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How Brand Conversations on Social Media Prompt Jealousy in Brand Relationships

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Prior research has shown that consumers develop feelings towards brands that are similar to those they have towards other individuals (Fournier and Alvarez 2012). One increasingly important avenue that practitioners employ in order to bring brands closer to consumers is social media and a wide range of online platforms (Voorveld 2019). A specific form of such interaction, *brand conversation*, is a particularly relevant construct consisting of a series of online messages exchanged between one or more consumers and a brand [representative]. The exchanges that brands and consumers have on social media are conceptually akin to social interactions, but happen to occur within new media types. Thus, research on social interaction is relevant to understanding the processes that may be at work.

In order to answers these questions, our research employs face-work theory (Goffman 1955), attachment theory (Park et al. 2010), and the interpersonal theory of love applied to consumer situations (Whang, Sahoury, and Zhang 2004). We propose that, similar to the case of personal relationships that involve affect, when a partner bestows flattery or compliments onto someone outside of the relationship there is the potential to threaten the other partner and produce jealousy, with potential deleterious effects on the relationship.

Developed by Goffman (1955), face-work theory explains how people behave when interacting with others. It assumes that during an exchange each participant commits to carrying out two simultaneous actions: maintaining their own face while ensuring the other participants do not lose face (Goffman 1955). To achieve this dual mission, they use a number of strategies aimed at avoiding face-threatening acts (FTAs) as well as producing face-flattering acts (FFAs) (Brown and Levinson 1987). In an online context, FFA can consist of flattering consumers, paying respect to them, or more generally of conveying appreciative expressions (Grossman 1998). FFAs have been shown to have a positive effect on consumers (Fombelle et al. 2016) and given that they are more efficient when produced publicly rather than privately one would expect face-work strategies to have an impact on consumers via social media. We thus expect that mimicking human interactions norms (e.g., using FFAs), will create consumer perceptions according to which brands have human characteristics. We also postulate that brand FFAs will be more or less well perceived depending on the degree of brand attachment. This is similar to social relationships, where those in stronger, closer ones are less likely to crave reinforcement than individuals who are part of weaker relationships.

Psychology research supports the existence of different flattery perceptions depending on context: we like better those who flatter us than those who flatter others (Vonk 2002). This occurs because most people have positive self-esteem and therefore are likely to think their ingratiator is sincere. Also, observers lack information on the target of ingratiation and thus will often question the ingratiated judgement. In a similar manner, consumers prefer being flattered by a favored brand to seeing strangers be flattered by it. If brand love (Batra et al. 2012) exists, then brand jealousy is sure to follow (Sarkar and Sreejesh 2014).

Previous research has addressed consumer brand perceptions along the warmth and competence dimensions (e.g., Fournier and Alvarez 2012; Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012) and found that brand warmth (but not brand competence) is a key driver of consumers' online brand endorsements (Bernritter et al. 2016). This is in line with the intuition that personal relationships in which individuals invest the most tend to be affective in nature, as proposed by Berscheid's (1983) model of emotional interdependence in close relationships.

Formally stated:

H1: Brands are perceived as more human when they use FFAs addressed to consumers.
H2: The use of FFAs addressed to other consumers produces higher brand humanization perceptions for consumers of low than for consumers of high brand attachment.
H3: Consumers display more jealousy after observing brand FFAs addressed to others.
H4: Brand positioning moderates the focal effects, such that the links between the use of FFAs and (a) brand humanization and (b) jealousy is stronger for brands positioned on warmth relative to those positioned on competence.

Study 1 (N = 188 adults from an online panel) addresses H1 and H2 in a 2 (brand FFA: absent vs. present) x 2 (brand attachment: low vs. high) between-subjects design. Participants imagined browsing their Facebook newsfeed and noticing a particular brand-consumer conversation. Brand FFAs were manipulated by including (or not) appreciative expressions into the brand's posts. Participants indicated the extent to which they anthropomorphized the brand on six 7-point semantic differential scales (adapted from Hudson et al. 2015; α = .89). A two-way ANOVA on perceptions of anthropomorphism with the two experimental factors as predictors uncovered a significant effect of brand attachment (F(1, 182) = 26.57, p < .001) and a significant interaction between the two factors (F(1, 182) = 7.19, p < .01). Consumers not particularly attached to the brand perceived the brand as more human when employing FFAs (vs. when not), but this effect was absent for consumers strongly attached to the brand.

Study 2 (N = 397 undergraduates) assesses the extent to which consumers would perceive the brand as more humanlike and express more positive brand perceptions and less jealousy when they (vs. another consumer and vs. control) would be the target of a brand's flattery (H3). The design was thus a three-cell (FFA target: self vs. other vs. control) between-subjects comparison. Participants were asked to provide a specific brand that they had a relationship with, which was subsequently employed by the software in the study's cover story. The subsequent procedure and measure were similar to Study 1. A one-way ANOVA on the brand anthropomorphism item revealed a significant main effect of FFA: F(2, 389) = 5.65, p < .01. Respondents perceived that a brand's use of FFAs, whether aimed at the self (M = 5.05) or another consumer (M = 5.20) appeared as more humanlike than the same brand not employing FFAs (M = 4.60). Furthermore, participants observing an FFA aimed at the self reported less jealousy (M = 5.19) than those observing the brand aiming the FFA at another consumer (M = 4.57) or those noting a brand conversation that did not include an FFA (M = 4.53; F(2, 389) = 17.75, p < .001).

Study 3 (N = 126 undergraduates) adds a brand positioning variable such that more jealousy was expected when the brand was positioned on warmth rather than competence (H4). The design was thus a 3 (FFA target: self vs. other vs. control) x 2 (brand positioning: on warmth vs. competence) between-subjects. The cover story and measures replicated Study 2. Participants assessed brand positioning on a 6-point semantic differential item anchored at 1 = *definitely warmth-based* and 6 = *definitely competence-based*. A two-way ANOVA with the two experimental factors as predictors and the brand feelings item as the dependent measure revealed a significant main effect of FFA: F(2, 120) = 4.16, p < .02. Participants observing an FFA aimed at the self reported less jealousy (M = 5.43) than those observing the brand aiming the FFA at another consumer (M = 4.93) or those noting a brand conversation that did not include an FFA (M = 4.81). However, this effect did not vary significantly by brand positioning, potentially due to the study's low power.

While much research addresses the effects of social media in general, little is known about how brand flattery impact consumer response. This research identifies the relationships between brand flattery, brand humanization, and brand jealousy, thus contributing to literature on brand-consumer relationships.

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SUMMARIZING TABLE

Study, Hypotheses	*Design*	*Insights*
Study 1: H1, H2	2 (brand FFA: absent vs. present) x 2 (brand attachment: low vs. high)	Low brand attachment consumers perceive brands that use FFAs on social media as more humanlike.
Study 2: H3	FFA target: self vs. other vs. control	There is jealousy when the brand aims its FFA at another consumer.
Study 3: H3, H4	3 (FFA target: self vs. other vs. control) x 2 (brand positioning: on warmth vs. on competence)	There is jealousy when the brand aims its FFA at another consumer. No clear effect of brand positioning.