

The invisible leash: when human brands hijack corporate brands' consumer relationships

Brand
relationship
hijacking

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Abstract

Purpose – Corporate brands increasingly use influential, high reach human brands (e.g. influencers, celebrities), who have strong parasocial relationships with their followers and audiences, to promote their offerings. However, despite emerging understanding of the benefits arising from human brand-based campaigns, knowledge about their potentially negative effects on the corporate brand remains limited. Addressing this gap, this paper deepens insight into the potential risk human brands pose to corporate brands.

Design/methodology/approach – To explore these issues, this conceptual paper reviews and integrates literature on consumer brand engagement, human brands, brand hijacking and parasocial relationships.

Findings – Though consumers' favorable human brand associations can be used to improve corporate brand outcomes, they rely on consumers' relationship with the endorsing human brand. Given the dependency of these brands, human brand-based marketing bears the risk that the human brand (vs the firm) "owns" the consumer's corporate brand relationship, which the authors coin relationship hijacking. This phenomenon can severely impair consumers' engagement and relationship with the corporate brand.

Originality/value – This paper sheds light on the role of human brands in strategic brand management. Though prior research has highlighted the positive outcomes accruing to the use of human brands, the authors identify its potential dark sides, thus exposing pivotal insight.

Keywords Consumer engagement, Human brands, Human-brand based marketing, Parasocial relationships, Relationship hijacking

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In the last 15 years, social media's growing ubiquity has led to a multitude of corporate brands being endorsed, promoted and discussed by media personas (i.e. human brands; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020). In this environment, consumers not only engage with marketer-generated content, but also with content generated by those media personas (Goh *et al.*, 2013; Smith *et al.*, 2012), yielding a complex branding landscape. In particular, social media's ever-evolving modes of (a)synchronous communication (e.g. through live stream-based real-time interactions; Giertz *et al.*, 2022) fuel the development of consumers' parasocial relationships (PSRs), defined as their illusionary, intimate relationships with human brands (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019). Given the capacity of PSRs to nurture consumer-brand relationships (Labrecque, 2014), firms are increasingly leveraging consumers' existing PSRs with high-reach human brands to endorse their corporate brands on social media (Audrezet *et al.*, 2020; Hughes *et al.*, 2019).



We refer to using human brands to endorse corporate brands as *human brand-based marketing*. Irrespective of whether human brands appear in marketer-generated or their own content, human-brand based marketing concerns the expected spillover of a consumer's engagement with a human brand to their engagement with the promoted corporate brand (Bowden *et al.*, 2017), thus highlighting *consumer brand engagement's* pertinent role. Consumer brand engagement, defined as a consumer's cognitive, emotional and behavioral resource investment in their brand interactions (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019; Kumar *et al.*, 2019), is widely acclaimed to exert a relationship-building effect (e.g. by raising brand loyalty/satisfaction and purchase; Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Pansari and Kumar, 2017), including in the social media context (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Weiger *et al.*, 2017).

Human brand-based marketing encompasses specific sub-types (e.g. celebrity endorsement and influencer marketing), which can be classified based on the distribution and appearance of the corporate brand message. While celebrity endorsement utilizes human brands as the corporate brand's face and messenger in campaigns distributed on dedicated (e.g. television) advertising media, influencer marketing employs human brands as message creators for the corporate brand on the influencer's own social media pages (e.g. blog posts, Twitter posts; Karaguer *et al.*, 2021; Knoll and Matthes, 2017).

Given its rising relevance, human brand-based marketing is receiving growing scholarly attention, with most studies examining its favorable effects on the corporate brand, including sponsored blogging (Hughes *et al.*, 2019), human/corporate brand congruence (Knoll and Matthes, 2017), brand alliances (Kupfer *et al.*, 2018) and sponsorship disclosures (Evans *et al.*, 2018; Stubb and Colliander, 2019), to name a few. Though prior research has produced valuable insight (e.g. by identifying human brand success factors), it tends to highlight the positive outcomes of human brand-based marketing (e.g. Ki *et al.*, 2020), thus largely overlooking its potential adverse effects. Further, the literature predominantly takes a dyadic approach by featuring consumers' engagement with the corporate brand, thus largely neglecting the role of human brands and their existing PSRs with consumers. This is surprising, as consumers' strong PSRs with human brands are likely to impact the effectiveness of the communication process (Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019). In a recent study, Leung *et al.* (2022) propose that influencers (i.e. human brands) are valuable for acquiring new customers but unable to retain customers for the corporate brand, thus calling for studies along these lines. Addressing this gap, we inductively draw on insight derived from the engagement and PSR literature (e.g. Hollebeek *et al.*, 2020) to better understand the impact of consumers' human brand-based PSRs on their engagement with corporate brands.

Our conceptual insights contribute to multiple research streams. First, by exploring the potential threats of human brand-based marketing for the corporate brand, we contribute to branding/human brand research by unveiling the phenomenon of human brand-based *relationship hijacking*. We describe the relationship hijacking concept as the human brand (vs the firm) unrecognizably "owning" the consumer's brand relationship, which in turn may reduce, or even nullify, the corporate brand's intended relationship-building effect. Through our insights, we broaden scholarly understanding of the brand hijacking concept by extending its scope to consumers' pre-existing relationship with the corporate brand. In other words, we add brand relationships as a brand hijacking "target," thus contributing to hijacking research.

Second, the paper furthers the engagement literature by identifying that a consumer's engagement with a corporate brand's *stakeholder* (e.g. an influencer or employee) can prevail over that with the corporate brand itself. Specifically, consumers' engagement with the corporate brand may appear volitional, although it is instigated by and dependent on another stakeholder, thus representing an *invisible leash* on consumers. We also offer suggestions for managers regarding how to minimize the potentially negative effects of human brand-based marketing.

The paper unfolds as follows. In [Section 2](#), we review foundational literature on human brand-based marketing and brand hijacking that underlies our theoretical reasoning, followed by the development of the relationship hijacking concept and its effects in [Section 3](#). The paper concludes with [Section 4](#), in which we discuss key implications that arise from this research, including those for policy-makers in terms of understanding and shaping the impact of human brands on society.

2. Literature review

2.1 Human brands and parasocial relationships

Like corporate product and service brands, media personas may constitute brands in their own right, as they represent names or symbols that have the capacity to elicit consumer associations, distinguishing them from others ([Ki et al., 2020](#); [Thomson, 2006](#)). Accordingly, a *human brand* refers to “the persona, well-known or emerging, who [is] the subject of marketing, interpersonal, or inter-organizational communications” ([Close et al., 2011](#), p. 923).

Human brands feature differing levels of consumer attachment to or engagement with the brand ([Fletcher et al., 2000](#); [Thomson, 2006](#)), which may range from the individual’s mere awareness of the persona, to their perception of having a close, friend-like relationship with the persona ([Dibble et al., 2016](#); [Steinhoff et al., 2019](#)). The latter, which is described as a PSR, is particularly likely to arise in the social media context, which permits various modes of communication, including public posting, real-time private messaging/live streaming interactions or commenting/liking ([Bozkurt et al., 2021](#); [Chung and Cho, 2017](#)). Based on parasocial interaction theory ([Horton and Wohl, 1956](#)), PSRs offer a means to transfer positive feelings to objects and humanize corporate brands, thus offering an avenue to build consumers’ corporate brand engagement ([Appel et al., 2020](#); [Steinhoff et al., 2019](#); [Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019](#)), leading to their frequent adoption in firm-based marketing activity.

2.2 Effects of human brand-based marketing

Prior research on human brand-based marketing, primarily in the form of celebrity endorsement and influencer marketing, has examined several initiatives and their outcomes for the human brand-utilizing firm. [Table 1](#) shows the studied elements, outcome variables and effects noted in key empirical studies. In terms of the elements used in human brand-based campaigns, we identify a key role of human brand/product congruence ([Belanche et al., 2021](#); [Choi and Rifon, 2012](#)) and the human brand’s persuasiveness and reputation ([Ki and Kim, 2019](#); [Zhou and Whitla, 2013](#)). In terms of impact, prior research has tended to concentrate on campaign- and product-level outcomes (e.g. attitude toward the ad or purchase intent; [Belanche et al., 2021](#); [Choi and Rifon, 2012](#)) relating to the endorsed offerings ([Knoll and Matthes, 2017](#)). However, only few studies to date examine corporate brand-level outcomes, including the consumer’s liking of or attitude to the corporate brand ([De Jans et al., 2020](#); [Stubb and Colliander, 2019](#); [Zhou and Whitla, 2013](#)).

[Table 1](#) suggests that human brands are mostly effective in enhancing consumer responses at the campaign and endorsed product/service “micro” level. However, if we look beyond the campaign or product and focus on more holistic outcomes for the endorsed corporate brand, extant research reveals a less favorable picture. While one study identifies a positive impact of human brand-based campaigns on corporate brand liking ([De Jans et al., 2020](#)), others find that strong human brands can undermine the consumer’s corporate brand attitude by overshadowing or dominating the consumer’s attention (vs that given to the advertised brand; [Ilicic and Webster, 2014](#); [Zhou and Whitla, 2013](#)). Relatedly, if human brands fall from grace (e.g. through a scandal/negative publicity), their damaged reputation

Table 1.
Empirical human
brand-based
marketing research
suggesting detrimental
effects for the
corporate brand

Study	Examined human brand	Examined elements of human brand-based campaign	Effects on campaign and product level outcomes	Effects on corporate brand level outcomes	Mechanism for explaining effects
Choi and Rifon (2012)	Celebrity	Celebrity/consumer congruence Celebrity/product congruence	Positive effects on attitude toward the ad and endorsed product purchase intention	No significant effect on corporate brand attitude	-
Zhou and Wita (2013)	Celebrity	Celebrity's moral reputation	Negative effect on attitude toward endorsed products	Negative effect on corporate brand attitude	-
Ilicic and Webster (2014)	Celebrity	Celebrity focus in campaign	-	Negative effect on corporate brand attitude	-
Erfgen <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Celebrity	Celebrity endorsements (vs non-celebrity endorsements)	Negative effect on ad recall	-	Consumer's familiarity with celebrity
Knoll and Matthes (2017)	Celebrity	Celebrity endorsements (vs non-celebrity endorsements)	Positive effect on endorsed product/service; no significant effect on attitude toward the ad	-	-
Ki and Kim (2019)	Influencer	Influencer's persuasiveness	Positive effect on purchase intention and product-related word of mouth (WOM)	-	Consumers' desire to mimic influencer
Stubb and Colander (2019)	Influencer	Disclosure type of sponsored content	-	Non-disclosure of sponsored content positively impacts corporate brand attitude, while explicit sponsorship disclosure does not	Perceived credibility of influencer
De Jans <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Influencer	Influencer posts (vs corporate brand posts)	-	Positive effect on corporate brand liking and negative effect on corporate brand awareness	Consumer's admiration of the influencer
Belanche <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Influencer	Influencer/product congruence	Positive effect on attitude toward the endorsed product, purchase intention and WOM intention	-	Consumer/product congruence

can damage their likeability and perceived trustworthiness as an endorser, thus also negatively impacting the endorsed corporate brand (Zhou and Whitla, 2013).

Though no research has fully examined the effects of human brand-based marketing on consumers' corporate brand relationship to date, existing studies point to the potentially detrimental effect of human brands on corporate brands' relational outcomes. Moreover, the findings compiled in Table 1 hint to the crucial role of the relationship consumers have with human brands in impacting the health and stability of their relationship with the corporate brand, thus casting doubt on the literature's focus on human brand-based marketing's positive effects. Evidence from adjacent disciplines supports this observation. For example, Palmatier *et al.* (2007) acknowledge that a customer's loyalty to a firm might be illusory because it is, in fact, "owned" by particular (e.g. "star" or "unicorn") salespeople. Yim *et al.* (2008) describe this phenomenon as a "hostage effect," in which strong consumer–staff relationships may lead consumers to follow the employee if they defect to a competing firm.

Taken together, we propose that a consumer's human brand relationship strongly affects the relational outcomes for the corporate brand, which may not be salutary *per se*, as principally assumed in the literature to date. To examine this tension between human and corporate brands, we next review brand hijacking research.

2.3 Brand hijacking

We draw on the *brand hijacking* literature to frame our assertion regarding the (potentially problematic) dependency of consumers' corporate brand relationships on their human brand relationships. Fueled by social media's omnipresence, the *hijacking* concept, defined as the "[. . .] unauthorized use and/or transformation of the brand that manifests itself in forms of non-collaborative brand co-creation [. . .]" (Siano *et al.*, 2022, p. 118), is increasingly applied in the marketing literature. The idea of hijacking can be used to explain how human brands proactively shape consumer-perceived corporate brand value (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020) by facilitating a perceived value spillover effect and *hijacking* corporate brand messages or meaning (Cova and Pace, 2006; Fournier and Avery, 2011; Wipperfurth, 2005). While existing scholarly acumen of brand hijacking tends to be limited to a single corporate brand communication element (e.g. Greenpeace campaigners parodying and reinterpreting Nestlé's KitKat "Take a Break" advertising; Armstrong, 2010), we argue that hijacking's scope may extend to the consumer's *entire* corporate brand *relationship*, as developed in the next section.

3. Conceptual development: human brand-based relationship hijacking

3.1 Concept of human brand-based relationship hijacking

Informed by our review, we argue that the hijacking concept, as discussed in published research to date, is too narrow and fails to encompass the full impact of human brands on corporate brands. We draw on the PSR and engagement literature to adapt brand hijacking theory and extend its scope to corporate brand relationships, as outlined, by conceptualizing the notion of *human brand-based relationship hijacking*.

We view relationship hijacking as a collaborative phenomenon (vs non-collaborative as in the case of brand hijacking), as it transpires through corporate brands purposefully employing human brands to generate consumers' corporate brand engagement. While the literature to date stresses engagement's *fully* voluntary nature (e.g. customers choosing to engage with their preferred brand; Fletcher-Brown *et al.*, 2021), engagement may, in fact, reveal differing levels of consumer volitionality. That is, while it *can* be fully volitional, it can also contain a less voluntary element (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2020). In the human brand-based marketing context, a consumer's corporate brand engagement may be boundedly (vs fully) volitional as it emerges—at least to some degree—through the individual's human brand-based

PSR. That is, a consumer's corporate brand engagement is governed by the human brand acting as an intermediary in the corporate brand-consumer communication process (Ki and Kim, 2019).

For example, consumers' corporate brand relationships can be positively impacted by a human brand if their positive associations with the latter (e.g. through high source credibility) are transferred to the corporate brand (Stubb and Colliander, 2019). As noted, we argue that human brand-induced engagement is less volitional, since a consumer's PSR manifests as a friend-like relationship with a human brand, the desire to become more like the human brand and stronger engagement in parasocial activities. Thus, consumers are inclined to make more favorable attributions to the corporate brand *on account of* their strong PSR with the human brand (Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019), revealing an relationship-building engagement spillover effect (Bowden *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, consumers' human brand relationship may determine and dominate their corporate brand relationship.

We, therefore, define relationship hijacking as:

A prevalence of human brand engagement over corporate brand engagement resulting from the contingency of corporate brand engagement on a consumer's parasocial relationship with the human brand.

3.2 Effects of human brand-based relationship hijacking

Our conceptualization of relationship hijacking suggests that engagement, generated through human-brand based marketing, involves not only the consumer's engagement with the focal corporate brand, but—to an extent—also covers consumer's PSR with another party (i.e. the endorsing human brand). This non-dyadic nature, which constitutes relationship hijacking, entails different dynamics for the formation of engagement. We, therefore, propose the following principal relationship hijacking effects.

First, human brands can impact consumers' resource investment in the corporate brand in multiple ways. That is, either a consumer's human brand engagement, or the human brand's affiliation with the corporate brand, can affect the consumer's corporate brand relationship. For instance, when human brands are caught in negative publicity, this will tend to harm consumers' PSR, in turn potentially impacting their corporate brand engagement (e.g. as showcased by the Tiger Woods scandal; Knittel and Stango, 2014; Zhou and Whitla, 2013). Likewise, upon termination of the corporate brand's campaign, the human brand will stop endorsing the corporate brand, thus likely weakening the consumer's corporate brand relationship. Consumers could even defect from the corporate brand and shift their resources toward offerings provided or launched by the admired human brand (e.g. Kanye West leaving Nike and partnering with Adidas; Gorsler, 2021; Kupfer *et al.*, 2018).

Second, the dependency on the human brand can directly impair a consumer's corporate brand engagement, either by declining positive engagement or by developing negative engagement (Bowden *et al.*, 2017). These unfavorable outcomes can manifest in different ways, including through reduced engagement (Zhou and Whitla, 2013), oppositional engagement (Thompson and Sinha, 2008) or the inability to impact engagement (Knoll and Matthes, 2017).

4. Discussion, implications and further research

4.1 Discussion and theoretical implications

Our analysis reveals that corporate brands face an inherent risk when deploying human brands for marketing purposes, which is subject to a dearth of research to date. In particular, human brand-based marketing may falsely suggest the existence of a favorable, strong consumer/corporate brand relationship, while the relationship is, in fact, owned by the human brand. Therefore, a consumer's bond with a human brand may *hijack* the corporate brand/

consumer relationship, leading to the firm's potential over-rating of its human brand-based marketing campaign and posing a strategic risk. That is, the human brand-based campaign's performance can, in fact, be deceptive or illusory: It may erode as soon as the human brand stops partnering with the firm.

In other words, as human brand-based performance metrics rise, corporate brands may evaluate their campaigns as effective, though their outcomes may be primarily owned by the human (vs the corporate) brand. This over-estimation can bear devastating consequences, as it may generate sub-optimally allocated marketing budgets incurred by a failure to acknowledge the extent to which engagement-boosting effects hinge on human brand-based PSRs. Correspondingly, we recommend future scholars to further elucidate the relationship hijacking effect in the following ways.

First, we recommend researchers to empirically deepen the understanding of the relationship hijacking effect by determining the share of illusory (vs actual) beneficial outcomes of human brand-based campaigns. Importantly, these studies should assess both short- and long-term outcomes, which may be investigated by using cross-sectional and longitudinal research methods, respectively. That is, corporate brand performance metrics should extend beyond individual campaigns to avoid falsely attributing engagement-based changes or fluctuations. For example, upon termination of the human brand-corporate brand collaboration, the human brand's decaying carry-over effects should be accounted for as the induced positive corporate brand associations fade.

Second, our findings suggest that the success of human brand-based marketing campaigns is determined by their ability to create strong links between the focal human- and corporate brand (Choi and Rifon, 2012). For example, high thematic congruence of the human brand, corporate brand and the endorsed offering facilitates the spillover of positive associations (Bowden *et al.*, 2017; Erfgen *et al.*, 2015) through an effective leveraging of consumers' PSRs. Moreover, long-term campaigns can facilitate the development of strong human-corporate brand associations, reducing a potential relationship hijacking effect. Analyzing human brands' single corporate brand (vs multiple brands) endorsement may also be fruitful in explaining the spillover of consumers' positive associations to the corporate brand. That is, a consumer's engagement transfer from the human to the corporate brand may be more effective for an exclusive cooperation (vs multiple cooperations), warranting further exploration of exclusivity in human brand-based marketing communications. Sample research questions include: Will such exclusivity generate more favorable consumer responses, from the corporate brand's perspective? How might this effect pan out for corporate service brands (e.g. Uber) comprising multiple sub-brands (e.g. Uber Eats/Uber Freight)?

Third, we suggest that the firm's assessment of human brand-based marketing should extend to other stakeholders beyond consumers alone (e.g. employees, suppliers, the media; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2020). Prior research shows that the deployment of influencers can impact corporate reputation negatively (Kim *et al.*, 2021), which could potentially affect employee or supplier engagement, thus rendering these stakeholder relationships susceptible for being hijacked by a powerful human brand. For example, employees may also have a strong attachment to the endorsing human brand that dominates employees' loyalty to the firm, which may lead employees to exit the firm when the human brand terminates the partnership with the firm (Tavassoli *et al.*, 2014). This case can be further extrapolated to network-based human brands that exist beyond incentivized campaigns. For instance, CEOs may embody key representatives who shape stakeholder relationships in their firm's network through their internal/external communications (Koporcic, 2020). As outlined, the instigated engagement can manifest favorably or detrimentally, thus potentially revealing the individual's illusory engagement with the corporate brand. Therefore, the extent to which the relationships that firm representatives build with their stakeholders can impact these stakeholders' corporate brand engagement offers a fruitful avenue for further research. Since

our analysis highlighted relational intimacy as a key driver of relationship hijacking, future studies may wish to examine the concept across different firm sizes (e.g. small/medium-sized enterprises) and firm stakeholders (e.g. employees/distributors).

4.2 *The impact of human brands on society*

We argue that the prevalence of human brand-based communication extends existing branding campaigns. Our findings further underscore that human brands are increasingly relevant to shape the public opinion and guide consumer decision-making, aligning with the growing consensus of branding in a hyperconnected world and an ever-reducing significance of marketer-generated content (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020).

Our analysis suggests another potential dark side of human brand-based PSRs. While we focused on the spillover effect to corporate brand relationships, human brands may also influence a consumer's perception and opinion regarding other topics (Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019). In turn, while a consumer's mindset on a specific subject may, at first glance, appear volitional, it is ultimately owned by the human brand, who may change it at their will, revealing the human brand's *invisible leash* with respect to the consumer. Consequently, policymakers and social media platforms are challenged to identify and combat manipulative or (deep) fake personas without censoring free speech and sanctioning human brands in general.

The prevalence of human brand-based communication (vs non-human communication; e.g. governmental/institutional communication) begs the question regarding what values, ideologies and symbols human brands transmit to society, communities and stakeholders. Though human brands can influence consumer choices, they can also be used to raise awareness of social injustice or environmental sustainability. At the same time, they run the risk of spreading misinformation, thus harming society. Therefore, the ability of human brands to make an impact in different areas may vary and thus, requires further consideration of other factors, including mode of communication, platform utilization or consumer influenceability, thus offering a further trajectory for future research to shed light on human brand's impact on society.

4.3 *Limitations and further research*

This study is subject to several limitations that reveal additional research avenues. First, we applied an inductive analytical approach in this conceptual study. Consequently, the proposed relationship hijacking concept and its effects warrant future empirical testing and validation (e.g. through experimental or survey research).

Second, by focusing on strong PSRs fueled by social media, this study limited its focus to a relationship hijacking-prone context (e.g. owing to its regular adoption of branded personas). Therefore, our findings may apply differently in other, non-social media contexts (e.g. traditional offline marketing platforms), offering an opportunity for further study. Moreover, social media platforms differ in terms of their purpose, functionality and communication (e.g. through video/photo sharing, real-time/asynchronous communication or ephemeral/long-lasting content availability; Giertz *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, consumer perceptions of human brands and their respective social experiences will depend on social media platform characteristics. Consequently, researchers may wish to examine to what degree relationship hijacking exists in other (e.g. online/offline) settings (e.g. blog-based endorsement). For example, though non-celebrity micro-influencers may have less relationship hijacking power, they may nevertheless be perceived as trustworthy or authentic corporate brand endorsers. As these micro-influencers tend to be far less expensive for firms—while also lowering the risk of hijacking—they may offer a suitable alternative to celebrity human brands.

Third, further research may wish to assess the relationship hijacking effect from alternate or related theoretical perspectives, such as the homophily effect (Bozkurt *et al.*, 2021), congruity theory (e.g. Islam *et al.*, 2018) or the (digital) extended self (Belk, 2013). The adoption

of these may uncover additional nuances that help improve scholarly understanding of the proposed concept and ultimately assess the effectiveness of human brand-based marketing and the relevance of human brands.

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