



Received 12 December 2025;
Accepted 7 January 2026;
Published 10 January 2026;

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Conflict of interest statement:
Author(s) reported no conflict of interest

DOI: [http://doi.org/10.70764/gdpu-jmb.2025.1\(2\)-02](http://doi.org/10.70764/gdpu-jmb.2025.1(2)-02)

BEYOND FUNCTIONAL BRANDING: AN INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS OF HUMAN-LIKENESS, TRANSPARENCY, AND BRAND ENGAGEMENT IN MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES

Alwis Fauzi Prio Aji¹

¹Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to develop an interpretive understanding of how human-likeness and transparency in corporate brand communication jointly shape brand engagement within cross-cultural multinational contexts. Specifically, it examines how human-like communication and perceived transparency influence trust formation, emotional closeness, and consumer behavioral engagement across different cultural settings.

Research Design & Methods: Adopting an interpretive qualitative research design, this study draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with corporate communication managers from six multinational companies and consumers from five countries (the United States, Germany, Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia). The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to uncover recurring meaning structures that explain how human-likeness and transparency are interpreted and enacted across cultural contexts.

Findings: The findings reveal that human-likeness functions as a relational mechanism that fosters emotional closeness through empathy, warmth, and personalized communication, while transparency operates as a culturally situated signal of integrity that builds trust through perceived consistency between corporate values and actions. Importantly, the study shows that authentic brand engagement emerges from the interaction between human-likeness and transparency, rather than from either dimension alone. This interaction manifests differently across collectivist and individualist cultures, shaping consumer participation, advocacy, and loyalty in distinct ways.

Implications & Recommendations: The findings position human-likeness and transparency as interrelated dimensions of corporate humanization that enhance brand engagement beyond transactional approaches. For multinational companies, culturally adaptive human-like communication and responsible transparency are essential to building trust, reducing skepticism, and fostering ethically grounded corporate-consumer relationships.

Contribution & Value Added: By offering an integrative conceptual framework that links human-likeness and transparency to authentic brand engagement in cross-cultural contexts, this research provides novel interpretive insights and enriches the literature on global branding, corporate humanization, and cross-cultural marketing communication.

Keywords: Human-likeness, Transparency, Collectivist Culture.

JEL codes: M31, M14, D91.

Article type: research paper

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and digitalization, multinational companies operate in an increasingly complex environment, where consumers not only evaluate products based on functional quality, but also on the values communicated through the brand (Montecchi et al., 2024). The increasingly transparent global marketplace requires companies to demonstrate a corporate identity that is human, authentic, and open, especially since consumers now have broad access to information that can confirm or refute corporate claims (Yang & Battocchio, 2021). This change signifies that corporate marketing is no longer just about conveying value propositions, but also about creating a narrative of relationships that involves trust, authenticity, and consumer engagement.

Human-likeness is an important concept. Human-likeness refers to the extent to which companies project human characteristics in communication interactions, such as empathy, warmth, and emotional involvement (Puzakova et al., 2013). Although brand anthropomorphism has been extensively researched, most studies stop at understanding brand personification alone. In fact, in an era of intensive digital interaction, human-likeness is perceived not only through visual symbols, but also through communication experiences that consumers perceive as real, relevant, and meaningful (Montecchi et al., 2024). Therefore, it is important to understand how consumers from different cultures interpret the concept of human-likeness when dealing with global brands. In addition, transparency in corporate communication is increasingly considered one of the main determinants of consumer trust (Abitbol et al., 2022). Transparency is not only related to openness in conveying business information, but also the ability of companies to demonstrate integrity, honesty, and accountability in their marketing practices (Cambier & Poncin, 2020). Social and regulatory pressures in various countries have forced multinational companies to be more careful in conveying their messages, as a failure to be transparent can have a negative impact on their global reputation and brand image (Sansome et al., 2025). Furthermore, consumers now view transparency not only as formal communication, but also as a reflection of the company's true values (Montecchi et al., 2024).

Both concepts are closely related to brand engagement, which includes the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral involvement of consumers in interacting with the company (Ma et al., 2022). Brand engagement not only reflects loyalty, but also consumers' willingness to actively participate in building shared value, such as sharing positive experiences or even advocating for the brand in their environment (Brodie et al., 2019). However, this engagement is not a universal phenomenon; its meaning is influenced by cultural factors, consumer experiences, and perceptions of corporate reputation. In the context of multinational companies, this becomes even more complex due to differences in interpretation and expectations in various global markets (Aksoy et al., 2022). Although there have been many studies discussing human-likeness, transparency, and brand engagement, most studies still use a quantitative approach that emphasizes the measurement of the influence between variables, such as the relationship between human-likeness and trust or the relationship between transparency and purchase intention (Yang & Battocchio, 2021). This approach does provide an overview of how significant the influence of a factor is, but it tends to ignore the subjective, contextual, and interpretive aspects of consumer experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tronvoll & Edvardsson, 2022). In fact, in a global reality full of cultural diversity, the meaning that consumers attach to human-likeness and transparency is a crucial aspect that needs to be understood more deeply (Liu & Wei, 2021).

Based on these conditions, this study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how human-likeness and transparency are perceived, interpreted, and implemented in corporate marketing communication strategies by multinational companies. This study does not focus on measuring the magnitude of influence, but rather on an interpretive understanding of how consumers from various cultural backgrounds respond to human-centered and transparent strategies promoted by global companies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tronvoll & Edvardsson, 2022). Thus, this study aims to provide insight into the meaning attached to cross-cultural corporate marketing practices and how these strategies shape authentic engagement between companies and consumers. The contribution of this study lies in two main aspects. Theoretically, this study expands the literature on branding and

corporate marketing by showing that human-likeness and transparency are not merely variables that can be measured quantitatively, but also social phenomena that are influenced by cultural interpretations and consumer experiences (Puzakova et al., 2013). In practical terms, this research provides guidance for multinational companies to design communication strategies that are more sensitive to cross-cultural diversity, so that the engagement built is authentic, sustainable, and stronger in facing global market dynamics (Montecchi et al., 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Human-Likeness and Its Interpretation in Corporate Marketing

Human-likeness or brand anthropomorphism refers to the attribution of human characteristics to brands, such as warmth, emotions, interpersonal communication, and moral traits, which aim to bring brands closer to consumers (Prooijen & Bartels, 2019). Quantitative research has shown that anthropomorphism can strengthen positive attitudes toward brands, improve product evaluation, and increase purchase intent, depending on the context, such as brand distinctiveness and stereotypical content (Zhang et al., 2020). However, some early qualitative studies have begun to explore how consumers construct meaning around human-likeness: for example, the study *The Elements of Brand Anthropomorphism: Qualitative Investigation Into Local Brands Amongst Young Adult Consumers*, which used in-depth interviews to explore elements of human-likeness in local brands in Asia, found that attributes such as "friendly brand voice," "human-like narratives," and "the ability to respond to feedback personally" are considered significant by young consumers (Mayasari & Haryanto, 2022).

In addition, consumers in Asian cultures in the study interpreted human-likeness not merely as "visual personification" or "mascots," but through verbal and nonverbal communication aspects that showed attention, empathy, and responsiveness to consumer needs in a direct and humane manner (Mayasari & Haryanto, 2022). Other quantitative studies show that the effect of brand anthropomorphism on visit intention is greatly influenced by culture—but these studies still measure intention rather than exploring how consumers understand anthropomorphic attributes themselves (Lee & Oh, 2021). Research such as *Unpacking the influence of anthropomorphism and stereotypes on consumer attitude towards luxury brands* shows that anthropomorphism, combined with stereotypes and brand credibility, influences attitudes towards luxury brands, but the context is highly dependent on consumers' perceptions of "believing that the brand represents human values" (credibility & warmth) and the extent to which these anthropomorphic attributes are perceived as authentic or merely a marketing strategy (stereotype content) (Malhotra & Dandotiya, 2023).

From this review, several insights emerge that support a qualitative approach in research: (1) that many studies still use experimental or survey designs to measure the influence of anthropomorphism, rather than to investigate consumers' subjective understanding of human-likeness in a corporate context; (2) that local culture and social context greatly influence how anthropomorphic attributes are perceived—for example, empathy may be considered essential in collectivist cultures, while formality of communication is more important in cultures with high power distance values; (3) that attributes such as "warmth," "responsiveness," "personality," "ability to listen," and "human narrative" appear in qualitative studies and show that human-likeness is not only aesthetic, but also a meaningful communication experience.

The main research gaps that emerge are: the lack of qualitative research in the context of large multinational companies dealing with corporate communication strategies (not just product campaigns), and the lack of studies comparing perceptions of human-likeness across cultures so as to reveal possible interpretive differences. This research will contribute by exploring, through in-depth interviews and document analysis, how multinational companies present human-likeness in their communications and how consumers from different cultures interpret it.

Brand Transparency and Consumer Response

Brand transparency refers to the extent to which a company is open in communicating information about its production processes, business practices, costs, sustainability, or even acknowledgment of mistakes. Transparency is often seen as a sign of integrity and can foster consumer trust when consumers perceive that the company is not hiding important information (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014; Yang & Battocchio, 2021). The type of transparency (cost vs. production) differs in its influence on perceptions of brand authenticity, consumer attitudes, and intentions; production transparency is often associated with ethical values and sustainability, while cost transparency is more related to economic clarity and consumer fairness (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014; Yang & Battocchio, 2021).

In experimental research and surveys, it was found that disclosing negative activities can be considered a form of high transparency; consumers view negative disclosures as a signal of nerve costs and commitment to truth that increases trust, especially if the company shows an honest response and not just propaganda (Sansome et al., 2025). However, these experiments only measure the effect on consumer responses (word-of-mouth, trust), rather than exploring how consumers understand transparency or how they distinguish between authentic and manipulative transparency in the context of multinational corporations. There is also literature that shows that transparency and authenticity are often seen as overlapping. Organizational transparency strengthens perceptions of authenticity, which in turn influences trust, and trust is necessary before loyalty can be built (Busser & Shulga, 2019). However, the subjective aspect of how consumers filter transparency signals (what is considered sufficiently open, when what type of disclosure is considered manipulative) has not been widely studied through in-depth interviews or qualitative studies.

Cross-cultural context also arises in brand engagement studies, such as Brand Engagement in Self-Concept: A Comparative Study in Austria, Italy and Poland, which shows that cultural values moderate individuals' perceptions of engagement and the concept of self-brand congruity—but the study still uses quantitative methods (Razmus et al., 2020). Cross-cultural literature emphasizes that transparency standards accepted in one culture may be considered insufficient in another culture, or even considered "too much." Factors such as social norms, institutional trust, and local history influence the interpretation of transparency signals (Borzino et al., 2023). Therefore, this study will investigate not only the forms of transparency practiced by multinational companies, but also how cross-cultural consumers interpret them: when they consider transparency to be "authentic," when it is considered "a formality," and when it is considered manipulative or solely for marketing purposes.

Brand Engagement in a Cross-Cultural Context

Brand engagement has become one of the key concepts in contemporary marketing literature because it reflects consumers' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral involvement with a brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Engagement is not merely the result of satisfaction or loyalty, but rather a form of deep psychological relationship, in which consumers actively participate in building shared value with the company (Brodie et al., 2019). In the context of market globalization, understanding engagement has become increasingly complex because consumer experiences are not homogeneous—they are shaped by differences in cultural values, social norms, and perceptions of company-consumer relationships (Aksoy et al., 2022). In a cross-cultural context, engagement is influenced by cultural value orientations such as individualism and collectivism, power distance, and the level of uncertainty accepted in society (Hollebeek, 2018; Wen et al., 2023). Consumers in individualistic countries tend to assess their engagement with a brand based on the extent to which the brand can express their personal identity and individual uniqueness. Conversely, in collectivist societies, engagement is more often interpreted through social relationships, a sense of togetherness, and acceptance within the group (Connell et al., 2023; Razmus et al., 2020). This confirms that engagement is not a universal entity, but rather a social construct mediated by cultural values and the surrounding social context.

Multinational companies face challenges in maintaining global brand consistency while adapting their communication approaches to local cultural differences (Aksoy et al., 2022). A strategy that is successful in one market may not necessarily be effective in another, because the form and intensity of engagement depend on the cultural symbolism used by the company. For example, messages that emphasize autonomy and self-expression will be effective in countries with individualistic cultures, but may be considered inappropriate or even arrogant in cultures that value social harmony. Therefore, a global approach to engagement must be balanced with sensitivity to differences in cultural values and perceptions in order to maintain authentic relationships with consumers. The dimension of emotional engagement is the aspect most susceptible to cross-cultural variation. A study by Razmus et al. (2020) shows that consumers in Eastern Europe view engagement as a social experience that strengthens a sense of togetherness, while consumers in Western Europe view engagement as an expression of self-authenticity and freedom of brand choice. In a cross-cultural study between India and Australia, collectivist values in India resulted in more community-based engagement, while Australian consumers showed more individualistic engagement (Roy et al., 2023). This difference shows that brand communication strategies need to take social and cultural contexts into account in order to create the right emotional resonance.

The cognitive engagement aspect also shows significant cultural variations. Consumers in countries with a high cognitive orientation, such as Japan and Germany, tend to be more involved in information processing and rational evaluation of brands (Aksoy et al., 2022). Conversely, in countries with a high affective orientation, such as Brazil or Indonesia, engagement decisions are more influenced by positive feelings, the warmth of interactions, and the empathetic narratives conveyed by companies (Ma et al., 2022). Understanding these variations is important because engagement is not only determined by the message conveyed, but also by how consumers interpret the message in their cultural context (Suseno & Nguyen, 2023). Globalization and the development of digital technology have expanded the space for cross-cultural engagement (Ling et al., 2024). Digital platforms enable multinational companies to build global communities where consumers from different countries interact simultaneously. However, these cross-cultural interactions are not always harmonious; different symbolic meanings can lead to diverse interpretations of the same message. For example, campaigns that emphasize humor, irony, or progressive values may be positively received in one country, but trigger resistance in another country that is more culturally conservative (Ma et al., 2022). Therefore, cross-cultural digital engagement requires companies to manage communication that is sensitive to differences in perceptions and social values.

Overall, brand engagement in a cross-cultural context is the result of complex interactions between individual psychological factors and collective social value systems. Human-likeness and transparency, as key elements of modern corporate communication, are important instruments in creating meaningful engagement in various cultural contexts. However, their effectiveness greatly depends on the extent to which companies are able to tailor their expressions of humanity and transparency to the expectations and cultural sensitivities of consumers. A deep understanding of these cultural dimensions requires a qualitative approach that allows for contextual exploration of meaning and perception. Thus, cross-cultural qualitative research has the potential to make a significant contribution to enriching engagement theory and helping multinational companies design authentic, inclusive, and sustainable communication strategies in the global market.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with an interpretive paradigm to understand how the concepts of human-likeness and transparency are perceived, interpreted, and implemented in the communication practices of multinational companies. This approach was chosen because the focus of the research was not to measure the magnitude of influence, but rather to interpret the subjective meanings formed by cross-cultural participants through social interaction and communication experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The research was conducted on multinational companies (MNCs) in the consumer goods, technology, and digital services sectors that are known to actively implement brand humanization and information transparency strategies in their global marketing activities. Two groups of participants were involved in this study, namely corporate managers responsible for designing communication strategies at the global and regional levels

(approximately 10 people), as well as cross-cultural consumers (20–25 people) from five countries, representing individualistic (United States and Germany) and collectivistic (Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea) cultural orientations. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement and experience in brand communication activities or direct interaction with multinational companies. The number of participants was determined using the principle of data saturation, which is when interviews no longer produce new relevant themes (Guest et al., 2020). This ensures that the data obtained is in-depth and representative of the phenomenon being studied.

Data was collected using three complementary techniques. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of communication strategies that emphasize human-likeness and transparency. The interview guide was designed to be open-ended to allow for a broader exploration of meaning in accordance with the cultural context of each participant. Second, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted to reveal social dynamics and compare cross-cultural perceptions of brand communication practices that are considered human and transparent. Third, corporate documents were analyzed, including sustainability reports, digital campaigns, and corporate communication content, to identify how the values of openness and humanity are strategically constructed. The combination of these three techniques was used to achieve triangulation of sources and methods, thereby increasing the validity and enriching the interpretation of the research results (Gibson, 2017).

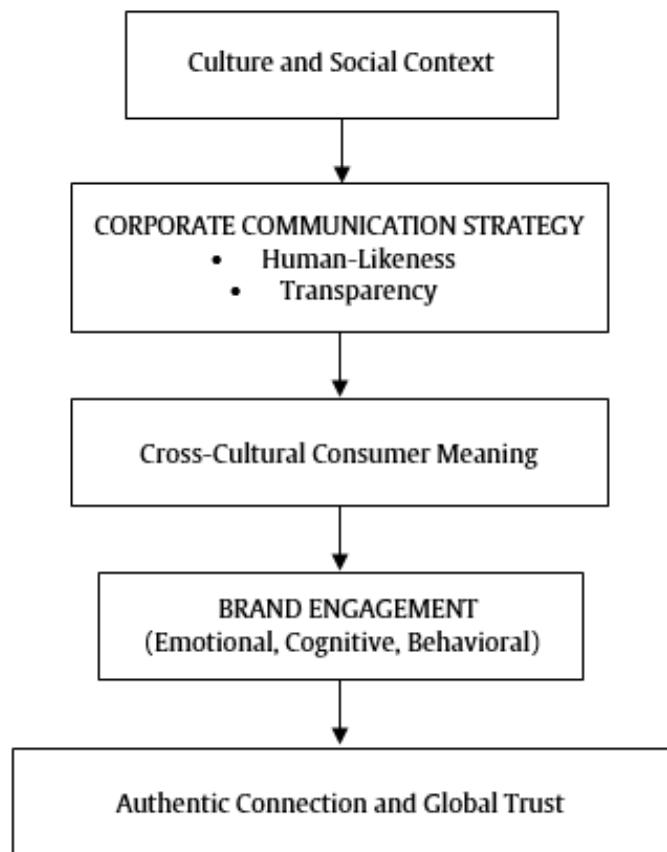


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Data analysis was conducted using Thematic Analysis developed by Braun & Clarke (2006) through six main stages: reading and understanding the data, conducting initial coding, identifying potential themes, reviewing and validating themes, naming themes, and compiling interpretive thematic narratives. The analysis process was conducted iteratively, in which the researcher moved back and forth between empirical data and theoretical frameworks to maintain depth of reflection

and thematic consistency. In this process, the conceptual framework was used dynamically as an interpretive guide in exploring the relationships between concepts. Themes related to human-likeness were analyzed to understand how human forms of communication are perceived and accepted in different cultural contexts, while the theme of transparency was used to explore how participants interpreted corporate openness as a form of honesty, ethics, or reputation strategy. Furthermore, the theme of brand engagement is identified as the result of the interaction between these two factors, describing consumers' emotional and participatory attachment to global brands. The conceptual relationship between these three dimensions is visualized in an interpretive flow that describes the process of cross-cultural meaning formation, rather than as a statistical model.

Figure 1 illustrates that human-likeness and transparency do not stand as independent variables that directly impact brand engagement, but rather serve as symbols of communication that are interpreted socially. This process of meaning-making is influenced by culture, social norms, and local values that differ from country to country. In the context of multinational companies, communication strategies that emphasize the human nature and openness of the company will be received differently by consumers from diverse cultural backgrounds. This meaning-making ultimately shapes different levels of brand engagement—it can take the form of emotional involvement, social participation, or brand advocacy. This framework guides research to explore how the meanings of human-likeness and transparency are constructed, negotiated, and articulated by cross-cultural consumers in relation to global brands. Thus, this conceptual framework is interpretive and exploratory in nature, in line with the qualitative approach used.

RESULT

Emotional Proximity through Humanized Communication

This research finding reveals that humanized communication is a fundamental element in building emotional proximity between consumers and multinational companies in various cultural contexts. For consumers, humanized communication does not only mean the use of friendly language or a soft tone, but also includes the company's ability to interact personally, respond to problems with empathy, and show its human side in its corporate narrative (Raina, 2022). Personal responses in service communication, for example when companies respond to consumer complaints with individual greetings and a direct commitment to resolve the issue, are perceived as proof that the company cares and is emotionally present in the interaction (Raina, 2022). Several participants emphasized the importance of storytelling that reveals the human side behind the brand. Consumers from Japan and Indonesia mentioned that when companies share stories about their workers, production processes, or real challenges in running their business, they feel that the brand is more authentic and "close to humans" rather than just presenting formal promotional messages (Thompson & Kumar, 2022). This is in line with the findings of Ghorbanzadeh et al. (2025) which show that storytelling with a focus on human values strengthens the dimension of brand authenticity, especially when the narrative is conveyed through a local voice that reflects the local culture. Thus, human-likeness does not stop at universal communication strategies, but depends on the localization of narratives and consistent emotional presence in various cultural contexts.

Other findings show that cultural differences significantly influence how consumers interpret humanistic communication. Consumers from collectivist cultures (e.g., Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea) tend to assess human-likeness based on the extent to which companies demonstrate social empathy, interpersonal care, and harmony in the relationships between brands, workers, and communities (Connell et al., 2023). Conversely, consumers from individualistic cultures (such as the United States and Germany) assess human-likeness through individual authenticity and freedom of brand expression, as well as a preference for interactions that feel personal and not generic (Aksoy et al., 2022). In other words, the concept of a "human-like brand" is culturally relative, and its interpretation depends on the social norms that underlie interpersonal relationships in society (Bredikhina et al., 2023; Luo & Hamlin, 2022). In addition to the narrative aspect, the element of admitting mistakes emerges as a factor that reinforces human-likeness. Many consumers mention that companies that openly admit mistakes, explain the causes, and outline corrective measures create an empathetic and trustworthy impression (Park & Hyun, 2021). A

participant from the United States said, "When a company says 'we made a mistake and we fixed it', it feels more honest than a corporate statement that is only defensive." Revealing brand weaknesses can increase perceptions of authenticity and strengthen consumer trust, as brands are seen as having a human side and being able to empathize with the impact they have (Liu et al., 2025).

Perceptions of error acknowledgment are also influenced by culture. Consumers from collectivistic contexts view error acknowledgment as a form of social responsibility and solidarity, while individualistic consumers view it as a symbol of personal integrity and individual brand honesty (Cambier & Poncin, 2020). This shows that admitting mistakes is not only a form of transparency, but also an emotional communication tool that increases relational closeness with different audiences (Erickson, 2021). This study found that emotional proximity is not static, but is formed through a continuous communication process that combines empathy, authenticity, and openness. Consumers say that interactions that occur after purchase—such as personal follow-ups to complaints, expressions of gratitude, or transparent updates on product improvements—are more meaningful in building emotional relationships than large marketing campaigns. This confirms that human-likeness must be demonstrated consistently through corporate behavior, not just communication messages, as suggested by Sansome et al. (2025) who found that perceived corporate sincerity only arises when communication practices are aligned with organizational actions. These findings show that emotional proximity is the result of three key practices of humanistic communication: (1) authentic local narratives, which present real stories from employees, customers, and the company's social context; (2) personal responses to complaints, which demonstrate the company's empathy and genuine engagement with consumer experiences; and (3) acknowledgment of mistakes and open corrective measures, which transform weaknesses into sources of trust and emotional connection. These three practices work synergistically to strengthen perceived warmth and authentic engagement between global brands and cross-cultural consumers (Ma et al., 2022; Raina, 2022).

Thus, human-likeness is not merely a symbolic strategy or communication style, but a reflection of the company's human values embodied in real actions and interactions. In the context of multinational companies, the ability to adapt humanistic communication to local cultural sensitivities is a key factor in determining the extent to which emotional closeness can be formed and maintained sustainably. Emotional proximity ultimately plays an important role as the basis for cross-cultural brand engagement, which is supported by the warmth, honesty, and social relevance that consumers feel in every interaction (Ghorbanzadeh et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025; Sansome et al., 2025).

Cultural Integrity and Trust as Products of Transparency

The results of the study show that transparency in cross-cultural brand communication is understood by consumers as a reflection of cultural integrity and as the main foundation for building trust in multinational companies. Transparency is interpreted more broadly than simply presenting factual information such as financial reports or sustainability data. For most participants, corporate openness includes clarity of values upheld, honesty in the production process, the origin of raw materials, and the social and environmental impacts of business activities (Sansome et al., 2025). In this context, transparency acts as a moral mirror that reveals the extent to which companies practice alignment between their claimed ethical principles and their actual actions (Cambier & Poncin, 2020).

Participants from countries with a tradition of ethical consumption, such as Germany and Japan, showed high sensitivity to the consistency between corporate communication messages and practices. When there is a discrepancy between sustainability claims and visual evidence in the field, such as the use of plastic packaging on products labeled "environmentally friendly," they feel moral dissonance and lose trust in the brand (Cheah et al., 2023; Magnier & Schoormans, 2015). This phenomenon confirms that inauthentic transparency is easily identified as greenwashing, which ultimately damages perceptions of corporate integrity (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Conversely, consistency between communication, actions, and concrete evidence enhances perceptions of corporate honesty and fosters sustainable trust (Yang & Battocchio, 2021). From the company's

perspective, interviews with regional communications managers in Asia show that efforts to build transparency are now being carried out through visual and interactive approaches. Practices such as virtual factory tours, behind-the-scenes videos, and open dialogue forums on social media are used to show the production process and decision-making directly to the public. This form of openness is considered to reinforce the perception that the company has no hidden agenda and is ready to be accountable for its actions to consumers (Acuti et al., 2022). This real-experience-based approach serves as a medium for forming relational trust, where consumers feel closer to the "reality" of the company beyond its symbolic marketing image (Scholz & Duffy, 2018).

Perceptions of transparency are also influenced by the cultural context in which consumers live. In collectivist cultures such as Indonesia and Japan, consumers tend to view openness as a form of social responsibility and group solidarity. When companies openly acknowledge the challenges they face—such as supply chain disruptions due to the pandemic or raw material shortages—and explain the corrective measures they have taken, this attitude is seen as showing empathy and good intentions, thereby eliciting forgiveness and moral support (Connell et al., 2023; Rim & Dong, 2018). Conversely, consumers from individualistic cultures such as the United States and Germany demand a more action-oriented form of transparency. They view openness as an expression of personal integrity and judge companies based on the extent to which each statement is accompanied by evidence of implementation. Transparency that stops at rhetoric actually raises suspicion and weakens brand credibility (Aksoy et al., 2022; Southworth, 2019).

These cross-cultural findings show that transparency is not a universal communication strategy, but rather a practice mediated by cultural values and moral systems within society. In a collectivist context, honesty is understood as a commitment to social harmony and shared responsibility, while in an individualistic context, honesty is considered a manifestation of individual authenticity and moral accountability (Bredikhina et al., 2023; Luo & Hamlin, 2022). Therefore, the effectiveness of transparent communication depends on the ability of multinational companies to tailor their messages and forms of openness to the cultural orientation of each target market. Data also shows that transparency accompanied by concrete actions builds more trust than symbolic transparency. Companies that openly explain operational difficulties, such as delivery delays or price adjustments, while also outlining mitigation strategies or collaborations with local suppliers, receive positive assessments from consumers. This attitude is considered a form of moral courage and commitment to continuous improvement (Sekerka, 2020). Conversely, when openness stops at the level of communication without being followed by concrete steps, consumers interpret these actions as manipulative and insincere, which ultimately reduces trust in the brand (Al-Badawi & Al-Tarawneh, 2024; Gunawan et al., 2020).

The results of the analysis show that there are three interrelated dimensions of transparency that determine the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication. First, value transparency, which is the company's openness to the ethical principles and moral values that form the basis for decision-making. Second, process transparency, which includes clarity of the production process, source of materials, and the socio-environmental impact of business activities. Third, action transparency, which is the clarity of concrete steps taken by the company in response to acknowledged issues or mistakes. These three dimensions work synergistically to build an ecosystem of trust rooted in cultural integrity and organizational moral responsibility (Cambier & Poncin, 2020; Sansome et al., 2025). Transparency based on values and reinforced by actions creates a relationship between companies and consumers that goes beyond the contractual. The trust that grows within it is relational and emotional because consumers not only trust the product, but also assess the alignment of the company's ethics with their personal values. When openness becomes an integral part of corporate identity, brand communication is no longer seen as a form of persuasion, but rather as a practice of ongoing honesty, which strengthens moral legitimacy and consumer loyalty in the global market (Acuti et al., 2022; Yang & Battocchio, 2021).

Authentic Engagement: From Meaning to Behavior

The third finding highlights how the combination of human-likeness and transparency in brand communication shapes authentic consumer engagement patterns. The interaction between these two dimensions results in a brand experience that transcends cognitive perception and

transforms into concrete actions such as content sharing, recommendations, and repeat purchases. When consumers feel that a company communicates in a human, open, and trustworthy manner, an emotional closeness emerges that encourages active participation and behavioral commitment (Dessart et al., 2016; Ma et al., 2022). For many participants, human-likeness creates a sense of connection that resembles interpersonal relationships. When companies use warm conversational language, acknowledge mistakes, or present personal narratives, consumers perceive these interactions as forms of empathy and social presence. This sense of presence reinforces the perception that the brand has real character, emotions, and good intentions (Kervyn et al., 2022). In this situation, transparency acts as a reinforcement of authenticity: honesty and consistency of information make the company's expressions of humanity appear sincere, not just a marketing strategy (Yang & Battocchio, 2021). The combination of the two fosters the belief that the brand operates with good intentions and can be trusted as a social partner (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Morhart et al., 2015).

Interviews show that this authentic perception triggers concrete engagement behavior. Consumers in Indonesia, for example, describe a tendency to share positive experiences through Instagram Stories or TikTok when they feel "appreciated" by brands that are honest and communicative. This sharing activity is not merely voluntary promotion, but an emotional representation of a sense of belonging to the brand narrative (Zimmermann et al., 2025). Consumers view their participation as a form of contribution to the brand community and as a means of expressing a self-identity that is in line with the company's values (Brodie et al., 2019). Participants from the United States and Europe showed similar behavior patterns, albeit with a more rational orientation. They tended to view the combination of transparency and human-likeness as a value differentiator that justified premium pricing decisions. When companies are open about their production or decision-making processes, consumers view high prices as an ethical premium worth paying because the brand is considered morally responsible (White et al., 2019). The decision to buy here is not solely based on economic preferences, but rather the result of internalizing ethical values that are consistently communicated by the company (Kingsford et al., 2018; Yilmaz, 2024).

In addition to consumptive behavior, field findings also show the emergence of participatory engagement patterns. Consumers no longer play a passive role as recipients of messages, but have become co-creators in brand communication. They actively comment on content, ask questions, and expect personal responses from companies through digital channels. Quick and humane responses have been proven to increase emotional closeness and strengthen long-term loyalty (Giertz et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2022). This phenomenon shows that engagement is not only the result of interesting content, but also of a continuous and trusting two-way relationship. Communication practices that involve consumers in public dialogue have also been shown to strengthen perceptions of autonomy and social participation. When companies use user-generated content or feature customer stories, consumers feel recognized as part of the brand's identity. This builds psychological ownership, which is the feeling of belonging to a brand that drives loyalty and voluntary advocacy (Renz & Posthuma, 2023). In this context, emotional involvement serves as a bridge between symbolic meaning and behavioral action. A sense of ownership of brand values encourages individuals to act as informal ambassadors who extend the company's reputation in the public sphere (Dessart et al., 2016).

Qualitative analysis shows that authentic engagement is formed through three interrelated stages: (1) Perceptual alignment – the alignment of perceptions between the brand image and consumers' personal values; (2) Emotional resonance – emotional attachment arising from perceptions of brand honesty and social presence; and (3) Behavioral enactment – behavioral manifestations in the form of purchases, recommendations, or active participation on social media. When these three stages occur consistently, engagement is not only situational but develops into a form of loyalty rooted in identity and moral values (Dessart et al., 2016; Iglesias & Ind, 2020).

The conceptual model in Figure 2 visualizes the process of transforming authentic engagement as a result of synergistic interactions between human-likeness and transparency. This model illustrates how warm, empathetic, and open corporate communication not only influences consumers' cognitive perceptions but also triggers emotional resonance that ultimately results in

participatory behavior and long-term loyalty. The process begins with the human-likeness dimension, where companies build social presence through communication that is humanistic, empathetic, and dialogical in nature. This element serves as the initial trigger for the formation of perceptions of warmth and personal closeness between the brand and consumers (Kervyn et al., 2022).

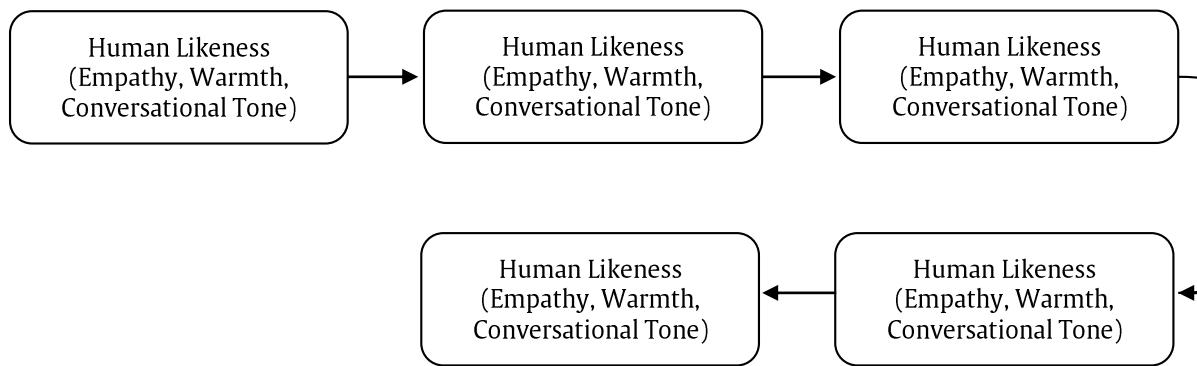


Figure 2 Thematic Model of Authentic Engagement

The next stage is transparency, which reinforces perceptions of honesty and authenticity by disclosing information about the company's values, production processes, and operational decisions. Transparency acts as a credibility amplifier, ensuring that the humanity displayed is not merely symbolic rhetoric but a reflection of the organization's real values (Yang & Battocchio, 2021). These two elements interact to form perceptual alignment, which is the alignment of perceptions between brand values and consumers' personal values. This alignment results in psychological attachment, which is the foundation of long-term emotional relationships (Dessart et al., 2016). When value alignment is achieved, emotional resonance emerges, which is an emotional connection based on trust, empathy, and moral affinity towards the brand. This resonance encourages consumers not only to trust the brand but also to identify with it (Iglesias & Ind, 2020).

The final stage in the model is behavioral enactment, where emotional attachment is translated into concrete actions such as sharing content, giving recommendations, participating in brand activities, and making repeat purchases. This form of behavior marks the realization of authentic engagement, which is engagement that arises from meaning and trust, not just attraction or temporary promotion (Giertz et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2022). This horizontal model emphasizes that authentic engagement is not merely a linear result, but a layered process that combines emotional, moral, and behavioral aspects. The interaction between human warmth and structural honesty forms a relational cycle that continues to revolve, strengthening trust and expanding consumer participation over time. By understanding this flow, multinational companies can design cross-cultural communication strategies that are not only attractive but also meaningful and sustainable in the eyes of global consumers.

DISCUSSION

Human-Likeness as Relational Catalyst

Human-likeness acts as a catalyst for emotional connections between companies and consumers, creating the perception that brands have a lively, empathetic, and authentic personality. In the context of global corporate marketing, a human-like communication style—through expressions of empathy, warmth, and a natural conversational tone—creates the perception that the company understands consumer values and experiences (Avis, 2012; Sundar, 2020). This approach not only reduces the psychological distance between large organizations and individuals, but also reinforces the perception of authenticity that is the foundation of emotional engagement (Chen & Lin, 2021). Human-likeness strengthens social presence, which is the perception of human presence behind digital interactions, encouraging a two-way communication experience (Doorn et al., 2017).

In online interactions, social presence created through natural conversation styles, affective symbols such as emojis, or responses that show personal attention increases the perception that brands have a real and caring personality (Hayes et al., 2020; Morhart et al., 2015). Consumers no longer see brands as abstract entities, but as responsive social partners.

In a cross-cultural context, human-likeness is adaptive to the communication norms and social values of each society. In East Asian countries, forms of communication that emphasize collective empathy and social harmony tend to be more effective because they are in line with communitarian values (Connell et al., 2023). Meanwhile, in Western cultures, communication that emphasizes directness and personal expression is more appreciated because it is considered to reflect individual authenticity (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). The success of human-likeness strategies depends on a company's ability to tailor affective expressions to the cultural context without obscuring its global brand identity (Aksoy et al., 2022; Oliveira et al., 2025). Human-likeness elements also contribute to the formation of long-term trust and loyalty. Consumers tend to trust companies that show interpersonal care and warmth through consistent communication across various media channels (Aiello et al., 2020; Chandler & Lusch, 2015). Perceptions of warmth and competence form the basis of social evaluation of brands, and both are positively correlated with consumer loyalty and advocacy (Phan & Bui, 2025).

This finding expands the concept of brand anthropomorphism by showing that authentic human-likeness has greater relational power than symbolic anthropomorphism. Consumers not only perceive brands as "alive," but also internalize brand values and emotions as part of their social identity (Chen & Lin, 2021). In the context of multinational companies, human-likeness serves as an emotional bridge that facilitates cross-cultural communication and enhances the social relevance of brands in various global markets (Zhang, 2024).

Table 1 Conceptualization of Human-Likeness as a Relational Catalyst

| Human-Likeness Dimension | Description | Relational Implications | Reference |
|--------------------------|---|---|---|
| Empathy | The brand's ability to express concern for consumer experiences and needs. | Enhance emotional connection and the perception that the brand "understands" individuals. | Morhart et al. (2015); Sundar (2020) |
| Warmth | Warm, positive communication that values the audience. | Promote interpersonal trust and the perception of brand morality. | Phan & Bui (2025) |
| Conversational Tone | Use of natural, personal conversational language in brand communication. | Foster social presence and reduce psychological distance. | Doorn et al. (2017); Hayes et al. (2020) |
| Cultural Adaptability | Ability to adapt human-like expressions to local cultural norms. | Increase social relevance and cross-cultural acceptance. | Connell et al. (2023); MacInnis & Folkes (2017) |
| Authenticity | Consistency between values, messages, and actions that reflect "emotional honesty." | Generate long-term brand loyalty and identification. | Avis (2012); Chen & Lin (2021) |

Table 1 confirms that the concept of human-likeness is a multidimensional construct consisting of empathy, warmth, natural conversational style, cultural adaptability, and authenticity. These five dimensions interact systemically to shape the perception that brands have social and moral agency, not merely economic function. Within the framework of consumer psychology, this combination activates affective trust and relational identification, whereby consumers view brands as trustworthy partners that represent their personal values (Chandler & Lusch, 2015; Fiske et al., 2007).

Empathy and warmth serve as the affective foundation of psychological connectedness. Empathy signifies that the brand understands the emotional context of its consumers, while warmth evokes a sense of security and social acceptance that forms an emotional comfort zone in the brand–consumer relationship (Morhart et al., 2015; Phan & Bui, 2025). The combination of both

builds moral resonance—that is, emotional and ethical alignment between the company and consumers that strengthens long-term engagement. A natural conversational style serves as a social cue that transforms corporate communication into more human interpersonal interactions. When companies use a responsive, open, and non-hierarchical tone of communication, consumers interpret the brand as a social entity with a sincere intention to connect (Doorn et al., 2017; Hayes et al., 2020). This style of conversation establishes social presence and reduces the psychological distance that often arises between large organizations and individuals.

Cultural adaptability plays a strategic role in strengthening cross-context relevance. Effective human-likeness is not just about mimicking human behavior, but about adapting affective expressions to the communication norms, social values, and emotional expectations of a particular society (Connell et al., 2023). This approach demonstrates that cultural sensitivity is an integral part of brand humanity. When expressions of empathy and warmth are articulated contextually, consumers perceive brands as more authentic because they demonstrate deep social understanding (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017; Oliveira et al., 2025). Authenticity serves as a moral anchor that maintains the credibility of all forms of human-likeness. Authenticity is formed through consistency between a company's messages, values, and actions. Modern consumers, especially in the digital context, judge emotional honesty based on consistency across communication channels and repeated brand experiences (Avis, 2012; Chen & Lin, 2021). When this consistency is maintained, brand authenticity develops into a form of relational truth—that is, the perception that the brand is honest not only in its words but also in its social intentions.

Conceptually, human-likeness functions as a relational mechanism that reconstructs the relationship between the company and the public from a transactional one to an affective one. Brands are no longer positioned solely as product symbols, but as social actors participating in the dialogue of consumer values and emotions (Zhang, 2024). In the context of multinational companies, this mechanism enables the development of glocal intimacy—that is, emotional closeness that operates on a global scale but remains rooted in local sensibilities. Human-likeness ultimately articulates a new form of corporate humanism in the digital age, where successful communication no longer depends on the power of persuasion, but on the organization's capacity to display emotional honesty and social responsibility that can be felt humanely by its consumers.

Transparency as Cultural Integrity

Transparency serves as an ethical mechanism that strengthens cross-cultural trust, not merely a tool for conveying information. In the context of global corporate communication, transparency plays a symbolic role as a representation of organizational morality, signifying harmony between values, words, and actions (Cambier & Poncin, 2020). The success of transparent communication depends on the extent to which companies are able to connect public messages with real behavior that reflects their social responsibility (Lee & Li, 2021). When this alignment is maintained, a perception of cultural integrity emerges, namely the view that organizations not only comply with universal ethical norms but also respect the moral values that apply in local cultures (Sansome et al., 2025). In an era of increasing awareness of manipulative practices such as greenwashing and ethics-washing, transparency has become a means of restoring a company's moral credibility (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). Global consumers are increasingly critical of sustainability rhetoric that is not followed by concrete actions (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Therefore, consistent disclosure between claims and performance is considered an indicator of ethical integrity that distinguishes authentic companies from opportunistic ones (Yang & Battocchio, 2021). Transparency, manifested through supply chain clarity, social and environmental reporting, and openness in decision-making processes, strengthens public trust and the social legitimacy of organizations (Acuti et al., 2022; Mueller et al., 2009). In a cross-cultural context, transparency is not a universal concept, but rather a reflection of the values and moral orientations of each society. In collectivist contexts such as East Asia and Southeast Asia, acknowledging corporate limitations or mistakes is interpreted as a sign of moral responsibility and respect for the community (Shao et al., 2022). Empathetic and collaborative disclosure reinforces the impression of social solidarity and loyalty to the value of group harmony (Connell et al., 2023). Meanwhile, in individualistic cultures such as the United States and Western Europe, transparency is considered authentic if accompanied

by evidence of concrete actions that demonstrate personal consistency and professional commitment (Southworth, 2019). Transparency without concrete actions is considered symbolic compliance, which actually undermines trust (Aksoy et al., 2022).

Conceptually, the effectiveness of transparency in building cultural integrity can be explained through three main pillars: Value Clarity, Process Openness, and Ethical Accountability (Rocha, 2025). Value Clarity describes the company's openness to the values and moral principles that form the basis of its policies; Process Openness emphasizes the clarity of procedures and operational responsibilities; while Ethical Accountability demonstrates the company's readiness to take responsibility for the consequences of every action taken (Acuti et al., 2022; Mueller et al., 2009). These three pillars reinforce each other in forming a trust architecture rooted in moral integrity and cultural sensitivity (Sekerka, 2020). Transparency also functions as a cultural signaling mechanism, whereby organizations adjust their communication style to the social norms of their audience. For example, visual narratives that highlight interpersonal relationships and collective work processes are more effective in Eastern cultures that prioritize togetherness, while quantitative reports with objective performance indicators are more valued in Western cultures that emphasize individual accountability (Acuti et al., 2022; Cambier & Poncin, 2020). This adaptation reinforces brand authenticity and ensures that information disclosure is not only understood but also morally respected in various cultural contexts (Yang & Battocchio, 2021).

Table 2 Cross-Cultural Transparency Matrix

| Cultural Orientation | Focus on Transparency | Effective Communication | Moral Meaning Produced |
|---|---|---|--|
| Collectivistic (East Asia, Southeast Asia) | Empathy and social responsibility | Empathetic narrative, acknowledgment of shared challenges, community engagement | Solidarity, harmony, collective moral responsibility |
| Individualistic (North America, Western Europe) | Clarity of action and ethical evidence | Quantitative reporting, independent audits, explicit commitment to improvement | Personal integrity, moral consistency, individual accountability |
| Hybrid (Global Market / Multinational) | Integration of universal values with local adaptation | Multi-channel communication that unifies ethical narrative and factual data | Global authenticity, cultural flexibility, sustainable trust |

Transparency based on cultural integrity serves as a catalyst for building trust and legitimacy in a global market that is increasingly sensitive to issues of ethics and social responsibility. In a complex and culturally fragmented business environment, openness is no longer just a normative requirement, but a source of sustainable reputational advantage (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). When companies demonstrate consistency between their communicated values and actual behavior, they strengthen the affective trust that underpins cross-border consumer loyalty (Sansome et al., 2025). Authentic transparency signals a commitment to moral honesty and social integrity, transforming corporate communications into a space for ethical dialogue that strengthens stakeholder relationships (Acuti et al., 2022).

Within the framework of moral legitimacy, transparency builds the perception that companies act in accordance with social norms applicable in various cultural contexts. The alignment between universal principles—such as fairness, honesty, and responsibility—and local values such as harmony, respect, and solidarity creates the perception that organizations not only comply with formal regulations but also understand the moral meaning behind them (Cambier & Poncin, 2020). This approach reinforces what is known as moral congruence, which is the alignment between corporate values and the moral expectations of society (Drumwright, 2014). Companies that display contextual transparency—for example, by explaining the ethical dilemmas faced in the supply chain or the impact of policies on local communities—are considered more credible than those that only highlight sterile sustainability data (Yang & Battocchio, 2021).

Transparency based on cultural integrity also plays a strategic role in mediating tensions between globalization and locality. In a digital economy characterized by information openness and

public participation, an authentic corporate image can only be built through narrative consistency that is recognized across cultures (Sekerka, 2020). When companies tailor the form and narrative of their transparency to local value orientations without sacrificing universal principles, cultural legitimacy is created, namely social recognition that the organization operates in good faith and with moral sensitivity to the cultural context it serves (Connell et al., 2023; Shao et al., 2022).

Strategically, transparency rooted in cultural integrity strengthens the long-term function of corporate reputation as a moral asset. Reputation is determined not only by economic performance, but also by the extent to which an organization is perceived as a trustworthy, responsible entity that respects global values (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). Transparency translated into accountable storytelling—for example, open reporting on sustainability challenges, decision-making processes, and ethical reflections—enables companies to build emotional closeness that cannot be achieved through transactional communication strategies (Wong et al., 2021). In this context, openness becomes a moral practice that connects global corporate identity with public moral expectations, strengthening trust as a form of social capital that is irreplaceable in the long term (Sansome et al., 2025).

Authentic Engagement as Behavioral Transformation

Authenticity in brand engagement represents the highest form of psychological connection between consumers and companies. This phenomenon not only reflects a high level of emotional trust, but also marks a shift from transactional interactions to participatory and meaningful relationships. When consumers perceive a company's communication as honest, warm, and human-like, a sense of emotional and moral engagement arises. The combination of empathy in communication (human-likeness) and consistent openness (transparency) creates the perception that the company operates based on authentic values, not just marketing strategies (Brodie et al., 2019; Yang & Battocchio, 2021). Authentic engagement develops through a transformational process involving three main layers: perceptual alignment, emotional resonance, and behavioral enactment. In the initial stage, consumers assess the compatibility between their personal values and the values articulated by the brand. When this alignment is achieved, a deeper emotional connection emerges, characterized by trust, affective closeness, and a shared sense of morality (Dessart et al., 2016). The final stage involves tangible behavioral changes such as advocacy, sharing positive experiences, and participating in brand activities that demonstrate consumers' internalization of corporate values (Ahmad et al., 2023).

From a socio-psychological perspective, authentic engagement reflects a strong form of self-brand connection, where individuals integrate the brand's image and values into their self-representation (Westhuizen, 2018). When a brand is perceived as an entity with integrity and empathy, engagement becomes both a moral and social expression. Consumers support brands not only because of their functional benefits, but also because they feel ethically and emotionally connected to them. This relationship has the potential to create stable and deep loyalty because it is based on internalized values, not purely utilitarian considerations (Morhart et al., 2015; Tuškej et al., 2013). In different cultural contexts, the manifestations of authentic engagement show significant variations. In collectivist societies such as Indonesia, South Korea, or Japan, forms of engagement tend to be oriented towards social contribution and group harmony. Consumers show their support by participating in corporate social campaigns, sharing positive narratives in the community, and building moral solidarity with the brand (Shao et al., 2022). Conversely, in individualistic cultures such as the United States or Germany, engagement is more directed toward self-expression and personal validation, for example through personal content creation, digital reviews, or identity-based advocacy (Southworth, 2019).

These differences show that authenticity is not universal, but rather understood within different social value frameworks. Authenticity in collectivist cultures is often measured through consistency and social responsibility, while in individualistic cultures, authenticity is more often interpreted as personal honesty and individual moral consistency (Chen, 2019). Companies that want to foster authentic engagement in various cultural contexts need to integrate this understanding into their global communication strategies so that the messages conveyed remain morally and emotionally relevant in every market (Acuti et al., 2022).

Conceptually, authentic engagement is the result of simultaneous interaction between two main pillars: human warmth and moral integrity. Human-likeness creates emotional connections through empathy, warmth, and social presence, while transparency strengthens moral legitimacy by demonstrating consistency and honesty. When these two dimensions interact, relational trust is formed, where consumers judge a brand not only by its performance, but by how it “behaves” ethically and communicatively (Fournier & Alvarez, 2013; Sansome et al., 2025). Authentic engagement ultimately functions as a sustainable behavioral transformation, as its foundation is built on trust, emotional warmth, and value integrity. Companies that successfully cultivate these conditions not only build loyal relationships but also form moral communities that interpret their engagement as a form of participation in shared values. In a digital age marked by public skepticism toward corporate image, authentic engagement proves that honesty and humanity remain strategic strengths in building long-term brand relationships (Acuti et al., 2022; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011).

Integrative Model and Theoretical Implications

The integration of human-likeness and transparency produces a relational model that repositions how multinational companies understand and build brand engagement in the digital age. These two concepts are not merely communication strategies, but rather two psychosocial mechanisms that reinforce each other in creating authentic engagement. Human-likeness stimulates affection and social closeness through warmth, empathy, and conversational presence, while transparency fosters moral trust through honesty, consistency, and corporate responsibility (Sundar, 2020; Yang & Battocchio, 2021). When these two elements operate simultaneously, perceptual alignment between brand values and consumer values is formed, which then develops into emotional resonance and culminates in behavioral enactment such as advocacy, loyalty, and co-creation (Brodie et al., 2019; Dessart et al., 2016). Theoretically, this model expands the understanding of brand anthropomorphism by showing that brand humanity is not only perceived through linguistic or visual forms, but also through structural honesty in corporate communication (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). Human-likeness without transparency can create a manipulative impression, while transparency without warmth can potentially feel cold and impersonal. The synergy between the two builds relational authenticity—a condition in which consumers not only believe what the brand says, but also who the brand is morally and emotionally (Morhart et al., 2015).

In a multinational context, this integration has significant cross-cultural implications. This model shows that the effectiveness of authentic communication depends on the convergence between cultural norms and corporate moral expression (Chen, 2019; Tarawneh, 2025). In collectivist cultures, relational authenticity is formed through social participation and recognition of shared challenges; companies that acknowledge mistakes and engage the public in dialogue are considered to have high integrity (Shao et al., 2022). In individualistic cultures, authenticity arises from the personal consistency of the brand—how the values expressed align with actual actions in the production chain, price transparency, and environmental policies (Southworth, 2019). This model reinforces cross-cultural literature by emphasizing that the ethical dimension of communication is not universal but is constructed locally based on the value orientation of society (Acuti et al., 2022).

In addition, the results of this study expand on Tuškej et al. (2013) consumer-brand relationship theory by adding morality as an important mediator between perceptions of humanity and engagement behavior. Until now, consumer-brand relationships have been explained mainly through affective bonds and self-identification, but this model shows that moral congruence serves as the core of sustained engagement. When consumers perceive that a brand operates in accordance with the ethical values they believe in, engagement becomes a moral expression rather than merely an affective preference (Kingsford et al., 2018; Sansome et al., 2025). Another theoretical implication is the emergence of the concept of affective transparency—a state in which corporate honesty is conveyed emotionally, not just informatively. This form of communication bridges the cognitive dimension of trust and the affective dimension of social closeness. For example, when companies acknowledge production challenges or logistical failures with an empathetic tone and warm conversational style, consumers perceive these actions not as weaknesses, but as evidence of

humanity and moral responsibility (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). This model enriches the literature on trust formation by adding that trust is built not only through the accuracy of information, but also through the emotional way in which the information is conveyed.

From a managerial perspective, this integrative model proposes a new approach to strategic corporate communication based on a balance between empathy and honesty. Companies need to adopt a communication style that is not only informative but also relational—combining elements of human warmth with ethical integrity to create a meaningful brand experience (Fournier & Alvarez, 2013). This approach can be implemented through two-way communication strategies such as open dialogue platforms, behind-the-scenes storytelling, and user co-creation narratives that allow consumers to actively participate in the brand value journey. In the long term, this model contributes to the formation of a new paradigm in brand engagement studies, where engagement is no longer understood as a behavioral reaction to brand stimuli, but as a form of continuous moral and emotional participation. Brands that are able to maintain a balance between human warmth and ethical transparency will occupy a unique position in a global landscape that increasingly demands social responsibility and transparency (Acuti et al., 2022; Sansome et al., 2025). This shows that the future of corporate communication is not only determined by technology or visual strategies, but by a company's ability to demonstrate integrity and humanity in every interaction.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that human-likeness and transparency are two key elements in building authentic brand engagement in a global context. Human-likeness brings an emotional dimension through empathy, warmth, and a communication style that resembles human interaction, while transparency strengthens moral legitimacy through openness of values, consistency of actions, and honesty in the process. Both work synergistically to form trust-based relationships, where consumers not only feel emotionally close but also believe in the company's integrity. These findings provide an understanding that consumer trust and loyalty are not solely built on product quality, but on the company's ability to demonstrate its humanity and ethical responsibility. A communication strategy that balances human warmth with factual openness is key to creating authentic cross-cultural engagement. Brands that are able to combine these two elements will find it easier to build long-term relationships based on values, trust, and active consumer participation in the brand ecosystem.

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