Social media interactions with brands causes consumers to attribute human minds to them. When brands are perceived to have minds, we theorize and show that it dampens individuals’ perception of human minds (i.e., empathy for others). We contribute to the mind attribution and brand anthropomorphism literatures, and consider societal implications.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Brands can be perceived as anthropomorphic entities, leading consumers to attribute humanlike minds to them (Kervyn, et al. 2012; Aggarwal and McGill 2007, 2012). Previous marketing research has focused on firm-level benefits of brand and product anthropomorphism. However, thus far, marketing research has not considered whether there might be negative societal outcomes of seeing brands as humanlike.

In general, enhanced mind attribution represents increased accuracy, because seeing other minds is a motivated process (e.g., Kidd and Castaño 2013; Waytz et al. 2010). Individuals often decrease mind attribution to outgroup members, which is associated with social ills such as dehumanization and racial discrimination (Haslam 2006; Gray et al. 2012). However, not all increases in mind attribution represent increased accuracy. In this work, we argue that social media interaction with brands may lead consumers to attribute minds to brands. We further theorize that attributing minds to mindless agents may decrease understanding of other people’s mental states.

Viewing social media content is likely to increase mind attribution to the entities who post such content, whether human or brand. Prior work has shown that reading narrative fiction increases mind perception abilities because it requires more effortful determination of others’ mental states than does reading nonfiction (Kidd and Castaño 2013). Furthermore, a motivation to connect with another person—likely the intention of most individuals in social media contexts—enhances mind attribution to the person (Pickett, Gardner and Knowles 2004; Waytz et al. 2010).

Competing predictions can be made regarding outcomes of undue mind attribution. On one hand, effortfully attributing minds to mindless targets might improve mind perception in humans, much like exercising a muscle strengthens it. However, we posit the opposite: mind attribution to brands will decrease mind perception in other people. First, seeing a mind where none exists may temporarily distort individuals’ sense of what constitutes a human mind. This may make it more difficult to identify or understand a human mind. Second, because it is more difficult to imagine the type and contents of a non-human (vs. human) mind, individuals who do so may subsequently feel less confident about their mind perception abilities (Bem 1972; Ross, Lepper, and Hubbard 1975). Three experiments test our hypotheses.

Sixty-three undergraduate students completed experiment 1. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: an identical Facebook post that was shared by the Cheetos brand or by a person. In a control condition, 26 participants described their favorite college course. Next, participants completed 6 items from the cognitive empathy scale (Jolliffe and Farrington 2006). As predicted, cognitive empathy was lowest among individuals who thought about the brand’s mental states, compared to individuals who thought about a person’s mental states or the control condition (both p’s<.05). Differences between the person and control conditions were not statistically significant (p>.99), likely because both recollection and mind perception of other human minds are fairly effortless and common cognitive processes.

Experiment 2 tests whether using hashtags (e.g., #IloveGap) in social media posts to brands results in decreased self-reported cognitive empathy (Jolliffe and Farrington 2006). We first established that using a hashtag in a comment to a brand increases mind attribution to the brand. This is likely because hashtags serve as a meta-commentary on a written statement (e.g., “It’s Monday! So excited! #sarcasm”; Wikipedia 2017) and require consideration of how perceivers will interpret both the message and the commentary. In a pre-test, 25 Mturk participants were assigned to write a message about the Gap using a hashtag, either directed to the Gap or to a friend. Mind attribution to the brand was measured using 3 items standard in the literature (Ward et al. 2013). Individuals who directed a hashtag to the Gap (a friend) rated it as having more (less) mind (p<.01). In the main study, we used the same hashtag paradigm and measured understanding of other minds with 3 items from the Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) cognitive empathy scale (N=82). As predicted, individuals who used a hashtag when commenting to the brand (a friend) reported less (more) cognitive empathy (p<.05). Thus, social media interactions with brands can depress individuals’ ability to understand the minds of other humans.

In experiment 3, 83 Mturk participants read information about the shoe brand Naturalizer. In one condition, the information was presented as if it appeared in the brand’s Twitter feed; in the other condition it was presented in list form. Next, participants rated the extent to which the brand possessed a mind before completing 10 RMET items. We controlled for prior experience with the brand and Twitter. As predicted, individuals in the Twitter condition attributed more mind to the brand compared to those in the list condition (p<.05). They also performed worse on the RMET (p<.001). Mind attribution mediates the hypothesized relationship (Zhao et al. 2010). The mean indirect and direct effects are negative and significant (95% bootstrap confidence intervals exclude zero). Thus, even reading about a brand in social media settings can increase mind attribution to the brand, which leads to poorer ability to understand others’ emotional states. This experiment rules out the alternative explanation that our result is due to participants’ level of knowledge about the social media platform or the brand.

In this work, we present evidence that social media interaction with brands can incorrectly heighten mind attribution to the brand, harming individuals’ ability to understand the mental states of other people. Both decreased empathy for others and decreased performance on the RMET indicate that consumers who attribute a mind to a mindless agent subsequently struggle to understand agents that do possess a mind. This finding contributes to the extant research in marketing on brand anthropomorphism, which has not previously examined societal outcomes. Furthermore, as mind attribution to brands may occur outside consumers’ conscious awareness, this finding should be communicated to the public. Finally, motivations such as a need for control over one’s environment and loneliness can enhance mind attribution to mindless agents (Waytz et al. 2010). Thus, the potential for ill effects due to mind attribution to mindless brands may extend beyond social media interactions.

REFERENCES


