
Social Media Content Personification and Brand-Consumer Engagement: Lessons from Corporate Organisations in Tanzania

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Abstract

Although the rise of social media as a vital channel of communication between companies and their customers has increased over time, there is limited evidence on how integrating human conversation content in online communication (brand personification) enhances brand-consumer engagement. To address this gap, we explored the human conversational content on social media pages of two corporate organisations in Tanzania and investigated their influence on brand-consumer engagement. Based on the analysis of 200 brand tweets and semi-structured interviews with 13 social media users, it was established that the most commonly used brand personification technique was message personalisation, encompassing personal greetings, addressing consumers personally, addressing employees personally, and using a personal signature. It was also evident that an informal speech (visual and tactile elements, informal language, audible elements, contractions/abbreviations and interjections/idiophones) and invitational rhetoric (stimulating dialogue, empathy, apologising, acknowledging, and well-wishing) were adopted to complement message personalisation. Furthermore, integrating brand personification techniques and ensuring instant response, active engagement, entertainment content, personalised communication, humour and appealing content enhanced brand-consumer engagement. Consistent with the Communication Accommodation and Integrated Marketing Communication theories, the study demonstrates that personification of marketing communication influences engagement between the brand and consumers.

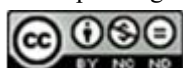
Keywords: Anthropomorphism, Human conversational techniques, Personified Communication, Social media, Brand-consumer engagement

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/udslj.v20i1.10>

Introduction

Since the advancement of social media platforms through Web 2.0 in the 2000s, there has been a growing consensus that social media has great potential to facilitate companies in recruiting and retaining customers through consumer-brand engagement (Sivathanu & Pillai, 2014; Kostamo, 2013; Sivathanu & Pillai, 2014; Mbura, 2020). The most recent evidence suggests that several companies are shifting their promotional campaigns to social media

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(Saura et al., 2020; Mbura, 2020) and reducing their spending on traditional media, such as television, radio, and newspapers (Pulizzi, 2013; Alhaddad, 2015; Hudson et al., 2016). Indeed, social media offers several benefits, including alternative marketing options to reach people with little time and resources, ample space to engage with consumers, open communication, customer care services, real-time feedback, as well as fan pages and online brand communities (Kostamo, 2013; Mohammad et al., 2020; Muninger et al., 2019). It is generally viewed as a strategic approach to ensuring consumer-brand engagement in the contemporary world (Mohammad et al., 2020; Pulizzi, 2013). Consequently, research on integrating social media in the marketing communication strategies by various business organisations is increasingly receiving attention (Gretry et al., 2017; Feng et al., 2020).

In the context of this research, it has been established that most corporate organisations integrate aspects of human conversation into their social media campaigns to enhance effectiveness and reduce promotional costs (Greene et al., 2022). Additionally, the concept of brand anthropomorphism, or brand personification, as a way to enhance consumer-brand engagement has begun to be explored in the field of marketing communication (Chen & Lin, 2021). Kuan-Ju et al. (2015) confirm that brands on social media increasingly adopt brand-personified communication to boost user engagement globally. It has been observed in Tanzania that while some brands struggle, others are increasingly utilising brand-personified communication to engage users; however, the methods employed and their impact on brand-user engagement are not well-documented. Since brand anthropomorphism/personification is a relatively new phenomenon, there is a notable knowledge gap regarding its use in social media campaigns and how it affects consumer-brand engagement. This gap is especially prominent in developing countries, where social media is still in the early stages of growth (Kanje et al., 2020). To address this gap, we examined the use of brand anthropomorphism and personification techniques and their impact on consumer-brand engagement in corporate organisations in Tanzania. Specifically, we studied brand-personified techniques used by corporate organisations in their brand tweets and assessed how much they enhanced consumer-brand engagements. In the context of this study, brand personification is used interchangeably with brand anthropomorphism, implying a non-human element communicating like a human being (Schipper, 2017). According to Feng et al. (2020), brand-personified communication (BPC) is a form of interpersonal brand communication used to engage with customers. It entails communicating with the public using the characteristics of non-human conversation as a conversational human voice. It is interpersonal communication (communication between two or more people) filled with human communication qualities (Feng et al., 2020). In this instance, a brand assumes a human-like status, as the message and information conveyed possess human characteristics, such as unrelated information and an informal style.

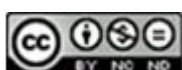
Although personification functions differently across disciplines such as English and literature studies, religion, philosophy, psychology, ethnology, history, anthropology, and marketing, the essence remains the same: a humanising of non-human entities (Fata & Aprilya, 2021). Even as it has been studied using different approaches and methods in various marketing disciplines, the interest has been in how brands and products are imbued with humanlike features or made to behave or look like humans and appeal to human beings. The aim is to connect the brand to the people. Therefore, brand-personified communication is perceived as a strategic way of communicating with customers by expressing feelings, emotions, traits, behaviours, and intentions just like humans (Clifton, 2009).

This study draws on the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and the Integrated Marketing Communication Theory (IMCT) to advance the concept of brand personification from the marketing perspective. The study is paramount in the field of marketing, given the rapid development of the marketing communication field resulting from the influence of digitalisation on marketing communication channels. Using empirical evidence from the context of developing countries to demonstrate how brand personification influences the effectiveness of social media expands our understanding of contemporary marketing communication strategies in a context where digitisation is driving the marketing activities of most companies. The study provides valuable insights for business practitioners on the best strategies for designing communication strategies that humanise media techniques to enhance consumer-brand engagement.

Theoretical and Empirical Underpinnings

To contribute to research on brand personification from a marketing perspective, we drew inspiration from the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and the Integrated Marketing Communication Theory (IMCT). Developed by social psychologist Howard Giles in the 1970s, CAT posits that interlocutors tend to accommodate the norms of other speakers during communication (Giles & Ogay, 2007). According to CAT, individuals can better understand communication by adjusting their speech to commonalities or shared values. This provides a comprehensive framework that predicts and explains many adjustments communicators make to decrease or increase social distance in interaction (Giles & Ogay, 2007). Accordingly, interactants typically minimise communication differences, especially linguistically and psychologically, by using simple language and other means that enhance understanding with their counterparts (Giles & Ogay, 2007; Elhami, 2020). They communicate in ways that reduce social distance and boost engagement (Pitts & Harwood, 2015). Aligned with this perspective, when organisations engage with people on social media, they strive to converge their communication style to match that of the audience, creating a sense of togetherness and enhancing understanding (Gallois et al., 2005). Communicators are often eager to appear similar and be liked (Gallois et al., 2005). Ideally, CAT encompasses all types of communication, including both verbal and non-verbal forms. In the realm of social media, it also includes visual elements such as emoticons and emojis (Giles & Ogay, 2007; Elhami, 2020). Our study draws on the convergent perspective to investigate how brands adapt their communication to align with human styles and social groups by tailoring their interactions to fit online communities and become an integral part of them. This aligns with Elhami's (2020) view that interlocutors modify their communication to seek approval, be understood, and be accepted by others.

In addition to CAT, it is essential to note that Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) is increasingly dominating companies' communication and marketing strategies (Rehman et al., 2022). IMC emerged in the late twentieth century, and its significance has continued to grow ever since (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2015; Grove et al., 2002). In their book on IMC, Schultz, Tannenbaum, and Lauterborn (1993) emphasised that technology can enhance marketing communication strategies; traditional advertising techniques and new, unconventional marketing practices may be applied through social media. In other words, the availability of social media has reshaped integrated marketing communication by offering new channels and methods of communication with consumers, allowing them to fully utilise this medium



(Gordon-Isasi et al., 2021). The increased use of social media compels brands to incorporate social media into their marketing communication channels, as it becomes essential for determining overall brand identity, brand image, and company performance in the marketing competition (Rehman et al., 2022). Since consumers prefer to network and create groups on various online media platforms that share common preferences, interests, and desires (Kanje et al., 2020), social media has created a new avenue to enhance and amplify IMC strategies, incorporating all forms of social media as an inclusive and valuable tool in designing modern marketing communications (Rehman et al., 2022). This study integrated IMC with CAT to balance the analysis of brand personification on social media. While CAT emphasises brands as communicators aiming to align their communication with their counterparts, IMC introduces personified communication as a key component of brand communication in social media.

Empirically, the attention to anthropomorphism in brands shows that most marketing studies on this topic have focused on three significant perspectives: the impact of personification on brands, the physical resemblance of personified brands to people, and how people cognitively process personified content. A considerable amount of literature has been published on the debate surrounding the impact of personification. This is supported by Zhang et al. (2020), who, in their study on brand anthropomorphism and brand distinctiveness, found that numerous marketing communication studies have examined the impact of personification on ads, products, and brands, revealing positive effects. This view is also supported by Calabro (2014), who revealed the positive impact of spokesperson personified tactics on the consumer-brand relationship; Laksmidewi et al. (2017), who studied the effect of personified products on consumer behavior; Chen and Lin (2018), who state that most previous studies focused on the consumer end and how the humanisation of brands or products influenced customer attitudes; Barcelos et al. (2018), who examined the influence of the tone of voice companies use to promote their brands on consumers' purchasing decisions on social media; and Cheng and Pan (2021), who investigated the impact of personified profiles on clients' expressions of complaints or emotions through tweets. These studies, including those by Calabro (2014), Laksmidewi et al. (2017), Chen and Lin (2018), Barcelos et al. (2018), Zhang et al. (2020), and Cheng and Pan (2021), examine the impact of personification on brands. However, despite all the positive effects of brand personification, Puzakova et al. (2013) found that the study also examines the detrimental impacts of personification, arguing that brand personification can be harmful if the personified brand has a negative image or personality due to wrongdoing.

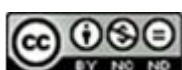
Apart from the impact of anthropomorphism on brands, another highly studied perspective is the psychological view on brand personification, which examines the cognitive inclinations of the mind and how people think and associate themselves with brands. Zhang et al. (2020) explained that researchers focused on schema congruity and the anthropomorphic effect on cognitive perspectives. Golossenko et al. (2020) aptly concur with Zhang et al. (2020), stating that many studies conducted on brand personification centred on measuring limited psychometric properties used for manipulation purposes. Along the same lines, Masnita et al. (2020) argue that other cognitive approaches concentrate on personified objects and their influence on human behavioural responses by being similar to humans. Unlike the first view, which highlights the personified benefits that brands derive from their marketing initiatives, this perspective critically examines how personification affects the human mind and how it is processed. The third perspective of previous marketing studies on personification extends the

debate to consumers' physical resemblance and the characters that brands simulate, such as mascots and robots. Laksmidewi et al. (2017) also agree that many marketing studies have focused on the physical resemblance to human characteristics. Similarly, Feng et al. (2020) concur with this viewpoint, noting that many studies have examined the likeness of brands, characters, and consumers through factors such as brand presentation and individual differences. Masnita et al. (2020) studied brand characteristics to help illustrate consumer-brand identification, while Puzakova and Aggarwal (2018) state that many previous studies on marketing concentrated on how individuals like to differentiate themselves from others by expressing distinctiveness, product choices, and intentions regarding customising their products. As noted by other scholars in this domain, Delgado-Ballester et al. (2019) concur that researchers have focused on areas including customers' characteristics and identities, consumers' experiences with brands, and features of brands and products. In summary, brand personification refers to how brands are humanised and made to resemble people. Many scholars have utilised different perspectives on the physical resemblance between brands and their consumers. However, they still share one commonality: they all address how brand identity or personality is formed, similar to how humans are shaped.

The empirical literature indicates that human-based communication can positively impact brands and their products. It explores the effects of brand personification, anthropomorphised brands mimicking human traits, and the cognitive perspective on how people consume such content. While previous studies on social media offer some insights into current research, it is necessary to expand upon them by incorporating an analysis of social media brand communication techniques and users' perceptions gathered through interviews. As most articles on social media brand communication focus on brand content or meta-analyses of various posts, we incorporate social media users' perceptions into our analysis. Furthermore, our study is conducted in the Tanzanian context, a Swahili-speaking country, which lacks any traceable research on brand-personified communication.

Methods and Data

The study used a qualitative descriptive design to explore the personification strategies brands used in social media and examine respondents' views on the influence on brand-consumer engagement. The design was adopted because the goal of qualitative descriptive studies is to provide a comprehensive summary, in simple terms, of specific events experienced by individuals or groups (Lambert & Lambert, 2012). It is a naturalistic inquiry to study a phenomenon in its original context. Data were collected using documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews with social media users. Documentary analysis was used to extract the data from X, as this method systematically evaluates documents in textual or electronic form (Bowen, 2009). The data were collected from the official X accounts of two leading corporate organisations in the banking and telecom sub-sectors, namely CRDB Bank Limited and Vodacom Tanzania. X was chosen because it allows both micro-blogging and instant messaging simultaneously, offering richer data compared to other social media (Meghanasree & Krishna, 2019). Many brands utilise X to engage more effectively and provide better customer service to their customers. The study focused on textual content from the two organisations mined from X to enhance the richness of the data; hence, it was a suitable source of rich data. Two hundred tweets were collected from two brands, along with their comments and replies. These tweets were collected over two months, from March to April 2023, using consecutive sampling. The focus was not on a specific event but on content “tweets” from the



current day of data collection, going backwards to obtain 100 tweets from each of the two companies. The quantity of tweets was sufficiently substantial as it encompassed both tweets and replies. Furthermore, this dataset was comprehensive enough to triangulate the findings from the interviews. Data in textual form was generated, enabling us to code, establish the patterns, and interpret the findings. This study adapted the analytical framework proposed by Liebrecht et al. (2021) as a model for data analysis, as it reveals a comprehensive set of brand personification and anthropomorphic strategies. It focuses on three main categories: message personalisation, informal speech, and invitational rhetoric.

Table 1: List of Personified Communication Techniques

| Anthropomorphic Strategy | Description and Example |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Message Personalisation | |
| Personal Greetings | Greeting the consumer personally, e.g., Dear, Hello, often also by addressing their name (Hi John) |
| Personal Addressing Consumer | Using second-person pronouns, e.g. (You, U, your, yours, yourself) |
| Personal Addressing Employee | Using first-person pronouns, e.g., I, my, me, myself, we, us, our, ourselves) |
| Personal Signature | Signing the brand message shows consumers that they are dealing with real people, e.g. (Niina from customer services) |
| Personal Information Employee | Presenting more personal information about the brand's representative, e.g., profile picture, email address, phone number, and personal narratives. |
| Informal speech | |
| Nonverbal cues | Linguistic features that represent audible, tactile, or visual elements in face-to-face communication |
| a. Audible elements | Capitalization (FOLLOW US), repeated punctuation (!!!), sound mimicking (sooo), intonation (M-i-n-e), volume (*whisper*), censorship (\$ %) |
| b. Visual elements | Emoticons: emoji, stickers, pictures, videos |
| c. Tactile elements | Emoji and stickers where physical touch is visualised, such as a kiss, handshake, high-five, or holding hands. |
| Verbal cues | Conversational-style communication that consists of linguistic cues on a lexical and phonological level |
| a. Contractions/ abbreviations | Shortened words (pls, ok) or multiple words merged into one word (That's, LOL) |
| b. Interjections/ idiophones | Spoken language-based words that often express emotions or the magnitude of something (ah, wow, haha) |
| c. Informal language | Informal vocabulary and phrases that senders could use to create a natural, spoken-like conversation. |
| Invitational rhetoric | |
| Stimulating dialogues | Explicitly inviting people to share their thoughts and experiences about the brand, e.g., by asking questions (Could you explain |

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| | what the matter is?) and expressing the value of (critical) feedback (Please share your thoughts with us!) |
| Acknowledging | Explicitly thanking consumers for their thoughts, suggestions, comments, and questions (Thank you for approaching us) |
| Apologising | Offering an apology to show consumers' comments are taken seriously (sorry, apologise) |
| Showing empathy/sympathy | Putting yourself in the shoes of consumers (I can imagine) |
| Using humour | Using humour to enhance a warm, approachable, and open communication climate |
| Well-wishing | Expressing positive wishes to consumers to ensure the relationship will be maintained in the future (Have a nice day! We sincerely hope that you will return) |

Source: Adapted and slightly modified from Liebrecht et al. (2021)

In addition to the document analysis, 13 interviews were conducted with social media managers and users. Interviewed managers and users (respondents) were selected using purposive and convenience non-probability sampling, respectively, whereas textual data were drawn using consecutive-day non-probability sampling. The interview data were recorded and analysed inductively using thematic analysis in QCAmap qualitative software. The data were integrated with the results generated from the documentary analysis to produce the findings presented in this article. Also, textual data were analysed through thematic deductive analysis using the QCAmap software.

Findings and Discussion

In this study, we identified the brand personification used by the studied brands on their X accounts. We assessed its influence on brand-consumer engagement through interviews with social media users. Thus, the findings presented in this section are organised in line with the key objectives of the study.

Brand-personification techniques corporate organisations use on social media

The identified brand-personified techniques represent the accommodation made by corporate organisations to reach their customers in a human-like approach. As indicated in Table 2, it was found that the studied brands used at least 3910 tokens of personified techniques. As expected, most content was in Swahili, the language spoken by the majority of Tanzanians (Roy-Campbell, 1995), with a few pieces in English, depending on the nature of the products being sold in that content. Interviewees also observed that Swahili was the most preferred language; “...*On social media, the language that is supposed to be used is Kiswahili*”, a respondent noted. However, in comments and replies, the brand usually responds to customers using the language used by particular customers in their inquiries. Therefore, the analysis presents a dataset in Swahili and English.

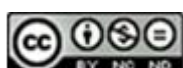


Table 2: Personified Techniques, Their Frequency and Percentage

| SN. | Personified Technique | Frequency of appearance | Percentage (%) |
|--------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| 1 | Personal Addressing Consumer | 751 | 19.1 |
| 2 | Personal Addressing Employee | 622 | 15.8 |
| 3 | Personal Signature | 440 | 11.2 |
| 4 | Stimulating dialogues | 414 | 10.5 |
| 5 | Personal Greetings | 351 | 8.9 |
| 6 | Empathy/Sympathy | 302 | 7.7 |
| 7 | Contractions/Abbreviations | 225 | 5.7 |
| 8 | Visual and Tactile elements | 200 | 5.1 |
| 9 | Informal Language | 191 | 4.9 |
| 10 | Apologising | 155 | 3.9 |
| 11 | Acknowledging | 123 | 3.1 |
| 12 | Audible elements | 110 | 2.8 |
| 13 | Well-wishing | 37 | 0.9 |
| 14 | Humour | 5 | 0.1 |
| 15 | Interjections/ idiophones | 4 | 0.1 |
| 16 | Personal Information Employee | 0 | 0.0 |
| Total | | 3930 | 100 |

Guided by Liebrecht et al.'s (2021) analytical framework, three groups of personified techniques were identified, namely, message personalisation, informal speech, and invitational rhetoric.

Message Personalisation

At least four message personification techniques were identified, namely, personal addressing consumer, personal addressing employee, personal signature, and personal greetings. The personal information of the employee was not used at all. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, the personal addressing consumer (PAC) was the most frequently used personified technique, with 751 instances, accounting for 19.1% of usage. Both brands (CRDB and Vodacom) demonstrated a considerable use of the PAC technique, probably because most companies use social media to interact directly with their audience, which is a core part of their information dissemination (Mbura, 2020). In connection with PAC, the study reveals varied excerpts from the data that represent ‘you-attitude’. As indicated in Table 3, various categories of PAC were identified: U prefixes in Swahili agglutinated verbs, that is, Swahili second-person pronouns, and English second-person pronouns. In line with other scholars (e.g., Millambo, 2021; Liebrecht et al., 2021), it is evident that brands frequently use the second person in their content, as this type of writing is relevant to the audience and addresses the consumer directly. This indicates that the content is intended for the audience consuming it. Furthermore, the results indicate that the Personal Addressing Employee (PAE) was the second most frequently used technique by both brands. This technique uses a ‘you-perspective’ in content to address consumers directly. It also uses first-person pronouns by the brands’ employees or representatives to communicate on behalf of the company. In our analysis, PAE is divided into first-person forms in agglutinated verbs, as well as plural and singular forms. Given our findings, both brands demonstrated considerable use of the first person in Swahili and English. While the first-person plural was the most used technique by both brands, the singular was

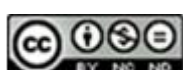
the least used. This shows that a brand-personified approach is essential for neutralising the company's formal status, making it perceived as a fellow consumer.

Table 3: Message Personalisation Personified Techniques Examples

| Personified Technique | Example | Translation | Frequency of occurrence | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|---|--|-------------------------|------------|
| Personal Addressing Consumer | <i>Unaweza yenu</i> | You Your (Plural) <i>You</i> | 751 | 19.1 |
| Personal Addressing Employee | <i>Tunaendelea Sisi <u>nikusaidie</u></i> | We continue We I help you, or can I help you?" | 622 | 15.8 |
| Personal Signature | <i>^ DDK, ^ Neema, ^ Muhsin Said</i> | | 440 | 11.2 |
| Personal Greetings | <i>Habari Habari Tukulamba</i> | Hello Hello Tukulamba <i>Hello Ema</i> | 351 | 8.9 |
| Personal Information Employee | | | 0 | 0 |

Furthermore, another identified message personification technique was the personal signature, which entails the employee signing at the end of the message. The technique was used 440 times out of 3930 tokens. These techniques enable social media users to perceive brands as fellow human beings. Our findings indicate that the two companies used four types of signatures: initials, first names, first names and initials, and full names. All the signatures were preceded by the caret symbol “^,” indicating that they were not the original author. Ideally, using personal signatures in brand content humanises the brand, serving as a tangible symbol to consumers, showing that they are not alone or talking to a mere entity. Instead, they feel they are talking to the company through human beings behind it.

It was observed that personal greetings were used when both brands conversed with their customers, a technique used 351 times out of 3930 tokens. The messages that address consumers by beginning with greetings show friendliness and courtesy, and humanely open the conversation. It is evident that the greetings used by the two brands differed in their written form; some entailed only a greeting, while others included a greeting with the customer's name mentioned. Moreover, the study reveals that the personal information of employees was not used at all, probably because this technique requires brand employees or their representatives to share their private information, such as emails and other contacts, with consumers for further communication.



Informal Speech

The findings indicate considerable use of various informal speech techniques, as shown in Table 4. In particular, visual and tactile elements were mainly used to complement the text messages sent by both brands. Visual elements were used across all content, including emojis, pictures, and videos. Emojis are visual elements used as nonverbal cues to complement the meaning of written messages. Sometimes, they were used independently, without being attached to any message, and the essence was that emojis represented a specific message to the people. Figure 1 presents several emojis used by CRDB Bank to represent different messages. First, an emoji of a sofa was used in their message to persuade people to buy a sofa using a CRDB TemboCard VISA to get a discount. Secondly, an emoji of a VISA card was used to represent the card visually. Numbers were also used: 60% and 10% to allow consumers to view the proposed offer more vividly. Lastly, the calendar emoji was used to represent the end of the offer, so that consumers feel the urgency to make a purchase.

Table 4: Informal Speech Personified Techniques Examples

| Personified Technique | Example | Translation | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------------------|---|---|-----------|------------|
| Contractions/Abbreviations | <i>ATM</i> <i>DM</i> | | 225 | 5.7 |
| Visual and Tactile elements | Emojis, photos, and videos | (see Figure 1) | 200 | 5.1 |
| Informal Language | <i>Jibusti</i> <i>Mchongo wa Mkwana</i> | Boost yourself A big chance to win the lottery | 191 | 4.9 |
| Audible elements | <i>FULL BIMA</i> (Capitalisation) <i>Vaaanny Boooy</i> (Sound Mimicking) | | 110 | 2.8 |
| Interjections/idiophones | <i>Baab kubwa</i> | So big | 4 | 0.1 |

Furthermore, as indicated in Figure 1, pictures were used to enhance the consumption of social media content and help people better understand the message. The picture used by Vodacom had captions that elaborated on its meaning. The content was about the bundle promotion for *Ihsan Ramadan*, engaging people to join the offer and receive Ramadhan season messages. The use of the picture of an Islamic woman dressed modestly in hijab could appeal more to the target audience. The advertised packages of TZS² 200, 1000, and 3000 could help the audience to understand the product easily. Additionally, we found that videos were used in some posts to create more appeal to the audience. This is likely because people prefer watching content over consuming other types (Xiao et al., 2019). Visual and tactile elements can be the most effective way to personify the content, as non-verbal cues are commonly used in face-to-face communication or video-recorded communication (Tang & Hew, 2019). In the case of social media communication, where people often struggle to convey their emotions and feelings through written messages, visual elements can help bridge the gap.

²1USD =2,500 TZS

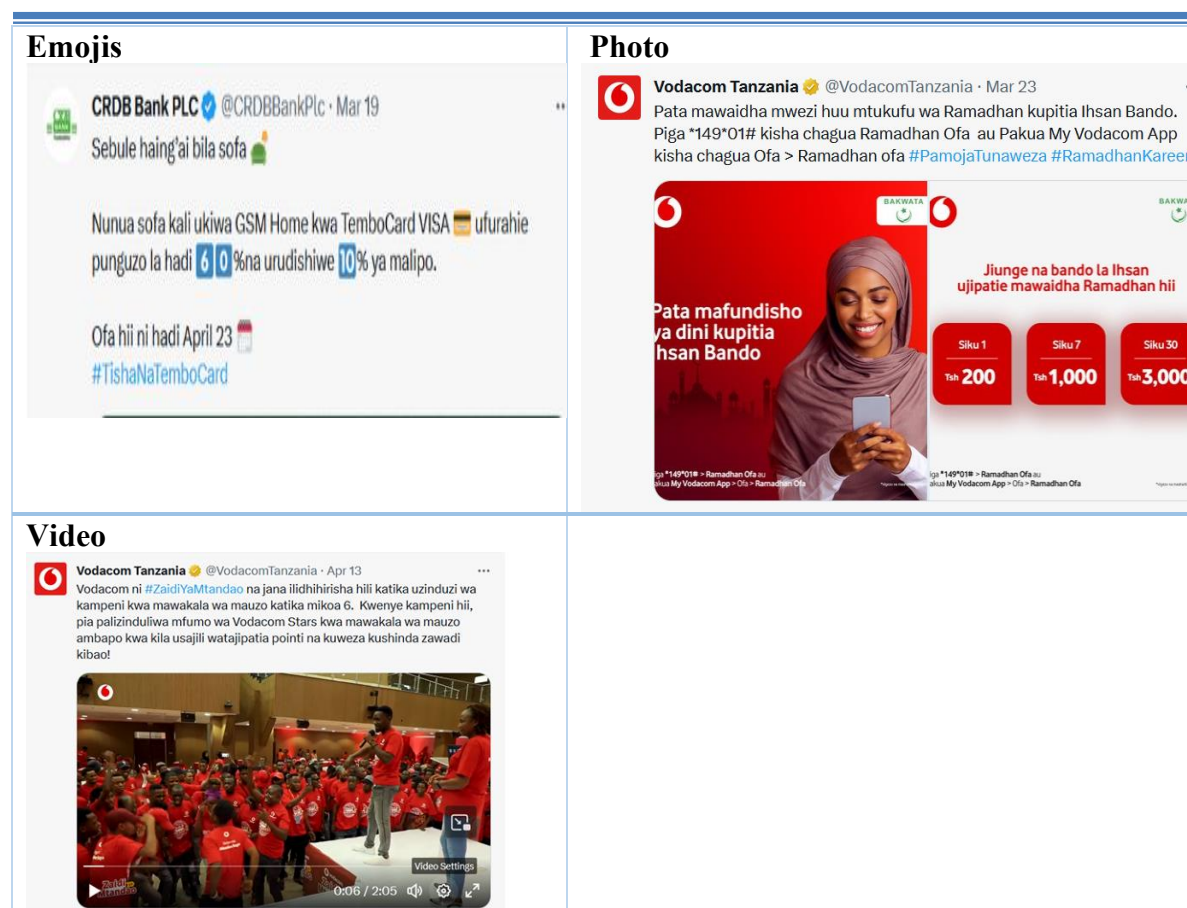
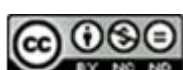


Figure 1: Emojis, Photos and Videos

In our analysis, we observed that both brands used informal language in several tweets, probably because social media communication is characterised by conversational language (Liebrecht et al., 2021). Informal speech consists of phrases and a few casual clauses that may not be accepted in formal communication. It helps engage more users than formal language, making users feel that the brand communicates in their language. As shown in Table 4, the companies studied employed informal speech that encompassed code-mixing, borrowing, and other innovative ways of creating new words and messages using Swahili and English as resource languages. Informal speech can facilitate personification in brand communication, as opposed to the common practice of most companies, which use formal communication such as formal letters and other written forms. Seeing brand communication resemble people's informal communication style makes the content more appealing to the users. This technique is crucial in helping brands humanise their communication to attract like-minded individuals, namely their customers and prospects.

Companies also use Audible elements in customer engagement. These are non-verbal cues in written words that present the texture of the spoken form. How words are written presents an extra meaning, just like in the spoken form. Findings show that both companies utilised audible elements, with a total of 110 elements out of 3,930 tokens. Generally, audible elements present speech qualities in the written form. They convey more meaning than writing the word in its natural form. It is a typical spoken language where people can speak, alter, and make sounds as they wish to portray specific meanings. In social media, brands also humanise



their communication to match that of human beings by capitalising and mimicking their words to attract them to engage in communication.

Usually, people simplify their communication using contractions, codes, abbreviations, and acronyms. Findings show that the brands employed the same tactics, with 225 contractions and abbreviations out of 3,930 tokens. Contraction and abbreviation are typical brevity features of an informal communication style in both written and spoken language. A company typically avoids using unnecessary contractions in its official communications. However, because they have opted to use social media platforms, they would want to demonstrate their ability to adapt to social media styles and informally engage customers. Hence, they employ such language styles and techniques to humanise their communication, attracting consumers to view the brand as part of the intergroup.

Apart from contractions and abbreviations, ideophones were also used. These words evoke ideas by mimicking sounds to express an extra meaning about an action, manner, or property. Usually, it can be heard in spoken conversations; a word or sound may be pronounced differently to elicit a specific meaning. The findings show that this is another underutilised feature. From the analysis, the following interjection/ideophone was used: *baab*, a word with no meaning but used with *kubwa* “bigger” to show the event’s intensity or size, *baab kubwa* “so big.” Ideophones were used only four times throughout the entire content. This can be one of the strategies to humanise communication because mimicking sounds, like in gap fillers, can only happen in spoken language when humans are conversing.

Invitational Rhetoric

Our findings show that both brands employed invitational rhetoric through the stimulating dialogue technique to encourage consumers to engage with service customisation (Table 5). This technique adopted both English and Swahili content, depending on the language used by the consumer to inquire for information. For instance, stimulating dialogue messages were used to bring the brand to life. Humans want to be listened to and helped when necessary, so the brand has to invite consumers to share their thoughts (Liebrecht et al., 2021). Another invitational rhetoric technique was empathy/sympathy, where the brand becomes human by incorporating empathetic language in their communication, such as ‘very sorry.’ This indicates that brands can influence customers’ feelings even before providing them with assistance. Both brands also used an apology as a humanisation technique, showing concern and acceptance of what happened. It is a human instinctive behaviour that repairs relationships. In our findings, the apology strategy was employed 155 times out of 3,930 tokens across all content (Table 5), particularly by brands seeking to reconcile with their unsatisfied customers. At least 123 tokens of acknowledging communication excerpts were observed, showing acceptance of what has happened. Companies acknowledged that customers need to humanise communication and show courtesy towards others.

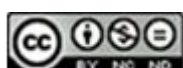
Table 5: Invitational Rhetoric personified techniques examples

| Personified Technique | Example | Translation | Frequency of occurrence | Percentage |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| Stimulating dialogue | <i>Karibu tukuhudumie tafadhali.</i> | Please welcome, we | 414 | 10.5 |

| | | | | |
|-------------------------|---|---|-----|-----|
| | | are ready to serve you. <i>Kindly explain to us via our inbox (DM)</i> | | |
| Empathy/Sympathy | Pole sana. | Very sorry <i>We appreciate your feedback.</i> | 302 | 7.7 |
| Apologising | <i>Tunaomba radhi kwa ujumbe huo.</i> | We apologise for that message. <i>We are very sorry.</i> | 155 | 3.9 |
| Acknowledging | <i>Tunashukuru kwa maoni.</i> | We thank you for your comments. <i>Thank you for the feedback</i> | 123 | 3.1 |
| Well-wishing | <i>Nakutakia siku njema. Heri ya Jumapili ya Matawi.</i> | Have a great day. Happy Palm Sunday. | 37 | 0.9 |
| Humour | <i>Kuna mtu anavutishwa pumzi ya moto kesho. Wale wakongwe tujuane. Simu ya kwanza kutumia ilikuwa ya namna gani na ilikuwa mwaka gani?</i> | Tomorrow, someone will be in trouble. Old chaps, let us gather here. What was your first phone to use, and which year was that? | 5 | 0.1 |

Another technique was ‘well-wishing’, which was used to spread love and show interest in others' success. Typically, human beings are pleased when others wish them well, and they look forward to receiving positive remarks and prayers. Thus, both brands used well-wishing messages to their customers after serving them. Wishing the best of luck to their customers in whatever endeavours they undertake indicates that brands utilise this tactic to appear more human. This demonstrates that they cared and were aware of what was happening in customers' lives, fostering companionship while ensuring loyalty and a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, the studied brands used humorous content to appeal to the users. A conversation with humour makes the communicators laugh or smile and get happily involved. In this case,



the brands engaged and attracted followers by being funny and interesting. The content had to be both entertaining and educational. However, humour was used only five times out of 3930 tokens across all contents. The limited use of humour suggests that one must be exceedingly witty and creative in message design. However, humorous content makes a difference in the conversation, as people generally dislike boring conversations. Thus, the best way to attract people to read your content and engage is probably by incorporating a sense of humour into the conversation.

Social Media Users ‘Perception of the Effectiveness of Personified Communication

One of the objectives of this study was to determine how social media users perceive the effectiveness of brand-personified communication in enhancing brand-consumer engagement on social media. In connection, we gathered users' opinions on brand social media personified communication through semi-structured interviews. Overall, respondents believed that the brand could achieve a higher engagement rate on social media by employing various personified communication strategies. At least five influences of brand-personified communication strategies were reported to have a positive influence on brand-consumer engagement, namely instant response, active engagement, entertainment content, personalised communication, humour, and appealing content.

For instance, most respondents reported that instant responses to customers' comments were likely to enhance brand-consumer engagement. That is to say, when a brand replies instantly, it increases the chances of consumers continuing to engage on their page. An instant response makes customers happy and motivates them to engage with the brand. On the contrary, delayed responses to their comments disappoint them. In relation to this, instant response shows that the company is active, and according to another respondent, active engagement enhances brand-consumer engagement. Respondents underscored the importance of active engagement on social media. Furthermore, entertainment content was reported to be one of the key techniques for enhancing brand-consumer engagement. In this case, most respondents reported being motivated to engage in brand content when they are entertained. This suggests that entertainment content may be crucial in enhancing brand engagement. In addition to that, respondents viewed personalised communication as the motivating factor for consumers to engage on social media. Users appreciate being addressed directly. It makes them happy and feel recognised. The influence of humour on brand-consumer engagement was also observed in interviews. For instance, respondents admitted that they usually consume more humorous content, which is the type of content that keeps them spending a significant amount of their time on social media. Finally, compelling content was reported to be one of the key drivers of brand-consumer engagement. Consumers want content to be written in a way that attracts their attention, and when consuming it, the content must be creatively presented to make them enjoy it.

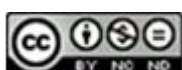
The study revealed that both brands employed 3,930 tokens of personified techniques, of which more than 95 per cent of the content was written in Swahili, the language used by the majority of Tanzanians. However, English was used to reach customers who were not Swahili speakers in order to sell specific services or products. For example, Vodacom used English when promoting 5G routers: “Order your 5G router today by visiting <https://vodacom.co.tz>”. In this case, out of 100 Vodacom tweets, only five were in English. While CRDB did not use

English in all 100 tweets, both companies replied to users' comments using the language the user had used (both Swahili and English). This corroborates the findings from the interviews, where most social media users preferred Swahili to English because the majority of people in Tanzania speak and understand the Swahili language.

In line with prior marketing communication studies (e.g., Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Park & Lee, 2013; Van Noort et al., 2015), our findings indicate that the studied brands largely anthropomorphised their communication to match human beings. Three main categories of personified communication were identified: message personalisation, informal speech, and invitational rhetoric (Liebrecht et al., 2021). Message personalisation, which includes personal greetings, addressing consumers by name, addressing employees by name, using a personal signature, and displaying personal information to employees, was the most prevalent technique. This supports the idea of using message personalisation to humanise brands and increase brand-consumer engagement effectively (Arya et al., 2022; Liebrecht et al., 2021). An informal speech (visual and tactile elements, informal language, audible elements, contractions/abbreviations and interjections/idiophones) and invitational rhetoric (stimulating dialogue, empathy, apologising, acknowledging, and well-wishing) were used to complement the message personalisation indicating the value of integrating brand personification techniques in achieving greater brand-consumer engagement.

Surprisingly, while humour is one of the most recommended invitational rhetoric techniques (Greene et al., 2022), we found that the studied brand communication used humour only five times in 200 tweets (including tweets and their replies). Although the respondents felt that the use of humour could increase brand-consumer engagement and a few humorous messages attracted more engagement, the studied brands did not frequently use this technique. This is likely due to the perceived risk of humour in promoting corporate brands for large companies like CRDB and Vodacom. For instance, despite the potential of humour to attract more brand-consumer engagement, Matamoros-Fernandez et al. (2023) aptly state that humour is ambivalent and has the risk of potential harm when used on social media. Likewise, Warren and McGraw (2016) asserted that failed humour may offend consumers, and brands need to be very careful. According to Warren and McGraw (2016), humour can harm a brand when it features highly threatening humour, makes fun of a subset of the general population, or encourages people to avoid something. In line with this, Warren and McGraw (2013) and Warren et al. (2019) caution companies to exercise caution when using jokes in their content.

Out of the 200 tweets analysed, the six tweets with the highest engagement incorporated personified features within the duplicate content. That means, in line with Arya et al. (2022), the more the content is personified and integrated, the higher the chance of attracting people's engagement. However, those six tweets had some additional features, as four of them were question-based, and two entailed both the question and humour techniques. It was noted that when personified content is presented as a question, it increases the likelihood of making people feel obligated to answer and ultimately engaging more with the brand. When a question is combined with humour, it stimulates more engagement because consumers feel the obligation to respond in a more relaxed manner.



Conclusion

This study examined the human conversational content used by brands on social media in Tanzania and investigated its influence on brand-consumer engagement. Despite the largely unstudied nature of brand personification in Tanzania, it was found that some brands personify their content primarily through three primary approaches: personalising social media content, employing informal language, and using invitational rhetoric to foster welcoming and friendly conversations. These techniques are employed on social media to foster rapport and engage users within online brand communities. Personified communication has a direct impact on consumer-brand engagement, a primary goal for any brand online. Furthermore, integrating multiple techniques into a single piece of content is more effective in terms of personified communication. For example, the study found the question technique was effective when combined with humour. Out of 3,930 tokens of personified techniques, more than 95% of the content was written in Swahili, which demonstrates that on social media, it is not about an organisation and its branding; to succeed and bring people together, brands must speak the ordinary language of the people.

Implications of the Study

Theoretically, the study contributes to marketing communication literature by integrating CAT and IMCT to demonstrate how brand anthropomorphic communication enhances brand-consumer engagement. This suggests that effective marketing communication involves accommodating counterparts in a conversation and incorporating the most effective communicative cues. Accordingly, our study reveals the importance of incorporating personified brand communication features in enhancing brand-consumer engagement. This supports the notion of integrating various marketing communication techniques to improve customer relationships and enhance marketing performance. Additionally, we observed that humour, a less serious tone of voice, simple language, short content, graphics, videos, and informal language can enhance brand-consumer engagement. Most respondents linked those personified features to their likelihood of interacting with the content. Other critical elements motivating respondents to engage with the brand were the brand's quick response time, active engagement, and more entertaining content. As a result, respondents broadly agreed with the idea of using integrated, personified communication to enhance brand-consumer engagement. Practically, the study demonstrates that social media communication is a unique space for individuals and companies to interact, have fun, build friendships, and pass the time. More importantly, brands and marketers need to be proactive and strategic enough to utilise personified communication to reach a broader audience and engage with them more effectively at a lower cost than traditional media.

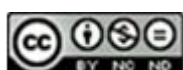
Limitations and Areas for Further Research

Finally, despite the significant contribution of our study, it is essential to acknowledge some limitations. First, the data analysed in this study were collected from one microblogging social media site, X, which may differ from other types of social media. Second, the study was guided by the analytical framework established by Liebrecht et al. (2021), which might have excluded other aspects of brand-personified communications. Thus, we recommend areas for future research on similar topics to assess brand-personified communication among small and medium enterprises on different social media platforms. By doing so, we can develop

comparative results and potentially create a more comprehensive model for analysing brand personification techniques, particularly in countries like Tanzania. Additionally, one such technique praised by scholars is humour; however, it is used less frequently. Research needs to be conducted to establish the reasons behind this and to determine better ways to use humour to mitigate the risk of distorting the image of corporate brands.

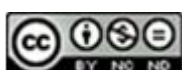
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