In a Serious Relationship with My Streaming: The Case Study of the Humanized Netflix?s Interaction on Facebook

Autoria

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Resumo

Faced corporate investments on social media to improving the consumer-brand relationship, the using of marketing devices to encourage anthropomorphism seems to be an effective strategy to achieve marketing goals. Previous studies have shown that perceive congruity between brand and consumers influences positively consumer-brand relationship, as well as there is a positive relationship between the extent to which a brand is anthropomorphized and the perceived quality of the consumer-brand relationship. However, it is unclear how these marketing devices are being implemented and to what extent they are effective. Giving that, our research question is: How can a brand stimulate anthropomorphism to increase consumers? perception of congruity between consumers and the brand and, consequently, have a positive consumer-brand relationship? Through a field exploratory case study, we collected one month of Netflix Brasil interactions with its followers on Facebook. Our data analysis observed that Netflix employs a discourse based on three subdomains of anthropomorphism which are working as communication tactics to build the consumer-brand relationship: Personified cues and Social conventions; Demonstration of empathy; and Demonstration of emotions and affection. The results advance the topic by highlighting the concept of brand-self connections (consumer-brand congruity) as a connector between anthropomorphism and consumer-brand relationship.

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Abstract
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Key words: Anthropomorphism, Brand-self connections, consumer-brand relationship.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a marketing tactics, companies have been attributing human-like features to their products and brands aiming to increase their emotional appeal and positively influence consumers' responses as judgment (Kim and McGill, 2011) and behavior (Hur, Koo and Hofmann, 2015). By adding human-like features to products and brands increase consumers' tendencies to anthropomorphize it which, in turn, can arouse emotions, express social relationships, affect the willingness to pay and increase sales (Aggarwal and McGill, 2007; Hadi and Valenzuela, 2014; Newman, 2018). Moreover, anthropomorphism is the precursor to developing a relationship with the brand (Fournier, 1998) and there is a positive relationship between the extent to which a brand is anthropomorphized and the perceived quality of the consumer-brand relationship (Ghuman et al., 2015).

Anthropomorphism describes the tendency to imbue the real or imagined behavior of nonhuman agents with human-like characteristics, motivations, intentions, intelligence, or emotions (Epley et al., 2007; Epley, 2018). There are several devices for eliciting human characteristics to brands and, consequently, stimulate anthropomorphization, such as creating a character to represents the brand (e.g., Mr. Muscle), attributing a human voice to the product (e.g., Alexa) or adding a face on the brand's logo (e.g., Quaker). For MacInnis and Folkes, (2017), the tendency to humanize maybe even more accentuated with the technological advances that offer more possibilities for ways to connect socially. For example, Netflix uses social media as a direct channel to maintain a relationship with its consumers, without having a visual or rhetorical device to humanize itself, the brand transmits human-like characteristics through verbal devices.

A recent market study presented by Forbes on USA with social media users reveals that one in four users are following brands on social media from which they might make a purchase,

and in mean consumers' time spent on social media is up and is now at around 2 hours and 15 minutes per day (McCue, 2018). Thus, the young generation is using social networks to be closer to their preferred brands. To follow this trend, brands are investing more and more in this media. Despite companies are investing in communication strategies to get closer to their consumer (such as by humanization) and studies have shown that the ways in which consumers perceive congruity between a brand and themselves influences consumer-brand relationship (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017), it is unclear the understand about how these strategies are being implemented and to what extent they are effective. Considering that both the extent to which a brand is anthropomorphized and the ways in which consumers perceive congruity between a brand and themselves influences consumer-brand relationship, our emerging research question is: How can a brand stimulate anthropomorphism to increase consumers' perception of congruity between them and the brand and, consequently, have a positive consumer-brand relationship? Through an exploratory case study of Netflix Brasil in social media, we intend to answer the question. Furthermore, our study advances the understanding of Consumer Brand Relationship within the virtual environment, and the practice of an unusual way of humanizing brands, through verbal devices.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism describes the tendency to imbute nonhuman agents (such as objects, products, natural forces, animals, religious deities, mechanical and electronic devices) with real or imagined human behavior, human-like characteristics, motivations, intentions, intelligence, or emotions (Epley, Waytz and Cacioppo, 2007; Epley, 2018). Commonly misunderstood, the concepts of anthropomorphism and personification differ from their individual and object perspectives. While personification is the process of attribute human characteristics to objects, anthropomorphization is the human capacity to transform the object into a human being who has its own desires, intelligence, and identity (Delbaere, McQuarrie and Phillips, 2011). The personification is only understood by individuals because of their cognitive ability to anthropomorphize nonhuman agents. Another term used in the marketing field that differs from anthropomorphization is brand personality. It is defined as a set of human characteristics that consumers associate with the brand (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality tries to illustrate the symbolic and self-expressive functions of the brand.

The effect of anthropomorphism on behavior

The effects of anthropomorphization in human behavior have been studied in many dimensions. It is known that anthropomorphization has effects on several consumer responses, such as attitude (Hadi and Valenzuela, 2014; Maeng and Aggarwal 2018), indulgent consumption behavior (Nenkov and Scott, 2014; Hur, Koo and Hofmann, 2015), product no replenishment (Chandler and Schwarz, 2010), accumulation (Timpano and Shaw, 2014), sense of efficacy (Kim and McGill, 2011), and preferences (Wan, Chen and Jin, 2018).

Concerning its effects on behavior, Nenkov and Scott's (2014) studies showed that a particular type of anthropomorphized product, which are considered sweet and cute could lead consumers to a more indulgent consumption behavior even when this product is not for children. The study showed that the effect of these products on the indulgence consumption occurred both in hedonic categories of products (such as cookies) and utilitarian categories of products (such as office supplies).

Regarding the effects on attitude, as shown by Kim and McGill (2011) humanizing nonhuman agents can bring a sense of efficacy to the object, as well as increases its emotional

connection and positively affects its evaluation. In that sense, during their experiments, Hadi and Valenzuela (2014) asked participants to hug and to carry a humanized product. They found that these affectionate gestures increased the attitude towards the humanized products compared to the non-humanized products. Also, results suggest that the relationship between physical interaction and evaluation is mediated by anthropomorphism.

Concerning to preferences, Wan, Chen and Jin (2018) pointed out that anthropomorphism increases consumers' preference for products with superior appearance and this effect is mediated by consumers' conviction that "beautiful is good". Also, the study showed that the perception of anthropomorphism on products leads consumers to spend more time and money searching for information about appearance.

In sum, companies develop humanized products seeking to cause emotions in their consumers and to transmit social relationships, which, consequently, will increase their sales performance (Epley; Waytz; Cacioppo, 2007). According to Waytz, Cacioppo and Eplay (2010), the new technologies can bring a friendly sense to anthropomorphized machines, such as cell phones, computers and robots, which can better interact with humans and serve as social connectors to minimize damage in people who suffer from depression and loneliness. For example, the iPhone from Apple has an assistant named Siri who has a female voice and it is able to listen and talk to the consumer to execute some activities such as phone calls, research on Internet, or writing a message.

Determinants of anthropomorphism

The psychological determinants that lead people to anthropomorphize nonhuman agents have been studied by Epley, Waytz and Cacioppo (2007). They propose that there are three determinants which involve both cognitive and motivational individuals' aspects: (i) elicited agent knowledge), (ii) effectance motivation and (iii) sociality motivation. These factors are influenced by four elements linked to the individual: dispositional, situational, developmental and cultural (Figure 1). These determinants are necessary for the perception of nonhuman agents as human by individuals.

Figure 1 – Key psychological determinants of anthropomorphism: SEEK Model (Sociality, Effectance, and Elicited agent Knowledge)

Categories of independent variables	Key psychological determinants		
	Elicited agent knowledge	**Effectance motivation**	**Sociality motivation**
Dispositional	Need for cognition	Need for closure, desire for control	Chronic loneliness
Situational	Perceived similarity	Anticipated interaction, apparent predictability	Social disconnection
Developmental	Acquisition of alternative theories	Attaining competence	Attachment
Cultural	Experience, norms, and ideologies	Uncertainty avoidance	Individualism and collectivism

Source: Epley, Waytz and Cacioppo, 2007, p. 867.

Although the SEEK (Sociality, Effectance, and Elicited agent Knowledge) Model presents three different drivers that lead people to anthropomorphize, frequently, studies on consumer behavior are focused on the eliciting agent knowledge factor. Thus, for eliciting agent

knowledge, brands can add human-like features to be perceived like a human, such as having a human name, gender, or human-like physical characteristics (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017). It is seen as the most common marketing tactic to activating agent knowledge.

According to MacInnis and Folkes (2017), a variety of marketing tactics also seem to activate human schemas and encourage consumers to perceive brands in human-like terms. Their literature review presented three devices able to increase consumers' tendencies to anthropomorphize brands and products: First, through visual cues, by adding a human face on the product (e.g. the vacuum cleaner |Henry), or a body (e.g. the curves of Coke's package), or creating an avatar to represent the brand (e.g. the M&M's characters); Second, through verbal devices, such as giving the product a human name and describing the product in the first person (Aggarwal and McGill, 2007); and third, through rhetorical devices such as engaging the brand in human-like actions (e.g. dancing) even when the image does not have a human-like form or physiognomy (Delbaere, McQuarrie and Phillips, 2011).

2.2 Brand-self connections

The term brand-self connection is related to the extent consumer perceived brand as connected to them in a way that goes beyond being similar to them (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017). That is, the connection to the brand has two dimensions: one related to the consumers perceive congruity between the brand and the self and another referent to the extent to which a brand resonates with consumer's identity (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). According to MacInnis and Folkes (2017) the perceived congruity between the brand and the self also affects brand-self connections. Next, we are going to conceptualize both dimensions.

Congruity between brand and consumer

Park and John (2010) argue that brand attachment requires brand-self connections – as consumers perceive a close connection between the brand and the self, they are likely to become attached to it in a way that is analogous to the interpersonal attachment. Studies have shown that consumer can perceive brand as a potential relationship partner, being that effect is stronger when there is a similarity between the brand personality and the consumers' personality (Wan & Aggarwal, 2015).

Through an extended literature review, MacInns and Folkes (2017) cite studies which point out that consumers can perceive a congruity between the brand and the self in terms of personalities, the user or usage congruity, gender, reference group identification, and cultural identification. Thus, unlike the anthropomorphism that can occur when the individual perceives similarity in terms of physical attributes – by the situational elicited agent knowledge – congruity between brand and consumer involves intangible factors related to being. For instance, Park et al. (2013) suggest that consumers become increasingly attached to brands that enable the self, providing a sense of self-efficacy, power, and competence.

Identity Resonance

The identity resonance perspective is related to the extent to which a brand consonance with the socio-cultural system to reflect or construct a consumer's actual or ideal identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). According to Escalas and Bettman (2005) for a brand which symbolize membership in an in-group, the tendency to form brand-self connections may be particularly strong. Thus, differently from congruity, identity resonance is not related to someone's individuality but to someone as a part in a group which as its own shared values and meanings. For example, Park et al. (2013) suggest that consumers are predicted to become attached to brands that enrich the self because they reflect desired self-identities.

2.3 Consumer Brand Relationship

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On her seminar work, Fournier (1998) debuted the idea that consumers can think about their relationships with brands in a manner that is parallel to their relationships with people. As suggested by MacInnis and Folkes (2017) just as consumers have relational norms that guide relationships with other people, they also appear to have relational norms that guide their brand relationships

Consumer Brand Relationship is related to consumer brand attachment which has been described as the strength of the bond connecting the consumer to the brand (Park et al., 2010). There are some drivers for this bond, as effectance (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017) and sociality motivation (Park et al., 2013) that impact the extent of consumers' brand attachments. Thus, just as individuals can anthropomorphize brands to meet their social motivations needs, the consumer brand relationship is built when the individual finds a way to connect to a brand.

Literature has been demonstrated some effects of consumer brand relationship. For instance, when a brand attachment is strong, consumers are willing to invest resources as time, money, reputation in the brand to maintain its relationship with the brand in a positive way (Park et al., 2010). In this same sense, MacInnis and Folkes' (2017) review presented that the more consumers are attached to a brand, the more they engage in pro-brand behaviors, such as brand advocacy and brand loyalty behaviors, and it enhances consumers' desires to be part of a brand community. Given that we are using the case of brand social media which, sometimes, looks like a brand community, for us is necessary to observe how the concept of consumer brand relationship is materialized in dialogues between the brand and consumer.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to answer our research question, we attempt to explore the field by selecting Netflix Brazil as our case study. Because of its large number of followers – more than 55 million – and the way the brand communicates in social media using its own voice, Netflix is the most representative case. Thus, its uniqueness was crucial in determining its selection as a case study (Yin, 2008). Therefore, we followed all @NetflixBrasil profile's publications on Facebook in the course of June 2018.

During the data collection period, Netflix Brasil published 56 posts, which generated approximately 40,896 Shares, 416,800 Likes, and 105,649 Comments. We collected all the publications, but to select the comments we used the 'most relevant' filter tool on Facebook which allow us to collect approximately three followers' comments per publication and two responses given by Netflix for these comments. In total, we collected a volume of 7.091 words. Table 1 shows the collection summary:

Table 1: Summary of data collection

Type of data	Number of collected items	Data volume (number of words)
Netflix's publications	56	1.133
Followers' comments	185	4.620
Netflix's responses	116	1.338
Total	357	7.091

Source: Authors

For the data analysis, all material was read and encoded by one research and one external encoder who were focused on identifying frequent patterns in the texts collected to create categories that represent the patterns (Yin, 2008). During the analysis, the categories were agglutinated by their similarities. In the end, three drives were established both coming from followers' comments and Netflix' responses: (1) Personified cues and Social conventions; (2) Demonstration of empathy; and (3) Demonstration of emotions and affection.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Personified cues and Social conventions

The data analysis enabled us to observe a pattern of brand communication (see Figure 2 for more data): Netflix often speak in the first person when is not using a neutral speech and presents herself as being female (e.g., *"I'm feel like a little girl!"; "I also watched a lot of it ~when I was a child~"*). Sometimes the brand presents itself as a human also talking about parts of her body (e.g. *"I watch with a dictionary in hand"* and *"Oh my heart. Someone else found something. Tell me!!!"*). By employing this verbal device, the brand is inducing their followers to perceive itself as a human, in other words, anthropomorphize herself.

As a consequence of this employment, we can observe how the followers also humanize Netflix with messages like this: *"Netflix, you're wonderful! You have no idea how happy I was to hear that 'Anne With An E' is back! Thank you so much, you're beautiful!"*. Most often consumers refer to the brand as a female person.

These observations are consistent with the anthropomorphism literature which suggest that verbal devices (such as the product speaking in the first person) are able to activate individuals agent knowledge (Aggarwal and McGill, 2007; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017).

Demonstration of empathy

Even though verbal devices are widely applied by brands to leads anthropomorphism, Netflix stands out when employs empathy and affection devices in her online interaction. For instance, Netflix expresses empathy to deal with difficult situations faced by her followers (Follower: *"You're very rude, Netflix! I was happy thinking that a new season was coming!"*; Netflix: *"I feel your pain! Let's us girls binge-watch again together!"*).

Netflix seems to align its communication strategies with the concept of brand-self connections. As suggested by MacInnis and Folkes (2017), brand-self connections depend on the congruity between the brand and consumer' self, besides the extent to which a brand resonates with consumer's identity. On Netflix Brasil Facebook page consumers share their interests, speak their tastes, make requests to the brand, and they are answered by a brand that is as passionate about products as they are (e.g. *"I'm so screwed up too."*; *"Every night I went to bed thinking if you were mad at me. Good thing we're fine now."*).

By encouraging individuals to perceive similarities with her, Netflix contributes to increasing empathy with her audience and, consequently, to increase her brand congruence and brand-self connections. For example, in that sentence, Netflix demonstrates to have the same habits of her followers in childhood (*"Yes! I felt the same. Even brought back my collection of decorated paper."*)

Demonstration of emotions and affection

For many times Netflix demonstrates that she feels the same emotions as her followers (e.g. *"In the end I was clapping with one hand and drying tears with the other"*), and they respond with the same expressions of affection (e.g. *"Just wanna say that I love you, Netflix. Happy Valentine's Day"* and *"Netflix is not hard to have you; it is hard to deserve you!!!! I*

love you!!! ♡*”*). Furthermore, the brand is loving when talk about her products (e.g. “*The heart even warms up. I'm so proud of them.*”) and when express affection to her followers (e.g. “*Happy Valentine's Day for our relationship.*”).

By demonstrating emotions and affection, Netflix is establishing relationships analogous to the types of relationships consumers have with people. Thus, she offers communication that follows the language, meanings, values, and emotions of her audience and, in response, she receives the same loving treatment. This communication strategy is improving Netflix consumer-brand relationship.

Moreover, during the analysis, we asked encoders to code each Netflix' post and response with one of the thirteen the following adjectives: aggressive, careful, cold, empathy, euphoric, evil, funny, indifferent, loving, neutral, rough, sarcastic, and sympathetic. Through this codification, we could observe that most of Netflix's lines are funny, sympathetic, sarcastic, and loving. In this sense, brand personality formation could be seen here (Aaker, 1997); however more specific research directly with consumer should be addressed, aiming to understand Netflix personality from consumes' point of view.

Figure 2: Examples of Netflix and Followers Comments by Drivers of Humanization

	Personified cues & Social conventions	Demonstration of empathy	Demonstration of emotions and affection
Netflix	If everybody that asks for a show had a "Tau", I'd be a dead lady.	Yes! I felt the same. Even brought back my collection of stationary paper.	Me too. I got the chills!
	I'm feel like a little girl!	I can't make that decision, either. I need cereals!	Oh my heart (*anxious*)! Did anyone find anything else? Tell me!!!
	I'm no crazy woman to let a man like that go! Of course there's a chance. ALL THE CHANCES.	I felt that too watching The Rain... even through the choice.	Everynight I went to bed thinking you were mad with me. I'm glad that everything is fine between us now.
	Just like me a girl.	We just wait in pain, right? LOL	My heart is warm with pride of them.
Followers	I want "Anne With An E", Miss Netflix. I've never asked you for anything.	Netflix I'm so looking forward to the second season of 'Anne With An E' too! ♡Aaaaah You beautiful	By the love of god, Netflix, stoooooop! I can't keep with the anxiety! (...) ♡ Netflix isn't hard to get, it's hard to deserve!! I love you!!!
	Netflix, since you're my current girlfriend, I present you with a 1 year subscription and lots of movies with popcorn, if you bring Super Natural back...	if I cried with this trailer, imagine the whole season LOL	Netflix, you beautiful girl! I dream about the day you will release the next season of AMERICAN HORROR HISTORY!! (...)🙏♡♡♡
	Mrs. Netflix, I'm gonna take actions if you don't update Riverdale soon! I have an aligator pet, baby, thanks.	Netflix, are you a man or a woman?🤪🤪	(...) I was hoping to spend Valantine's day watching the new season, since I have a personal relationship with you 😭😭♡

| You're very rude, Netflix! I was happy thinking that a new season was coming! | See how proud I am?? | Happy Valentine's, baby, how could I live without you? ♡😆😁😂😍 |

Source: Authors

5. CONCLUSION

Our research intended to answer the following question: *How can a brand stimulate anthropomorphism to increase consumers' perception of congruity between them and the brand and, consequently, have a positive consumer-brand relationship?* By collecting Netflix Brasil interactions with her followers on Facebook, it was possible to observe that Netflix employs a discourse based on three subdomains of anthropomorphism which are working as communication tactics to build consumer-brand relationship: (1) *Personified cues and Social conventions* which is related to the extent the brand speaks in the first voice, presenting herself as a woman, and uses the company's name as her name, what makes consumers anthropomorphized her; (2) *Demonstration of empathy*, which is related to the extent the brand reveals facts from her childhood, speaks about feelings and experiences lived as same as those lived by her followers, what increases consumer-brand congruence; and (3) *Demonstration of emotions and affection,* which is related to the extent the brand employs an affectionate speech, full of affection and amusement, which makes the consumer-brand relationship close to the intimate relationship of real friends.

Both Fournier (1998) and Ghuman et al. (2015) claim that brand anthropomorphism can influence the perceived quality of the consumer-brand relationship. However, our study advanced the topic by highlighting the concept of brand-self connections, specifically, the consumer-brand congruity as a connector between brand anthropomorphism and consumer-brand relationship.

Although our exploratory research already offers appointments to observe Netflix brand communication strategies, empirical studies are needed to confirm the causal relationships explored here. Specifically, it is relevant to investigate the effects of consumers' brand-self connection on the brand relationship and behavioral responses in a social media context involving an anthropomorphized brand. As previous studies showed, the more consumers felt strong brand-self connection, the more their brand relationship is becoming intimate, and they were satisfied with the brand (Aaker et al., 2004). Thus, a future causal study can investigate the mediation role of brand-self connection o the effect of brand anthropomorphism on behavioral responses related to consumer-brand relationship, such as sharing of messages, engagement in online chats, brand loyalty, and word of mouth.

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