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Brand entification as a post-anthropomorphic attribution among Twitter-using Millennials

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to report a three-study effort that aimed to explicate the brand entification construct, a post-anthropomorphic attribution that results from user-brand interaction on Twitter. Entified brands are not merely humanlike, they are viewed as human celebrities with an elevated social status.

Design/methodology/approach – A testable conceptual framework, hypotheses and measurement scales for explicating the brand entification construct are derived from focus groups. The framework is tested using two separate surveys; the first surveyed college going, Millennial users of Twitter, the second surveyed a nationwide sample of Twitter using Millennials.

Findings – The fear of being ignored (FOBI) emerges as the key antecedent of brand entification. Elevation in healthy narcissism emerges as its key consequence. Twitter users experiencing elevated narcissism are found to defend entified brands when they receive negative tweets from other users.

Research limitations/implications – All constructs and measurement scales reported in the data are new, the evidence of linkages between the antecedents and consequences of brand entification are similarly unprecedented; both reflect the theoretical contributions of the study. Further testing of scales, and replication of results using multiple samples of Twitter users are essential before formalized theory and widely generalizable findings emerge.

Practical implications – Shaping Twitter-users' sense of healthy narcissism emerges as the key challenge for managers aiming to build brands via Twitter communication. Stimulating users' FOBI emerges as a key entry-way in this process.

Originality/value – The paper reports the first empirical investigation of the brand entification construct in the context of Twitter-using Millennials.

Keywords Twitter, Brand entification, Healthy narcissism, Post-anthroporphism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Consumer-brand relationships and emotions attributed to brands are widely discussed in the marketing literature (e.g. Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015; Jain *et al.*, 2018; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017). Among the many streams of research, brand anthropomorphism and the attribution of human-likeness brands has attracted considerable attention (see Puzakova *et al.*, 2013). Much is known about how and why people attribute human-likeness to brands and about the advantages they produce for brand managers (e.g. Wan and Aggarwal, 2015). Yet, the marketing literature is largely silent when it comes to explaining post-anthropomorphic attributions toward brands recently reported from studies of social media usage. Attributions are deemed post-anthropomorphic because some social media users no longer question whether a brand is humanlike, but it regard as human with a unique socio-emotional status. For instance, Snapchat users reportedly regard brands they encounter on the medium as humans, and categorize them as human strangers, acquaintances, friends or intimates (Sashittal *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, recent study suggests that Twitter users entify some brands, i.e., deem them as human celebrities with an elevated



social status (Sashittal *et al.*, 2014, 2015). Entified brands, just as human celebrities, signal aliveness by speaking and responding intelligently to fans, express emotions and communicate core values. Authors propose that entified brands such as Starbucks, Oreos and Intel jostle for attention less among competitor coffee, cookie or semiconductor brands, and more among media celebrities such as Katy Perry and Lady Gaga, each with over 11m followers on Twitter (Sashittal *et al.*, 2015).

At present, there is no theory to explain post-anthropomorphic attributions toward brands. This absence is consequential and calls for fresh thinking and research in two important ways. First, brand managers increasingly connect with users via social media (Blackwell *et al.*, 2017). Social media triggered user–brand interaction shapes brand-related perceptions more decisively than brand messages alone (Lopez *et al.*, 2017). Second, Twitter presents a compelling context for the study of brand-related post-anthropomorphic attributions. In total, 80 percent of US Millennials are active on Twitter, and a vast majority (80 percent) follow an average of five brands on the medium (Culotta and Cutler, 2016; Little, 2016). More brand-related discussions occur among the 330m users of Twitter than on any other social media (Baer, 2016; Statista, 2018).

This paper reports findings from three studies that explicate brand entification as a post-anthropomorphic construct emerging from user–brand interactions on Twitter. For aid future theory development efforts, the paper presents evidence of brand entification, freshly derived measurement scales and evidence of relationships that serve to explicate the construct. Brand anthropomorphism and brand entification are clearly delineated based on evidence, and new implications are drawn to address the practical realities of managers interested in building user–brand relationships with customers on social media.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

An entified brand is attributed the status of a human celebrity as a result of user–brand interaction on Twitter; the fear of being ignored (FOBI) and the fear of missing out (FOMO) are identified as active in the entification process (Sashittal *et al.*, 2015). FOBI has some reference in the literature, although outside the realm of branding theory. Known as athazagoraphobia, FOBI refers to the fear of being forgotten, ignored or neglected (Staniloiu and Markowitsch, 2012), is associated with internet usage and with narcissists (Olesen, 2019) and characterizes people disconnected from their authentic selves (Miller and Stiver, 1997), disconnected from people in their immediate environment and more connected with strangers (see Trepal *et al.*, 2012). The FOMO is widely discussed as a driver and/or a consequence of social media engagement and has entered common usage outside of social media literature (see Rifkin *et al.*, 2015). Sashittal *et al.* (2015) also reported two key outcomes of brand entification. First, Twitter users report enhanced usage experiences; i.e., the enjoyment derived from physical interaction and consumption of the brand is further enhanced by Tweeting about the brand. Second, as result of entifying brands, Twitter users either withhold negative tweets or respond negatively to the criticism entified brands receive from other Tweeters.

The literature devoted to general Twitter usage, consumer–brand relationships and brand humanization and anthropomorphism do not address the key concern with post-anthropomorphic attributions on Twitter (see MacInnis and Folkes, 2017; Kwak *et al.*, 2015; Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015 for exhaustive reviews). Despite preliminary evidence from the study of Sashittal *et al.* (2015), the epistemology of brand entification and an ontology to serve as the building blocks of future theories remain underdeveloped (see Laudan, 1977 for more on research traditions and ontology). The state-of-the-art does not yield testable hypotheses for “brand is a celebrity” as a post-anthropomorphic construct, precludes a one-shot theory-derived hypotheses testing effort and implicates the need for grounded theory.

Grounded theory development

Grounded theory development is advocated for study of phenomena unexplained by current theory (see Samuel *et al.*, 2018), and particularly recommended for understanding social media usage – i.e., in instances when new and emerging market phenomena are unburdened and unanchored to current theory (e.g. Barry and Girona, 2018). For instance, Rosenbaum (2018, p. 790) noted: “a novel, contemporary theoretical framework that emerges from data collected via social media monitoring, and analyzed following rigorous methodological procedures, would most likely be more valuable in its generalizability, relevancy and managerial practicality, than say a theoretical verification study that draws upon a long-established theory.”

In view of this, grounded theory was generated using focus groups of self-described heavy users of Twitter, and based on the guidelines of Miles *et al.* (2014). Participants in four focus groups were students enrolled in two sections of an undergraduate class on Marketing Research taught by a co-author at an AACSB accredited B-School (8 participants per group, total of 32 students, 17 males, 15 females). Participants were traditional age, mostly senior year marketing majors, checked their Twitter feeds at least once a day and followed at least one brand on the medium. Non-participants were required to listen, observe and draw plausible hypotheses.

The purpose of the focus groups was to explicate brand entification as an established construct in the context of Twitter usage. Participants were engaged in learning by doing, i.e., identifying key antecedents and consequences of a key construct, developing constitutive and operational definitions and deriving testable hypotheses. This purpose contrasts sharply with one aiming to discover what social media participants use, or discover the multiple types of emotional attributions toward brands, or re-discover brand entification based on Sashittal *et al.*'s (2015) study. As part of learning by doing, all participants had completed secondary research and developed literature-derived frameworks of branding on Twitter, and were familiar with current thinking about brand anthropomorphism and entification. The students then received instruction on qualitative research, and the process of deriving grounded frameworks, hypotheses and measurement scales.

Focus group participants were explained the purpose of the study:

Based on your secondary research into user-brand interactions on social media and on Twitter in particular, and your understanding of brand anthropomorphism and brand entification, you are participating in a focus group that aims to further analyze, or explicate the brand entification construct on Twitter. I.e., please tell us about your experience with brand entification, if you have any, and then tell us about how and why you might have entified a brand, and what might be the consequence of brand entification if in fact you have done this as a user of Twitter.

The focus groups were audio taped, transcribed and content analyzed independently by the co-authors based on the guidelines of Miles *et al.* (2014). The co-authors independently derived: a constitutive definition of brand entification, a list of plausible antecedents and consequences and operational definitions and scales for key constructs. After the first iteration, each author had produced a consolidated boxes-and-arrows framework that included the antecedents and consequences of brand-related attributions, and measurement scales supported with evidence from verbal protocols. Next, the co-authors met to compare and contrast independently derived findings. Labels and definitions of variables and measurement scales were redefined until consensus was reached. Figure 1 shows the resulting framework; it makes explicit the data-derived learning about convergence and directionality of the relationships hypothesized as significant (e.g. Cavusgil *et al.*, 2005; note: the path coefficients based on two samples taken for the present study are also shown in Figure 1, descriptions to follow).

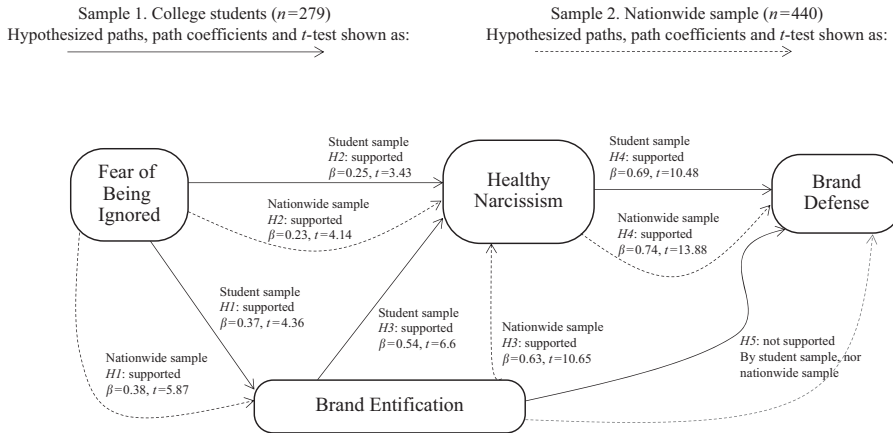


Figure 1.
Standardized
structural model

Notes: Fit parameters from student sample shown by solid arrows ($n=279$): NNFI=0.95, CFI=0.96, IFI=0.96, RMSEA=0.054; fit parameters from nationwide sample shown by dashed arrows ($n=440$): NNFI=0.98, CFI=0.99, IFI=0.99, RMSEA=0.03

Inductive inferences and hypotheses

Entification is defined in the following terms:

Focus group #1, female: Starbucks is a celebrity. Definitely. She walks on fashion runways, and she is coffee. I don't even drink coffee, [...] but I follow her on Twitter. Like Taylor Swift or Rihanna [...]. famous.

Focus group #2, male: Intel rocks [...] (Intel) is a celebrity. But he is like a celebrity that I don't get to touch and feel. He feels you.

Focus group #3, female: Of course Victoria's Secret is a famous, nice looking celebrity.

Focus group #4, male: McDonald is a famous person [...] not a clown. He is a fit male model [...] Channing Tatum with a cup of coffee and fries.

Focus group #4, male: Oreos is human, a famous dude. Samsung is famous fashion person. Not like me.

Both FOBI and FOMO were discussed by focus groups. FOMO was identified as non-specific to Twitter despite its wide discussion in social media literature. Hence, the study tested for FOMO as a discriminant factor; a notion contrary to current discussions of the construct. FOBI emerged as the most plausible antecedent of entificatory attributions; it received near universal agreement as a motivator of brand entification. Participants say they dread having their presence on Twitter being ignored by others, it leads them to search for social cachet. Tweeting about brands they follow as if they are celebrities and gaining attention from others, helps them address the dread and anxiety they feel (please see Table I for measurement scales):

Focus group #1, female: If I didn't tweet [...] and I am not doing it all the time [...] about Victoria's Secret, all I've got to say is that "I love you." That gets attention from people.

FOBI is associated with the envy felt when others' social media posts get more attention. Participants afflicted with high levels of FOBI reported that they often exaggerate their emotions while communicating with others, just to get attention:

Focus group #2, female: I've exaggerated not a lot maybe but a little bit. Like pretending it's a big deal when it's not. I want my friends to say, "cool!" and maybe feel a little bit of envy.

Brand
entification

Latent variable	Indicator variables	Measurement loading
Fear of being ignored (FOBI)	I dread that people will ignore my social media posts	0.739
	I feel strong envy when other people's activities on social media get more attention on social media than I do	0.806
	I have often exaggerated my emotions while communicating with others so that people would pay attention to what I have to say	0.595
Brand entification (B.ENTF)	I view this brand as a person with human qualities	0.820
	This brand is a celebrity	0.533
	This brand has feelings	0.858
Healthy narcissism (H.NARC)	When I maintain a connection with this BRAND on Twitter, I feel cool	0.806
	When I maintain a connection with this BRAND on Twitter, I feel privileged	0.827
	When I maintain a connection with this BRAND on Twitter I feel like a celebrity	0.656
	When I maintain a connection with this BRAND on Twitter, I know my voice is being heard by like-minded people	0.578
Brand defense (B.DFENS)	If something negative is Tweeted about this BRAND, I am most likely to tweet positively about this brand	0.803
	If something negative is Tweeted about this BRAND, I am most likely to "favorite" another person's Tweet that is positive toward the brand	0.815
	If something negative is Tweeted about this BRAND, I am most likely to re-Tweet another person's Tweet that is positive toward the brand	0.896
	If something negative is Tweeted about this BRAND, I am most likely to Tweet positively about this brand so that people know where I stand	0.834

Table I.
Standardized solution
for the hypothesized
model

Note: Nationwide sample, $n = 440$

Notions of self-censoring comments, and enhanced usage experiences were discussed in all focus groups. Participants identified sharply focused consequences. First, elevated healthy narcissism was identified as a key consequence of both FOBI and brand entification. It was defined as an enhanced feeling of coolness, fame and privilege by users' association with the brand. Consider the following voices:

Focus group #4, male: Oreo is like a hero. Famous hero. Like I know you're there [...] famous guy. I tweet about him. My friends think I am cool for (doing) that. He is famous, so I feel famous. That may not be the only reason I am doing that (tweeting about Oreo), but it is definitely a factor.

Focus group #3, female: I am [...] wasn't getting traction. like attention. But I'll show you the post [...] with me and Victoria's Secret and just for a hashtag [...] I am famous. Even got some retweets on that one.

Focus group #1, male: I am lit [...] yo! But when you have me adding (name of brand) hashtag (to my tweet) [...] all of a sudden I am getting noticed, like respected [...], that's all [...] (I am) not as big like Intel or nothing but I am getting my [...] celebrity creds on. Intel's the wave and I'm ridin' it.

Second, participants identified brand defense behaviors as a consequence of brand entification and elevated narcissism. The construct was defined as: "I will defend the entified brand by sending positive tweets if it is criticized or attacked by other users on Twitter – because this brand is a celebrity I love, and makes me feel cool and privileged among my peers." Consider the following words:

Focus group #3, male: I've got a positive (feeling) here. The brand tweeted back to me. If you attack him (brand), you are hurting his feelings. I am going to defend that, like trash the dude who does it.

Focus group #3, male: I did that [...] you can't just dis Intel. (I want to say) you don't know **** about Intel [...] not sure I will trash that tweet or the person sending it, but I will say I like Intel [...] make a statement.

Focus group #4, female: Don't buy Victoria's Secret if you don't want to. I will say I love the brand even though you're all hating it or whatever.

The focus groups yielded the following hypotheses in the context of Millennial generation, college-going, heavy users of Twitter who follow brands:

- H1.* The higher the levels of FOBI, the higher the likelihood of entifying the brand.
- H2.* The higher the levels of FOBI, the higher the reported elevation in healthy narcissism.
- H3.* The stronger the brand entification, the higher the reported elevation in healthy narcissism.
- H4.* The higher the elevation in healthy narcissism, the greater the defense of the brand.
- H5.* The stronger the brand entification, the greater the defense of the brand.

Scale development

Table I shows the scales derived from student vocabularies based on the process recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), Cavusgil *et al.* (2005) and Churchill (1979). The observed indicators for each latent construct illustrated in Figure 1 were identified; every item on every scale reported in Table I reflects the words used by focus group participants, corrected for grammatical errors when necessary.

Confirmatory studies

Survey of Twitter-using college students

A Qualtrics questionnaire with scales shown in Table I was circulated among students enrolled in multiple sections of graduate and undergraduate business classes at two AACSB-accredited B-schools. The purpose of the survey was to test for the reliability and validity of scales and produce a purified theoretical model for future testing. Students received the link via e-mail and a request to participate if they checked their Twitter feed at least once a day and followed at least one brand on the medium. To prevent overlap, the online questionnaire was administered in the semester subsequent to the one during which focus groups were conducted, and contained instructions clearly stating that students who were enrolled in the Marketing Research classes during the semester in which the focus groups were conducted should not participate.

The questionnaires, fully completed by 279 college students, served as a basis for purifying scales and the hypothesized model, and yielded the data for an initial test of hypotheses. The sample was 49.5 percent male, 50.5 percent female. Most (93 percent) of the sample checked their Twitter feeds on their smartphones, followed by laptops (40 percent). Nike, Starbucks, Victoria's Secret and Taco Bell were the most followed brands; most followers of Nike were male and most followers of Starbucks and all followers of Victoria's Secret were female.

The hypotheses were simultaneously tested, a structural equation model using EQS 6.2 was fitted on the data (based on Anderson and Gerbing's, 1988 study). Whether a structural model existed in the data was determined using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The CFA models included all covariances and four latent factors (i.e. FOBI, "brand entification," "healthy narcissism" and "brand defense"). The robust estimation procedures was used to overcome the bias that can be caused by non-normality in the data based on guidelines of Anderson and Gerbing (1988) and Bentler and Wu (2002). Six successive CFA models were

fitted to the data in an attempt to purify the measurement model. The Lagrange multiplier test was used to identify problematic factor loadings on the latent variables; these observed indicators were eliminated from the model. After the sixth iteration, the measurement model held excellent fit indices; i.e., NNFI = 0.951; CFI = 0.962, IFI = 0.962 and RMSEA = 0.54. Next, a path analysis was conducted. After specifying all hypothesized paths, the parameter estimates (β) of the link between “brand entification” and “brand defense” were found insignificant; the Wald’s test indicated that the path between the two variables should be dropped to produce better fit indices. The path coefficients obtained from the student sample and the fit parameters are significant; they support all hypotheses except *H5* (see solid arrows with associated path coefficients, and fit parameters reported at the bottom of Figure 1).

Nationwide survey. Data were collected from a nationwide sample of 440 Millennials using an Amazon Mechanical Turk panel, with the aid of the same instrument and scales used to gather data from college students. Participation was solicited from Millennials who checked their Twitter feed at least once a day, and followed at least one brand on the medium. M-Turk has received extensive study in recent years (see Litman *et al.*, 2017). Scholars find that M-Turk and student samples yield comparably reliable measures (Kees *et al.*, 2017), and that people participating in the former are more likely to read instructions from researchers (Ramsey *et al.*, 2016). The resulting sample of 440 was 55 percent male, and 45 percent female. The hypotheses were tested using the same path specifications. The path coefficients obtained from the nationwide sample of Millennials and the fit parameters are significant; they support all hypotheses except *H5* (see dashed arrows with associated path coefficients, and fit parameters reported at the bottom of Figure 1).

Reliability and validity. The grounded nature and newness of scales required particular attention to reliability and validity. As Table II shows, Cronbach’s α s ranged from 0.753 to 0.902 (e.g. Churchill, 1979) and construct reliability ranged from 0.76 to 0.93 (e.g. Hair *et al.*, 1998) and attested to the reliability of scales. The convergent validity test relied upon: establishing the significance of hypothesized relationship, and from the calculated average variance extracted (AVEs) for each of the four latent variables, i.e., FOBI, healthy narcissism, brand entification and brand defense, using the factor loadings produced by CFA (e.g. Hair *et al.*, 1998).

Discriminant validity was tested in three ways. First, Yanamandram and White (2010) pointed to correlations greater than 0.8 between latent variables as likely reasons for questioning discriminant validity. As Table II shows, correlations among latent variables were less than 0.76. Second, the qualitative research study identified FOMO as a discriminant factor (see Table I for Likert scale). The FOMO scale included three items: if I do not check social media posts often, I will miss out knowing what my friends are up to, if I do not check social media posts often, I will miss out on something very important that is occurring and if I do not check social media posts often, I will miss out on people and events that have a potential to enrich my life. The correlation between brand entification and FOMO was insignificant, attesting to discriminant validity ($\alpha = 0.749$; $r = 0.11$, $p = 0.2$).

	α	Mean	SD	CR	AVE	FOBI	Correlations BENTF	HNARC
Fear of being ignored	0.75	2.52	0.96	0.76	0.52	1		
Brand entification	0.77	2.67	1.02	0.79	0.56	0.38	1	
Healthy narcissism	0.8	2.85	0.9	0.87	0.63	0.47	0.72	1
Brand defense	0.9	3.13	1.06	0.93	0.76	0.37	0.55	0.76

Table II.
Key statistics and
correlations among
latent variables

Third, the AVEs range from 0.52 to 0.76, i.e., they are greater than the squared correlations between each pair of factors (see Table II). This points to a positive discriminant validity test because when compared to the shared variance between any two latent variables, the variance captured by the latent construct from observed indicators is higher (e.g. Fornell and Larcker, 1980).

Findings

The nationwide study finds: higher the levels of FOBI, stronger the entification of brands, and higher the elevation in healthy narcissism (supporting *H1* and *H2*), stronger the brand entification, greater the elevation in healthy narcissism (supporting *H3*) and greater the elevation in healthy narcissism, greater the defense of the brand on Twitter (supporting *H4*). *H5* is not supported; the path coefficient between brand entification and brand defense is insignificant. These findings mirror the evidence produced by the college student sample ($n = 279$), and demonstrate consistency between student and Mechanical Turk samples as noted by others (Kees *et al.*, 2017).

Given the lack of support for *H5*, the likely mediation effect of healthy narcissism on the relationship between brand entification and brand defense was examined. The evidence of full mediation emerged in two ways. First, the Sobel's test indicated significant mediation ($t = 8.45, p = 0.0$; Quantpsy, 2016). Second, a four step test for mediation based on Singh *et al.* (1994) also pointed to full mediation. Table III shows the key parameters associated with the test of full mediation. Briefly, the brand-entification → brand defense is significant when tested for direct effect. When healthy narcissism is specified as a mediator, i.e., when the paths brand entification → healthy narcissism is added to the model, the brand-entification → brand defense linkage (*H5*) loses significance.

Implications

Brand entification as a post-brand anthropomorphism construct

The key differences between brand entification as a post-anthropomorphic and distinct construct are identified by the findings. Brand entification is embedded in the highly emergent context of celebrity-rich discourse on Twitter, and a culture that worships celebrities and accepts narcissistic expression (Ashe *et al.*, 2005; Jin and Phua, 2014). In contrast, anthropomorphism is triggered by the desire to find humanness in non-human agents (e.g. Jipson and Gelman, 2007); humans have looked at clouds and imagined that they resemble humans before the advent of mass media (Guthrie, 1993).

Brands that resemble humans are known to trigger anthropomorphic attributions (e.g. Jipson and Gelman, 2007). Physical resemblance to humans is irrelevant to Twitter users. Entified brands are regarded as human celebrities; they signal social vitality just like

Model	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
FOBI → H.NARC	$\beta = 0.23$ $t = 4.01$	$\beta = 0.57$ $t = 7.82$	$\beta = 0.48$ $t = 7.25$	$\beta = 0.23; t = 4.09$
FOBI → B.ENTF	$\beta = 0.38$ $t = 4.78$	$\beta = 0.52$ $t = 7.8$	$\beta = 0.55; t = 7.62$	$\beta = 0.38; t = 5.67$
B.ENTF → H.NARC	$\beta = 0.64$ $t = 10.5$	Not Tested	Not Tested	$\beta = 0.63; t = 10.37$
H.NARC → BDFENS	Not Tested	Not Tested	$\beta = 0.76; t = 13.61$	$\beta = 0.76; t = 9.05$
B.ENTF → BDFENS	Not Tested	$\beta = 0.57;$ $t = 10.06$	Not Tested	Tested: linkage loses significance upon addition of HNARC in the model

Table III. Evidence of "healthy narcissism" as a full mediator in the "brand entification → brand defense" linkage

media celebrities. A human celebrity engages Twitter users' FOBI, creates opportunities for gaining social attention and building social cachet among peers and triggers entificatory attributions not as an end in itself, but as a pathway to elevating users' healthy narcissism; i.e., entification produces direct psychological benefits for Twitter users. Anthropomorphic attributions emerge from activation of three cognitive processes, i.e., elicited agent knowledge, effectance motivation and sociality motivation (see Epley *et al.*, 2007; Waytz *et al.*, 2010 for further explication). Brand entification results from the activation of FOBI; a construct peripheral to current discussions of branding and social media engagement.

Brand entification and brand anthropomorphism produce sharply differing consequences. Anthropomorphic attributions render brands more likeable (Aggarwal and McGill, 2007). When anthropomorphized, buyers feel warmer, more connected and loyal to brands (Epley *et al.*, 2008; Chandler and Schwarz, 2010). Puzakova and Aggarwal (2015) found that anthropomorphic attributions toward a luxury brand hurts the perception of the brand's sophistication, i.e., feelings of closeness produced by anthropomorphic attributions interfere with the signal of status for those concerned with status signaling. That is, anthropomorphism reduces perceptual distances between users and brands, and renders them more accessible. Brand entification, in sharp contrast, endows the brand with an elevated social status of a celebrity and accentuates perceptual distance. Twitter users bask in the glow of celebrity brands, they do not claim nearness and personal connection (see direct quote: "Intel rocks [...] (Intel) is a celebrity. But he is like a celebrity that I don't get to touch and feel. He feels you"). An entified brand is not cloying for attention; it is aloof as are celebrities who respond only selectively to fans. Brand entification elevates the entifier's healthy narcissism; anthropomorphism literature is largely silent on the narcissism of the attributor.

The delineation is incomplete without attention to key contextual differences. The brand anthropomorphism construct is inseparable from the context of traditional print, broadcast and outdoor media (Aaker, 1997; Aggarwal and McGill, 2012). Entification is likely unique to social media with heavy participation of celebrities, and distinct from notions of "celebrities such as Michael Jordan as brands," (e.g. Renaud *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, some Twitter users may interact with Starbucks brand's mermaid logo and attribute anthropomorphic properties; another segment can entify the brand. Entification by one does not invalidate nor replace anthropomorphic attributions by another set of Twitter users (e.g. Sashittal *et al.*, 2015).

Healthy narcissism and Twitter usage

Findings produce insights into understanding and assessing healthy narcissism of social media users. Currently, social media literature refers to self-absorptive narcissism as a salient feature of its users and blames it for dysfunctional outcomes including conspicuous consumption (Taylor and Strutton, 2016). This thinking is somewhat resonant with notions of narcissism as a mental disorder and defined as a "grandiose preoccupation with one's own self-importance," (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). The 40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory scale assesses self-admiration, needing admiration of others, entitlement to a special status and self-aggrandizement (Raskin and Hall, 1979).

The data-derived notion of narcissism contrasts sharply with these views. We find that entification triggers healthy narcissism, i.e., users feel cool, privileged, celebrity-like and relevant among like-minded people. This view resonates with thinking about healthy narcissists (Godkin and Allcorn, 2011), and constructive narcissists (Amernic and Craig, 2010). Narcissism is healthy when it produces: pleasure and worth (Campbell *et al.*, 2006), realistic self-assessment and acceptance of one's weaknesses and strengths (Bergman *et al.*, 2010) and self-confidence, empathy and assertiveness (Rice and Dellwo, 2002). This finding is also supported by current theory. Narcissists are known for celebrity worship (Ashe *et al.*, 2005),

and known to: favor over-idealized parasocial relationships – such as the one they have with the brand to whom they have attributed a human celebrity status (e.g. Ashe *et al.*, 2005; Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001), talk up their positive experiences (De Angelis *et al.*, 2012) and generate content for the web because it helps them gain attention from others (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2015).

Addressing psychosocial needs of Twitter users

The lack of support for *H5*, coupled with evidence that healthy narcissism fully mediates the link between brand entification and brand defense suggests emotional attributions toward brands are primarily about shaping the way Twitter users feel about themselves; their brand-related behaviors do not result directly from their emotional attributions to brands. Marketers should note that the key to producing brand-defensive Tweets is about communicating in ways that stimulate users FOBI and produce an elevated sense of healthy narcissism among Tweeters.

A review of current practice lends further credence to the findings about FOBI and healthy narcissism. Coca Cola is a dominant global brand with a market cap of \$191bn (Google, 2018). Yet, its Twitter presence with 3.41m followers in 2018 provides little evidence of entification. A tweet sent on February 16, 2018 says: “Go for the crisp, refreshing gold. #EnjoyYours #WinterOlympics #PyeongChang2018.” The Tweet reflects the brand’s FOBI (with an appeal “please don’t ignore me”) and narcissism (“look at my awesomeness, I am connected to the winter Olympics”). As predicted by this study, the brand message garnered 48 retweets and 260 favorites. Starbucks, an entified brand with a significantly smaller market cap of \$79bn (Google, 2018), is squarely focused on their 11.9m followers’ FOBI and narcissism. On February 14, 2018, they tweeted: “Your order is complicated. Like our love.” The focus on Twitter followers’ anxieties and complications of loving relationships on Valentine’s Day earned 68 comments, 771 retweets and 3.5K favorites; a response aligned with its entified status.

Limitations and future research

The reported studies suggest that social media users’ attributions toward brands are post-anthropomorphic; brands are occupying the status of living human celebrities. New research into brand-related attributions resulting uniquely from user-brand interactions on social media, without the filter of currently popular constructs such as personalities and human-likeness, and reflective of what real-world buyers actually perceive and do – is sorely needed.

The model and scales deserve testing across multiple samples; random samples of all Twitter users and longitudinal designs are left to future research. The SEM procedure was used to simultaneously assess multiple hypothesized unidirectional relationships based on the study of Anderson and Gerbing (1988); no implications of causality are currently drawn (e.g. Fornell and Larcker, 1980). Common method bias may have inflated measurement because of self-reports (e.g. Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Assessment of “brand defense” from third-party reports is left to future research. To address this issue, we followed Conway and Lance’s (2010) guidelines, i.e., we paid particular attention to demonstrating composite reliability and discriminant validity. Finally, the direction of arrows shown in Figure 1 is derived from qualitative data, not from the SEM procedure. This should address concerns about why the arrows point the way they do; exploration of relationships in alternative directions is left to future research.

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Further reading

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