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WHEN PERSONIFICATION TRIGGERS ONLINE CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT: THE MODERATING ROLE OF HEDONIC MOTIVE

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Keywords: personification, social media, online consumer engagement, hedonic motive

Description: The objective of this research is to explore the psychological processes underlying the effect of personification on online consumer engagement and the moderating role of hedonic motive.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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Research Question

While abundant work on digital or online consumer engagement has demonstrated that the content featuring brand personality, emotion, or hedonic value posted by brands on social media leads to liking, sharing, commenting, or retweeting intentions (Chen et al. 2015; Hughes et al. 2019; Lee et al. 2018), little research has explored the underlying psychological mechanisms that drive such engagement and boundary conditions. Further, what specific marketing or advertising strategies should be adopted to generate emotion-focused or hedonic-value content is underexplored. The

current research fills these knowledge gaps by addressing the questions of whether personification affects online consumer engagement, and what drives and enhances such an effect.

Method and Data

We conducted three studies among undergraduate students recruited from a North American university. Across these three studies, participants viewed different stimuli of brand postings (personification vs. non-personification) on different social media platforms. Linear regression was performed to test the main effect of the personification appeal on online consumer engagement. A serial mediation analysis was performed in PROCESS (Model 6; Hayes 2013) to uncover the psychological mechanisms and a moderated serial mediation analysis (Model 83; Hayes, 2013) was conducted to confirm the moderating role of hedonic motive.

Summary of Findings

The findings demonstrate that a personification (vs. non-personification) appeal featured in a brand posting leads to a higher level of consumer engagement on social media. More importantly, the underlying mechanisms have been uncovered, such that the brand posting featuring a personification (vs. non-personification) appeal induces higher perceptions of brand warmth, which in turn strengthens the need for social belongingness, thus leading to stronger liking intention (Study 1 and Study 2). Further, the serial mediation effect of the personification appeal on consumer engagement is enhanced by consumer hedonic motive, such that when consumers have high (vs. low) hedonic motive to approach social media activities, they perceive the brand warmer in the condition of the personification (vs. non-personification) appeal and show stronger need for social belongingness, thus exhibiting their higher liking intention (Study 3).

Key contributions

The current research makes contributions to several streams of literature, such as personification effects, anthropomorphism, online consumer engagement, and well-being theory. It also offers practitioners or brand managers guidance on whether the product in a brand posting should be imbued with human characteristics or featured in a humanlike context. Our findings suggest that practitioners or marketers adopt personification strategies through verbal cues to trigger perceived warmth of a brand and consumers' need for social belongingness, thus increasing their engagement with the brand.

References are available upon request.