



# Humanisation of Media on Social Media

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## **Abstract:**

The study aimed to broadly discuss the humanisation of media to help media companies strategically face present and future digital challenges. Mass media delivered a one-way communication model that limited the interaction between sender/receiver. It also benefited large organisations that profited and provided information according to their interests. However, communication has always been essential to human lives, and with the emergence of Web 2.0 and social media platforms, digital communications have become crucial in all sectors worldwide. A two-way communication model was established, where people's voices started to resonate, and interactions between sender/receiver grew exponentially. The internet allowed brands and ordinary people to use it according to their preferences, which developed a new challenge involving creating a genuine virtual relationship. The human factor became decisive in how the relations would develop, giving space to a new profession, the influencers. Consequently, humanisation changed how the media communicates. And by transforming the communication system changed how the industry performs. The research explains the evolution process from mass media to the social media revolution and how brand humanisation is associated with the subject. As the humanisation of media is considered a phenomenon, the framework includes an extensive literature review mixed with netnography, providing scholarship and incorporating popular debate. Also, qualitative research through a questionnaire allowed the study to demonstrate the market's point of view by having answers opposing or corroborating the theory. The study provided a definition and explanation of the humanisation of media as a conclusion.

**Keywords:** Humanisation of media, social media, brand humanisation, mass media, influencer, communications, relationships, digital communications

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Since the existence of human beings, communication has been a critical factor that drives the connection between the specie, as humans are communal animals that need to interact, express thoughts, and create relationships (Picard, 2015). Therefore, communication is a social affair which includes speech, writing, gesture, and habits (Cherry, 1957).

However, modern life allowed the use of 'new' technical means of communication such as the telephone, telegraph, radio, and printing, making the process cheaper and more accessible, reaching a more comprehensive range of society (Cherry, 1957; Jucker, 2003). With this, the media industry evolved over the years. It went from mass media using a one-way communication model (Jucker, 2003) with no interaction to having web 2.0 changing it all and creating a revolution. Because, different from how mass media silenced people, social media gave their voice back by re-humanising communication (Picard, 2015). The popularisation and access to the internet made it possible to people to communicate and express their opinions. And, with it, made organisations and brands adjust how they used media.

It calls for understanding the humanisation of media developed from communication scholarship, and although Picard (2015) elaborates on the topic, no definition is proposed. On the other hand, brand humanisation emerged as an essential medium to find context when conducting this research. Studies over the years show comparisons with anthropomorphism used in consumer psychology (Orlando, 2021). Moreover, when addressing marketing communications, it is referred to as brand personification, which is the "process of applying a rhetorical figure with human attributes to a brand and presenting it as if it were a living person" (Chen, 2017, p.75). In popular debate, Irigoyen (2022, no pagination) adds that humanising a brand "means adopting a more relatable and personable communication style when interacting with customers instead of standard business jargon".

The use of social media has opened an array of opportunities for both media and brands to communicate and expand their consumer relations. It became an important role when

sharing a business with the world as it is a suitable means of publicity (Baruah, 2012). Moreover, it has extended the marketing communication skills as it is considered a two-way communication model where customers and companies can reach each other and create a community where consumers engage (Csordás, Markos-Kujbus and Gáti, p.51-52, 2014).

Nylund (2013) states that the media primarily creates cultural, social and public value instead of only business value or profit. However, social media has managed to keep these values and put them in equal importance with the business value and profit. Consequently, it may have blurred brand and media, as it has become a new media industry and a profession for many influencers (Szcurski, 2017), copywriters, designers, digital marketers or those who put their faces out in favour of their brand.

Moreover, this also opens up the discussion of personal brand and personal branding concepts. Casas (2016, p.29) clarifies that personal brand is "our essence, our attributes and values, the memory we leave in others, our reputation" and that since birth, people build their 'self' through their living experiences impacting others in different ways. In contrast, personal branding is a "strategy for being known for what you do, achieving the recognition you deserve and being perceived as unique and valuable" (Casas, 2016, p.29). Additionally, this strategy can be seen by, e.g. influencers daily on social media working to leverage whatever they do to their audience and, consequently, grow online.

I have worked online for the past six years as a content creator. My experience creating identification with my audience showed me how crucial humanisation was to building a community. However, social media makes actions normalised as there is no interference between the communicator and receiver. So back in the day, to humanise was an unconscious attitude and a consequence of being myself in daily interaction. Yet, Instagram, for instance, hindered growth by putting barriers for small creators, consequently making followers seen as numbers to reach a goal. The change of mindset, prioritising the quality of interactions and strengthening personal branding was a deal breaker in consciously humanising communication to grow.

According to Voorveld (p.18, 2019), social media allows people to say anything about anything to everyone. This networking consequently creates user-generated content

(UGC) used in brand communication. That said, modern times have shown that being online is essential to strengthening a company's relationship with the consumer as it has become a business strategy (Swani et al., 2017). Moreover, as there are minimal barriers to social media, everyone can become a content creator or be online. With this, social media also changed how businesses use integrated marketing communication strategies, as how they communicate with consumers impacts consumers' purchase behaviour (Achen, 2017). However, digital media has also become an overloaded content environment with a constant increase in competition (Nylund, 2013).

Social media is a tool that can rapidly escalate the good or the bad, and social transmission can be an emotional attitude that reaches broad audiences, making content viral (Berger and Milkman, 2012). With this said, there is a fine line between humanisation and overexposure, which leads to positive and negative effects on all users. In recent years, I have sought a balanced online lifestyle where this fine line is kept healthy. Although my life has never been an open book, I believe humanisation also needs caution when applied, as online life cannot override real life.

With all this information, it is possible to say that humanisation has changed how media works. And, by no means, not only to big organisations but to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) as for ordinary people. Therefore, this present thesis offers a modest answer to the humanisation of media, its development, and how it has impacted the industry.

## **1.1 Background and problem statement**

According to Mehsood (in Shabir et al., 2015, p.11), media means

*[...] the channels, the mean or forums using for disseminating information, providing entertainment with time motto to create awareness among the masses.*

When analysing how media has evolved during the centuries, from the printing press to Web 2.0, it is safe to say that all sorts of businesses had to adapt to the new reality that arose when communication changed how it connected with the world.

Mass media worked well for years with its one-way communication model. With no interaction and omnipresent communication, it aimed for commercialisation to encompass larger audiences (Picard, 2015, p. 61). They had control of what was said and reported to benefit their interests. However, academic literature from the mid-'90s already showed the need for a review of the communication processes, punctuating that the participation of the receiver with emotional involvement was necessary due to the limitations of conventional media (Moraes Gonçalves and Santos Galindo, 2015).

The change began with the emergence of digital and social media. Kleinberg (2008 in Amaral, 2016, p.177) states that the sprung of social networks created a "growing pattern of movement through online spaces to form connections with others, build virtual communities, and engage in self-expression". In other words, people started to have a voice and be exposed to current information, which increased their probability of engaging in civic and political life matters (Boulianne, 2017).

As a result of everyone being online, from media companies to all sorts of brands, professionals are forced to transition from offline business to online if they want to fit into the new reality. Yet, the message's transmission makes the difference when seeking a good reputation and relationship with users. Consequently, it spawned a more humanised approach, which gave access to interactions, opinions, feedback and user-generated content among users and companies, changing the communication structure and strategy.

The media industry deeply evolved over the years. Therefore, people who understand the movement and work towards humanlike exchange in digital and social media will be able to face challenges more strategically in the present and future (Silva, Resende and Cunha, 2021).

This research conducts mixed methodological analysis, which includes a literature review, a netnography, and a questionnaire with eight open questions on the humanisation of media to find answers to the following questions:

1. What is the humanisation of media?
2. Why has the humanisation of media happened?



3. How has humanisation changed the media?
4. Who came first, influencers or humanisation?

Due to the problematisation research and findings limitations, the first point of view to consider was from the influencers. However, the development of the study showed that other perspectives were needed, and professionals from marketing and brand communications joined the research.

## **1.2 Aim of the Study**

The scarceness of academic research with the definition and explanation of the humanisation of media motivated this study. My experience as a content creator in social media since 2016 has shown me that humanisation must be incorporated into the communication process to create affinity with the receiver. Without it, there is no connection, resulting in a lack of trust and credibility. Throughout my online career, I had to learn how to deal with the audience and understand what created the relationship. Moreover, this also taught me the limitations and personal impacts of humanisation.

Several pieces of research in the marketing field show the importance of humanisation in brands. They lead from anthropomorphism to its communication strategies online (e.g. MacInnis and Folkes, Chen, Lynch and Chernatony, and Andriuzzi). However, the same does not happen in the media industry. The lack of information gave me the will to discuss it widely to help media companies strategically face the present and future digital challenges.

## **1.3 Limitations**

As an outcome, this study proposes a better understanding of the humanisation of media, a recent phenomenon in digital communications. However, the scarcity of scholarship led the research to create a framework with adjacent topics to discuss the

theory and a netnography to analyse the field. Moreover, during the study, the need to have an overview of those who act in the industry arose. The chosen method was a questionnaire to facilitate participants' acceptance of the research. However, of 24 individuals who accepted to join, 18 completed the form, and a technical issue was identified, as some participants had problems receiving the form link by email. The study also questioned if influencers derived from humanisation or if it was the opposite. However, the investigation has not impacted the issue.

## 1.4 Structure of the thesis

This study consists of seven chapters, and the structure is as follows:

**Introduction** - The first chapter introduces the issue and the inspiration and reasoning behind the research topic and subject choice. Moreover, it also shows its significance and aim and presents what the research questions are.

**Method and Sampling** – The second chapter details the methodology used throughout the study and the research data. It has four main subchapters explaining literature review, netnography, data collection and analysis.

**Media Transformation** – The third chapter discusses scholarship and builds a theoretical framework by conducting a timeline of the media evolution and introducing the brand anthropomorphisation concept.

**Social Media Revolution** – The fourth chapter is a netnography which explores how social media evolved into a business tool, creating new actors, joining forces with other markets, changing the communication system and presenting brand humanisation.

**Discussion and Research Findings** – The fifth chapter is divided into four subchapters, each answering one of the research questions. The first defines the humanisation of media; the second explains why it arose; the third is how it is applied and who the actors are; and the fourth shows how humanisation has changed the media. These chapters

present theory from scholarship and a netnography study together with the research findings from the questionnaire.

**Future Research** – Chapter six addresses ideas for future studies about the humanisation of media and adjacent topics.

**Conclusion** – Chapter seven closes the study with a summary and evaluation of the leading research findings.

## 2 METHOD AND SAMPLING

The theoretical contribution of the research is to define the humanisation of media and expand its knowledge base in the industry. For this to be possible, the search strategy was to find information that used the term *humanisation of media*. The first searches failed with the small number of papers available. So, to carry on, new keywords were added to amplify the investigation, and analysing the articles generated further references, leading to new keyword findings. Moreover, discussions in popular debate (e.g. Fernandes, 2022; Recriativi, 2020; Eo Ipso Communications, 2018) addresses the topic with similar terminology. Some refer to it as the *humanisation of social media*, others as the *humanisation of communication*.

A mixed methodological study was conducted, uniting an integrative literature review, netnography and qualitative research. Moreover, being a content creator allowed me to analyse it from an observation perspective (Kozinets, 2015). Chapters on netnography and an extensive literature review developed a theoretical framework around media evolution and understanding of how media's humanisation arose. The literature includes academic sources, primarily journals, studies, books, and non-academic writings in popular debate. Moreover, various databases, e.g. Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Academia, SagePub, Elsevier, Taylor & Francis Online, Google Books, and others, served as search engines. Also, the Sci-Hub website provided access to papers not readily available in open sources.

As the study drives the media evolution, it has no predetermined time frame. Moreover, different keywords are used throughout the study search to identify relevant information. When looking for studies in English, only one article referred to the topic directly and used the term *humanisation of media*. The scarcity of scholarship created the need to explore papers in other languages - mainly Portuguese – to reach the most considerable amount of knowledge and expand the keyword range. As the research topic is considered new to the industry, it was essential to look deeper to find relevant results. The keywords set as not used were because there were no specific papers on the topic, or the articles available did not have vital information to contribute.

The figure below shows the used and unused keywords throughout the study research:

# KEYWORDS

## USED KEYWORDS IN ENGLISH



## USED KEYWORDS IN PORTUGUESE



## NOT USED KEYWORDS



Figure 1 Used and unused research keywords

## 2.1 Literature Review

This chapter explains what literature review research is and displays the study's chosen method.

### 2.1.1 Definition and purpose of a literature review

Hart (2001 in Jesson and Lacey, 2006, p.140) defines literature review as

*The selection of available documents (both published and unpublished) on the topic, which contains information, ideas, data and evidence written from a particular standpoint [...].*

Moreover, it aims to fulfil and express views, plus determines how the selection is investigated and evaluated according to the proposed research (Jesson and Lacey, 2006). The information used in the study creates a framework where the sum can bring interesting conclusions through different points of view and paradigms (Jesson and Lacey, 2006; Wee and Banister, 2015).

According to Rozas and Klein (2010), this type of review presents two attributes: it describes primary studies instead of introducing them and outlines the findings to create an understandable report. Therefore, it makes literature reviews useful for many purposes, such as dissertations, published papers, experimental pieces, and even teaching (Rozas and Klein, 2010; Wee and Banister, 2015).

However, its main purpose is to collect and synthesise primary research from a specific subject and summarise it for newcomers to have relevant knowledge provided in an overview (Rozas and Klein, 2010). Moreover, a thorough analysis of the data collection also helps reveal where more research is needed, as it is a "critical component of creating theoretical frameworks and building conceptual models" (Snyder, 2019, p. 333). Additionally, they may establish a new or broaden understanding of the topic by developing the theory into a new conceptual model (Rozas and Klein, 2010; Snyder,

2019) and "create research agendas, identify research gaps, or simply discuss a particular matter" (Snyder, 2019, p. 334).

In other words, Jesson and Lacey (2006) explains that the goal of writing a literature review is to compile existing information, create and improve research ideas, and allow critical thinking, which displays

*Awareness of the current state of knowledge in the subject area (description skills); a synthesis of resources showing the strengths and limitations, omissions and bias (critical skills); and how the research fits into this wider context (analytical skills) (p.140).*

The analytical process of Jesson and Lacey (2006), shown in figure 2, demonstrates the review process:

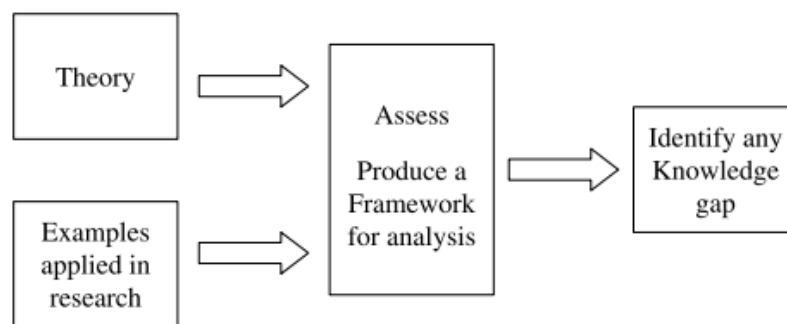


Figure 2 The analytical process (Jesson and Lacey, 2006, p. 143)

### 2.1.2 Types of literature review

There are different types of literature reviews. However, the most common ones are the systematic, semi-systematic and integrative reviews (Snyder, 2019). Moreover, these can be divided into many other approaches, as seen in figure 3:

Approaches to literature reviews.

Approach	Systematic	Semi-systematic	Integrative
Typical purpose	Synthesize and compare evidence	Overview research area and track development over time	Critique and synthesize
Research questions	Specific	Broad	Narrow or broad
Search strategy	Systematic	May or may not be systematic	Usually not systematic
Sample characteristics	Quantitative articles	Research articles	Research articles, books, and other published texts
Analysis and evaluation	Quantitative	Qualitative/quantitative	Qualitative
Examples of contribution	Evidence of effect Inform policy and practice	State of knowledge Themes in literature Historical overview Research agenda Theoretical model	Taxonomy or classification Theoretical model or framework

Figure 3 Approaches to literature reviews (Snyder, 2019)

Systematic literature reviews have a strict search strategy (Snyder, 2019) and a select time frame for the articles chosen to develop the study (Cronin, Ryan, and Coughlan, 2008). Its purpose is to "identify all empirical evidence that fits the pre-specified inclusion criteria" (Snyder, 2019, p. 334). A list "of all the published and unpublished studies relating to a particular subject area" (Cronin, Ryan, and Coughlan, 2008) is selected by using "rigorous criteria to identify, critically evaluate and synthesise all the literature on a particular topic" (Cronin, Ryan, and Coughlan, 2008, p. 39). There are two different subtypes available: meta-analysis and meta-synthesis. The meta-analysis combines the findings from several articles on a subject using statistical techniques (Cronin, Ryan, and Coughlan, 2008). On the other hand, meta-synthesis is a non-statistical technique that transforms specific literature into new theory and is "used to integrate, evaluate and interpret the findings of multiple qualitative research studies" (Cronin, Ryan, and Coughlan, 2008, p. 39).

The semi-systemic review, also known as narrative review, aims to analyse how a topic has developed over time (Snyder, 2019). According to Cronin, Ryan, and Coughlan (2008), the narrative literature review collects an amount of specific literature to summarise and synthesise the topic asked on the research question. In other words, this type builds up new studies upon a selection of existing knowledge by describing the case and leading them to a critical approach (Cronin, 2011) which creates a "comprehensive background for understanding current knowledge" and highlights the importance of developing new research (Cronin, Ryan, and Coughlan, 2008). Moreover, the material is usually selected based on a personal choice where the writer believes there is an essential contribution to the subject (Jesson, Matheson, and Lacey, 2011).

The integrative review is the one used in this research, and its aim is

*[...] to assess, critique, and synthesise the literature on a research topic in a way that enables new theoretical frameworks and perspectives to emerge (Snyder, 2019, p.335).*

Rozas and Klein (2010) state that articles are collected through the selected keywords to search about the topic. Moreover, it still adds that reviewing the segment, such as its "history, primary conceptualisations and interactions, methodological issues, and practices" (Rozas and Klein, 2010, p. 395), helps recognise the contributions and deficiencies in the literature.

This research carries out an emerging matter, and, as Snyder (2019) explains, integrative reviews create introductory approaches and theoretical models. Additionally, it combines points of view of "different fields or research traditions" (Snyder, 2019, p. 336), which results in investigating published and unpublished research that includes from "traditional databases" to "formal and informal networks" (Rozas and Klein, 2010, p. 396).

## **2.2 Netnography**

Netnography is a term that combines ethnography and the internet. According to Atkinson and Hammersley (1994), the term ethnography has been controversial as some refer to it as a

*[...] philosophical paradigm to which one makes a total commitment, for others it designates a method that one uses as and when appropriate (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994, p. 248).*

Silverman (2011) adds that ethnography is a "methodology based on direct observation" (p.103) and that it "comprises two research strategies: *non-participant* observation and *participant* observation" (p.105).

Kozinets (2010) states that netnography is the branch of ethnography that analyses individuals' free online behaviour and offers insightful information by utilising online marketing research strategies. Understanding social media and internet data is vital to sociocultural research. Thus, internet ethnography, or netnography, is defined as



research about social behaviour on social media channels covering media education, geography, linguistics and sociology (Kozinets, 2015).

Moreover, the increasingly expanding online presence of today's society over the last decades generated the need for researchers to fathom the internet's capabilities. Therefore, with the help of netnography, researchers are trying to understand the consumer mindset and their behaviour online (Sakoda, 2013).

In the examination method practised in ethnography, participants know about the research, which can make it inaccurate as people may behave differently than usual due to being observed. While in the netnography method, there are three types when analysing online communities: "observational (no participation and unobtrusive), participant-observational, and autonetnographic (active participation)" (Abeza et al., 2017, p.331). Moreover, the research can observe the subject's behaviour via several online mediums. And as the participants are in a neutralised and anonymous environment, the impact of the research results on the opinions, unbiased contributions, and candid answers within the online tool compared to direct observation (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018).

This research follows the participant-observational methodological procedure as years as a content creator/influencer have given me the knowledge to contribute with my own experience. Moreover, observation is also key to understanding how the media evolved and how it may have blurred with brands.

## **2.3 Data Collection**

The research follows the triangulation approach, which is the "use of two or more independent sources of data or data collection methods to corroborate research findings within a study" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009, p.154). It includes a literature review, a netnography, observation within the context and a questionnaire with participants involved with the digital industry, such as e.g. influencers, marketers, and communication managers.

The observation method was the first approach. I have worked on social media as a content creator since 2016. I have consequently experienced the industry's evolution, which led to what is known as participating observation (Gil, 2008). Creating a relationship with my audience required me to get them involved in my storytelling to generate affinity and intimacy. Therefore, my interest in developing this research came from the scarcity of scholarship in the humanisation of media, as participating showed me the importance the topic had to the media sector.

Moreover, being constantly online made me observe how branding and social media have blurred for most people in the industry, becoming one feature that modified how both perform. Also, working directly with a Brazilian audience helped me understand what could work for the public. But living in Finland and knowing and following influencers with a different culture also showed me that humanisation could have different approaches. Encountering my point of view determined that the humanisation of media needed a deeper interpretation, which led to focusing on learning what it is, why it happened, how it has changed the industry, who the players are, and their role. Therefore, being an active observation participant has contributed to developing the research criteria. So, the scholarship was introduced in the literature review; and online articles in the netnography and discussion to build up the narrative.

Finally, a questionnaire (appendix 2) was conducted to complete the triangulation approach and gather qualitative data from the field. It contained eight open questions created in Google Forms for participants to explain their points of view. Moreover, one multiple choice was displayed to understand in which field each participant worked. The questions were written in English and Portuguese to avoid misunderstanding the content and to allow the participant to express their opinion freely. When needed, translation was done, keeping the answers the most accurate. However, there is no transcription of the answers in this research. Moreover, the investigation was elaborated on logically: the intention was to answer one of the research questions for every two questions. The main areas of interest developed from the reviewed literature, along with my experience and theoretical framework, as seen in figure 4:



*Figure 4 Categories of themes for the questionnaire*

The participants' selection criteria were their online relevancy, digital experience, and communication skills. Moreover, the participant's number of followers also varied to analyse if there was a different perspective. The minor participant had over 13 thousand followers, and the largest had one million followers.

Additionally, although the study is done from the influencer's perspective, it was essential to have others introduce the branding context. Furthermore, the selection is prevalent among Brazilians due to the ease of approaching them. However, the invitation included a multicultural list of participants from Brazil, the UK and Finland.

Participants were invited by email or Instagram messages, and those who responded positively received the Google Form link. The timeframe for sending and answering the questionnaire was during October 2022.

## **2.4 Data Analysis**

The study follows a qualitative data analysis in which patterns and themes in textual data are examined and interpreted to find their contribution to the solution of the research questions (ACE - WSU, 2015). For this matter, the answers opposed or

corroborated the theory, which helped substantiate the conclusion from the market perspective.

The study selected 50 names from Instagram to enter the research. From this number, 26 people responded to the invitation, of which 24 were positive, and two were negative — participants who joined summed up 18 candidates. After some investigation, the study discovered a technical problem with the email, and some participants did not receive the invitation or the Google Form link. However, because of time limitations caused by this issue, some participants were not able to join.

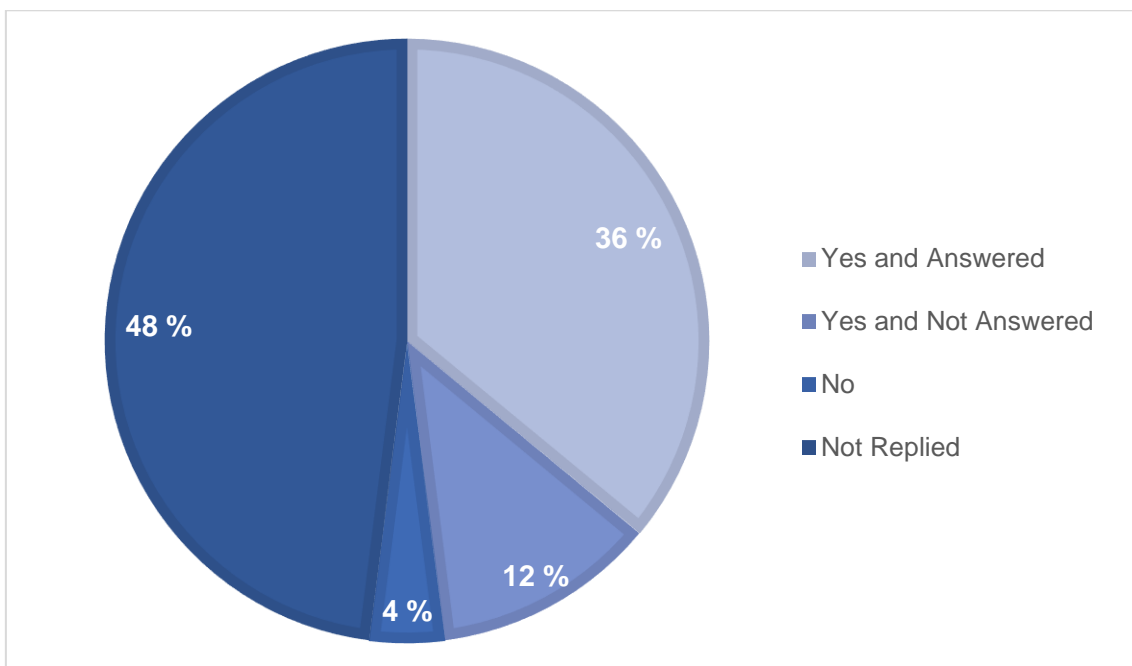


Figure 5 Questionnaire response distribution

The final score was 144 open-question and 18 multi-choices responses. The language of choice was mainly Portuguese, apart from two participants who preferred to do it in English. The data translation was not carried out initially, as keeping it in its original version was more comfortable for maintaining its best comprehension. However, the translation eventually occurred once the findings were ready to be added to the report. Moreover, although the invitation included other nationalities, only Brazilians cooperated.

The participants had the chance to identify themselves in different fields. The options given to them were: influencer, public relations, digital marketing, brand

communication, branding and others. They could choose more than one option, and 89% consider themselves influencers. Moreover, 50% also marked digital marketing as a competency. One participant has self-entitled as a marketing manager, which entered the digital marketing category. Another participant used the term 'online business owner'. However, other participants can also be considered the same by working online. So, for this matter, this categorisation was not acknowledged in the study.

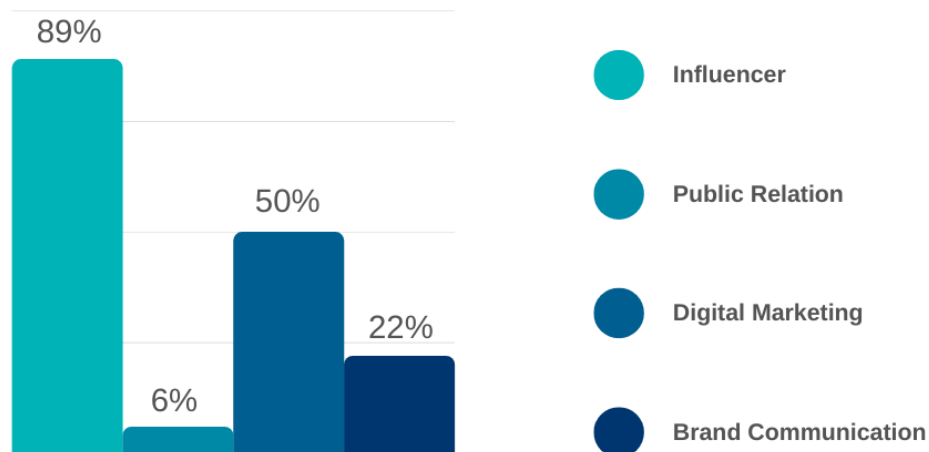


Figure 6 Participant's field distribution

The study has opted not to codify and categorise the research findings as it would not be as beneficial as using the information to demonstrate the market's point of view.

### 3 MEDIA TRANSFORMATION

Although the term humanisation of media exists, the term's concept is not adequately defined. So, to understand how meaningful it is to how people perceive it through social media, this chapter will present a set of factors that relate to explaining the context and expose its importance to the industry.

### 3.1 Mass Media Evolution

Mass media arose with the need to communicate more widely (Picard, 2015) and is a one-way communication model where a single source distributes the information to a larger audience with no reciprocity, as usually seen in face-to-face communication (Jucker, 2003). It effectively communicates across borders, yet it alienates most people, giving voice to just a few (Picard, 2015). Therefore, printing, recording, and broadcasting emerged and defined who could speak and be heard, creating a unidirectional communication style.

However, computer technology and the internet paved the way for new forms of communication. Data dissemination has caused a new information revolution whose significance probably surpasses the process brought on by the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century (Jucker, 2003). Moreover, the twentieth century has also taken media everywhere with advanced technology. It reduced the distance between people, as most have virtual access and can choose any content they wish to connect. Furthermore, it has also developed the media influence on economic, political, cultural, and social levels (Shabir et al., 2015).

Additionally, media saturation started to be more evident as, in mass media, global companies dominated people's experiences by redirecting their thoughts (Shabir et al., 2015; Newell, Pilotta and Thomas, 2008). Consequently, as digitalisation gained popularity, mass media started to lose its high efficiency in centralising communication.

By 1990, the media convergence theory was established and widely discussed (Bateman, 2021). According to Jenkins (2004) - the concept author -, "is more than simply a technological shift. Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences".

Analysing the practical side of it, Jucker (2003) explains how personalisation started to be used in media by addressing the audience with linguistic forms, humour, and interaction, plus creating a sense of belonging. However, personalisation goes against what mass media's model originally was. So, restructuring was necessary to continue

relevant, as the internet and the development of social media introduced elements that re-humanised communication, reestablishing a multi-directional communication system (Picard, 2015).

Thus, the boundaries once set between mass media and interpersonal communication narrowed. And this is because of the speed at which technology developed allowed regular people to become broadcasters and reach larger audiences simultaneously (O'Sullivan, 1999 in Jucker, 2003). Additionally, Nylund (2013) states that digitisation, the internet, and social media are key drivers in the media industries. However, they are also considered disruptive technologies.

This movement created a significant transformation in the industry, which also made different media sectors combat similar challenges and problems (Nylund, 2013). To adapt to the new reality, the traditional way of communication changed by integrating other channels and following its structures. It became more personal and with less audience targeting, creating interactive content for people to interact with, and replacing the fixed 24-hour newspaper cycle with an online format as information gets rapidly outdated and is easier to modify (Jucker, 2003). However, this makes the news industry dominated by multinational companies with similar products, whether broadcasting and newspaper industries or online media (Nylund, 2013).

## **3.2 Social Media Development**

With Web 2.0 in 1999, the internet started a new era. According to Wilson et al. (2011, p. 2), the term means

*[...] the second generation of the Web, wherein interoperable, user-centred web applications and services promote social connectedness, media and information sharing, user-created content, and collaboration among individuals and organizations.*

In other words, this technology brought a social media revolution. It facilitated user-generated content (UGC), which is "a process whereby ordinary people have the opportunity to participate with or contribute to professionally edited publications"

(Hermida and Thurman, 2008 in Manosevitch and Tenenboim, 2016, p.2) by expressing their opinion online. According to O'Reilly (2007, p.24), one of the concept's creators, "one of the most highly touted features of the Web 2.0 era is the rise of blogging". However, Constantinides and Fountain (2008) add that blogging was not the only tool developed. There were five new categories: blogs, social networks, communities, forums, and content aggregators.

Also, Baruah (2012, p.1) pointed out that "social media is media for social interaction as a superset beyond social communication". Because, despite mass media having as a core value the centralisation of information, social media gives voice to people, makes content popular and accessible, and creates a sense that people can have typical passions, inspire movements, and make changes. (Picard, 2015).

Over the years, it has also paved the way for social networks to grow their global community and take over the internet. That is because people shape media to its needs as it is an agent of diversion and entertainment as information and influence (Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas, 1973). And for this study, social networks will be referred to as social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and Tiktok.

Consequently, regular people also started to build their communities and relations with others with similar interests (Akram and Kumar, 2017). So, when social media began to be entertainment and a business, the trend was to be part of every platform. You had to be seen to belong and be noticed. And this remains up to date as the revolution has affected everyone. People are always connected, and every search result raises UGC and opinions (Smith, 2009). Moreover, it became more than only a means of communication. Organisations strategically use it to improve their advertisements and communication (Akram and Kumar, 2017).

### **3.3 Brand Anthropomorphism**

Anthropomorphism is "the propensity of some people to attribute human characteristics to inanimate objects" (Andriuzzi, 2015, p. 223). Moreover, brand anthropomorphism is



"the extent to which a branded product is perceived as a human being" (Guido and Peluso, 2014, p. 2). Andriuzzi (2015) states that anthropomorphism is associated with a brand and consumer relationships. Applying humanlike attributes augments meaningful connections as users today relate to brands as they relate to people (Portal, Abratt and Bendixen, 2018).

Still, there are two types of brand anthropomorphism. According to Portal, Abratt and Bendixen (2018), one perceives trustworthiness where sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness are identified as brand personality traits. And the second one focuses on a humanlike mental state. Users relate to it more sentimentally, creating comparisons between interpersonal and brand relationships.

So, in other terms, brand anthropomorphism is also understood as the humanisation of brands. However, this does not mean that a brand needs to be personified but must create a relationship where the conversation is human-driven and focuses on consumer satisfaction (Andriuzzi, 2015). Furthermore, according to Grönevik and Langfeldt (2017), a desired behavioural response can also be triggered by humanising a brand. Consequently, creating or enhancing a brand personality that users will identify (Grönevik and Langfeldt, 2017).

Portal, Abratt and Bendixen (2018) show through the Human Brand Model (HBM) what tools are required to establish a human brand. The graphic has four stages: "the first three indicate the brand inputs, and the fourth shows the consequences of those actions or the brand benefits" (Portal, Abratt and Bendixen, 2018, p.371), as seen in figure 7.

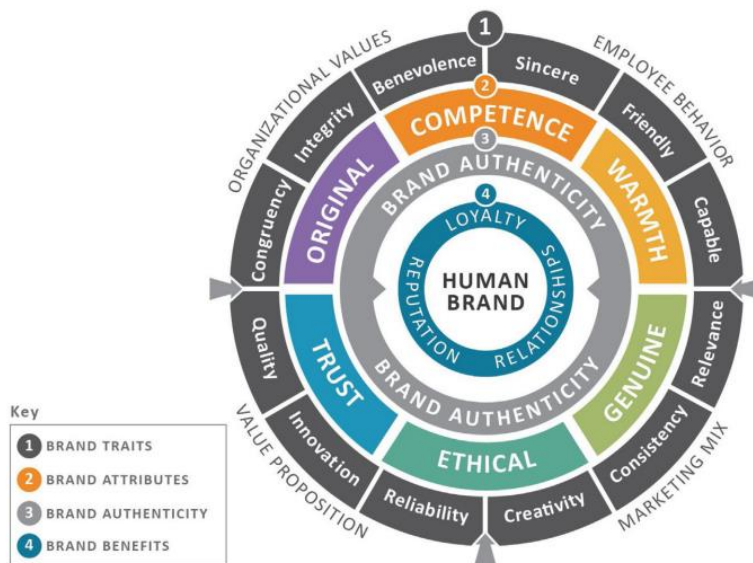


Figure 7 Human Brand Model (Portal, Abratt and Bendixen, 2018)

Still, according to what the HBM presents, creating a human brand brings valuable benefits. One of the most relevant is reputation, which is "a result of stakeholder images of the brand over time" (Portal, Abratt and Bendixen, 2018, p.373). Moreover, the more they are seen as human, the more chances are that the brand has a higher reputation which also outcomes consumer loyalty and an increase in sales.

## 4 SOCIAL MEDIA REVOLUTION

Social media has escalated the growth of the media industry, becoming a phenomenal tool. Because in the digital era, social media is part of most people's daily routines around the world and how most private or corporate individuals communicate. It also directly leverages the development of the economy as the influencer marketing industry only tends to grow. Furthermore, it is noticeable that other sectors are relying on strategies that make them more visible online, as word-of-mouth (WOM) has now become digital.

Social media is a tool that has developed rapidly throughout the years, and many sources – even scholarly studies performed in recent years – have become obsolete fast.

Moreover, the humanisation of the media phenomenon suffers from a lack of literary research, although there is constant discussion online. For this research to present current facts, the popular debate is used together with academic sources.

When analysing annual digital reports, these come from popular debate sources as firms conduct studies related to the industry and digital marketing websites release them. The same applies to much other information involving the topic. So, the exclusive use of scholarship in this chapter would not complete the explanation as there would be lacunas during the reading.

## **4.1 Social Media as a Business Tool**

Social media is more than only a tool for socialising. It has become an efficient means to help individuals and businesses expand their knowledge, build a professional network, grow their community, get customers' feedback, or promote a brand (Akram and Kumar, 2017). Or as Castro, O'Reilly and Carthy (2021, p.60) state, with the development of the digital age, it has become a "powerful tool in many areas, such as marketing and communication".

Over the years, many social media platforms have emerged. According to the Global Digital Overview report done by DataReportal and WeAreSocial and Hootsuite (Kemp, 2022), the top three favourite social media platforms in 2022 are WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook. The variety means that everyone can choose which one aligns best with their interest and field.

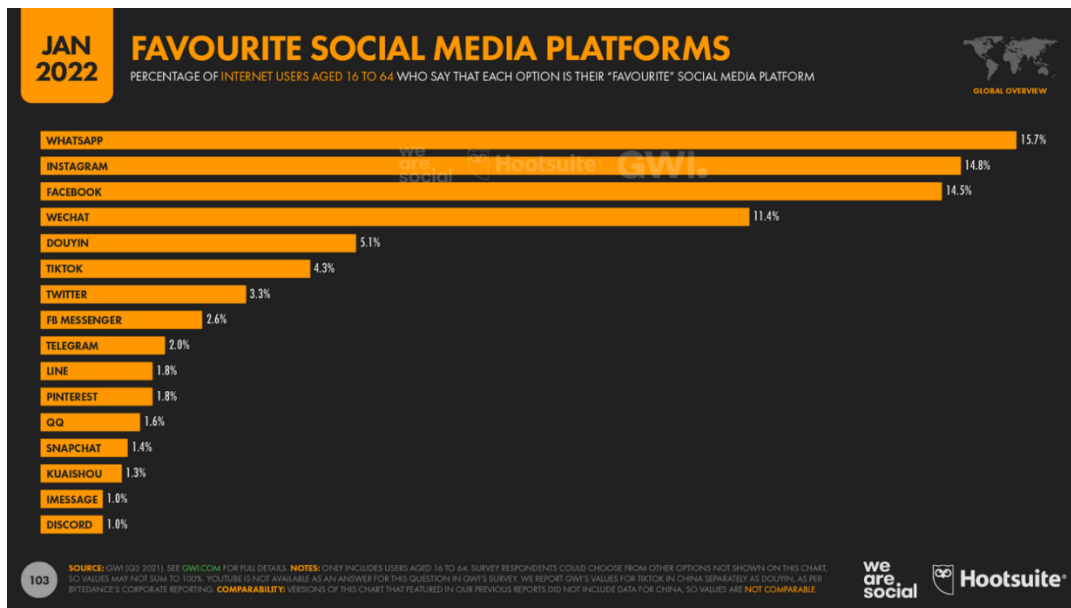


Figure 8 The World's Favourite Social Media Platforms (DataReportal, 2022)

Looking from the business perspective, according to Akram and Kumar (2017), social networks are used as a strategy, and companies can benefit from it to grow. Moreover, it also provides direct communication between firms and customers, permitting a more human-centric approach (Adeola, Hinson and Evans, 2020). And this is visible when analysing the marketing benchmarks for 2022 by Hubspot's report (2022), where social media usage is rated first by B2B and B2C marketers with 44%.

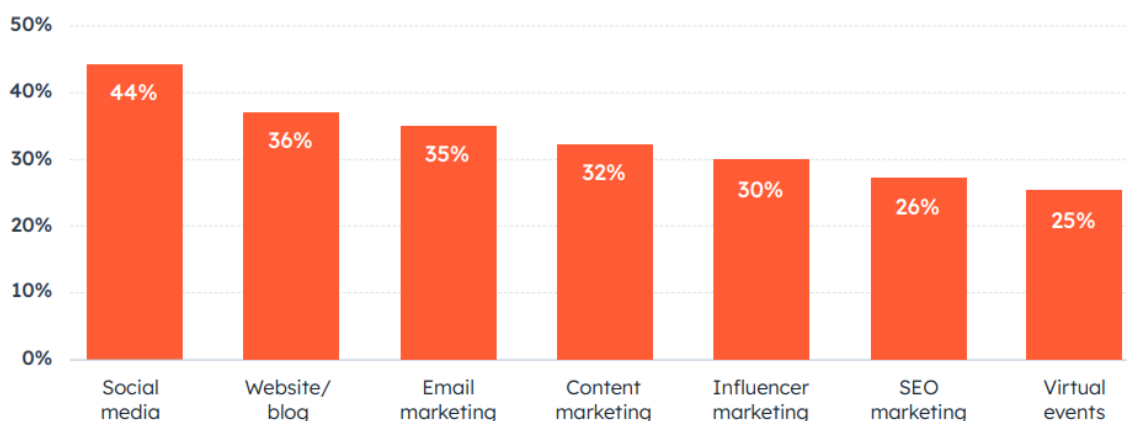


Figure 9 Top Marketing Channels in 2022, Hubspot (2022)

However, it does not only apply to companies; if individuals want to stand out professionally, they must also get visibility and engage online. Consequently, it is making both individuals and companies create social media strategies, which shows

how social media is changing how people communicate, collaborate, consume and create (Aral, Dellarocas and Godes, 2013).

Being online has revolutionised how businesses pertain to the marketplace and society, as it has modified how firms, employees and consumers reach their goals (Aral, Dellarocas and Godes, 2013). Besides, social media can help in many ways. Sharing content is easier and faster, increasing awareness about the business and its products. Once online, brands get closer to their customers, connecting to their needs and understanding them better. The interaction results in a richer customer experience and helps gain new clients. Moreover, competitors are also online, and it is easier to monitor how they work (Akram and Kumar, 2017).

According to the study Cisco Visual Networking Index: Forecast and Trends, 2017–2022 (Cisco, 2019), where optical networks are analysed, content in video format was predicted to represent 82% of all internet protocol (IP) traffic by 2022. The State of Inbound Marketing Trends Report by Hubspot (2022, p.8) confirms the growth as it states that "short-form videos are both the most-used format on social media and the most engaging".

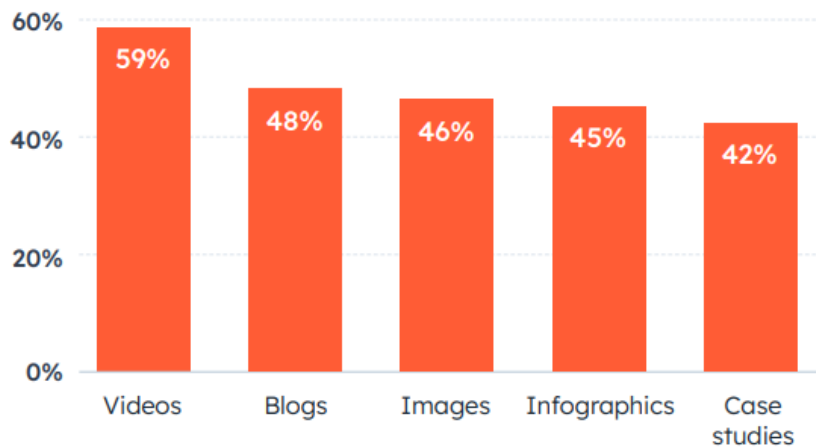


Figure 10 Top Media Formats Marketers Use (Hubspot, 2022)

Another study by Disney|ABC Television, Omnicom Media Group and Insight Strategy Group (McAteer, 2018) concluded that half of the consumers are video users. Plus, most media clips, e.g. memes, are shared on social media by Gen Zers, followed by

Millennials, Gen Xers and then Boomers. This interaction shows how this format influences UGC, as seen in figure 11:

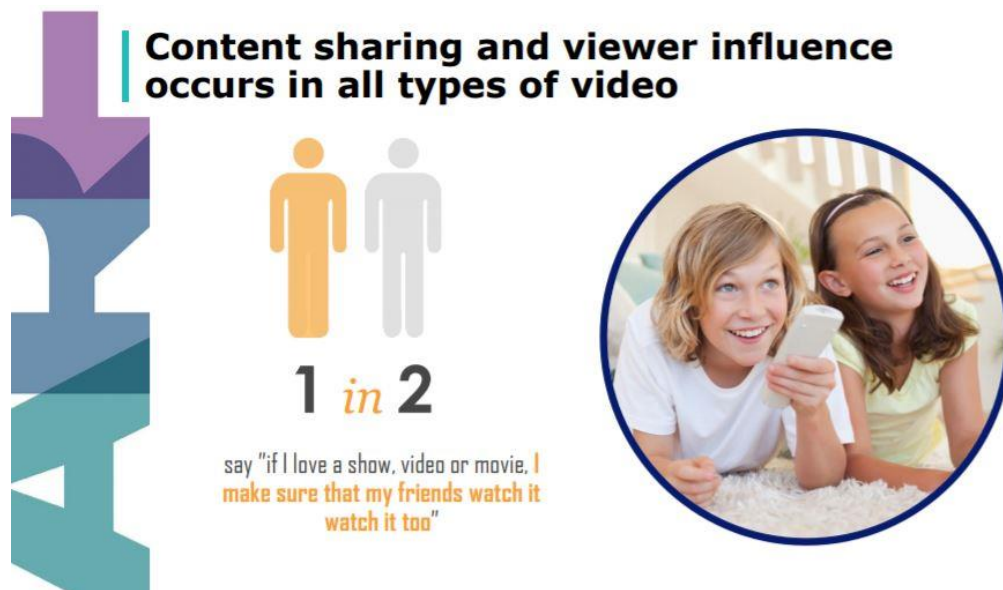


Figure 11 Content sharing and viewer influence (McAteer, 2018)

Whoever uses Instagram, for instance, knows that it has evolved from a photo form to a video platform. And it all started with short-form videos - called stories - with captions (Litsa, 2018) that made the user's experience more effective and have progressed into other forms over the years, from IGTV, which had a longer length, to the recent format called Reels. The usage of augmented reality (AR), which is a technology that "allows users to perform tasks in the real and virtual environment at the same time" and "provides an intuitive interaction method which bridges both worlds" (Piumsomboon et al., 2013, p. 282) is also growing. Especially on apps like Instagram and TikTok.

Furthermore, social media is not only for businesses and has gained an essential main character who also helps endorse brands, the influencers. It is interesting to see how blogging took over WOM in the past and came back as a trend in social media. Studies show how the term influencer derives from the concept of market mavens. According to Harrigan et al. (2021, p.1), mavens are "an individual that possesses and disseminates an extensive array of general knowledge about all things consume". Moreover, Feick and Price (in Harrigan et al., 1987) describe that they were individuals with significant connections of friends and co-workers who would generally influence the consumer base in their local area. In other words, it means that people already had a role in the

past in shaping other people's choices (Galeotti and Goyal, 2009). And as technology evolved, it just made it easier for any regular person with access to the internet and social media to become one. Furthermore, Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu (2019) remark that they can enjoy being both famous and ordinary people. However, with a higher importance in what is known today as social media marketing and influencer marketing (Harrigan et al., 2021).

## 4.2 Influencer Marketing Industry

According to Widiashi and Darma (2021, p. 162), a content creator is "someone who produces various content materials in the form of writing, images, videos, sound, or a combination of two or more materials". In other words, they gain authority in a specific subject by creating and sharing relevant content online. However, Breindel (2017) differentiates them from influencers and divides the term influencer into two groups: celebrities and influencers. He claims that:

*[...] influencers become famous by marketing themselves on social media, while celebrities become famous by being marketed by others through film, TV, and the like (Breindel, 2017, no pagination).*

Although they can be slightly different, as content creators are recognised for their work and influencers create opportunities by being in the spotlight and using it to influence other people, both are important to the industry. Precisely because content creators on social media also become influencers as their followers trust their opinions. Moreover, the opposite also happens, as many influencers are creating authentic content to stand out from the competition.

This context brings up another terminology used, digital influencers. Brown and Hayes (2008 in MoShi, 2020, p. 8) refer to influence "as the power to affect a person, thing or course of events". Once added to digital means, the influence achieved is through online platforms. With the exclusive use of social media, this term has derived and is also known as a social media influencer.

Dhanesh and Duthler (2019, p.3) define social media influencers as

*A person who, through personal branding, builds and maintains relationships with multiple followers on social media, and has the ability to inform, entertain, and potentially influence followers' thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours.*

This type of influencer creates an online image and a social status with a specific lifestyle to engage with a larger audience (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019; Szczurski, 2017). De Veirman et al. (2016 in Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu, 2019, p. 569) add that influencers are "people who built a large network of followers, and are regarded as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches". Dhanesh and Duthler (2019, p.3) also claim that

*Influencers are one form of microcelebrities who document their everyday lives from the trivial and mundane, to exciting snippets of the exclusive opportunities in their line of work.*

Castro, O'Reilly and Carthy (2021) add that they can have the power to transform people's behaviour and attitudes when they engage with their massive audience, as they sell their image to brands for the sake of influence. And the transformation happens because they are considered relatable people (Szczurski, 2017). Even with the limitation imposed by mass media, influencers still managed to gain fame through social media (Reinikainen et al., 2021). Consequently, it reveals that the relationship built between them and their followers is their most successful feature, leveraging credibility to develop their own media brand (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019).

Influencers have five classifications: nano, micro, mid-tier, macro, and mega/celebrities. The classification has the criteria of dividing them by the number of followers, and accounts with less than one thousand followers are unclassified. According to the Annual State of Influencer Marketing report done by HypeAuditor (2022) to analyse the trends and performance metrics, the largest Instagram group of creators is micro-influencers, with 44.3%.



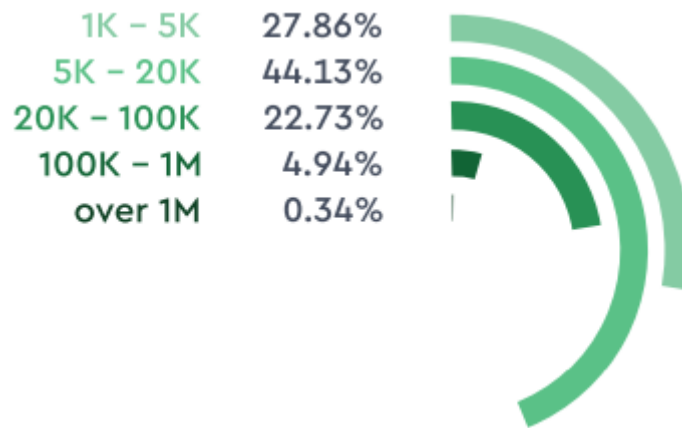


Figure 12 Percentage of influencers on Instagram by influence tiers (HypeAuditor, 2022)

However, the same report adds that nano-influencers have the highest engagement rate reaching 4.8% in 2021, compared with 2.2% of the average rate for all tiers. These figures show the strong connections they have with their audience.

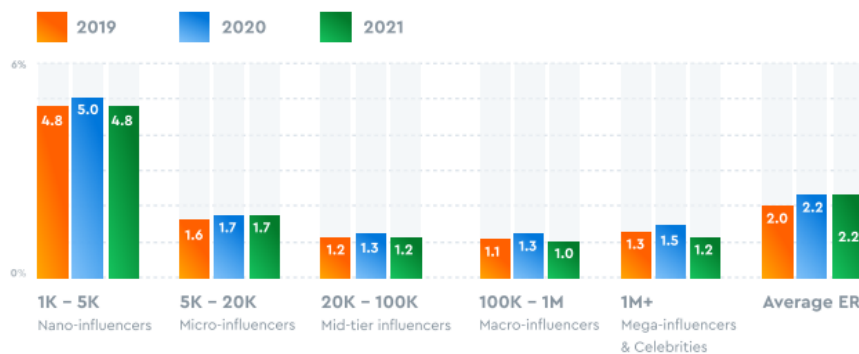


Figure 13 Engagement Rate per influence tier (HypeAudito, 2022)

Influencers can be categorised as mutable, as they must adapt to new trends, constantly be creative, and frequently deliver knowledgeable and relevant content to their niche audiences. They have the vital role of using rhetoric to persuade consumers as they are the ones who know best the values and interests of their audience and how to speak their language to engage (Ge and Gretzel, 2018). Likewise, they work in different stages of marketing strategies, from creating awareness to selling. Because the primary benefit is that they can use WOM through social media to disseminate information about whatever the company wants and needs to achieve (Harrigan et al., 2021). Yet, social media is also dependent on UGC to propagate content. Therefore, call-to-actions are required and have been used more and more by individuals and brands to make users share content or encourage them to create their own (Ashley and Tuten, 2014).

Javits (2019) points out that influence marketing is a cost-effective strategy for marketers to reach the expected audience and promote their product or service. It can generate 11 times more return on investments (ROI) than traditional advertising. Consequently, the Annual State of Influencer Marketing report (HypeAuditor, 2022) conservatively estimated that the industry will grow from USD 13.8 billion in 2021 to USD 22.2 billion by 2025.



Figure 14 Estimated Influencer Marketing Market Growth (HypeAuditor, 2022)

The estimated compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 12.6% during the predicted period demonstrates that consumers' decision-making is highly defined by the repercussion when acknowledged by an influencer. So, it is possible to say that influencers are an essential tool for marketers when creating strategies for the marketing communications mix. Therefore, how these influencers, who are opinion leaders, communicate to their audience shows how people relate when the message sent has a personal, authentic, credible, and down-to-earth tone (Harrigan et al., 2021). In other words, it shows how humanisation is critical when dealing with social media.

### 4.3 Brand Humanisation on Social Media

Thompson (2006 in Tan, 2018) was the first to use the term human brands in 2006 when he published an article in the Journal of Marketing. Other terminology like humanising brands arose throughout the years, but according to Casas (2016), personal

branding ascended in 2016 when the marketing field identified that people stopped believing in brands. The cause changed the paradigm with the emergence of a new concept where "people believe in people, and people are the driving force of companies" (Casas, 2016, p.37). Besides, it also opened a range of opportunities to humanise a brand which led to transitioning to personal branding of employees.

Moreover, the social media era revolutionised branding, becoming the central issue of marketers as marketing practices shifted to "user-driven technologies" (Borges-Tiago et al., 2019; Smith, 2009 in Nisar and Whitehead, 2016, p.743). And it is interesting to notice that the Marketing Communications departments handle 70% of social media operations (Nowak, Rudeloff and Pakura, 2021).

Nisar and Whitehead (2016) state that online communities have existed for many years, but their value to marketing campaigns has only become valid in the past decade. Consequently, this made brands and clients endorse an "interactive communication model" (Borges-Tiago et al., 2019, p.474) and use the interaction to build valuable relationships between them and co-create content, as the success of UGC transformed the consumer's behaviour (Borges-Tiago et al., 2019; Nisar and Whitehead, 2016).

MacInnis and Folkes (2017, p.15) refer to brand humanisation as a "contemporary phenomenon". Making it effective on social media is challenging because connections must exist regardless of physical contact and paralinguistic cues while creating a "sense of being with another" (Orlando, 2021, p.1). This term refers to what is known as "social presence", and it is "a theory that speaks to how communication can be made intimate, immediate and indicate one's human presence in an online context" (Orlando, 2021, p.1). Orlando (2021, p.4) adds that "the expression of feelings, emotions, and mood is a defining characteristic of social presence". Some studies presume that it should be a long-term commitment, creating an "emotional connection between users at one end, and a sense of being 'present', 'there' or 'real' at the other" to encourage consumers to socialise and engage (Orlando, 2021, p.14). This context relates to Baer's (n.d.) observation that humanisation is giving a glimpse inside actual employees' lives as a brand is a group of real people working behind the scenes. And instead of focusing on achieving anthropomorphisation by concentrating on the establishment and brand personality, real people increase kinship, which builds trust.

The efficient access to users online has allowed brands to adopt social media marketing (SMM) techniques to enhance brand awareness and keep customers engaged (Nisar and Whitehead, 2016), increasing social presence. According to Bharucha (2018, p.74), "social media has a 100% higher lead-to-close rate than outbound marketing," which builds up trust and credibility in the brand. It is notable how social media has transformed and strengthened how brands are "brought to life" (Orlando, 2021, p.1). So, to understand why it has this significant impact, SMM can be defined as "a form of internet marketing that implements various social media networks in order to achieve marketing communication and branding goals" with the use of "the technology to build relationships, drive repeat business and attract new customers through friends from social media" (Dapke, 2014, p.1). And this goes from incorporating social presence cues (Orlando, 2021) to verbal marketing tactics like giving a human name to a product, "using closeness-implying pronouns (e.g., "we" versus "you and the brand")" (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017, p.4) or even by using influencer marketing to augment effective persuasive communication (Borges-Tiago et al., 2019).

Moreover, Orlando (2021) adds that studies have focused on physical characteristics to humanise a brand. However, linguistic strategies in branding studies show that the use of "'conversational' tone of voice, informal communication, assertive language and imperative verbs, and first-person and second-person pronouns" (Orlando, 2021, p.6) is more effective. And the use of these elements makes more sense when analysing what MacInnis and Folkes (2017, p.3) affirm that

*Brands may be humanized because they are made and sold by people, and in fact, in some cases, are people (i.e., celebrity brands).*

And this is likely because people relate to emotional and other abstract aspects rather than physical characteristics. Borges-Tiago et al. (2019, p.475) affirm that "consumers tend to choose brands with whom they share emotional bonds".

Baer (n.d.) has a great example of social presence and of what he considers humanisation at its finest: a video of a company that produces high-end fishing waders in the United States called Simms. The video posted on Simms' YouTube channel (Simms Fishing Products, 2016) shows the process of a handmade product, with intimate and emotional storytelling, presenting the staff and their working environment.

Humanising the brand created a connection, and just like Baer (n.d., no pagination) affirms

*I don't know all that much about fishing waders. But after watching this video, I might buy some just to support the craftsmen and craftswomen at Simms, who are justifiably proud of their work.*

So going back to the new concept that people believe in people, the change of paradigm is plausible.

There are different ways for brands to take advantage of the use of SMM as it is an effective use of the marketing budget, and even small and medium enterprises (SMEs) can benefit from it. And as more and more people engage online daily, social media has become vital for companies to use as a marketing tool (Nisar and Whitehead, 2016). Additionally, the benefits can be having access to larger audiences by reaching new customers. But also maintaining and retaining existing users, targeting advertisements based on data collection, building connections and “user loyalty” by listening to customers, and using the audience to solve business problems, enhancing the brand image and personality, driving sales by monitoring and engaging in consumer purchase decisions; growing fast by leveraging the UGC; and making use of the algorithms, as it learns about consumers' behaviour (Nisar and Whitehead, 2016, p.745; Dapke, 2014; Borges-Tiago et al., 2019; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017). Besides, good customer service and robust customer engagement strategies also result in viral marketing by individuals using effective electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) without extra cost to the brand (Nisar and Whitehead, 2016).

Moreover, social media also opens up other experimental marketing opportunities, e.g. brand experience, which Yu and Yuan define (2019, p.1235) as

*[...] sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of brand design and identity, packaging, communication and environment.*

The brand-related stimuli affect consumers' perceptions whenever they connect with a brand. Tan (n.d) explains that meaningful connections make consumers express who they are by, e.g. attaining social status, as the relationship arises when there is a resemblance, creating affinity. McAteer (2018) adds that brands that share their values

are likelier to have devoted consumers regardless of age. Moreover, Disney|ABC Television, Omnicom Media Group, and Insight Strategy Group's study that aimed to understand the brand affinity connection between generations (in McAteer, 2018) showed that around 75% of people are more loyal when brands reflect their values. So what Tan (n.d.) emphasises that “that is why you hear people telling they bought “Nike shoes”, not just “shoes” (no pagination) makes even more sense as when people refer to what they bought, it means it is more than only a product.

Allebach (2019) makes a similar reference as Tan (n.d) but criticises brands for being human on social media. The article stresses how the goal of massive brands is to make people believe they are part of it, but in the end, it is “world-building for consumerism” (no pagination). However, Allebach (2019) agrees that Nike is more than only a company; it is a lifestyle that creates needs, and when people purchase, they buy status. Although he still questions whether the narratives applied are correct or wrong, he concludes that they incorporate human traits to connect with people's identities.

In an interview for Lehigh University in the United States, Marina Puzakova (in Hyland, 2019), an associate marketing professor widely studying brand anthropomorphisation, brings up another critical point of view. She explains that “once a consumer begins to think of a brand as a “friend,” any subsequent failure by the brand can feel personal” (no pagination). Moreover, a study she participated in shows the detrimental effects, claiming that a brand's reputation should be influenced by factors that reinforce consumers' perceptions of its mission. However, negative publicity, e.g. product wrongdoing, is likely to result in less favourable consumer perceptions. Especially when a brand is anthropomorphised than when it is not, since doing so makes consumers believe that the brand is more accountable for its actions (Puzakova et al., 2013).

Regardless of criticism, the strategies generate a brand experience that results in customer equity, which is crucial for long-term success. Yu and Yuan (2019, p.1237) define customer equity as “the total of the discounted lifetime values summed over all of firms' current and potential customers”. In simpler words, the customer's net worth is calculated by estimating the profit it will generate for the firm in a business-customer relationship.

So, when analysing SMM, it is safe to say that some of the most valuable assets achieved through it are brand recognition increment, improved brand loyalty, higher brand authority and more affluent customer experience (Dapke, 2014) accomplished by prioritising people. And this is also associated with relationship marketing (RM) which is the process of

*Establishing, maintaining, enhancing, and, when necessary, terminating relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met, where this is done by a mutual giving and the fulfilment of promises” (Grönroos, 2004 in Abeza et al., 2017, p.326).*

Moreover, selling promotion is not the priority in RM but making a connection with the user (Iblasi, Bader and Al-Qurini, 2016). Hence, this is the opposite of what traditional marketing focused on, as, among other things, it included only advertising and branding without considering the consumer, as seen in figure 15.

Basic Elements	Traditional Marketing	Social Media Marketing
<b>Simple Definition</b>	The process of performing market research, promotion and selling products	The process of reaching out customers through socializing, engaging and empowering a community
<b>Platforms</b>	Offline medium such as:-TV, Radio, Newspaper, Banner, Magazine, fliers, Outdoor ads. etc	Blogs, Online communities, Social Networking and sharing sites YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn.. etc
<b>Technique</b>	Mass marketing, creating brand awareness through hard selling	Creating interaction among like-minded people around a brand
<b>Approach</b>	One size fits all	Customized and teller made as per the community interest
<b>Focus</b>	Advertising and branding	People, Community
<b>Customer perception</b>	Intrusive	Inclusive and Participatory
<b>Communication channel</b>	One way interaction	Conversational, Multi directional
<b>Communication style</b>	One-to many, company to consumers	Many-to-many, company with communities, and among community members
<b>Marketing Mix elements</b>	Product, Price, Place and Promotion	People, Platform, Participation and Promotion
<b>Return on investment</b>	Return on Implementation	Return on Influence
<b>Required budget</b>	Huge Budget Needed	Minimum Budget Needed
<b>Feedback handling</b>	Not Feedback friendly due to the communication style used	Provides a real time feedback handling opportunity

Figure 15 Comparison between Traditional vs Socia Media Marketing (Dapke, 2014)

However, social media also gave consumers a voice to become storytellers and share their good and bad experiences (Yu and Yuan, 2019) by creating content in different

ways, such as text, video, and photos (Gray, 2019). Yet, the engagement created by these stories started to produce more UGC, as when individuals relate to the content, they tend to share it with their network propagating the information (Gray, 2019). With this, brand managers lost their roles as primary authors, consequently acknowledging the importance and impact of these stories on social media (Gensler et al., 2013).

Furthermore, brands had to learn and adapt to the freedom of speech users have when reaching larger audiences since social media has become a valuable means of communication for them and consumers. Plus, companies created business profiles online to share more about their products (Bharucha, 2018). So, as Scott Cook, co-founder of Intuit (in Gensler et al., 2013, p.242) declared, “a brand is no longer what we tell the consumer it is — it is what consumers tell each other it is.”

Fair’s (2019) analysis of the Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report (Edelman, 2019) points out that consumers trust content after undergoing it within different channels. As brands had to reformulate their strategy, influencers became an asset to humanise and reach audiences through social media to gain consumers' trust. Figure 16 shows how the positive influence impacts consumers’ actions:



Figure 16 Use Trusted Influencers to Break Through (Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report, 2019)

Additionally, the report concluded that the three reasons someone trusts a brand are product experience, customer experience and impact on society. This conclusion shows that people are worried about whether the product is good and how a brand treats its consumers and staff and addresses public causes.



However, Tan (n.d.) highlights that solid relationships do not happen the same with older and new generations. He explains that people are more exposed to brands compared to the past, and this constant overexposure is more likely to create a connection when having positive feelings. Additionally, this connection reflects one's actual or ideal self, which means that people relate to brands that express who they are now or who they want to become.

Analysing Tan's point of view, the new generations have predominantly lived connected to the digital world, giving them access to a broader selection of brand options than their ancestors. Moreover, as one brand's strategy is using influencers, and most influencers are from the same new generation, consumers tend to create more substantial relationships with those who think alike. And brands increasingly utilise that to humanise their communication with their audience.

## **5 DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Throughout the research, different guidelines emerged that contextualised the humanisation of media. The variables created a framework that related media to the humanisation of brands and that helped to understand and define the phenomenon.

The discussion provides an overlook of the humanisation of media, including its causes, actors, and effects. Moreover, each subchapter responds to one of the research questions by adding the findings to the debate, where most of the participants' points of view match one another. However, analysing the facts, a counterpoint emerged which raised the following argument: do people understand the difference between media and branding?

It is unclear whether the humanisation of media stems from the humanisation of brands. Or if it developed from the need to humanise digital communication. Both sectors may have blurred during the study, and this perspective became more apparent throughout the participants' considerations. However, it is also essential to understand that points of

view can result from misconceptions, as both sectors have merger forces to better deal with the digital world.

## 5.1 Understanding the Humanisation of Media

Analysing and understanding the idea of humanisation from the media perspective, it becomes evident that the social media revolution demonstrated how people approach people is what makes a significant difference in communication. Because when mass media was the only means of information, it "made the dehumanisation inherent in all mediated communication worse" (Picard, 2015, p. 34). That is because, as Lynch and de Chernatony (2004, p. 410) stated, "communication is central to human behaviour" as it connects people and builds relationships. Therefore, this shows that it does not matter if it is in person or virtually; the human factor is necessary.

Until the beginning of 1990, media companies centralised journalism. Still, with the advent of the internet and the popularisation of electronic devices, anyone could share news (Azevedo, 2015). Azevedo (2015) states that this resulted in having educated professionals and non-professionals performing the same role, as the new media made it possible to reshape how people dealt with the news and how it was produced (Thibes, 2015). This change caused a phenomenon called transmedia, which, according to Jenkins (2010, p. 944),

*[...] represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story.*

In other words, as narratives migrate from one platform to another, they develop because of the interactive activities of users as content creators (Moraes Gonçalves and Santos Galindo, 2015), where the collaborative media results in UGC but also in user-generated media (UGM). Amaral (2016) explains that UGM is different from UGC. UGM creates and distributes non-professional content as information without following and complying with journalism norms; the latter consists of content produced and published by ordinary users independent of professional practices (Amaral, 2016).

In this framework, the new interlocutors establish genuine interests and abilities when they develop their communication channels, transforming them into wealth, information, knowledge, prestige, legitimacy, and authority (Guedes, Silva and Santos, 2015). In addition, web journalism allows innovation in how it is presented by adding multimedia narratives with interactive and hypertextual content (Winques, 2015). Consequently, this made organisations search for new ways to inform, convince, and involve consumers to overcome the barrier of attention (Moraes Gonçalves and Santos Galindo, 2015).

This scenario brought the opportunity of entering online networks, as they are defined by the possibility of trust, acting as a pillar for organisations to open for dialogue and interaction and take advantage of their relevant social capital (Silva, Resende and Cunha, 2021). Therefore, using the internet allowed entrepreneurs to start their companies online (Shabir et al., 2015). And this also comes with social media replacing traditional means of communication and opening a whole new experience of marketing opportunities (Grönevik and Langfeldt, 2017). And as widely observed online, with the rise of influencers, influencer marketing became crucial to the strategy.

When asked about the communication changes with the emergence of social media and influencer marketing, participants who answered the questionnaire mostly agreed that communication became the main key factor for it to thrive. And this implies both how and with whom communication takes place.

Participant 12 starts explaining that

*Communication has become more democratic and accessible, and viewers can choose what they want to follow, which was impossible in traditional offline media.*

Participant 2 adds that "the world had to reinvent itself! Newspapers, radio and TV ruled the world! And today, anyone has the power to speak, to have an opinion". This thinking meets with Participant 16 statement, which goes deeper into the power of speech:

*Now everyone is demanded to speak up. The black lives matter movement last year was proof of the big changes that social media brought into communication. Everyone has a voice and everyone has to use it. If you keep silent about your principles and about what's going on in the world, you will be charged for it.*

The above statement shows how everyone means all, regardless of being ordinary people or someone with relevance.

When viewing communication on social media from a business perspective, Participant 4 claims that "today, every content creator is a brand, everything he does, says, and posts communicate something". Moreover, Participant 6 complements:

*Social media and influencer marketing have changed communication; it is much faster and more dynamic, there are no physical barriers, and a campaign can impact anyone worldwide with internet access on social networks [...] (as) communication between two parties is open and not just one-way information - in the case of traditional advertisements in which only the brand says what it wants, but has no interaction with the audience that is watching.*

Moreover, Participant 18 explains that social media changed "the perception of proximity that people feel to brands because "real" people advertise them"; and adds that the audience feels they participate as "they can give reviews/feedback". Participant 18 also claims that social media have "greater agility in product/brand disclosure and feedback".

These declarations show how social media made brands and others working online adapt and be multifunctional. Because as Participant 8 declared:

*Influencer marketing didn't exist before for "non-famous" people, so I think everyone who works with social media sees themselves learning different professions.*

With the recognition of psychological and emotional elements, such as reassurance and responsiveness, which make brands stand more (Lynch and de Chernatony, 2004), many firms entered the digital world to achieve a wider audience. As a result, this became a business strategy, as online, they can share their humanlike narratives to establish relationships between brand and consumer (Hede and Watne, 2013).

From a profound perceptive, convergence goes for both companies and the media. According to Jenkins (2004), it became more than a branding opportunity and made media companies learn how to deliver content to increase revenue and strengthen viewers' engagement. New means of communication and dialogue changed interactions,

claims, conflict management and how voices are legitimised (Guedes, Silva and Santos, 2015).

Furthermore, not only UGC and UGM are influential, but firm-generated content (FGC) is too. FGC is "content created by marketers on official brand pages on social media channels" (Colicev, Kumar and O'Connor, 2018, p. 3). It is a crucial factor when enhancing companies' relationships with target users, creating positive effects on sales and profit (Poulis, Rizomyliotis and Konstantoulaki, 2018; Adeola, Hinson and Evans, 2020). The result is that brands can also share their personality and, when communicating it correctly, have better consumer responses and attitudes (Grönevik and Langfeldt, 2017). To achieve this, marketers implemented brand humanisation strategies, such as anthropomorphisation, personification, and user imagery (Hede and Watne, 2013). Additionally, firms benefit from social-network proneness, the engagement generated by the support and interaction of consumers with other consumers that create more excellent value and positive influence (Kumar et al., 2015).

All of this shows that effective communication is crucial to humanising. Recuero (in Guedes, Silva and Santos, 2015) states that mutual social interactions create bonds where people build a sense of belonging. And this is done by co-creating brand narratives, which may increase consumers' affinity (Hede and Watne, 2013). Also, Valentini (2015) adds that viewers prefer humanised news that contains personal information as they are the most read on news portals. This context can relate to what Souza and Pinto (2021) explain, that journalists are social agents that create journalistic narratives. They should examine all sides of the argument to acquire a humanised situation with empathic relationships because the interpretation of the information and its sharing can affect how people perceive the message and respond to it.

The different interpretations may relate to what Participant 12 added when identifying that communication has to be assertive because people can choose what to see and who to follow. So, to have positive relationships:

*It is minimally essential to make clear what is being said and communicated because if the message is not clear, if there is no clarity of positioning, it will be difficult for a qualified and faithful audience to form (Participant 12).*

And this opinion meets with what Fernandes (2022, no pagination) displays: “virtual connections” need to adhere to their own set of rules and have tailored content to a specific audience because overly general postings fail to engage readers.

Communication influences many ways, and Participant 4 argues that branding has changed forever. Because

*If before having a logo, a brand manual, etc., was necessary, today, a post on Twitter can sink or leverage the career of a creator, a brand or a personality, not to mention that it can also affect the stock market (e.g. Elon Musk's tweets).*

Back to scholarship, Carvalho et al. (2020) assume that because amateurs and professionals are now part of the same information ecosystem due to the rise of social media, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between fact and fake news and truth from rumours. Moreover, the freedom of speech people enjoy online is considered good and harmful. Participant 2, in the research findings, explains why:

*Many people without proper knowledge give opinions; it is also harmful because it leads to a hate nation and a cancel culture.*

However, Participant 2 also considers a positive side "as it took power from conventional media and gave more opportunities to many people and brands".

The study included deep research into the emergence of social media, the humanisation of brands and communication, influencer marketing and other co-related marketing, brand and media aspects. Along with the research, different backgrounds appeared through scholarly and popular debate to conceptualise the phenomenon (e.g. Picard, 2015; MacInnis and Folkes, 2016; Shabir et al., 2015; Lin, 2020; Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu, 2019). This analysis showed the media evolution and how it shifted from a one-way communication model to a two-way communication approach, removing the hierarchical structure used in mass media and giving voice to people. It also revealed how branding and media seemed to blur and their adjustment to comply with the new communication requirements of the social media revolution. These approaches concluded that the public's trust in media, or its lack, may have caused the process (Harper, 2010), together with the advance of new technologies, which introduced new

communication methods (Jucker, 2003). The new framework created the need for brand and media communications to work together to build relationships with their audience and consumers. The consequence was to humanise how messages were sent and received to diminish failure in the transmission.

Thus, this study concludes that the humanisation of media results from the social media revolution and the need to adapt to the new digital communication approach. It has also caused the media and branding to join forces and work together to leverage their interests. Moreover, it defines a communication model that makes any "communication to the masses feel more personal and human, less corporate and cold" (Participant 9) and which "seeks not only to communicate for the sake of communication but to impact and transform" (Participant 12).

## **5.2 Rise of the Humanisation of Media**

Social networks have existed since the emergence of Web 2.0. However, since Facebook opened worldwide in 2006, a new social media era began (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013). Because of it, other social media platforms, e.g. Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit and many others, emerged and were finally established after smartphones became accessible between 2008 and 2012 (Allebach, 2019). That is when social media started changing the world and becoming part of people's lives (Lin, 2020).

Claire Wardle, a researcher from Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University (in Guzman and Vis, 2016), explained in the Global Agenda Council of 2016 that

*In just seven years, newsrooms have been completely disrupted by social media. Social media skills are no longer considered niche, and solely the responsibility of a small team in the newsroom. Instead social media affects the way the whole organisation runs (no pagination).*

Social media and *smart technologies*, e.g. AI-modeled devices, intuitive algorithms, and data collection, took over and blurred real and online life. Traditional media like TV and radio, which used to be different means of communication, became part of smartphones

and other devices applications (Allebach, 2019), making people have them on hand. Additionally, over the years, intensified eWOM allowed social media to become an instrument for people to build brands through blogs and social networks (Casas, 2016). Thus, why has the humanisation of media happened?

With the constant use of social media, this channel has become a vital source of information and content (Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). The research findings demonstrate precisely its importance to the Participant's communication. When asked what tools they use to approach, relate and resemblance with their followers, 78% mentioned social media, a feature from a social media, or a specific social media platform. However, even when not discussed directly, e.g. participant 5 said: "share my life, deliver value, good storytelling", it is read as being communicated through a social media platform. So, considering these other answers, it is possible to say that all of them are social media users at some point.

When analysing the growth throughout the years, Kemp (2022) shows in the Global Digital Overview report that there will be 4.62 billion active social media users in 2022, representing over half of the world's population.

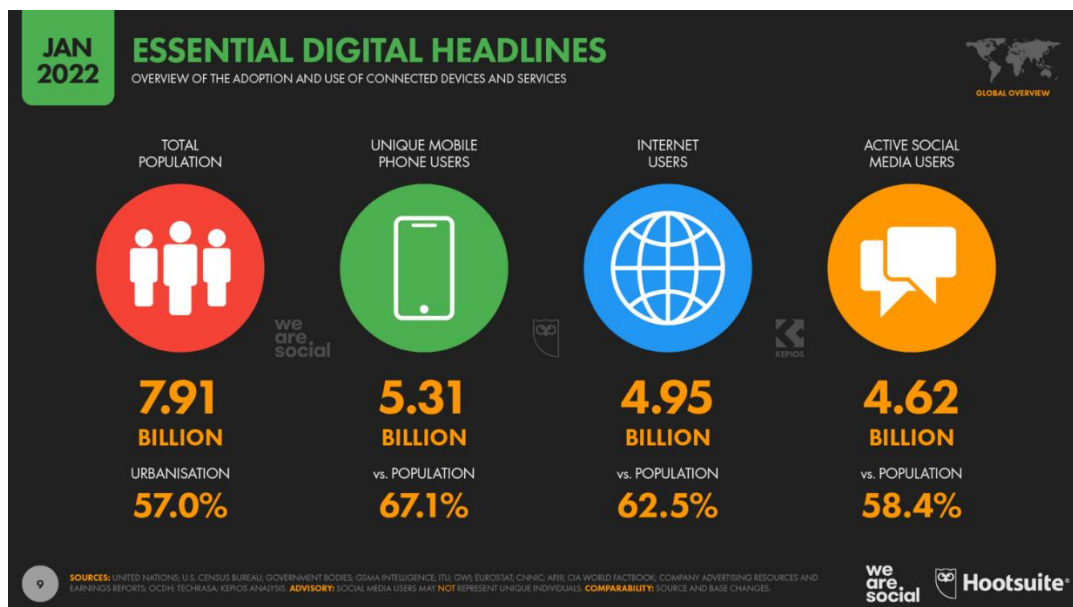


Figure 17 Global Digital Overview, DataReportal (Kemp, 2022)

It increased 3.1 times over the past decade when the total number of users was 1.48 billion and a CAGR of 12% (Kemp, 2022). However, this may not represent unique



users, as an individual may have more than one active account on the same network platform for personal or professional reasons.

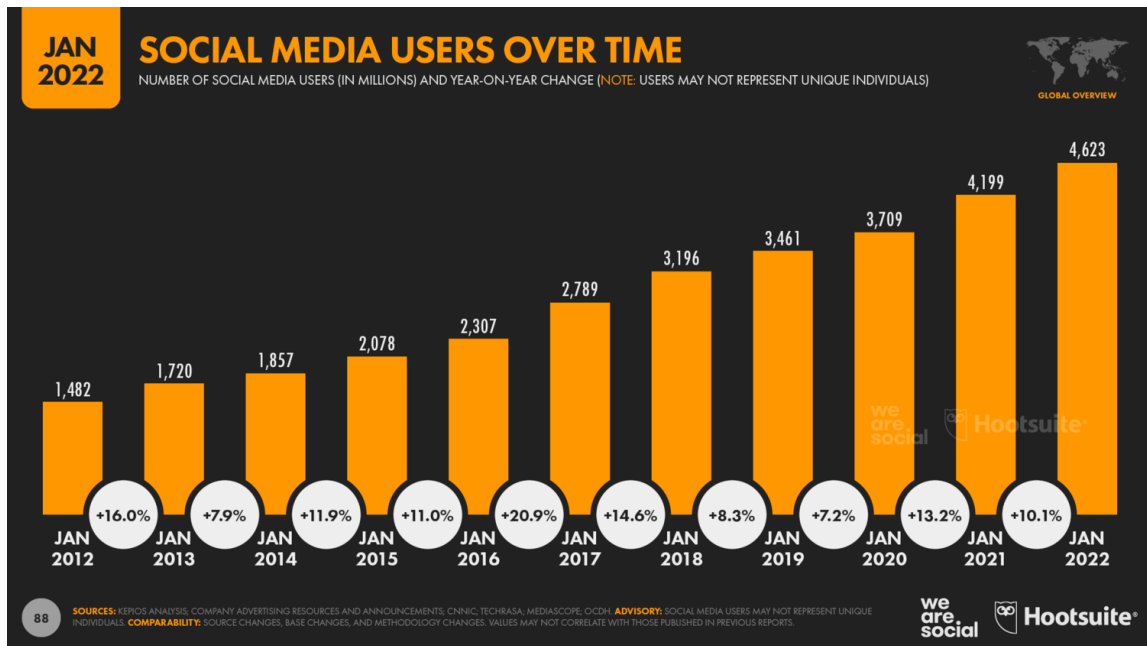


Figure 18 Global Social Media Users Over Time, DataReportal (Kemp, 2022)

Therefore, the development of media can be the result of this growth. As Ge and Gretzel (2018) assert, traditional media uses a one-way communication model focused on "communication to the audience", while social media "communicate with the audience" (Persuit, 2013, p. 62 in Ge and Gretzel, 2018). And the difference between them is the proximity between the speaker and receiver.

The research findings show that being close to the audience through social media is essential. Participant 6, which primarily uses tools on Instagram, explains that "they help bring the public closer, to humanise, show that an influencer is a person, just like them". Participant 2 adds that

*These tools connect us with the world! I follow people from Brazil and from around the world! That way, I can follow trends, news, and consumer behaviour. I use the tools to research, entertain, and give tips on exciting things. The networks make a kind of "bridge", providing access to things, people, and companies, that we did not have before.*

Firstly, analysing both responses, it is notable how direct communication can result in a faster affinity of speaker and receiver. And second, there are no distance or interest barriers anymore, as being online permits people to consume any content they desire.

Social media has functionalities that facilitate interactions, humanise communication and promote a mediated social being free from the hierarchical power structure of mass media organisations (Moraes Gonçalves and Santos Galindo, 2015; Picard, 2015). So, from the moment social media took over the media and marketing industry, it seemed as if re-humanised communication elements were rediscovered (Picard, 2015). And as Participant 12 said, the tools “make dialogue accessible”. Or as Participant 15 explains: “they shorten the path between the influencer and their audience; there is a genuine and sincere exchange between the two sides that is very nice!”. Because in the end, “it's about whoever has a voice to speak, but whoever listens can respond” (Participant 12). So back to re-humanising communication, real connections lead to genuine relationships.

Participant 6 exemplifies the use of Instagram tools in communication relations:

*Stories are excellent for creating relationships and approximation with the public (as they feel) closer than a post. Also, the question boxes help with this approximation; in addition to "feeling" which topic interests followers the most, I do it every Sunday. And reply to comments on photos and DMs (direct messages) shows that you have dedicated time to followers who feel "special", and (this) helps create a stronger bond.*

Additionally, storytelling has always made part of people's lives regardless of their field, which is essential to content creation. And when used on social media, Participant 13 explains well how it should be: “storytelling with generous pinches of reality. I value more real content than rehearsed content, which works well with my audience”. Besides, social media also created new language styles by using animated stickers, GIFs, emoticons and emojis, which made firms readapt their persuasive rhetoric strategies to achieve consumer response (Ge and Gretzel, 2018). Back to the findings, Participant 1 mentions how the communication happens: "(by using) directed language like: "what do you think?" instead of "you" (plural), GIFs, surveys, I answer everyone always showing attention". Analysing the method, Participant 1 prefers a singular

approach instead of using you as plural and already implements the new language styles.

According to Allebach (2019), corporate brands were humanlike pioneers on social media between 2011 and 2014, setting the trend mainly through Twitter. He adds that the interaction is known as parasocial interaction (PSI) and defines it as the

*[...] psychological relationship between an audience and mass media, where audience members begin to view media personalities as friends, but in reality it's almost always a one-sided relationship (Allebach, 2019, no pagination).*

However, this tendency evolved, and brands faced the challenge of building a relationship with consumers by delving deeper into community interactions to win fans and followers (Nowak, Rudeloff and Pakura, 2021). Because the expansion of eWOM shows how visibility is not what one publishes but how one's followers interact with it (Casas, 2016). Besides, social media became a means for brands to deal with market changes and leverage their growth (Ingram, 2021) as humanisation turned vital in branding strategy (Hede and Watne, 2013).

The findings demonstrate how applying it as a strategy is beneficial. Participant 10 says that "it is possible to share quality and extremely assertive content". Participant 7 asserts that "through it, we reach the customer". And Participant 3 goes deeper and expounds that they provide "ease and segmentation in communication. I can identify each person's stages of consciousness to communicate correctly with each of them".

Ingram (2021) expresses that social media has been a deal breaker in reducing business bureaucracy for many organisations, as consumers and companies can dialogue, ensuring better customer relationships. He also affirms seven different usage benefits: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and group, offering a low-cost direct marketing channel to companies. And a positive effect is that these benefits contribute to SMEs and larger organisations as they learn from other's activities online (Ingram, 2021).

The findings also expose that 33% use newsletters or email marketing in their communication strategy. This type of communication provides specific news to those

who have signed up for the material. And to sign up, a person has to give their personal information. Getting to this stage of trust may result from how each brand or individual humanises the dialogue with their audience on social media.

The old communication methods were no longer efficient, and a new approach was needed. By analysing the information, with the development of social networks and the voice they gave to people, the humanisation of media emerged from the need to structure a better communication system between sender and receiver. This system appears to be positive; however, it has to be taken into consideration that freedom of speech and communication is still a construction process online, and many factors may influence the relationship's success.

### **5.3 Humanisation of Media versus Influencers**

MacInnis and Folkes (2016) affirm that discussions of the humanisation of brands have happened in the literature for over 20 years. Different variables have risen of why humanisation was needed. And as seen in MacInnis and Folkes's (2016) figure, these have evolved, resulting in first having anthropomorphisation with a "human-focused perspective", then a "self-focused perspective", and finally a "relationship-focused perspective" (MacInnis and Folkes, 2016, p.2).

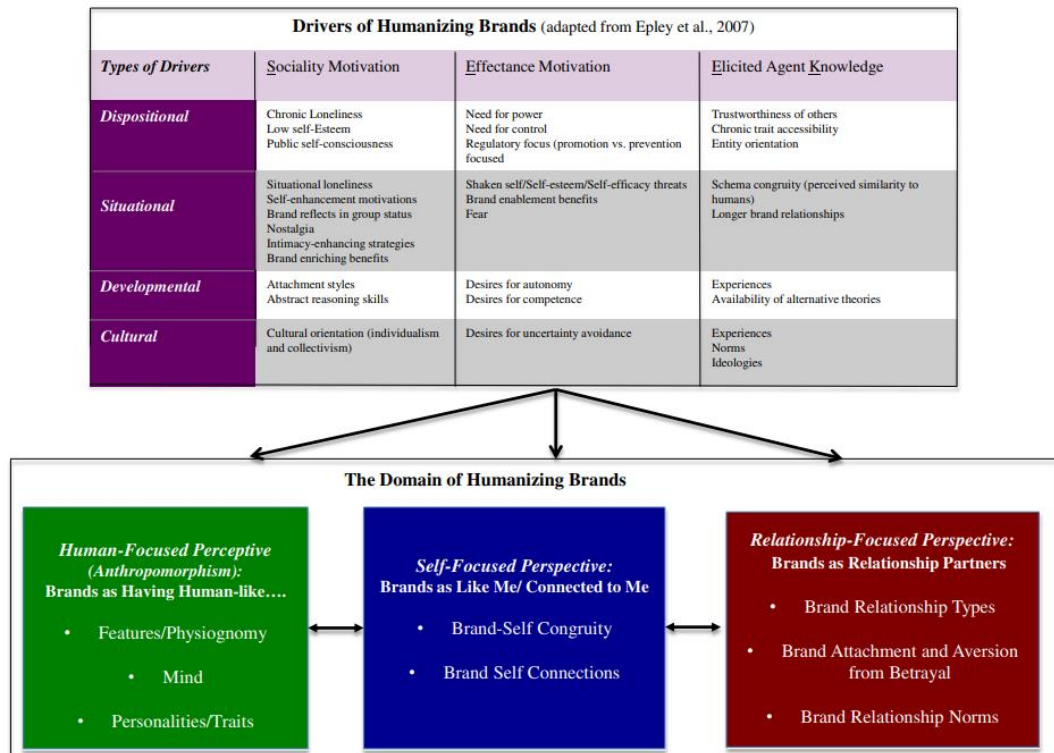


Figure 19 The domain and drivers of humanising brands (MacInnis and Folkes, 2016, p.3)

The branding evolution may relate to what Andy Stalman, co-founder and CEO of TOTEM Branding in Madrid, Spain (Inta.org, 2022) and considered one of the world's foremost branding authorities, declares in an interview with the International Trademark Association (INTA). He states that businesses have become more pervasive (and not just omnipresent) in people's lives due to the development of the internet and social media over the past two decades. Because their primary focus is on perception, as it represents what "people feel, say and think", and by creating relationships, as "relationships are more important than transactions" (Stalman, 2022 in Inta.org, 2022, no pagination). Offering a superior product or service is not enough for user retention; consumer relationships are more valuable. And this is possible because social media has substantially altered the communication methods between customers and businesses (Nisar and Whitehead, 2016). So, thinking about this change, the question of who came first, influencers or humanisation, arose.

According to Participant 9, "this is a difficult question". Perhaps it is, as depending on how it is analysed, the answer may be ambiguous and even confusing. The research findings displayed that 33% of the participants think the necessity of influencers to humanise media/brand communication came first. While 56% believe it was the

opposite: the need to humanise arose with the emergence of influencers, and 11% of the answers were unclear.

Since Web 2.0, people have increasingly used the internet for various purposes. Kemp's (2022) analysis of people's motivations to go online in the latest Digital 2022 Global Overview Report shows that the number one is searching for information, with 61% of users. Nonetheless, 45.8% of consumers use it to research products and brands and 51.3% for how to do things. According to Kemp (2022), the high percentage of the last two motivations expose how people go online with the "intention of solving problems or learning new skills" (no pagination). Moreover, as seen in figure 20, social networks rank second, with 95.2% of consumers accessing them.

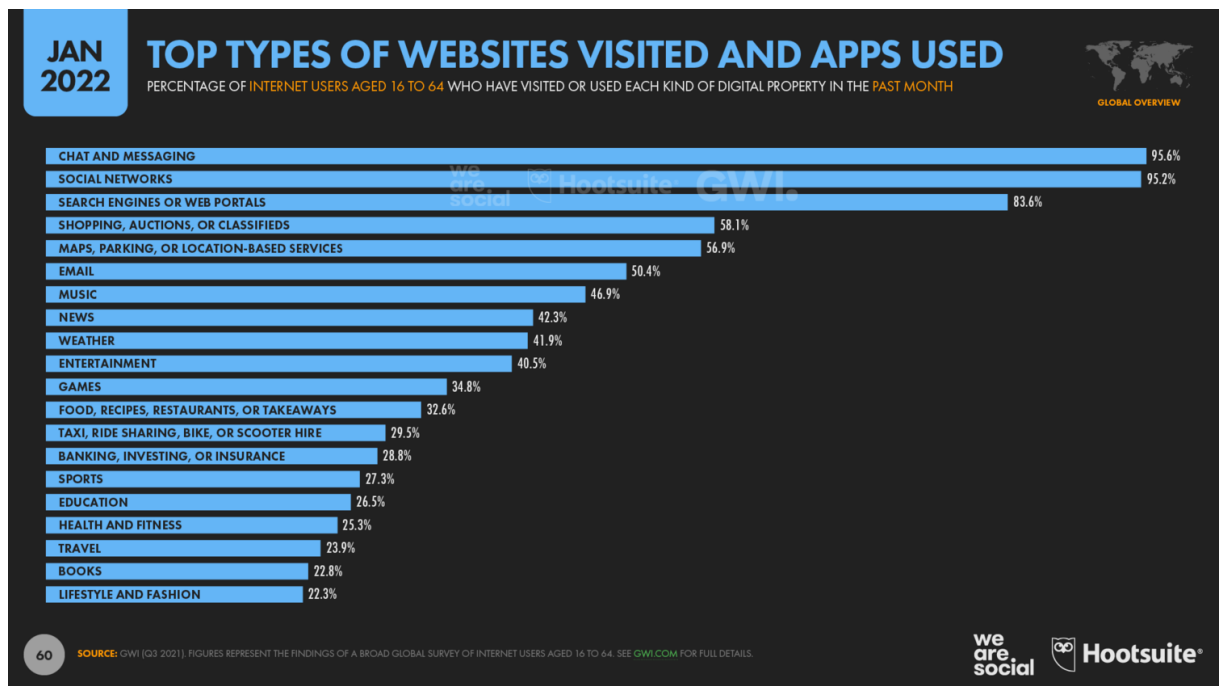


Figure 20 Top Types of Websites Visited and Apps used (Kemp, 2022)

And why are these rates so expressive? Because according to Silva, Resende and Cunha (2021), digital networks have two relevant components to function correctly: first, the actors, made up of businesses, groups, or people, who feed the web either individually or collectively; and second, connections, which show how users engage with one another. Analysing this consideration, consumers would be the connections, and influencers would be the actors.

The statements of how brands have changed over the years may also bring up three outcomes. First, that brand humanisation precedes brand relationship. Because as Orlando (2021, p.9) displays, "the brand must first be humanised in the consumer's mind to be legitimised as a relationship partner". Second, that dialogue and interaction are crucial to maintaining and improving relationships. And third that social media platforms became a primary tool opening new advantages for RM strategies because of their two-way interaction and extensive audience range (Abeza et al., 2017; Orlando, 2021).

Analysing the findings, Participant 6 states:

*I understand that today's so-called "influencers" were born from people who first shared tips, routines, and a diary on blogs. People who read blogs felt closer to the blogger than to soap opera actors, TV advertisements or newspapers; (being) a more informal and "real" communication, almost as if they were friends with the "blogger". At that time, there weren't many social networks, and when they emerged, there was a transitional movement from blogs to social media; that is when "influencers" arose with a more humanised, natural, and close communication with followers. I think that more humanised communication is a result of the emergence of influencers.*

Taking into consideration Orlando and Abeza et al. (2021; 2017) points of view together with Participant 6 statement, it is possible to find similarities in the discussion. Participant 6 exposes that people follow bloggers who became influencers when they migrated from one social network to another. When connecting the findings' data to theory, it is feasible to claim that the humanisation process began as a blogger and continued as an influencer. And that is a result of communication becoming more accessible in a social platform that gives tools to perform with a two-way interaction system. With this perspective in mind, it is possible to argue that the theory and findings concur with Participant 6's assertion that "the emergence of influencers is the cause of humanised communication".

Participant 10 also adds that humanisation arose with the influencer's possession of space and states that:

*Influencers have gained attention and audiences previously reserved for (media) vehicles and brands. In this scenario, brands began to understand that to recapture customer attention, they would need to do it through precisely these people.*

This point of view shows that these people, the influencers, took the lead in communication.

Influencers emerged from social networks and have a significant role in humanising brands and the media. When asked what the importance of using influencers in communication is, Participant 5 explains that "they can communicate a message that many companies cannot get through traditional media straightforwardly and transparently". And this relates to Participant 2 opinion:

*(The importance is) purchase by affinity and (to have) many options. Today, followers/customers buy from profiles they resemble. In the past, we were sold to TV and radio merchandising. It was a "small/limited world" and "for the few" because they are costly media. We didn't have so much access to options, we couldn't get to know many brands, and the internet made that a lot easier! Today you have a thousand possibilities for products and brands in a single influencer.*

Hudson et al. (2016 in Grönevik and Langfeldt, 2017) found that anthropomorphisation on social media causes a more intense consumer reaction towards the brand. Instagram, for instance, is a platform that permits engagement, stimulates social presence, and leverages relationships (Orlando, 2021). Influencers are drivers of these factors. According to Participant 10, influencers brought the following:

*Ability to amplify your message as a brand, take personal assets of influencers into yourself while branding (helping to consolidate your institutional brand), niche reach (qualified audience) and the ability to obtain metrics and audience responses through data. It is currently the most intelligent and assertive way for brands to relate to their end customers.*

Therefore, relating findings with theory, brands who collaborate with them take advantage of their credibility, authenticity and attractiveness (Reinikainen et al., 2021) to endorse sales, as widely observed online. The endorsement happens because using them humanises communication, increasing brand engagement with consumers (Orlando, 2021). Participant 11 adds that using influencers "employs an approach and affinity strategy with the target audience". And to accomplish humanisation, Hede and Watne (2013, p.207) refer to the "sense of place" (SoP) as the bonds between people and their environment. They suggest that SoP may foster and strengthen consumer-brand emotional relations as the narratives created may help consumers understand their purchasing experiences and ambience.



However, Participant 4 has another view of how humanisation arose and explains that:

*I believe that the need to humanise brands has always existed; the difference is that after ordinary people started to have a tremendous power of influence, brands began to understand the need to work with these influencers and not only with actors/actresses/singers. So, the first option came first.*

This argument relates to Participant 9's thinking which agrees that the need to humanise already existed and adds that:

*The need to humanise existed at some level but arose more with the emergence of influencers. Companies have always hired celebrities to endorse their brands, which is probably an early attempt to humanise brands. The difference is the personal touch of influencers, which made it seem like WOM marketing in the early stages of influencers.*

Anthropomorphisation has been a brand strategy used for decades. When analysing the scenario based on this concept, both Participant's arguments correctly state that humanisation was applied or attempted before the influencers' emergence. Moreover, Participant 7 brings another opinion:

*I believe that the need to humanise the brand made room for influencers. Through the growth of social media, brands realised that consumers wanted to interact more with them and that doing so through a "person like it" was a viable option. Additionally, it was more profitable for the business to invest in several niche influencers rather than a single celebrity.*

Furthermore, Hart et al. (2013 in Grönevik and Langfeldt, 2017) add that humanisation as a business application is prone to boost perceived consumer value. Plus, it is noticeable that people are connected online not just through social connections but also by context, similar experiences, and shared interests (Amaral, 2016). So, as Stalman (Inta.org, 2022, no pagination) stated, "humanising brands in the Digital Age is becoming a very profitable business" and "the more digital we become, the more we need the human touch and human interaction".

However, positive and negative emotions may interlace when the bonds between influencers, followers, and brands grow more robust. So, depending on how these emotions are displayed, it may result in possible gains or losses to the brand or influencer (Reinikainen et al., 2021).

After assessing the investigation, this study questions if it is indispensable to know which of them, influencers or humanisation, came first. Moreover, the results have not impacted the outcomes as both points of view may be considered valid. More in-depth research is recommended to examine anthropomorphisation's timeline and psychological effects versus humanisation if deemed necessary.

## **5.4 Humanisation Revolution**

In 1999, Bernd H. Schmitt's book *Experimental Marketing: How to Get Customers to Sense - Feel - Think - Act - Report to Your Company and Brands* suggested a review of the communication processes supported by conventional media (Moraes Gonçalves and Santos Galindo, 2015). Schmitt's proposal included working with sensations, affection and affairs as consumers should be emotionally involved in pleasurable experiences (Moraes Gonçalves and Santos Galindo, 2015).

Compared to traditional media, social media has become increasingly important to all brands in communicating and connecting with their audiences (Nowak, Rudeloff and Pakura, 2021). Consequently, social media significantly changed branding (Gensler et al., 2013), which may have caused both businesses to blur. But how has humanisation changed the media?

Over the last decade, massification has given way to individualisation, gradually transitioning from the information age to the post-information age. According to Amaral (2016), computer-mediated communication (CMC) and human-computer interaction (HCI) renewed the traditional communication process. Moreover, Amaral (2016) also suggests that the receiver was the sender, thus setting a precedent for social interactions. This paradigm corresponds socially to a new collective model that emerged with the spread of social media from 2004 onwards.

In other words, social media opened a new way of delivering content, allowing anyone to share whatever they want as an individual or a professional on their terms. Because as

Participant 14 says, the tools used to communicate “makes the content more interactive rather than expository”, and as Participant 9 adds:

*Social media has made it easier for brands and companies to see and understand what customers think in real time - through comments on posts, etc. It allowed companies to get closer to customers outside of small Focus groups. It made digital marketing more informal, young and fun. Influencers also play a role in this. With time, brands had to allow influencers to talk in their own way and create their own content, in order for the message to look natural to the audience, and not just another publicity stunt.*

This context gave people the "freedom of media choice" to express themselves socially (Szcurski, 2017, p.5). Therefore, it developed a two-way communication channel where media organisations had no more control over the information. Thus, media relations became crucial to establish connections, adapting to the rapid hybridisation of the media environment, the pervasiveness of social media, and the rise of social media influencers (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019).

When asked how the tools used to communicate with the audience contribute to the media and branding evolution, based on the research findings, Participant 3 discusses that there is a "much more assertive communication". And that is because

*What used to be one-way, today, you can fully understand the needs of your audience, so the content creation, products and services are more direct and specific (Participant 3).*

To face the change, ZadakBar (2022), founder and CEO of The Armin Bar (NYC|Milan), brings up a good point: "businesses need to understand that they are communicating with a complicated system – humans" (no pagination), which means that they are now dealing directly with the public.

Communication requires reciprocity, connecting with or sharing something with another person (Guedes, Silva and Santos, 2015). The interaction between sender and receiver, facilitated by, e.g. comments, shares, likes, and memes, "can strengthen relationships, ties, and social bonds", resulting in positive engagement that leads to "kinship, empathy, fidelity, and loyalty" (Silva, Resende and Cunha, 2021, translated, p.9). However, Participant 11 demonstrates concern about "maintain(ing) a more emotional and bidirectional relationship with the public".

Therefore, all communication demands efforts to reach the organisation's and its audiences' needs, encouraging dialogue to manage disputes and balance interests (Guedes, Silva and Santos, 2015). So, the cornerstone of effective public relations forges solid bonds via open, genuine, and transparent communication between companies and their audiences (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019). Or as asserted by Participant 6, by demonstrating "my values, positioning, worldview, lifestyle, and opinion, the brands can identify whether they are consistent with their branding". So analysing findings and theory conclude that communication is key to relationships, whether from an influencer/audience, influencer/brand or brand/audience perspective. Or as Participant 15 well stated: "in the end, the answer to everything is relationship. Sincere and true!".

This thinking comes back to what ZadakBar (2022) adds: for communication to be successful, it is necessary to apply the same offline contact principles of psychology and behavioural biology to the digital context. The challenge fell to social media managers, who must pursue their organisation's marketing communications, public relations, and brand communications goals. However, they must use integrated digital communication techniques and incorporate strategic public relations and marketing content (Nowak, Rudeloff and Pakura, 2021). Moreover, modern journalism turned professionals into news production machines, as the same journalist can write news in different formats, e.g. TV, radio and newspaper (Valentini, 2015).

The research findings brought some perspectives on the possible merger between social media and branding. Participant 4 states it was a natural communication evolution, and Participant 18 adds that it happened as "a result of the popularisation of influencers". Participant 5 goes beyond by affirming that "it was inevitable not to happen. (As) today, those out of the internet do not exist".

The new reality changed the tone used to communicate the messages, differing from what traditional media used. Participant 3 argues that:

*I think the time has come for a brand to exist outside conventional media. The, e.g. TV commercials, were restricted and with no relationships. (However), you can directly interact with customers through social media. (So), I believe branding has gained a new pillar now that it has become much more human.*

Moreover, Participant 2 states that

*Branding expanded (as) before the big celebrities, magazines, (and) brands who dictated the brandings. And today, anyone can have their personal branding, so to speak! I think social media has demystified things! Making everything more accurate (and) accessible.*

However, Participant 12 brings another view and displays a worry about what the blurring movement may cause, referring to it as dangerous:

*I think it's dangerous. Branding is vital for professional positioning, but at the same time, talking about people who are flesh and blood and also a brand, the obsession with branding can undermine people's spontaneity, humanisation and even authenticity. No one is as consistent in their personal lives as branding suggests it should be.*

Although, based on the research findings, it seems as if branding has eventually blurred with media, Participant 10 opposes this theory:

*My opinion is that the market still does not clearly understand that these are different elements. Social media is not branding; (but) it is a resource that helps build a brand's branding. Branding is an umbrella and the sum of all the touch points of a brand and not just a digital positioning.*

Discussions on the subject should consider this point of view as it may affect how effectively both elements are utilised.

Apart from this, an article by Eo Ipso Communications (2018), a German strategic agency, calls attention to ways of humanising a company on social media and its consequences. Analysing the report, companies must switch their communication from monologues to dialogue, set a cohesive voice and tone, and be authentic. Plus, humanising the service comprises people and language, integrating the development of open and dialogic relationships in an era when social media has become more popular (Silva, Resende and Cunha, 2021). Because social media is an excellent communication tool; however, content can escalate fast, defeating or enhancing one's reputation. So this first change is crucial as it will gradually cultivate a devoted group of followers who become fans and stand by during crises.

Additionally, social media is all about being social. Brands must prioritise people instead of making their profile just a product display. And this does not mean only

prioritising fans and consumers but also enhancing their staff by creating a community and using influencers to develop intimacy and affinity. Also, personalised content shows that companies comprehend consumers' needs, and a portion of well-placed humour when communicating is welcome (Eo Ipso Communications, 2018). Examining the research findings, Participant 6 discusses that:

*I think it's natural that the form and means of communication change over time. Social media has required brands to change how they communicate. Companies that have been able to create 360 communication plans that encompass traditional media and social media have created value for their brands. Social media requires evaluating and paying attention to which influencers convey the brand's values in line with its branding; (because) the influencer becomes the "face" of the brand, and hiring any influencer who does not have the same purposes can be self-defeating.*

Yet, Jenkins (2004) brings opposition by declaring that convergence was a risk because it forced media organisations to reevaluate what media consumption meant. He adds that old and new customers have different consuming habits and beliefs about dealing with the media. And, if formerly consumers were silent and unseen, now they are loud and visible (Jenkins, 2004).

In a summary of Wellington College articles analysing how social media impacts teenagers, Annie et al. (in Wellington College, 2022, no pagination) stated that "social media has revolutionised the news". It has become one of the primary sources of information for a substantial portion of the global population, and this expansion impacts opinions, decisions and views (Matthew and Ben, 2022 in Wellington College, 2022). This behaviour change has also taken social media and consumers to another level of relationship.

Consequently, it also creates positive and negative effects on society as connectivity leads to benefits, such as, e.g. education, noble causes awareness, advertisements, online community building, and news, among others. But the downside of it can be brutal, with cyber harassment, hacking, addiction, and reputation care being some effects of online exposition (Akram and Kumar, 2017). The Wellington College summary still shows that social media suffers constant judgments by damaging mental health (Estelle et al. in Wellington College, 2022), as the adverse effects are the most disseminated. However, Estelle et al. (in Wellington College, 2022) affirm that a report by Pew Research Centre

disclosed that 57% of teens make friends online, which makes connection and interaction reduce stress and improve mental health. Lin (2020) affirms that social media has advantages and disadvantages. It leverages business growth and promotion but has also given rise to issues with "mental health, emotional insecurity, and time waste for many people" (Lin, 2020, no pagination).

By putting theory and findings together, it is possible to say that humanisation changed how the media communicates. And by transforming the communication system changed how the industry performs.

## **6 FUTURE RESEARCH**

The humanisation of media is a complex subject, and stakeholders still misunderstand its role and how it affects the industry. Moreover, the research findings presented that there is still a lack of knowledge about the topic, especially as it is often confused with the humanisation of brands. So, due to scholarship scarcity, it is recommended to continue investigating the phenomenon and the consequences it may bring to the media sector.

Influencers also play an essential role in the humanisation of media. However, this study contested if it is indispensable to know whether they originated from humanisation or the reverse. So, the study suggests a chronological analysis, contrasting the psychological effects of anthropomorphisation and humanisation to have more knowledge about the issue.

Additionally, it is still unclear if branding and social media have indeed blurred. There are variables which conclude that it has; however, both are different elements helping each other to manage the digital world. And this is because stakeholders deal with it as a merger, but the market shows they might need to be treated separately. So for complete comprehension, a profound study is supported to understand the differences, the similarities, how they work together and how they grow apart.

## 7 CONCLUSION

Web 2.0 has changed communication in all means. And this resulted in the new digital era creating a necessity for adaptation not only for the media sector but for all those who use communication skills, including brands, self-brands and other types of organisations.

Being in the field and analysing how communication evolved over the years has shown that the two-way communication model arose abruptly without planning. And that can be seen when considering old predictions that the internet would not even last (Parr, 2015), with some believing it would end by 1996. Parr (2015) says that people did not think online databases would replace daily newspapers. Yet, 39 years have passed since the modern internet officially emerged in 1983 and 32 years since the World Wide Web's invention in 1990 (Andrews, 2019), and all these predictions have failed. Plus, the internet constantly evolves, and there is still a long way to understand how its development will affect digital communication over the years with the addition of new technologies.

The same happened when bloggers arose in the early 2000s and later when social media influencers transformed the internet with the beginning of Instagram in 2010. Meredith Vieira (in Kahn, 2019), an American broadcaster, asked Naomi Campbell in an interview in 2015 how she felt about Instagirls. Adamantly predicting they would not last long, she said, "easy come, easy go". Obviously, this is not how history happened. An expressive example is how Kylie Jenner became the "world's youngest 'self-made' billionaire at 21" (Kahn, 2019) by using her voice on Instagram.

But going back to how the humanisation of media emerged, the social media revolution gave a voice to people, making mass media lose control of information propagation. Social networks took over the internet and people's lives. Consequently, the humanisation process derives from the change because the old communication version, with the one-way interaction model, became inefficient. A new approach was needed to deal with many people actively sharing their voices on the internet because although communication is virtual, it still requires human factors. That is how social media has



become vital, and probably why 78% of the research participants identified it as their primary communication tool. Because through social media, communication has become more democratic and accessible to all, whether media organisations, brands, influencers, or ordinary people. And this is how the two-way model developed channels for interlocutors to establish genuine interests with their audience.

Furthermore, influencers play an important role in social media as digital networks have two relevant components to function correctly: connections and actors, in which consumers can represent the connections and the influencers, the actors. Thus, how this importance plays actively is as them being mediators of communication for brands and other organisations. But when relating them to the emergence of the humanisation of media, the debate can take different paths. When connecting the findings' data to theory, it is feasible to claim that the humanisation process began as people became bloggers and continued when they migrated to influencers. Some say this natural process made brands follow the same lead. However, others affirm that humanisation has always existed and derives from anthropomorphisation.

Therefore, the discussion of who arose first, influencers or humanisation, came to a halt as even participants defined it as complex to answer correctly. The research demonstrated the ambiguity the case might have, as 33% of the participants think the necessity of influencers to humanise media/brand communication came first. While 56% believe it was the opposite: the need to humanise arose with the emergence of influencers. And 11% of the answers were not considered. According to the research findings, the need to humanise arose with the emergence of influencers. However, both points of view have value, depending on each one's perspective. So this study questions if knowing who came first may change any future research outcome.

If Web 2.0 changed communication, humanisation changed how media communicates. Consequently, the humanisation of media revolutionised the industry's performance by creating a new communication model that aims to impact and transform with a more personal and human touch. However, dealing with humans is not straightforward — anyone receiving information can interpret it differently depending on their backlog, line of work and experience. So the model can attract positive or negative consequences, which may result in increased revenue or hate and cancel culture.

Moreover, social media is often associated with branding, with many believing they have blurred. However, the research findings raised a conflict of opinion: do the stakeholders understand that media and branding are two different elements? Although most of the research findings concur that both sectors have merged, when analysing the perspective that social media is a resource for branding and branding is not just a digital positioning, this study recognises there is confusion in how stakeholders view both markets. The study also claims that it is crucial to separate both elements when dealing with them. Likewise, the research findings categorised the merger as dangerous, as self-branding in social media is recurrent. Because what branding is and proposes can become overwhelming to achieve as an individual self. However, it also concludes that both have joined forces to deal with the constant digital changes and leverage performance to stakeholders' interests.

For a broader understanding, this study approached influencers and people who work online as entrepreneurs or with marketing and digital marketing, brand communication and public relations. The study understood that only influencers would not feel the gap created by information scarcity. So, all opinions helped the study answer three of the four proposed questions and contest one. Also, as one of the main conclusions, it has helped create a definition of the humanisation of media. Moreover, it is essential to mention that although most participants had some knowledge about the subject, not all fully understood it or had an opinion.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1. Email message: Research introduction with questionnaire invitation

Hello, 'Participant'!

I hope this email finds you well!

My name is Elisa, I follow you on Instagram, and I would like to make you an invitation.

I am a Master's Degree student in Media Management at the Arcada University of Applied Science in Helsinki, Finland. I am finishing my studies, and my thesis is about the humanisation of media. I developed a questionnaire with eight open questions to help develop the analysis. Moreover, participants will be kept anonymous to preserve their privacy.

I would like to know if you would like to participate. Indeed all your experience with social media can contribute to the research, and I would appreciate your support!

Please let me know if you want to join, and I'll send you the link! It will be a great pleasure to have your comments on the study.

I look forward to hearing from you and thank you in advance for your attention.

Kind regards,  
Elisa

## Appendix 2. Questionnaire Google Form

# Humanisation of Media | Master Degree Thesis

ENGLISH (EN)

My name is Elisa Arce Simmelink and I am a Master's Degree student in Media Management at the Arcada University of Applied Science in Helsinki, Finland.

The purpose of this research is to contribute to the Media Industry by providing scholarship about the Humanisation of Media. The scarceness of studies on the topic developed my interest to understand what it is, how it arose and what changes are consequences of this phenomenon. Your experience and contribution will be valuable not only for this research but for the ones that will follow in the future. By working together, we can help understand the evolution of media.

Please be aware that we take your concerns about privacy seriously and we make every reasonable effort to respect it. Please find important information below:

- All personal data will be kept anonymous for the participant's privacy;
- The researcher has the right to use all information given by the participant for study purposes about Humanisation of Media on the Master Degree Thesis research of the Arcada University of Applied Science;
- All the information in English will be kept original. However, information written in Portuguese will be transcript to English keeping the maximum of its originality during the translation;
- The consent agreement is at the end of the survey.

Thank you for supporting this research!

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PORTUGUÊS (PT)

Meu nome é Elisa Arce Simmelink e sou estudante de mestrado em Media Management na Arcada University of Applied Science em Helsinki, Finlândia.

O objetivo desta pesquisa é contribuir para a indústria da mídia, fornecendo um estudo acadêmico sobre a Humanização da Mídia. A escassez de estudos sobre o tema despertou meu interesse em entender o que é, como surgiu e quais mudanças são consequências desse fenômeno. Sua experiência e contribuição serão valiosas não apenas para esta pesquisa, mas para as que seguirão no futuro. Trabalhando juntos, podemos ajudar a compreender a evolução da mídia.



Esteja ciente de que levamos a sério suas preocupações sobre privacidade e fazemos todos os esforços razoáveis para respeitá-la. Confira abaixo informações importantes:

- Todos os dados pessoais serão mantidos em anonimato para a privacidade do participante;
- O pesquisador tem o direito de usar todas as informações fornecidas pelo participante para fins de estudo sobre a Humanização da Mídia na pesquisa de Dissertação de Mestrado da Arcada University of Applied Science;
- Todas as informações em inglês serão mantidas originais. No entanto, as informações redigidas em português serão transcritas para o inglês mantendo o máximo de sua originalidade durante a tradução;
- O acordo de consentimento está no final da pesquisa.

Obrigado por apoiar esta pesquisa!

---

\* Required

1. **EN:** What is your name? \*

**PT:** Qual o seu nome?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. **EN:** Choose below the areas you work with: \*

**PT:** Escolha abaixo as áreas com as quais você trabalha:

*Check all that apply.*

- Influencer/Influenciador
- Public Relations/Relações Públicas
- Digital Marketing/Marketing Digital
- Brand Communication/Comunicação de Marca
- Branding
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. **EN:** With the evolution of the internet, the development of social media and the requirement to deal with a 2-way-communication model, what do you think came first: \*

the necessity to have influencers to humanise the media/brand communication  
OR

the need to humanise arose the emergence of influencers? Explain why.

**PT:** Com a evolução da internet, desenvolvimento da redes sociais e a necessidade de lidar com um modelo de comunicação bidirecional, o que você pensa que veio primeiro:

a necessidade de ter influenciadores para humanizar a mídia/comunicação de marca OU

a necessidade de humanizar despontou com o surgimento dos influenciadores? Explique o por quê.

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4. **EN:** What is the importance of using influencers in communication? \*

**PT:** Qual a importância do uso de influenciadores na comunicação?

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5. **EN:** What tools do you use to approach, relate and create identification with your audience? \*

**PT:** Quais ferramentas você utiliza para abordar, se relacionar e criar identificação com seu público?

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6. **EN:** Why are these tools important and what do they add to your influencer/audience relationship? \*

**PT:** Por que essas ferramentas são importantes e o que elas agregam ao seu relacionamento entre influenciador/público?

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7. **EN:** Considering humanisation, what is your view on the merger that happened between social media and branding? \*

**PT:** Pensando na humanização, qual é a sua opinião sobre a fusão que ocorreu entre as mídias sociais e o branding?

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8. **EN:** In your experience, what role do the tools you use to communicate with your audience play in the media and branding evolution? \*

**PT:** De acordo com sua experiência, como as ferramentas que você utiliza para se relacionar com seu público contribuem para a evolução da mídia e do branding?

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9. **EN:** In your opinion, what has changed in communication with the emergence of social media and the use of influencer marketing? \*

**PT:** Na sua opinião, o que mudou na comunicação com o surgimento das mídias sociais e o uso do marketing de influência?

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10. **EN:** What do you understand or think the humanisation of the media is? \*

**PT:** O que você entende ou pensa que é a humanização da mídia?

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11. **EN:** Would you like to receive a copy of the study when it is published? \*

**PT:** Você gostaria de receber uma cópia do estudo quando ele for publicado?

*Mark only one oval.*

Yes/Sim

No/Não

12. **Consent Agreement** \*

"In submitting this form I agree to my details being used for the purposes of research for the Master Degree Thesis of the Arcada University of Applied Science about Humanisation of Media. The information will only be accessed by necessary university staff. I understand my data will be held securely, will not be distributed to third parties and my personal details will be kept anonymous during the research. I understand that when this information is no longer required for this purpose, the data will be disposed of."

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**Acordo de Consentimento**

"Ao enviar este formulário, concordo que meus dados sejam usados para fins de pesquisa para a Dissertação de Mestrado da Arcada University of Applied Science sobre Humanização da Mídia. As informações serão acessadas apenas por pessoas da universidade relacionadas ao estudo. Entendo que meus dados serão mantidos em segurança, não serão distribuídos a terceiros e meus dados pessoais serão mantidos anônimos durante a pesquisa. Entendo que quando essas informações não forem mais necessárias para esse fim, os dados serão descartados."

*Check all that apply.*

I consent to the usage of the information given for research purposes / Autorizo o uso das informações fornecidas para fins de pesquisa