

Should brands be like humans? An exploratory study of anthropomorphic digital robots from Brazilian brands

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Abstract

Marketing nowadays finds brand humanization an instrument capable of bringing relevance with the objectives of maximizing value creation. This work aimed to discover how brand humanization occurs in communication in social networks by Brazilian brands analyzing the case of the company Magazine Luiza. The research adopted the case study method. By presenting how brand humanization occurs and analyzing the context of social media, the main results are the greater willingness of opportunities to promote organic communications. The study also finds interactions with partner brands; product positioning actions in narratives created by brand humanization; the ease of printing discourses of identification with causes; the transmission of values and emotions. Finally, the work discusses how the growth strategy of brand humanization in the social networking environment has proved to indicate an ongoing change in brand relations with consumers.

Keywords

Brand Humanization; Brand Persona; Social Media.

Track

Digital Marketing & Social Media

1. Introduction

The creation of solid and lasting relationships between a brand and its consumer in the digital economy is re-signified in social networks in terms of how people interact with each other, creating digital bonds between the brand and human beings (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014; Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2017). In this context, one of the challenges for companies is determining the brand positioning in this non-physical world of the Web, where brand communication and interaction are multidirectional and dissociative of what is natural and synthetic (Almeida et al., 2012; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). There are strategies and techniques for humanizing the brand-customer interaction in the current Internet and its meta-universe through emotional connections, empathy, and moral issues co-created in a narrative of stories and characters mixed with life and in which the customer relationship occurs. Furthermore, the opportunity arises in this perspective to create humanized elements directly associated with the brand (Fournier, 1998). Among these ontological issues of human perception of reality and its relationship with brands, the use and practice of marketing management with anthropomorphized digital robot characters are increasingly present and are a relevant point of investigation to study consumer interactions between humans and machines, both in the physical and in the virtual environment (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012).

Given the contemporaneity of the theme of anthropomorphized digital robots, this article aims to discover alternative ways of using the humanization of the brand through digital robot characters in the relationship with customers in an exploratory investigation of a Brazilian case.

2 Anthropomorphization, personality, identity and brand persona

Like a person's identity, which provides direction, purpose, and meaning to the human self, a brand's identity could act similarly. It would be central to its strategic vision and drive a significant dimension of its brand identity. The brands receive human characteristics to make them more distinctive and memorable, attribute specific qualities that exemplify what they represent, or make them more captivating and enjoyable (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012). The goal of having a social interaction of being a living human in the consumer's attitudes corroborates with the concept of an aligned to have social interaction in the consumer's mind. The meaning of this logic is to cultivate implicit social interactions

through the anthropomorphizing elements of the brand, not only in pure transactional engagement in terms of purchase or consumption (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012).

The online presence coated with human characteristics, such as appearance, voice, and the name, is signaled by Van Doorn et al. (2017) to encourage customers to relate to the brand. The primary focus triggered by brand anthropomorphizing is to achieve successful social interactions with the humanized entity, not necessarily to obtain the implicit consumption benefit, as anthropomorphized brands can influence consumer behavior outside the context of the brand and purchase. (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012).

For Carrera (2016), anthropomorphization increases the possibility of more frequent interactions with consumers, adding that “brands that already propose this type of strategy in other contexts of communication, such as through persuasive communication, tend to stimulate interaction in social media better.” From the perspective of managing the brand’s identity expressiveness, somehow activating the identification with an element close to a human being, alternatively called a mascot, is the main focal point of this element (Carrera, 2016).

3. Method

Given the initial stage of knowledge about anthropomorphized robot characters, it is considered valid to conduct an exploratory field study by triangulating information around a prominent case in the Brazilian business scenario. The criteria for choosing the unit of analysis for the study was based on an organization with great technical material of public access, wide dissemination in the traditional media and social media, relevance in application stores, and access to the managers responsible for the correlated areas of development of the object of study of this article. The organization chosen for the study that falls within the established parameters was Magazine Luiza. The case study strategy was chosen because it allows examining contemporary events in which appropriate behaviors cannot be manipulated (Yin, 2010).

4. Findings

Magazine Luiza S.A. is a prominent Brazilian retail chain with 35,000 employees (2018) - with a business model is currently characterized as a digital platform with brick & mortar stores. Magazine Luiza, known as Magalu, was created over 60 years ago and

presented in its mission “include” in a way that contributes so that goods considered accessible only to the upper class could reach all Brazilian social classes. The company offers its motivation in considering consumption and the transformation of lives through access to it. The company reinforces its appreciation for people, “we are people who like people,” and its focus on the customer, reinforcing the “customer first” position in its values.

4.1 Lu: History and Motivation and Character's Role

Initially, Lu's function was to humanize the user experience in the purchase process in Magazine Luiza's e-commerce. Then, the character gained popularity and modernization of her appearance and new attributes as a brand element in the different environments she participates in. The role of the brand persona Lu is highlighted as part of the digital inclusion strategy proposed by Magazine Luiza, which aims to promote access to consumption as a form of social responsibility. In the environment "Lu Explains," the character assumes the virtual salesperson and shopping consultant role. The character leads the space dedicated to educational content about new technology and trends in the form of videos and infographics.

The character performs the online salesperson and consultant role expressively in the brand's e-commerce and the company's channels on YouTube. On social networks, Lu has become a digital influencer, with the main functions of cultivating relationships with the brand's followers, promoting it and printing its values, constantly interacting and speaking on behalf of Magalu, besides directly assisting in online sales and stores, all over Brazil, with numerous product placement actions.

Figure 1 - Lu, Digital Influencer.



Source: Adapted from the brand's Instagram (2021).

4.2 The brand's online presence on social networks

Magazine Luiza's social media positioning is translated, in a very playful way,

through an anthropomorphized appearance of the brand persona Lu. On Instagram, Magalu's Lu presented herself as a "3D virtual influencer," "Magalu's digital specialist," and "Content creator." The main visual identity icon of the brand profile, taken as the "profile photo," is in the form of a selfie of the character and not a logo. It humanizes the company's presence in digital social space by indirectly transposing a commercial account, even if identified with the company name in the user "@magazineluiza," in a personal blog appearance (Figure 2). The brand's online presence on the Twitter network is also accomplished through appropriating the character as a social being participating in the network.

Figure 2 - Presentation of Magazine Luiza's account on Instagram



Source: Adapted from images provided on the brand's Instagram (2021)

The brand's online presence on social media through the brand persona is a practice that has been observed to be adopted over the past three years. The evolution of the brand's feed's communication plan became noticeable after the adoption, in 2018, of the brand persona strategy as a spokesperson. The presence in the network resembles an extension of its marketplace as a personal blog format of Lu. The character commands the posts, has the narrative voice of the descriptions, and shares her routine, creating context so that the brand can still use the network as a channel for product placement actions. The insertion of the character within this space, considered as fostering social dynamics, is made in a way that allows a very subtle commercial character because it is clear the effort of the brand to reproduce behaviors to blend in with real people.

The appropriation of social behaviors of web users, with Lu adopting a posture that closely resembles the behavioral pattern of real digital influencers, builds the brand narrative on the platform. In addition to sharing her routine, getting into jokes that go viral on the web, and raising discussions, the character constantly promotes product placement actions, interacting with partner brands and artists, presenting products available in her marketplace, and promoting her shopping app.

Figure 3 - Lu, inserting a business account as a social being.



Source: Adapted from images provided on the brand's Instagram (2021)

Subtly, the character's narrative allows actions of insertion of products available for purchase in the retail chain's online and in-person sales channels in personal and daily routine, a strategy called product placement. Isolated appearances for product promotions outside the character's narrative are rare. Figure 4 consists of examples that consolidate this practice—on the right, often practiced by digital influencers when they reach milestones of followers. The post of 5M followers' celebration and thanks with the network was enriched by actions of brand insertions available for purchase through Magalu's app: vegetal oil, flour, and candies brands (ingredients used to make the character's cake). On the left is an overview of the character's feed, subtly enriched with products available for purchase.

Figure 4 - Lu, product insertions in the routine personal narrative.



Source: Adapted from images provided on the brand's Instagram (2021)

The day-to-day presence of the character on the network constantly imprints reinforcements of uniquely human characteristics, such as feelings, guiding many of her appearances in self-disclosure and expressiveness of emotions (Figure 5). In 2018, during Brazil's elimination from the World Cup, by posting a photo in which Lu appeared crying, the brand persona aroused feelings and emotion in her audience. "This was one of the

moments she humanized the most and created great emotional empathy, with comments like ‘Neymar, look what you did. You [...]’” highlights manager Pedro Alvim (2019).

Figure 5 - expressing emotions.



Source: Adapted from images provided on the brand's Instagram (2021)

Considering social media as a valuable tool to foster the power of storytelling (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), the brand's effort to take advantage of this attribute can be found with a solid incidence in Lu's publications on social networks. Pedro Alvim considers that the virtual influence of the character started with her humanization in narratives. "Behind every image that is made of her, there is a story that builds the character story itself," presents the content manager.

Using the voice of the persona, characterized as a female figure, Magalu imprints in Lu an instrument of expression and identification with social agendas already widely defended by the company, such as the fight for women's rights, repression of femicide and sexual harassment, breast cancer prevention, and other topics. The character is inserted in the narrative, giving context to the company's positions in a humanized way.

Also, ahead of Magazine Luiza's YouTube channel, Lu reaches the 2.6 million subscribers mark, being the first Brazilian retail channel to win the Play of Gold, granted by the platform to accounts that reach 1 million subscribers. In 2020, Magalu made its debut on the social network TikTok, also adopting the brand persona strategy as a spokesperson for the brand. The brand's entry into the network sought to bring it closer to the younger audience. The company maps out and invites the platform's creators to co-create content with the brand's team, besides studying TikTok's content to participate in the conversations in the best way. In the first 24 hours, the account surpassed the 200,000 followers mark, and its first post surpassed 4.6 million organic views. After only three months, the profile reached the 1 million follower mark. It was the first to belong to a Brazilian retail brand that reached this number on the social network after its debut, totally organically. Currently, the

profile scores 3.4 million followers.

The team behind brand persona argues that it has brought an extensive brand, Magazine Luiza, to the human scale and that although Brazilians know Lu is not a natural person, she has become one of the most loved and trusted voices. In an interview, Aline Izo, Social Media and Content Coordinator at Magazine Luiza said that the brand persona is not a sales ploy. Nevertheless, instead, “an influencer in the true sense of the word,” “Lu has millions of fans and when she takes a stand on something-for example, domestic violence or LGBT rights-people pay attention.”

5. Final considerations

The case study shows different ways organizations use the brand humanization attribute, through brand personas, in their integrated marketing communication activities. Considering the motivation that led the company to create its persona and use it in marketing communication, it converges in the adoption to humanize the contact with its audiences, aiming to play a role of mediation between the physical reality of the brand and the psychic and emotional reality of the different audiences (Perez, 2008). In this case, the company identified that one of the significant challenges for companies was positioning the brand in the online universe, in how to use the available resources to add value to the brand and make it closer to the consumer (Almeida et al., 2012).

As for the functions assigned to the brand persona in this case, it can be said that the influencer is a female character considered a digital spokesperson for the company, responsible for cultivating social interactions with the brand's audience and imprinting the company's values and causes. The role of representing the company to the public and imprinting a brand identity meets the impulse that the humanization attribute aims to establish a relationship between the brand and the customer through a value proposition involving functional, emotional, or self-expression benefits. It need not be obtained entirely from the perspective of the brand as a product but from additional perspectives such as "the brand as a person" and the brand as a symbol," which can improve understanding and create bases for differentiation (Aaker, 2009). The company converges on the concept presented by Tiago and Veríssimo (2014) about the need for a strategy that seeks to develop digital relationships that emphasize the co-creation of content and meaning for both sides.

With the daily opportunity for content creation and countless conversations provided in the social environment, the anthropomorphized figure of brands generates an excellent

possibility for more frequent interactions with consumers, as highlighted by Carrera (2016). Both support their content in the format of character narratives, using them as methods to influence and shape discussions in a manner consistent with the organization's mission and performance objectives, using the tools to leverage emotional connections, highlighted in the creation of contexts and identification elements, as well as embracing one or more causes important to their customers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

The online presence is marked by factors presented by Barcelos (2015), such as the bet on self-disclosure, the expressiveness of emotions, the transmission of positive feelings, human warmth, and informality, through the insertion of the characters in the network trends, dances, memes and other opportunities for conversation, converging with the theory that argues that these are attributes to increase brand intimacy.

By indirectly transposing a commercial account into a personal blog appearance, the use of brand humanization features on social media presented itself as a driver of engagement, interactions, and relevance in the environment. Furthermore, it allowed the company to pioneer achievement milestones and reach recognition by the platforms as never before, belonging to commercial accounts. This concept corroborates the theory that consumers accept companies' attempts to humanize brands. Suggests a willingness to consider them as vital members of a relationship, with the attribution of limited human qualities to the brand, with the transfer of the qualities of emotionality, thought, and a will is a notable event in marketing.

It has been noted as a notable trend the effort of brands to reproduce behaviors that allow them to mingle with real people in the quest to be present in moments that are not necessarily those of purchase. The present study shows a greater availability of opportunities to promote organic communications, interactions with partner brands and artists, and product positioning actions.

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