	.08	.85	.62	.18
$INDUSTRY_{12}$ (Luxury)	.76**	.38	.05	.62	.47	.19
$INDUSTRY_{13}$ (Media)	-.39	.39	.32	-.73	.48	.14
$INDUSTRY_{14}$ (Oil/Gas)	-.27	.55	.63	-.51	.67	.46
$INDUSTRY_{15}$ (Restaurants)	-.09	.42	.84	-.08	.52	.88
$INDUSTRY_{16}$ (Retail)	-.11	.39	.77	-.15	.48	.75
$INDUSTRY_{17}$ (Technology)	-.09	.33	.79	-.43	.41	.30
$INDUSTRY_{18}$ (Telecom)	-.14	.46	.77	-.16	.56	0.78

*$p \leq .10$.
**$p \leq .05$.
***$p \leq .01$.

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Samenvatting (Summary in Dutch)

Introductie

De opkomst van het internet en de sociale media hebben de manier waarop consumenten met merken omgaan radicaal veranderd. In tegenstelling tot de traditionele media (zoals televisie, billboards en radio), die informatie in één richting naar consumenten toe verspreiden, hebben het internet en sociale media tweerichtingsverkeer en interactie tussen consumenten en merken mogelijk gemaakt. Dientengevolge gaan consumenten nu via veel meer verschillende kanalen en veel intensiever om met merken dan ooit tevoren (Forrester, 2014). Daarenboven hebben ze nu veel hogere verwachtingen ten aanzien van de wijze waarop merken met ze zouden moeten communiceren (Labreque, 2014). In toenemende mate verwachten ze dat merken hen als een vriend behandelen, in plaats van als consument (Cummings, 2015). In een dergelijke context is het opbouwen en bestendigen van relaties met consumenten een heilige graal voor brandmanagers geworden. Dientengevolge moeten brandmanagers meer dan ooit letten op de wijze waarop ze met consumenten communiceren. Deze nieuwe context doet een belangrijke vraag rijzen: moeten merken, gezien de twee-richting en interactieve aard van hedendaagse consumenten-merk interactie, de manier waarop ze communicatie inzetten om sterke relaties met hun klanten te bouwen niet heel anders insteken?

Een fundamentele overweging in dit opzicht is de keuze van de communicatiestijl van het merk, om precies te zijn van de manier waarop merken hun communicatie met consumenten articuleren. Communicatiestijl wordt in deze context gedefinieerd als "de manier waarop men verbaal of paraverbaal optreedt om aan te geven hoe letterlijke betekenis (van een boodschap) opgevat, geïnterpreteerd, gefilterd of begrepen moet worden" (Norton, 1978, p 99). Het begrip communicatiestijl omvat alle aspecten van merk-gerelateerde communicatie die onafhankelijk van de inhoud van een boodschap gevarieerd kunnen worden (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999). Het thema 'communicatiestijl' is belangrijk, omdat reacties van consumenten op een boodschap van een merk niet alleen van de inhoud van de boodschap afhangen, maar ook van de subjectieve gevoelens die ontstaan tijdens het lezen van die boodschap (Lee & Aaker, 2004). Die subjectieve gevoelens zijn bijzonder ontvankelijk voor context-gerelateerde aspecten, zoals de communicatiestijl (McElroy & Seta, 2003).

Doel van het Onderzoek

Hoewel de door een merk gehanteerde communicatiestijl een belangrijk element is in de totstandkoming van de relatie van een merk met consumenten (Labrecque, 2014), ontbreekt in de wetenschappelijke literatuur een goed begrip van de effecten van die communicatiestijl op de consument-merk relatie. Het doel van het voorliggende proefschrift is precies om deze lacune in de literatuur op te vullen door te onderzoeken hoe, wanneer en waarom consumenten een bepaalde relatie met betrekking tot een merk opbouwen in reactie op de communicatiestijl die het merk hanteert. De centrale vraag die in de dissertatie aan de orde is luidt dan ook: *Hoe, wanneer en waarom beïnvloedt de communicatiestijl die een merk hanteert de relatie tussen merk en consument?* We proberen deze vraag te beantwoorden aan de hand van drie empirische onderzoeksprojecten,

waarin we het verband tussen communicatiestijl en merk-consument relatie verkennen. We hebben ervoor gekozen om in te zoomen op de volgende drie aspecten: informaliteit (in hoofdstuk 2), antropomorfisme (in hoofdstuk 3), en leesbaarheid (in hoofdstuk 4) van de merk-gerelateerde boodschap.

Een nader onderzoek van deze drie aspecten is wenselijk, omdat ze twee fundamentele veranderingen in de door merken op twee-richting communicatieplatformen gehanteerde communicatiestijlen weerspiegelen. In de eerste plaats gebruiken merken steeds vaker communicatiestijlen die een zekere familiariteit oproepen. Ze spreken consumenten steeds vaker informeel aan (informaliteit), of personifiëren hun communicatie (antropomorfisme), omdat ervan uitgegaan wordt dat dit de ontwikkeling van een band met de consument zal vergemakkelijken. Niettemin is er geen empirisch bewijs voor de aanname dat het gebruik van deze stijlen onder alle omstandigheden de beste manier is om met consumenten te communiceren. In de tweede plaats wordt communicatie van merken op sociale media steeds meer gekenmerkt door het gebruik van afkortingen, acroniemen en specifieke tekens zoals hashtags, @, en emoji's. Dientengevolge worden boodschappen van merken op deze platformen steeds complexer en moeilijker te begrijpen (Davenport & DeLine, 2014; Temnikova, Vieweg, & Castillo, 2015). Het thema leesbaarheid (of begrijpelijkheid) is van belang, omdat bekend is dat in traditionele advertenties en marketingcommunicatie boodschappen die moeilijker te begrijpen zijn ook minder overtuigingskracht hebben (Lee & Aaker, 2004).

We onderzoeken daarom hoe deze drie stilistische aspecten fundamentele dimensies van consument-merk relaties beïnvloeden. We kijken naar de dimensies van die relatie die het meest waarschijnlijk beïnvloed worden door de respectievelijke communicatiestijlen, met name het vertrouwen van de consument in het merk, in reactie op het gebruik van een informele versus een formele stijl (in hoofdstuk 2), de mate waarin de consument zichzelf blootgeeft als reactie op een antropomorfe versus niet antropomorfe communicatiestijl stijl (in hoofdstuk 3), en het engagement van een consument naar een merk als reactie op de (moeilijk-) leesbaarheid van de boodschap (in hoofdstuk 4). In de volgende paragrafen geven we meer gedetailleerd inzicht in ieder hoofdstuk en definiëren we de belangrijkste concepten.

De Belangrijkste Resultaten van het Onderzoek

In deze sectie vatten we de belangrijkste resultaten van het proefschrift samen.

Het effect van een informele communicatiestijl op het vertrouwen van consumenten in een merk (hoofdstuk 2)
In hoofdstuk 2 hebben we onderzocht of en hoe het hanteren van een informele (versus een formele) communicatiestijl door een merk het vertrouwen van consumenten in dat merk beïnvloedt. Om dit te realiseren hebben we de participanten in onze studie blootgesteld aan stukjes van conversaties op sociale media tussen verschillende consumenten en merken. We hebben daarna het vertrouwen van deze respondenten in het merk onderzocht. In experimenten lieten we merken omgaan met consumenten in hetzij een informele, dan wel een formele communicatiestijl. Onze bevindingen tonen aan dat respondenten verschillende vertrouwenspatronen ten toon spreidden, afhankelijk van in hoeverre ze bekend waren met het merk of niet. Om precies te zijn, het hanteren van een informele stijl (versus een formele) vergrootte het vertrouwen in merken waarmee ze bekend waren, maar verminderde het vertrouwen in merken waarmee ze niet bekend waren. We hebben laten zien dat deze effecten

plaatsvonden omdat respondenten verwachtten dat het merk zich volgens sociale normen zou gedragen, in die zin dat een informele stijl passend gevonden werd voor bekende merken en niet passend voor onbekende merken.

De effecten van antropomorfisme op de mate waarin consumenten zich blootgeven aan een merk (hoofdstuk 3)
De doelstelling van hoofdstuk 3 was het onderzoeken van het effect van antropomorfisme van een merk op de geneigdheid van consumenten om intieme informatie met dat merk te delen. Om die reden hebben we participanten hetzij aan een antropomorfe versie, dan wel aan een neutrale versie van het merk blootgesteld. We hebben ze daarna gevraagd om een vragenlijst in te vullen, zogenaamd uitgezet door dat merk, waarin intieme vragen werden gesteld. Onze bevindingen hebben laten zien dat participanten minder intieme gegevens blootgaven aan antropomorfe merken dan aan neutrale versies van die merken. Deze effecten waren zichtbaar in de mate van intimiteit in de gegevens, maar ook in de hoeveelheid gegevens die ze met dat merk deelden. We hebben aangetoond dat respondenten minder met antropomorfe merken deelden, omdat ze deze merken als intelligent zagen, en in staat om anderen te evalueren. Dit deed de mate van schaamte die de respondenten ervoeren bij het delen van intieme informatie toenemen. Daarnaast hebben we aangetoond dat het op een indirecte manier vragen naar intieme informatie deze negatieve effecten deed verminderen. Om precies te zijn, wanneer respondenten gevraagd werd om op intieme vragen te antwoorden vanuit het perspectief van een referentiepersoon, verdween het negatieve effect van het gebruik van een antropomorf merk.

De effecten van de leesbaarheid (begrijpelijkheid) van een boodschap op het merk-engagement van consumenten (hoofdstuk 4)
In hoofdstuk 4 hebben we een subtieler, maar meer kernachtig aspect van merk-gerelateerde communicatie onderzocht: het gemak waarmee een boodschap gelezen kan worden. Om precies te zijn, we hebben onderzocht hoe deze leesbaarheid merk-engagement van consumenten beïnvloedt. We hebben ons hierbij van experimenteel onderzoek, waarin de communicatiestijl gemanipuleerd werd, in de richting van veldonderzoek begeven, waarin real-world data gebruikt is om de effecten van leesbaarheid op merk-engagement van consumenten vast te stellen. We hebben 24.960 tweets, die door de 96 meest waardevolle merken geproduceerd werden, geanalyseerd (Forbes, 2016). Onze bevindingen hebben aangetoond dat het effect van leesbaarheid op engagement varieerde al naar gelang het niveau van hedonisme dat met het merk geassocieerd werd. Om precies te zijn, boodschappen die makkelijker te lezen waren veroorzaakten hogere niveaus van engagement bij weinig-hedonische merken, terwijl dit effect niet optrad of zelfs omgekeerd optrad bij hoog-hedonische merken. In lijn met bestaand onderzoek (Pocheptsova, Labroo, & Dhar, 2010), redeneerden we dat leesbaarheid van boodschappen door consumenten geïnterpreteerd wordt als familiariteit van het merk. Deze gepercipieerde familiariteit leidt tot een toename in engagement met het merk bij de consument. Niettemin, in de context van hoog-hedonische merken, waaraan consumenten vaak attributen als exclusiviteit en uniek zijn hoog waarderen, leidt de grotere leesbaarheid van de boodschappen juist tot een vermindering van het gevoel van exclusiviteit, en dus een vermindering van engagement.

Contributies van het Onderzoek

Wetenschappelijke contributie

In dit proefschrift hebben we consequent aangetoond dat de effecten van een merk-gerelateerde communicatiestijl op consumentengedrag niet onafhankelijk zijn van de specifieke context. Er moet zorgvuldig aandacht geschonken worden aan die specifieke context, waarin de interacties tussen merk en consument plaatsvinden. Onze bevindingen tonen aan dat consumenten op tegengestelde wijze reageren op vergelijkbare stijlen, afhankelijk van relationele en contextuele elementen, zoals de band die consumenten met een merk hebben (hoofdstuk 2), de manier waarop ze gevraagd wordt intieme gegevens te delen (hoofdstuk 3), en de doelen die ze nastreven in de interactie met een merk (hoofdstuk 4). Om precies te zijn, hoofdstuk 2 heeft licht geworpen op het belang van de bekendheid met het merk als een relationeel aspect dat de reactie van consumenten op een informele communicatiestijl modereert. In hoofdstuk 3 stelden we vast dat de methode van bevragen, d.w.z. het vragen van de consument om vanuit het perspectief van een ander de vragen te beantwoorden, de mate waarin respondenten intieme informatie blootgeven aan een antropomorf merk modereert. Tenslotte hebben we in hoofdstuk 4 laten zien dat consumentenreacties op makkelijk leesbare boodschappen verschillen, afhankelijk van de mate van hedonisme die ze associëren met het merk. Samengenomen stellen onze bevindingen de vanzelfsprekendheid aan de kaak waarmee aangenomen werd dat deze stijlen een ondubbelzinnig positief effect hebben op de relatie met consumenten. We hebben aangetoond hoe belangrijk het is om altijd die omstandigheden te analyseren waarvan aangenomen mag worden dat ze dit effect modereren.

Daarnaast hebben we een bijdrage geleverd aan de literatuur met betrekking tot communicatiestijlen, door inzicht te genereren in de psychologische processen die ten grondslag liggen aan de effecten die communicatiestijlen hebben op consumentengedrag. In hoofdstuk 2 hebben we aangetoond dat consumenten de mate waarin een communicatiestijl passend is lijken te evalueren, en te vergelijken met hun verwachtingen (e.g., Sela et al., 2012), terwijl die evaluaties vervolgens hun vertrouwen in het merk beïnvloeden. Vervolgens hebben we in hoofdstuk 3 aangetoond dat consumenten sociale omgangsregels toepassen op een merk, zodra dat merk in de eerste persoon communiceert, en zich verhouden tot dat merk alsof het een individu is in vergelijkbare omstandigheden (e.g., Kim & McGill, 2011). Antropomorfisme van een merk ontlokt aan consumenten de indruk dat het merk hen kan evalueren, waardoor ze minder bereid zijn om intieme gegevens met dat merk te delen. In hoofdstuk 4 hebben we gevonden dat het gemak waarmee een boodschap van een merk gelezen en verwerkt kan worden een zekere mate van bekendheid met dat merk oproept (e.g., Pocheptsova, Labroo, & Dhar, 2010; Schwarz, 2004), en dat gevoel beïnvloedt vervolgens de mate van engagement van consumenten met de boodschap.

In dit proefschrift hebben we ook belangrijke bijdragen geleverd aan de literatuur met betrekking tot de relatie van consumenten met een merk. Aangezien merken tegenwoordig met consumenten omgaan op manieren die doen denken aan interpersoonlijke communicatie, hebben we ook laten zien dat mensen zich verhouden tot, en reageren op, merken zoals ze dat ten opzichte van andere mensen zouden doen (Fournier, 1998). Om precies te zijn, hebben we in de hoofdstukken 2 en 3 laten zien dat consumenten, in de context van tweerichtingscommunicatie met een merk, sociale omgangsregels toepassen, wanneer ze de wijze waarop een merk met hen communiceert evalueren.

In hoofdstuk 2 hebben we laten zien dat consumenten een formelere communicatiestijl verwachten als ze niet bekend zijn met een merk, zoals ze ook van een onbekende persoon een meer formele communicatiestijl verwachten, als die hen aanspreekt.

In hoofdstuk 3 hebben we aangetoond dat consumenten zich ten aanzien van een antropomorf merk schamen om intieme informatie met dat merk te delen, en dat is een emotie die we normaal gesproken ervaren in een interpersoonlijke context.

Tenslotte hebben we een bijdrage geleverd aan de literatuur met betrekking tot sociale media (e.g., De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Labrecque, 2014; van Laer & de Ruyter, 2010), door een beter begrip te vormen van de wijze waarop een communicatiestijl de reacties van consumenten beïnvloedt op sociale media zoals Facebook en Twitter. We zijn daarmee ingegaan op recente oproepen om diepgaander onderzoek naar marketing in sociale media te doen (e.g., Stephen, 2016), en hebben laten zien hoe relaties tussen consumenten en merken beïnvloed worden door de informaliteit (hoofdstuk 2) en leesbaarheid (hoofdstuk 4) van merk-gerelateerde boodschappen op sociale media. In hoofdstuk 2 hebben we laten zien dat interacties tussen consumenten en merken op sociale media lijken op interpersoonlijke interacties en door de omgangsregels van interpersoonlijke interactie geleid worden. In hoofdstuk 4 hebben we beargumenteerd dat communicatie van merken op sociale media moeilijker te lezen valt dan op andere media, hetgeen ten dele veroorzaakt wordt door de beperkte tekstlengte van dergelijke communicatie, hetgeen de reacties van consumenten op deze communicatie beïnvloedt.

Aanbevelingen voor managers

Vanuit een praktisch oogpunt geeft ons onderzoek aanleiding tot een aantal concrete aanbevelingen voor marketeers, met betrekking tot het opstellen van boodschappen en het managen van communicatie met het oog op een verbetering van hun relatie met consumenten. Met name wijst ons onderzoek op het belang van de communicatiestijl, afgezien van de inhoud van de boodschap. We hebben de conventionele wijsheid dat 'het vooral gaat om de inhoud' (Rooney, 2014) aan de kaak gesteld, en aangetoond dat niet alleen *wat* merken zeggen, maar ook *hoe* ze het zeggen de kwaliteit van hun relaties met consumenten bepaalt. Om precies te zijn helpen onze resultaten managers hun dialoog met consumenten beter af te stemmen, zodat ze op gepaste wijze (hoofdstuk 2), op comfortabele wijze (hoofdstuk 3), en geëngageerd (hoofdstuk 4) met hen kunnen converseren.

Ons onderzoek doet vermoeden dat er nog veel ruimte is voor verbetering in het afstemmen van merk-gerelateerde boodschappen met het oog op het leggen van fundamenten voor een langdurige relatie met consumenten. Marketeers moeten de manier waarop ze communiceren met consumenten analyseren, om uiteindelijk tot een beter begrip te komen van wat het beste werkt voor hun specifieke merk. Effectieve boodschappen produceren is geen gemakkelijke taak en we tonen aan dat maatwerk noodzakelijk is.

Om precies te zijn kunnen op grond van de bevindingen de volgende aanbevelingen gegeven worden: als een merk bij consumenten bekend (onbekend) is, dan zouden managers de voorkeur moeten geven aan een informele (formele) communicatiestijl, om het vertrouwen in het merk te verhogen (niet te schaden). Daarenboven, als het gespreksthema door consumenten als intiem beschouwd wordt, dan zouden managers een antropomorfe stijl moeten vermijden, als ze zoveel mogelijk informatie van de consumenten willen krijgen. Als antropomorfisme deel uit maakt van de positionering van het merk, dan bevelen we managers aan om indirecte bevragingen te hanteren als ze consumenten willen aanzetten tot het delen van intieme informatie. Tot slot

zouden managers van (hoog-) laag-hedonische merken de voorkeur moeten geven aan makkelijk (moeilijk) leesbare boodschappen, om het engagement van consumenten te stimuleren.

Ons onderzoek is buitengewoon relevant voor managers van een merk-community, die meestal verantwoordelijk zijn voor het managen van merk-gerelateerde communicatie op sociale media. Voor veel merken geldt dat het invoeren en gebruiken van sociale media een trial-and-error proces. Het ontwikkelen van inzicht in hoe consumenten reageren op specifieke communicatiestijlen is erg belangrijk, omdat het succes van een sociale mediastrategie afhangt van de competentie van de community manager om nieuwe leden te werven en hen te transformeren in leden die bijdragen aan het merk, en ambassadeurs van het merk.

Iets dergelijks geldt voor managers van nieuwe merken. Gezien hun beperkte budgetten en de relatief geringe merkwaarde lijkt het van belang om aandacht te besteden aan details, zoal de communicatiestijl, die significante effecten kan hebben op een eerste reactie van de markt. We waarschuwen managers van nieuwe merken bovendien om niet systematisch en klakkeloos de communicatiepraktijken van grotere en al langer bestaande merken te imiteren. Onze bevindingen uit hoofdstuk 2 tonen aan dat een communicatiestijl die voor al langer bestaande merken zeer succesvol kan zijn, voor een nieuw en onbekend merk een negatief resultaat kan opleveren.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anaïs Grétry was born October 5, 1989, in Verviers, Belgium. Anaïs studied Management Sciences at HEC Liège (Belgium), with a major in Strategic Intelligence and Marketing. As part of undergraduate studies, Anaïs spent one semester as a visiting student at the University of North Alabama (USA) in 2009. In 2012, Anaïs graduated with highest distinction (*summa cum laude*) and received her Master in Management Sciences; her master's thesis also received the STIMA award for the Best Master Thesis in Marketing. She then joined both the Department of Marketing at HEC Liège (Belgium) and the Institute for Management Research in Radboud University Nijmegen (The Netherlands) as a doctoral candidate.

In the course of her doctoral studies, Anaïs conducted consumer behavior research while completing doctoral courses at Maastricht University (The Netherlands), Stanford University (online), and the Doctoral School in Management Sciences (Belgium). In 2015, Anaïs spent three months as a visiting Ph.D. student at the Sauder School of Business, University of British Columbia (Canada). In 2016, she spent one month as a visiting Ph.D. student at the Jones Graduate School of Business, Rice University (USA). Anaïs also has presented her research at several international conferences, including the Brands and Brand Relationships Conference 2013 and 2016 (Boston, Toronto), EMAC 2013 and 2015 (Istanbul, Leuven), Academy of Marketing Science 2014 (Indianapolis), and the Doctoral Colloquium of the Association for Consumer Research 2014 (Baltimore). During the Brands and Brand Relationships Conference 2016 (Toronto), Anaïs received the Best Paper Award, sponsored by GfK and the Brands and Brand Relationships Institute, for outstanding research. As of May 2017, Anaïs will start a position as Expert Brand and Customer Experience at GfK, Leuven (Belgium).