

THE HONG KONG POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING

Departmental Research Seminar

The Upsides of Imperfection: Perceptions of Authenticity and Humanness By



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Date : 13 Jan 2026 (Tue)
Time : 10:30 am – 12 noon
Venue : M802, PolyU

Abstract

As advances in media and information technology reshape both the format and cost structure of communication, consumers must adopt new strategies to signal their underlying qualities and infer others' qualities. I present results from three projects illustrating how imperfections and errors in technology-mediated communications can have upsides in social and marketplace settings, making communicators seem more authentic and human. The first project demonstrates that sharing candid (vs. posed) photos on social media can increase liking and strengthen social connection. These positive effects occur because observers view these less polished images as more genuine representations of the sharer's true self. The second project generalizes these insights and proposes a theoretical framework to explain how imperfections can serve as costly signals of authenticity. Because perfect signals of unobservable qualities are viewed as unrealistic, small imperfections can enhance signal credibility and lead to inferences of greater underlying ability. The third project examines how typos or minor errors made during real-time, text-based customer service interactions can humanize online communicators. These benefits apply to both chatbots and human agents, increasing positive evaluations of the communicator and the organization they represent. Together, these three lines of inquiry shed light on the balancing act between signaling desirable qualities and seeming authentic, and help uncover how the dynamics of signaling, deception, and detection evolve with technological change.

Prof. Alixandra Barasch is an Associate Professor of Marketing at the University of Colorado Boulder. She previously served as a faculty member at INSEAD and NYU, and earned her Ph.D. from The Wharton School. Her research investigates how technologies—such as photo-taking, content creation, live streaming, and tracking apps—are fundamentally reshaping consumer behavior and well-being. She also studies prosocial behavior, word of mouth and communication, and signaling and inference processes. Prof. Barasch's work has appeared in top journals in both marketing (*JCR*, *JMR*, *JM*) and psychology (*JPSP*, *Psych Science*, *JEP: General*), and she currently serves as an Associate Editor at *JCR* and *JM*, as well as on the editorial boards at *JMR*, *JCP*, and *JPSP*. She won the ACR Early Career Award in 2023, the AMA Erin Anderson Award for an Emerging Female Marketing Scholar and Mentor in 2024, and was selected as a Marketing Science Institute Young Scholar in 2021. Before starting her graduate studies, Prof. Barasch worked at MDRC, a non-profit dedicated to education policy research. She was also selected as a Fulbright Scholar, and spent a year teaching at the University of Macau and doing research at HKUST.

All interested are welcome.