

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54663/2182-9306.2025.v.13.n.336-362>

Research Paper

A Humanised Social Media Marketing Strategy: A Gym Chain Case in Portugal.

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ABSTRACT

Social networks enhance brand-consumer engagement. This is critical for marketing and responding to consumer behavior. The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced face-to-face interactions, prompting social media as an alternative engagement avenue. The main objective of this study is to analyze the marketing strategies and potential signs of personalized communication on the social media channels of a gym chain based in Portugal. A case study included a content analysis of the brand's social media (N=226) and a semi-structured interview with the director of the digital marketing division to validate the proposed humanization parameters. The findings underscore the necessity of a human-centric approach in social media marketing. Studies indicate that emojis are a prevalent tool. Furthermore, strategies that humanize interactions on social media enhance consumer trust and security and foster stronger consumer relationships. The findings delineate a strategic framework for business and marketing, highlighting methods relevant to public relations and brand distinction on social media via effective communication.

Keywords: social media, humanised marketing, social networks, strategy, gyms, fitness

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Received on: 2025.04.22

Approved on: 2025.12.29

Evaluated by a double-blind review system

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, social networks have experienced exponential growth, expanding beyond mere entertainment to encompass commercial opportunities. This phenomenon has ended up influencing and revolutionizing brand communication and the very positioning of companies (Gujrati & Uygun, 2020; Khan et al., 2020). The relationship between brand and consumer became more apparent during the pandemic, revolutionizing society and its behavioral norms (Hoekstra & Leeftang, 2020; Suhail et al., 2022). In the wake of COVID-19, brands are working to rebuild trust and connection with their audience (Nosi et al., 2021). This notion intersects with the idea that consumers are more likely to prioritize brands with which they form strong emotional connections (Borges-Tiago et al., 2019).

Humanized Marketing thus emerges as an advantageous tool, capable of associating positive human characteristics with the brand, initiating a long-term relationship easily and simply, with an impact on loyalty (McShane et al., 2021). The emotional bond created by Humanized Marketing reduces the distance between the brand and the consumer, positively impacting companies' strategic results.

In the physical activity and fitness club sector, which has been strongly affected by the pandemic and preventive measures, there has been a lack of effective communication strategies to engage consumers and enhance their relationship with the clubs (Ritter & Pedersen, 2020). Betting on humanized social media marketing strategies, capable of stimulating a sense of trust and safety when practicing in spaces such as gyms, ultimately meets these challenges. This theme proves the importance of the digital environment (Brem et al., 2021) in responding to adverse situations and in connectivity between users (Alsukaini *et al.*, 2023) since it mirrors the way individuals connect and interact with each other (Chauhan & Shah, 2020) emphasizing the importance of the human side of the new digital consumer. Users seek a new dynamic of interaction, desiring a more empathetic relationship in which the brand cares about the customer's intentions (Javornik et al., 2020).

Humanized marketing strategies on social networks such as Facebook and Instagram enable the assessment of communication effectiveness. They also provide insight into how a more personal approach, focusing on the emotional side of consumers, can be established as a strategic tool for fitness companies (Davis & Schwab, 2018).

This research aims to understand the marketing strategies and possible evidence of humanized communication on the social media platforms of a fitness chain located in Portugal. More specifically, want to understand how the dissemination and sharing of humanized content arouses a positive opinion and image for consumers; how the adoption of a human approach favors consumers' sense of trust; how a human approach conveys a reinforced value of security to consumers; how the bet on humanized publications can strengthen the relationship with customers; and what kind of humanization techniques are recurrently applied in the gym chain's social media strategy.

To achieve the objectives of this case study, we conducted content analysis based on the theoretical framework from the literature review. Additionally, we conducted a semi-structured interview with the gym chain's digital marketing director. This research will contribute to the knowledge of organizations in this business sector, enabling them to effectively utilize a humanized approach in their respective social networks or any other communication channels.

This article will provide a theoretical background on humanization in social media. The research will also include details about the data collection methodology used in the case study. It will present and discuss the findings of the content analysis and interviews. After that, the research will outline the key findings, address any constraints, and provide recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media marketing with personable content is an increasingly effective strategy for fostering customer loyalty and engagement. To Nikolinakou and Phua (2020), human values play a crucial role in driving valuable brand-related activities on social media. According to Kotler, Pfoertsch, and Sponholz (2021) a human-centred methodology enhances impactful communication is enhanced, promoting positive consumer experiences and facilitating the exploration of our inherent humanity. A strategy to humanise a brand on social media will need to be authentic, personable, and engaging, using personalisation and humanisation tactics, e.g., using responsive

interactions and personalised language, and considering that the content is related to strength, affection, and solidarity (De Souza & Ferris, 2015; Ruchiga & Knoll, 2019).

1.1 Humanisation strategies in social media

To implement this strategic approach, brands can adopt techniques to humanize content, such as Showcasing, Personalizing replies and comments, Feedback, opinions, testimonials, and reviews, user-generated content, adopting the video format, integrating emojis, and reinforcing social causes.

Showcasing takes as its starting point the principle that we are human beings and, as such, we continue to prioritize trust in real beings. Therefore, content that includes tangible human evidence continues to be more trustworthy. This strategy involves prioritizing the humanization of content by giving it a human face and voice. Attributing this type of element to a particular brand, or even demonstrating the actions of the brand's employees (Hollebeek et al., 2022), makes it possible to work on the organization's human competencies (Kim et al., 2016) and stimulates a more real and concrete association in the consumer's mind.

Personalization of responses and comments, based on the principle of 'make it personal' (Gil, 2019), involves providing personalized and customizable responses tailored to each customer, their profile, and their needs. This encompasses all efforts to personalize the experience to foster a more intimate and profound human connection (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). The goal is to enhance emotional connections through personalized responses, references in live streams, user mentions in comments, or any other method that promotes unity with immediate, real-time, or delayed feedback. Personalization, in terms of references to the consumer, ensures a human tone of voice (Gil, 2019; Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021) and shows the promptness of the response and the brand's concern for it (Bozkurt et al., 2021; Giertz et al., 2022; Sufian et al., 2020).

Feedback, opinions, testimonials, and reviews are fundamental sources for consumers when it comes to acquiring information about a particular product (Li et al., 2019) and can be interpreted as an advantageous promotional tool that makes it possible to attach a human value component to organizations (Voramontri & Klieb, 2019). Consumers support and admire human brands, with good feedback and opinions from the public, with external references and recommendations, which promote greater value (Chung et al., 2022; Tardin et al., 2020), stimulating trust and increasing desire (Dellaert, 2019; Fetscherin et al., 2021; Jiang & Tian, 2018). However,

consumers do not merely form connections with brands; they also establish relationships with other active consumers who maintain a relationship with the company (Badrinarayanan & Sierra, 2018). Generated Content empowers users to play a pivotal role in shaping the brand's communication and online reputation (Montecchi & Nobbs, 2018). In addition to diversifying the marketing strategy and strengthening relationships/involvement with the brand (Confente et al., 2019; He, 2016), the dissemination of this type of content makes it easier to populate institutional pages and ensures trust in the market (Müller & Christandl, 2019; Zhou et al., 2018), as it is external evidence that is perceived impartially.

The adoption of the video format shows a seductive character, close to the public, with the ability to generate authority in the market (Brock, 2021; Krämer & Böhrs, 2016) and stimulate affection for the brand (Belanche et al., 2019). Effectively, the format attracts the attention of the audience and is assimilated or memorized efficiently, reasons that promote the effective consumption of a given product or service and, at the same time, strengthen relationships with consumers, also reinforcing the concept of humanization (Vermot-Gauchy, 2021).

The integration of emojis is ushering in a new hybrid approach to messaging based on combining written discourse with visual graphic elements, which facilitates communication and gives organizations an emotional tone. Emojis make strategic copy more engaging, make it easier to decode the message (Martin et al., 2017), and can promote more flexible, multi-sensory communication, like real human sensations and expressions (Crivelli & Fridlund, 2018; Van Vleet & Feeney, 2015; Willoughby & Liu, 2018).

Reinforcing social causes is related to the social axis, giving space to communicating the brand's ideals about certain issues (Baptista & Costa, 2021). Consumers expect brands to have an attitude and a position about the world around them (Bieglmeyer & Fernandes, 2017; Deshpande, 2019), and it is, therefore, imperative that organizations express their points of view and embrace causes that are aligned with their identity (Craddock et al., 2018). Brands with tangible evidence mirror an idea of 'mind, spirit, and heart' through proximity to the public and encourage their support/engagement, ultimately generating a positive reputation in the market (Sarkar & Kotler, 2021).

A human-centred strategic trend in brand marketing communication, particularly on social media, aims to strengthen consumer trust and confidence (Audrezet et al., 2020; Kotler et al., 2021).

However, cultivating trust in digital contexts poses significant challenges for marketers due to the absence of a tangible presence (Irshad & Ahmad, 2019).

Social media platforms serve as effective tools for brands that foster genuine relationships with customers, especially when a sincere engagement approach is used (Ebrahim, 2019; Hughes et al., 2019).

Furthermore, digital consumers tend to establish deeper connections with humanized brands that engage in positive marketing communication, are attentive to consumer attitudes, promoting online interactions that resonate with cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects, leading to lasting relationships (Hollebeek et al., 2022; Sirgy, 2018; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019).

The humanized marketing strategy strives to foster consumer trust and loyalty by placing significant emphasis on empathetic relationships, transparency, and personalized experiences, thus culminating in greater customer preference and responsible profitability (Kotler et al., 2016; Polli et al., 2020). The humanization of brands has a beneficial impact on the perception of value and, at the same time, mitigates the risks perceived by consumers, generating robust emotional connections and increasing confidence in the company's innovative capabilities (Martiori et al., 2024). This comprehensive, human-centred marketing paradigm not only meets customers' expectations but also catalyzes their transformation into brand advocates, who subsequently endorse the brand to others (Kotler et al., 2016).

1.2 COBRAs Model - Consumers' Online Brand-Related Activities

The COBRAs model, developed by Muntinga et al. (2011) categorizing brand-related activities online. It explores the motivations and levels of engagement with brand-related content feeds, watching videos, reading comments, and contributing (where users actively interact by providing feedback, sharing opinions, or engaging with brand-related content, such as commenting on posts, sharing the brand on social networks. Engagement can be classified into three dimensions: consumption (where users passively engage by watching and consuming brand-related content, such as scrolling thro content, and participating in brand content), and creation (the highest level of engagement, where users generate original content about brands, such as publishing reviews, writing articles about the brand, and uploading brand videos and images).

1.3 Human Brand Model (HBM)

Portal, Abratt, and Bendixen (2018) created the Human Brand Model (HBM), a framework that outlines the key stages of developing a human brand (Figure 1). The model consists of four stages: Brand Traits,

Brand Attributes, Brand Authenticity, and Brand Benefits. The first three stages represent the inputs of a brand, while the last stage refers to the outcomes or benefits of the actions of the preceding stages.



Figure 1. The Human Brand Model (HBM)
Source: Portal, Abratt and Bendixen (2018)

The brand's characteristics are organised into four concentric circles. The outermost circle is defined by the key traits necessary for the brand to be recognised as having human qualities. It integrates organisational principles, employee conduct, the value proposition, and the composite elements of the marketing mix. The subsequent circle encompasses the brand attributes, which are derived from the outer circle. As posited by the present author, six attributes are considered to be intrinsic to the concept of a human brand. These attributes are as follows: original, trustworthy, affectionate, competent, genuine, and ethical. The brand is considered authentic when all six attributes manifest simultaneously. The third circle of the model represents the concept of brand authenticity, ensuring that the brand is perceived as genuine by consumers based on the attributes from the previous circles. The final circle is indicative of the benefits associated with the brand. The text draws attention to the results and final benefits of having a human brand, including a good reputation, improved customer-brand relationships, and increased brand loyalty (Portal et al., 2018).

3. METHODOLOGY

The following section presents empirical evidence on a chain of Portuguese gyms as part of the established objectives. The research is centred around a case study, defined by Yin (2017) as an empirical study

examining a phenomenon within its real-life context using various sources of evidence. This case study is based on a single instance. Qualitative research was primarily used to understand this case study, focusing on the social and humanistic aspects of research and how individuals perceive and interact with their environment (Lanka et al., 2021).

In a study by Yin (2017), the validation of a case study relies on using various sources of information (data triangulation), establishing a case study database, maintaining a chain of evidence, and carefully using data from electronic sources. This study focuses on employing two qualitative techniques - content analysis and semi-structured interviews - to comprehend and explain the social phenomena related to consumer behaviour in response to humanized marketing strategies (Bruchêz et al., 2016).

3.1. Content Analysis

In Bardin's (2016) view, content analysis is a method used for analyzing communication. This study focused on analyzing the content posted on Facebook and Instagram accounts of a gym chain's main account and a specific gym within the chain. The analysis was conducted in March and April 2024 to determine if the gym chain's social media marketing involved humanized techniques. The study used a two-month content analysis to identify various parameters of humanized techniques.

According to Campos (2004), content analysis requires the identification of analytical units to improve interpretative skills for characterizing specific topics. The literature review helped in identifying analytical constructs relevant to academic theories highlighted in earlier research, forming the basis for the study's definitive interpretation, supported by an empirical structure (Cavalcante et al., 2014).

Thus, this content analysis considered the constructs addressed earlier in the literature review - Showcasing; Personalization of responses and comments; Feedback, opinions, testimonials, and reviews; User Generated Content (UGC); Adoption of the video format; Integration of emoji and Reinforcement of social causes.

The content analysis involved sorting posts according to specific humanisation strategies previously defined in literature. Each unit of analysis in the sample of posts and comments and the interactions by users of varying posts were categorized technique-analytically to a set operationalisations from the content analysis of the posts.

The total counts of instances in each category and their arrangements in tables showed the scope of the humanisation strategies employed by the gym chain and the gym of relevance. The coding greatly aided in the assessment of the patterns and trends of the use of humanised marketing

strategies on the two platforms, Facebook and Instagram, and on the various accounts of the main chain and the branch.

3.2. Semi-structured interview

After the content analysis, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the head of the gym chain's marketing department via an online platform. This allows for the acquisition of comprehensive insights into specific perceptions or representations pertinent to a research topic, thus enhancing the understanding of the inherent conceptions and meanings associated with the subject (Morgado, 2018). A script was developed with a set of questions on assorted topics that were selected according to the objectives of the study and the literature review. Thus, the interview script included sixteen questions addressing issues related to humanisation and social networks.

4. RESULTS

This section presents the results from both the content analysis of the gym's social media platforms and the semi-structured interview with the digital marketing director.

4.1 Content Analysis

The content analysis focused on posts published on Facebook and Instagram accounts of both the gym chain and one of its branches during March and April 2024 (N=226).

4.1.1 Frequency of parameters in posts by social network

Table 1 shows an analysis of frequencies on Facebook and Instagram social networks of the chain of gyms and a specific gym of the brand over two months.

Table 1. Frequency of the parameter in publications, by social network

Humanisation parameters	March 2024				April 2024			
	Gym Chain		Gym		Gym Chain		Gym	
	FB	IG	FB	IG	FB	IG	FB	IG
Showcasing	0	2	14	6	1	1	3	4
Personalisation of replies and comments	1	4	0	0	4	3	0	1
Feedback, opinions, testimonials, and reviews	3	7	0	0	1	6	0	0
<i>User Generated Content</i> (UGC)	2	28	11	22	1	20	6	12
Adoption of the video format	3	13	3	4	2	6	0	0
Emoji integration	16	15	13	8	11	16	6	7
Reinforcement of social causes	2	7	4	2	2	5	0	0

Upon analysing Table 1, it is evident that the gym chain's Facebook account frequently uses the humanized strategy of integrating emojis. Similarly, on Instagram, emojis are integrated along with Generated Content and the use of video format. Additionally, Instagram shows occasional use of feedback, opinions, testimonials, reviews, and support for social causes. A study of an individual gym's account revealed that on Facebook, the most frequently used strategies are showcasing, user-generated content, and emoji Integration (Figure 2). On Instagram, the emphasis is on user-generated content and emoji integration.

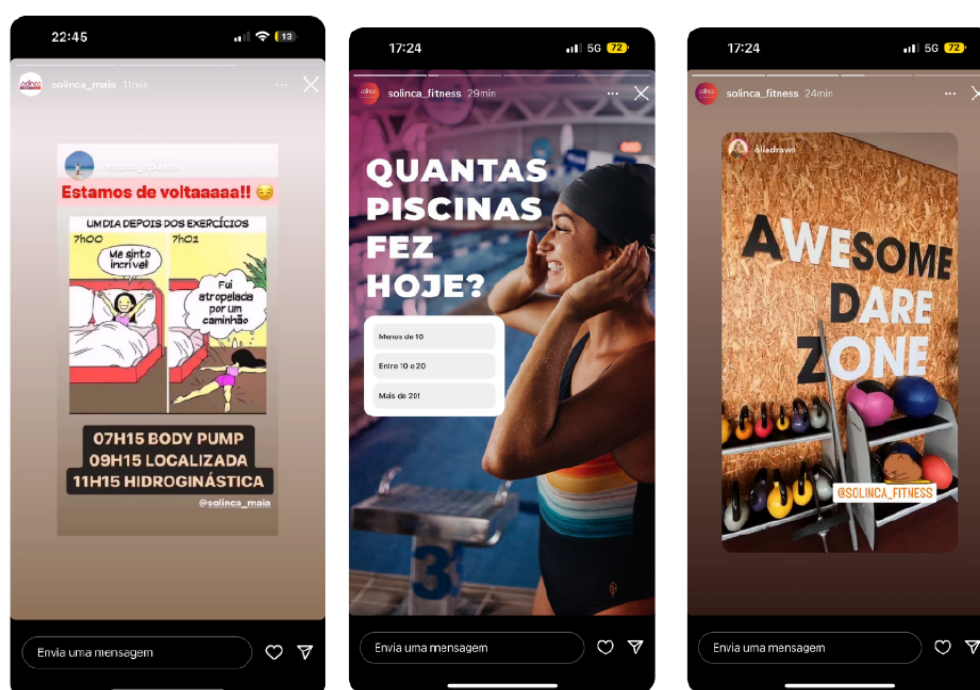


Figure 2. Example of a Post with humanisation strategies

Source: Instagram

4.1.2 Frequency of the parameters by social network as a function of publishing format

Table 2 presents the frequency of humanization strategies in each social network by publication format type.

Table 2. Frequency of the parameter in social network publications and publication format

Humanization parameters		March 2024				April 2024			
		Gym chain		Gym		Gym chain		Gym	
		FB	IG	FB	IG	FB	IG	FB	IG
Showcasing	Posts	0	0	14	1	1	1	3	1
	Stories	0	2	0	5	0	0	0	3
	Total	0	2	14	6	1	1	3	4
Customization Answers and Comments	Posts	1	4	0	0	4	3	0	1
	Stories	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	1	4	0	0	4	3	0	1
Feedback, opinions, testimonials, and reviews	Posts	3	3	0	0	1	1	0	0
	Stories	0	4	0	0	0	5	0	0
	Total	3	7	0	0	1	6	0	0
User Generated Content (UGC)	Posts	2	2	12	0	1	1	1	0
	Stories	0	26	0	22	0	19	0	12
	Total	2	28	12	22	1	20	1	12
Adoption format video	Posts	3	2	3	0	2	2	0	0
	Stories	0	11	0	4	0	4	0	0
	Total	3	13	3	4	2	6	0	0
Emoji Integration	Posts	16	11	13	4	11	11	6	3
	Stories	0	3	0	4	0	5	0	5
	Total	16	14	13	8	11	16	6	8
Reinforcement of social causes	Posts	1	1	4	0	2	2	0	0
	Stories	1	6	0	2	0	3	0	0
	Total	2	7	4	2	2	5	0	0

In considering humanization strategies within the context of publishing content for a gym chain on Facebook and Instagram, it's evident that emojis play a prominent role in posts on both platforms. User-generated content (UGC) is particularly prevalent on Instagram, being utilized frequently in both stories and posts, along with the integration of emojis. Video content is also becoming more popular in stories, and feedback, opinions, testimonials, and reviews are widely used in stories as well. Additionally, reinforcing causes is a common practice, especially within stories.

In relation to individual gym accounts, the integration of emojis and UGC is most seen in posts on Facebook, and showcasing is a highly utilized practice at the post level. On Instagram, UGC takes precedence in stories, followed by the integration of emojis in both stories and posts. Like Facebook, showcasing is widely used at the story level.

A. Social Media Communication Vs. Opinion and image of consumers

For the director of digital marketing, the use of social media has full importance for a *“brand like ours, in which it is of constant use, i.e. it is not a thing as other brands in which they sell a product”*. It still alludes to the fact that they are *“services and regular use”* allows social media to be the nearest and instantaneous channel to collect feedback from consumers, be positive or negative. The digital marketing manager adds that the gym’s communications communication is guided by *“a set of goals, subsequently, translated into pillars and rubrics that are applied to the social media strategy”*. Thus, it is understood that there is a constant concern about the favourable image for your target to identify with the brand values; however, the identification and proximity is a demanding job. Identification is worked by several strategies to generate *“a sense of belonging with partners, to give this positive image”*.

B. Social Media Communication Actions and Consumer Trust

In what concerns the increment of consumer trust, the director of digital marketing says that as *the “business is very people-based”* the marketing department implements a strategy oriented according to two fundamental pillars: *“passing the image of which is what is the experience that partners have at the club”* and *“giving the stage to our people [...] i.e. our instructors, nutritionists, club managers, staff, etc [...] as they are the face of the brand, even when there is an experience at the club”*. Therefore, these two pillars of the principal are the most effective methods of the process of humanization of communication on social media of the gyms by knowing reliable evidence and tangible lived experiences. Consequently, the two pillars converge with the brand identification process, as there is an effort to *“that people relate to brand values, but also with the brand’s themselves”*.

C. UGC and proximity to the community

A UGC strategy, according to the principal, is a recurring rubric to promote partners, *who then translates as a reblog strategy that [...] responds to the communication pillar [...] that is to create a sense of belonging*. Thus, it stimulates the inclusion of the partners who promote the brand, simultaneously *demonstrating “the reality of clubs, for people who do not use the club”*.

In addition to this aspect, the strategy still has two purposes – raising and retention, i.e., *“retaining the [...] partners, as long as possible, and attempting to also raise new partners,”* seeing that *“a fitness penetration rate in Portugal is low when comparing to other countries in Europe and internationally, United States, Brazil, New Zealand, Australia, ..., is not comparable to the sake*

of a half". The manager indicates that they seek to *"recycle the partner base" to mitigate low rate and capture attention from consumers can even be associated with other gyms*".

In addition to this attempt to raise consumers from other chains of fitness, the digital marketing director alludes that there is another audience that intends to achieve: *"[...] the big challenge here is to get people who are not in the fitness market. It is to try to convince them to come train and [show] the benefits that exist in training."* The brand tries to reach the target *"[...] beyond the basic things of showing the services, the modality and equipment"* is *"[...] [show] what the final solution is."* He also mentions that they try to pass the benefit to the target, i.e., *"[...] the promise we try to share with the fitness market. And this is proven, the fitness market and making regular sport prevent a lot of things. Our goal is to give that output that is there, for every person, it can be different."* In short, it is understood that communication is adapted to meet the requirements of the diverse gym chain target, as evidenced by a differentiated presentation of the proposal of potential value inherent to services offered, particularly about the physical welfare of members. It is also evident that there is a promise of readable value and that the group strives to suit their communication according to the profile and attributes of the target audience, as stated previously.

D. Consumer power in content creation

It was made to understand whether the brand understood the power that was attributed to consumers in creating the brand content. So, the director of digital marketing has certified the vitality of the content generated by the partners of the gyms, noting that this kind of content ends up generating a certain authenticity of what is lived by the clients and the positive experiences of customers.

The principal mentions that the communication they carry out, in addition to integrating the contents made by third parties, orients itself into a broader line and that it is not only for the obvious of subjects associated with the fitness industry:

"We even try to escape a little bit of the logic of "transformation". Typically, that transformation is associated with weight loss or muscle mass gain. And we try to get away from it. We don't want to fall into that buzzy which is just that it's just that. We try to communicate the promise more."

Accompanying audience comments and responses on social media is carried out by the brand, with the principal strengthening that there is an ongoing job of the team to be actively attentive in custom responses to users and partners who comment on social media posts.

E. Social networks of the chain of gyms and individual accounts

According to the details provided by the principal, it is noted that only the official Facebook and Instagram accounts of the gym network are adequately structured, planned strategically, and governed by a strict communication protocol. However, he does not oppose the establishment of supplemental accounts for the group academies; however, he lacks professional supervision regarding these accounts:

“As you can see, we only have one official page, both on Instagram and on Facebook. Now, eventually, let’s also move on to TikTok, but those pages and those accounts that end up existing and we don’t oppose, but we don’t manage them in-house are things done by clubs either. This is because we are a great chain and often trying to spend the specific reality of all clubs would mean I would have to have, per day, thirty posts. This even turns out to be more of an operational difficulty, but it is made to then not privilege one at the expense of others. So, what ended up happening...with our permission - and other times even without our permission, because they are the partners themselves who end up creating those pages - end up creating a community there.”

He pointed out, however, that since they are not officially managed, often:

“[...] the tone of the communication is not aligned. This strategy that exists on our social networks isn't there. That is a lot to share club content, day-to-day club, and the class map. It's a micro-community that exists in that club and then ends up being powered by people on the team, i.e., instructors, club managers, and receptionists who create and then dynamize, other times they are even the partners themselves. We don't control the groups and pages of Instagram of those clubs. The partners themselves and the teams of those clubs end up creating and feeding the content of those pages, and are a kind of brand ambassadors, in that regard, but reinforce that there is no such care at the comparison level. It is not comparable because there is no strategy and these kinds of goals on those side pages. There are no pillars; these rubrics that we are implementing in the official account.”

The director of digital marketing points out that there is no equal content line on the unofficial and official pages:

“If we go to see location pages one by one, some have nothing to do with others, and they also have nothing to do with the official page. But we don’t oppose it. The creation of these

pages turned out to be positive and re-entered at the point of humanization. It ends up also helping to show the reality of that club because we are doing it from a macro perspective. If we were a chain with one, two, or three gyms, if we had few clubs, we would do much more line-up in that direction. And we've done it, a few years ago, when we had about ten, twelve clubs, we were still able to do that that way. These days, it doesn't make sense for us anymore. We stop doing this, but keep the communication on an official page, which is where we direct all communication and manage internally, at the marketing department level. On the other hand, we give space to those pages and act as groups, let us say so”.

Due to the absence of proper oversight, the principal stated that there is autonomy. From an experiential and methodological standpoint, that is considered effective because it fosters an authentic discourse and assists in the development of tight-knit systems within assorted communities. In addition, the principal reiterated that the only rigorous and meticulously crafted strategy, from a marketing perspective, concerns official Facebook and Instagram accounts.

The secondary accounts “*create their own communication,*” even though they can turn to the contents of the official account. In all, the digital marketing director does not rule out the need for technical rigor, despite this approach to be, effectively, humanized:

“There must be specific creativity for social media, with all the norms we know must exist, text limits, the logo, and the well-identified graphic line, at the correct location, with the correct colours. And none of it is respected. But it also gives this authenticity to the brand and ends up working well in that regard. And we don't oppose it. Even if, in the optics of marketers, it costs us to see things there, because they are not done well, we know that the ultimate end and goal product, which is the creation of such a community, works, so that's okay.”

The technical rigor of unofficial account content serves as a compelling analytical parameter, seen by the principal as a humanization tool, also corroborating that “*the content that results and ends up arising is very humanized [...]. Not from a perspective so purposeful or thought out. It's not at all... but there it is, but it ends up arising, in that sense, and it also results because of it [being authentic].*”

Consequently, it is realized that the official account strategy is meticulously elaborate, in contrast to the most instinctively humanized approach to local accounts; however, the principal emphasizes

that partners must be directed to official pages whenever communication requests pertinent consultations or dialogues.

F. Pandemic consequences in social media strategy

The department manager released that the digital marketing team is reinstating alignment with the methodologies employed in 2019, with the aim of reversing the pre-COVID-19 strategies.

“The strategy came back a little bit to it. Obviously, there have been changes and optimizations that have been made from year to year, the evolution itself. We are now betting more on video content because the platforms themselves benefit from this kind of content, and so are we doing it. It’s not only for the sake of humanization but also for the sake of the very algorithm itself to benefit that kind of communication, which, in 2019, was not as relevant. There is then that suitability to the phase where we are. What happened, at the level of communication on social media, was suitable to the pandemic period. From the period we entered the pandemic in March 2020, if I recall, the clubs closed overnight. And we would have to answer this scenario and define a channel to communicate. Obviously, we had emails, SMS, and stuff like that, but we try to use social media to bind a commitment to our partners and during that time we try to give a lot of free content at the level of exercise for people to do at home, we launch challenges for people to stay active, i.e. the strategy has changed a lot to try to get people to continue active and we, allowing you to give free content.”

Social media constituted a crucial means to facilitate communication with partners during the pandemic era. The director's point of view further reinforces the importance of these platforms in promoting connection and engagement between brands and consumers. The respondent emphasizes that the health crisis in recent years fundamentally transformed consumer profiles and even altered the demographics of individuals who attend academies:

“[...] there is an increase in concern and increased awareness of people to health and fitness associated with health. We notice a paradigm change. I can't tell you at this point, even because we're still studying that data, if this has to do with a more generational question because we notice a very large increase of 18-year-old kids in the gym. Back in the day, there were few kids in the gym, they were going to play football, it was billboard things. These kids were isolated and the pandemic itself may have helped in that regard, they are young people who during the pandemic were obliged to stay home and the fact

that they were in a safe place, rather than going to the street, we feel these kids are looking for gyms to spend time. We comment that many times, some kids and girls are here to socialize. They go a bit on the treadmill, but it's almost a social environment. This social component is increasing quite a bit. Obviously, it could also be generational, but the pandemic has increased health concerns. This ends up translating into the number of people entering the gyms and there the older people who didn't go in and now they're entering to look for this prevention and be okay, not only from an aesthetic component but also healthy."

In relation to the adoption of a humanized approach and whether it would be essential to strengthen proximity on social media. In the gym communication strategy humanization is seen a convenient and close tactic to the partners, capable of stimulating consumers' sense of belonging:

"We really want people to feel identified with the brand. The best way to do this is through people. There you are, again, it is a people business for people. If we didn't do that, we wouldn't respond efficiently to this communication pillar that we have which is the identification. Therefore, humanization must exist. There may be industries where not, but in our type of business, obviously humanization ends up being essential and it translates to social media. Just see the way we communicate on social media and would say that 95% of the posts have people, i.e. there is no longer just the photograph of an empty machine or an empty gym. Sometimes it can come because it's easier to do a photo pick up with quality and no people, to show the space - even because that's another rubric we have - but there must be people to come up with this identification with the brand, which is a brand for people."

G. Human approach to the level of the digital channels of the gym chain

Even if you already consider the humanized brand, from a communicational point of view, the principal highlights that there are still possibilities to improve:

"It is already humanized, even as we have been talking, but obviously, there is always room to optimize and improve. There is a way to go. There are things I like to do, and for one or the other reason they can't be done, or still can't be made, but I'd say right now we already have a humanized brand. If you ask me if there is room to improve, of course there is, and we are here for it!"

However, it indicates that in digital *“Things are always changing. We must always be aware of our target, people who are in these networks, new networks that may exist, and in what ways do people use those new networks”*. It finishes the interview by noting that *“humanization question will always be an important component and we will always be optimizing and improving, to be able to match our goals and communication pillars, for social media.”*

5. DISCUSSION

In the face of research goals, some implications can be taken concerning market marketing of humanized products in gyms:

5.1 Diffusion and sharing of humanized content and opinion, and a positive image for consumers

Interviewing the director of digital marketing at the gym means that humanized content significantly increases confidence and promotes positive perceptions in the public sphere. Using brand customization, consumers experience a greater sense of connection, facilitating confidence in services provided and cultivating a favourable brand image. Consequently, one can deduce that gym chains prioritize interpersonal relationships and actively participate in authentic experiences using direct engagement in social media platforms. This result is congruent with that of Portal, Abratt and Bendixen (2018), as it encapsulates the brand's anthropomorphic attributes, which transmit security and reliability, promoting characteristics such as sincerity, enthusiasm, competence, sophistication, and robustness. Thus, there is a deep influence of humanized marketing in the sports sector, accentuating its fundamental role in interactions between sports facilities and their stakeholders (Da Silva & Las Casas, 2017).

5.2 A human-centred approach emphasizes building consumer confidence

Studies have shown that creating content with a human touch enhances the organization's image and instils trust in consumers. This is achieved through personalized interactions that foster intimacy and trust. Research suggests that consumers are more inclined towards brands with which they have strong emotional connections (Borges-Tiago et al., 2019). Furthermore, employing methods such as personalized responses on social media and engaging activities like educational sessions humanizes communication. Consequently, these approaches allow users to perceive the organization and its employees as accessible and empathetic (Kleemans et al., 2018). These techniques encapsulate genuine experiences and context, leading to practical and motivational outcomes (Sokolova & Perez, 2021). This observation aligns with the principles of effective communication and reliability.

5.3 The human approach conveys a reinforced security value to consumers

When the gym chain invests in content that emphasizes the quality of its services, such as comfortable, safe, and modern environments and well-trained, affordable, and attentive staff, it positively influences consumer

confidence. The COBRAs model demonstrates how user-generated content can improve brand communication, leading to increased consumption and consumer satisfaction. These benefits are linked to reputation and brand enhancement, aligning with humanization strategies according to the HBM model. Portal, Abratt and Bendixen (2018) state that these qualities provide authenticity and differentiation in the digital space. Authenticity specifically refers to user-generated content (UGC), which is characterized by being genuine, spontaneous, and not commercially driven. These attributes help to promote originality and authenticity, which in turn enhances the brand's reputation over time. User-generated content (UGC) is not limited to academic users; employees and customers can also contribute to content creation (Cardone, 2019). This involvement by representatives can boost user confidence in the brand. Research by Filieri, Alguezaui and McLeay (2015) supports the idea that trust is bolstered through the sharing of UGC, which greatly influences consumers' likelihood to follow recommendations from third parties. This perspective is further reinforced by the findings of Bahtar and Muda (2016), which establish that consumers' perceptions of a brand significantly impact the consumption of services based on UGC. When consumers share information, it positively affects the consumption behaviours of others, and the brand's dissemination of such UGC enhances confidence, leading to favourable influences on purchase intentions (Demba et al., 2019). The social media communication strategy serves as a channel for the marketing team, and the concept of security is deemed notably important in the context of post-pandemic adjustments.

5.4 Humanized publications and ability and narrow customer relationships

The following text highlights the effectiveness of humanised social media marketing in building strong and lasting relationships with customers. Implementing humanized strategies on social media platforms equips professionals with the ability to navigate challenges with higher strategic acumen in both the present and future (Pereira da Silva et al., 2021). This approach makes it easier to gather consumer feedback and assessments, enabling the articulation of customer satisfaction with the services provided. The generation of favourable opinions and experiences through humanized content not only serves as a competitive advantage but also allows for the dissemination of authentic and unbiased customer assessments. Social media plays a crucial role in communication strategies within the sports industry, inspiring and influencing potential clients, particularly in the fitness domain, which is highly popular on platforms like YouTube and Instagram (Sokolova & Perez, 2021).

5.5 Humanization techniques applied in the social media strategy

Corroborating the literature, it was found that the humanization strategy of the gym chain on social media platforms resorts to methodologies such as showcasing, personalization of response and commentary; the feedback, opinions, testimonials, and reviews; the User Generated Content; the adoption of the video format; the integration of emoji, and strengthening social causes. The methods of humanization of the analysed communications are prominent in the emojis, seen to have been used in both social networks of

the individual gyms and the individual gymnasium. This result, according to Moussa (2019), reports that emojis play a key role in analyzed channels, aiding significantly in digital humanization, as I use this one to improve understanding of the message in social media and drive consumer actions. The uses of emojis promote emotional ties with consumers, influencing their purchase decisions (Das et al., 2019).

5.6 Additional findings

It was found from the interview that the use of a “decentralization” strategy, which grants autonomy to local pages and accounts to share content, aligns communication more closely with the reality of each gym, promoting community formation. According to the interview data, the communication within these closed groups or local club pages, despite the lack of technical perfection, works well by showing an authentic portrait of the clubs. That inclination to amateur content, which does not follow rigid professional standards, resonates with the values of Marketing 5.0 and with human-centric approaches, allowing for errors and team failure. Colliander and Marder (2018) corroborate this thinking, seeing that content generated more genuinely, fast, and with an “instantaneous aesthetic” can effectively humanize a brand, which usually resists polished corporate images.

Also, it is concluded that amateur channels offer a competitive advantage. Tribal marketing dynamics improve information exchange and consumer satisfaction, so consumer direct service companies should cultivate cohesive communities to promote positive recommendations and strengthen tribal connections (Osman, 2021). Teixeira (2017) reports that users in closed Facebook groups exhibit strong brand affinity, creating a tribal community that offers valuable information to potential consumers, with persuasive power, influencing other consumers and acting as effective brand promotion mechanisms (Teixeira, 2017).

In short, the analysis of the communication strategy of the Gym and Instagram Gym chain reveals a consumer-centric approach. The company’s social media assessment indicates that they promote direct exchange of information, hindering a human-centric approach. Content analysis showed an effective reception of humanized content, with consumer feedback varying based on content type and the analysed constructs. That observation aligns with the theories established in previous studies. The findings resonate with De Souza and Ferris (2015), who claim that well-humanized social media posts increase consumer engagement with the brand.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that emphasizing human traits helps build trust with the public. This means that consistently using humanized methods that align with core values, brand identity, and public characteristics can be a sustainable strategy to strengthen relationships with consumers, especially on digital platforms. It emphasizes the growing importance of humanizing a brand on digital platforms for professionals in this field. The study identified specific criteria that form the basis for practical

humanization techniques, particularly on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, to foster trust.

This research is valuable for digital marketing professionals looking to incorporate humanized approaches into their strategies to improve consumer-brand relationships and increase public engagement. It also contributes to future studies on how humanized communication on social media influences consumer confidence and can inform academic research on brand-centred alternative strategies and methodologies in various sectors.

The techniques described can provide a fundamental framework for organizations looking to take a humanized approach to their social media and communication efforts.

Consequently, evaluating people's perceptions of these human-centric approaches will be pivotal in the future. Within future deployments, knowing how the people in the audience discern specific forms of social media communication will be fundamental to the engagement of social media practices deployed.

Additionally, it may be possible to extend the spectrum of humanization practices by combining the findings of additional studies with existing research and reviewing the valuable contributions made in the academic sphere. Contacting the organizations themselves may also provide insights into how they enact their strategies. The humanized approaches may also be in a state of flux, and their definitions may vary from one sector to another and from the moving goal posts of society.

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How to cite this article:

Moreira e Silva, M. & Teixeira, S. (2025). A Humanised Social Media Marketing Strategy: A Gym Chain Case in Portugal. *International Journal of Marketing, Communication and New Media*, Vol 13, N° 25, pp. 336-362. <https://doi.org/10.54663/2182-9306.2025.v.13.n.336-362>