Anthropomorphism and Animism Theory in Branding
Mark Avis, University of Otago

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Anthropomorphism and Animism Theory in Branding
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ABSTRACT

Animism and anthropomorphism theory have been introduced into branding, with an implication that consumers see brands as humanlike entities. A literature review identifies three papers that present significant discourse on the ‘humanlike brand’ and these form the basis of a critical review. Utilising brand definition and conceptualisation as a focus, the paper questions the citation of animism and anthropomorphism theory to justify the humanlike brand. Furthermore the empirical evidence supporting humanlike brand theory is examined and found to be questionable. As a result, the paper tentatively concludes that humanlike brand theory is questionable, and calls for a more thorough review.

Animism and anthropomorphism theory were first explicitly introduced into branding theory by Aaker (1997) and Fournier (1998), though earlier literature seemed to imply that brands were the subject of animism and anthropomorphism by consumers (Blackston, 1993; King, 1973; Guthrie, 1993), in an extensive and comprehensive discussion of animism and anthropomorphism, defines animism as humans “attributing life to the nonliving” and anthropomorphism as “attributing human characteristics to the nonhuman” (p52). As such, if brands are perceived as animistic/anthropomorphic, they are perceived by consumers as living humanlike entities (hereafter the humanlike brand). Indeed, Puzakova, Kwak, and Rocereto (2009) explicitly express this view, saying that the “fact that consumers form strong relationships with brands suggests that individuals perceive these brands as complete humans” (p413).

As a foundation for this paper, in addition to informal literature reviews, Scopus and Google Scholar database searches were undertaken to identify branding literature relevant to humanlike brand theory (see appendix). The aim of the reviews and searches was to identify papers that offer a significant discourse on the theory and/or evidence for the humanlike brand, and three articles were thus identified; Fournier (1998), Puzakova et al (2009) and Freling and Forbes (2005). The purpose of this paper is to present a critical review (see Niniiluoto, 1999 for a discussion of critical approaches to theory) of the theory and evidence for the humanlike brand that is presented in the three articles (hereafter referred to without dates).

A key focus of the paper is to evaluate humanlike brand theory in relation to brand definition and conceptualisation. In particular, the validity of the importation of animism and anthropomorphism theory is examined in this context and found to be questionable. In addition to this theoretical examination, the empirical evidence for humanlike brand presented in the three selected papers is examined, and is found to be questionable. Furthermore, there is literature and research that, directly and indirectly, suggests that consumers do not ordinarily think of brands as humanlike. This paper therefore finds that there are problems in both the theory and the empirical evidence presented in the three papers selected for the review. As such, bearing in mind the limited nature of the review, the paper tentatively concludes by questioning the validity of humanlike brand theory, and calling for a more comprehensive evaluation of the humanlike brand theory.

WHAT IS THE SUBJECT OF THE ANIMISM AND ANTHROPOMORPHISM?

The review for this paper commences with a fundamental question; when discussing that brands are perceived as humanlike, a problem arises as to what exactly a brand might be and this is the question of brand definition and conceptualisation. It is not a trivial question, as the three articles are importing and adapting a body of theory and research from the animism and anthropomorphism literature, and applying this to a brand entity. It is therefore essential that the theorists explain to what entity this theory might apply, as it is only possible to know whether the imported theory is being applied appropriately if the entity that is the subject of animism and anthropomorphism is explained.

The problem for theorists is that brand definition and conceptualisation is variable and proves to be inconsistent. For example, Brodie and de Chernatony (2009) recently observed that “there never will be a unifying definition of brand but a constantly evolving series of contexts of lenses through which the phenomenon is viewed” (p97). Likewise, the reviews of brand definitions by Wood (2000) and Stern (2006) identify multiple definitions and conceptualisations of brands, and other brand theorists such as Kapferer (2001, p3; 2004, p9) and Ind (2004, p16) have also noted that brand definition and conceptualisation are problematic.

It is therefore notable that Puzakova et al and Freling and Forbes offer no definition or conceptualisation of the brand. In doing so, they leave the brand concept open to interpretation so that it is unclear what exactly they are suggesting is the subject of the animism and anthropomorphism. By contrast, Fournier does define the brand but, as will be seen later, the definition proves problematic in relation to the importation of animism and anthropomorphism theory. Overall, it will be apparent that brand definitions and conceptualisations present significant challenges in relation to humanlike brand theory. In particular, when importing theory from the animism and anthropomorphism literature, examples and theory derived from the study of non-brand entities are used to explain brand animism and anthropomorphism.

For example, Freling and Forbes point out that anthropomorphism is a widespread phenomena, citing examples taken from Guthrie (1993), such as the human tendency to speak to plants, cars and computers. They propose that a “logical extension of this thinking is to view brand personality as an instance of anthropomorphism.” (p152) In the discussion that follows, there are citations from theorists who consider the ongoing debate about animal anthropomorphism in ethology, such as Kennedy (1992) and Moyinishan (1997). Furthermore, there is reference to teleology, which is a more general position that humans assign purposefulness to the world around them (Braudus, 2006), as well as discussion of the anthropic principle, which is the tendency to explain the world in terms of their own (human) experiences.

A fundamental problem with the discussion of Freling and Forbes is that they claim that the examples of anthropomorphism that they provide can be ‘logically’ extended to the application of the humanlike brand. As Freling and Forbes correctly identify, animism and anthropomorphism are commonplace and there are indeed
many variants of animism and anthropomorphism cited in literature. For example, in an extensive review, Guthrie (1993) identifies varied examples, such as a hat blowing in the wind being perceived as evading capture (p47), seeing a human form in a cliff (p84), attribution of human qualities in plants (p60) and animals (p93), anthropomorphism of objects in advertising (p85), and the anthropomorphism and animism of entities associated with religious thought.

Other theorists and researchers likewise identify similar examples, such as a Berliner key being perceived as a social actor that alters behaviour (Owens, 2007), animated geometric shapes perceived as humanlike (Castelli, Happé, Frith, & Frith, 2000), or the way in which technical devices come ‘alive’ when malfunctioning (Caporael, 1986; Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo, 2008).

In addition, the literature surrounding animal anthropomorphism (Chin, Sims, Clark, & Lopez, 2004; Kennedy, 1992; Mitchell, Thompson, & Miles, 1997) and anthropomorphism in relation to religion (e.g. J. L. Barrett, Richert, & Driesenga, 2001; Boyer, 1996a; Harvey, 2005; McDougall, 1915) is extensive. There can be little doubt that animism and anthropomorphism are phenomena that are apparent over many domains, but none of these examples demonstrate that brands might be the subject of animism and anthropomorphism.

A similar problem arises with Puzakova et al, who place considerable reliance on the work of Epley et al (2008; 2007), Epley et al (2007) consider a wide variety of anthropomorphic nonhuman agents and suggest that these agents might include “anything that acts with apparent independence, including nonhuman animals, natural forces, religious deities, and mechanical or electronic devices." A similar set of examples appear in the Epley et al (2008), where they broadly categorise nonhuman agents as mechanical devices, nonhuman animals, and deities and spirits. As for Freling and Forbes, the problems in these examples are how they might relate to brand anthropomorphism and animism, and this raises the question of brand definition and conceptualisation.

Neither Puzakova et al, nor Freling and Forbes have defined what they mean by the term brand. However, in the reviews of brand definitions and conceptualisations by Wood (2000) and Stern (2006) it is apparent that all of the widely accepted views of brands propose that a brand is an immaterial entity, albeit with some physical instantiations such as logos and products, Stern (2006) observes that the definitions and conceptualisation of brand are rooted in metaphor, and Davies and Chun (2003) come to the same conclusion. As brands are fundamentally immaterial/metaphoric comparisons of brands with the animism and anthropomorphism of entities such as animals, plants, and inanimate objects do not justify or explain the humanlike brand. They may indicate a general human proclivity towards animism and anthropomorphism, but nothing more.

In consideration of the conceptualisation of brand as being metaphoric, Epley et al (2007) suggest that metaphor can be anthropomorphic, giving the example of inflation perceived as an adversary. However, they also categorise this as a ‘weak’ variant of anthropomorphism, suggesting that the metaphor is lacking the human traits that they see as constituting ‘strong’ variants (e.g. deities). The problem for this as an exemplar for the humanlike brand is that the humanlike brand is a strong variant of anthropomorphism, as humanlike brand theory proposes that brands have personality, and are sufficiently humanlike that consumers might have a relationship with them.

In order for humanlike brand theorists to justify the humanlike brand, it is necessary to find examples in the literature that can be related to Epley et al’s (2007) strong variant of anthropomorphism i.e. a variant that is primarily immaterial/metaphoric but also includes a similar degree of humanlike attribution to the humanlike brand. Guthrie (1993) undoubtedly offers the most comprehensive review of literature on animism and anthropomorphism, but the only examples in his work that might be comparable with the humanlike brand are entities such as the spirits and deities. Further reviews of more recent animism and anthropomorphism literature presented the same conclusion, which is that the only example equivalent to the humanlike brand are those associated with religious thought (e.g. J. L. Barrett & Keil, 1996; Boyer, 1996a; Boyer, 1996b; Caporael & Heyes, 1997; Epley, Akalis et al., 2008; Epley, Waytz et al., 2008; Epley et al., 2007; Gonnerman, 2008).

It may be a matter of concern to researchers and theorists who propose humanlike brand explanations that the only comparable examples are entities such as spirits and deities. Whilst it may be possible for consumers to think of brands in ways that are comparable to thought about these entities, it also seems intuitively implausible (e.g. see Doppelt, 2005 for a discussion of intuitive plausibility). Furthermore, if this is the explanation of the humanlike brand it would need very robust support from the body of theory examining religious thought (e.g. J. Barrett, 2007; Boyer, 2001). In the absence of presentation of this theoretical justification, the importation of animism and anthropomorphism theory into branding fails to explain or justify the humanlike brand.

The importance of brand definition in relation to the humanlike brand is further illustrated by Fournier. The article is unusual in that it gives a clear conceptualisation of the brand as ‘simply a collection of perceptions held in the mind of a consumer’ (p344). In thus conceptualising the brand, the inevitable question is how it might be possible for a consumer to experience animism and anthropomorphism of a collection of their own perceptions. In particular, the perceptions must have a referent somewhere outside of the consumer, or brands would just be an elaborate self-induced fantasy. It seems fair to suggest that Fournier is unlikely to have intended this interpretation (see later). As such, de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley’s (1998, see p426) contemporaneous discussion of the components of brands presents some potential sources of referents for consumer perceptions, and is summarised in figure 1.

The first point to note in figure 1 is that both relationship and personality appear as components, raising the problem of relationship with what, and the question of what ‘has’ the personality. Aside from this fundamental problem, if looking for a target for the perceptions that might reasonably be the subject of animism and anthropomorphism, it is difficult to see any component that might be appropriate. Whilst the logo might be anthropomorphic (e.g. the Michelin Man), this does not imply or demonstrate brand animism. The only component that seems suggestive of being a source for humanlike perceptions, and with which a consumer might have a relationship is the company/corporation. It is therefore interesting to note that Fournier (1998) says the following:
A logical extension of this thinking [that consumers perceive a relationship through marketing activities] is to view all marketing actions as a set of behavioral incidents from which trait inferences about the brand are made and through which the brand’s personality is actualized." (p345)

In light of the fact that Fournier is proposing that the relationship is with the brand, this appears to be a contradictory position, with the relationship apparently with the firm. In this case, the brand simply becomes a label for the inferences derived from the activity of the firm. A firm’s actions are the collective activity of the individuals within the firm, and it is interesting to see that O’Guinn and Muniz (2009) have sought to reconceptualise brand relationships into ‘collective brand relationships’ and highlight the role of the firm. However, as firms are a collection of real humans, there is no need for animism and anthropomorphism theory, as consumers are making their inferences from the activity of real people. Furthermore, a more intuitively plausible concept of ‘consumer firm relationships’ presents itself, and this reflects conceptualisations of consumer commercial relationships presented by other theorists (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995).

The interesting point in the examination of Fournier’s theory is that, in later work, Fournier (2009) has seemingly retreated from the humanlike brand theory, which is described as a ‘red herring’. When considering the problematic nature of Fournier’s brand definition, and the implications of the definition, this is unsurprising. Furthermore, when examining the case studies in Fournier’s original work, it is apparent that there is surprisingly little evidence of humanlike brand perceptions, and that the ‘relationships’ are mostly derived from Fournier’s interpretation of mundane descriptions. Although there is mention of ‘love’ in two cases, the possibility that the use of the term ‘love’ might be figurative is not considered or investigated, despite the unusual nature of this discourse in relation to the overall discourse.

In the case of Puzakova et al and Freling and Forbes, who present no brand definition, it is nevertheless apparent that the commonality of brand definitions and conceptualisation as metaphoric/immaterial also present problems for the validity of humanlike brand theory. It is therefore interesting to note that, in a recent paper (Freling, Crosno, & Henard, 2010), there is no mention of humanlike brand theory, and no explanation for the disappearance.

**THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE HUMANLIKE BRAND**

Although there are problems apparent in the importation of theory and examples from the animism and anthropomorphism literature, Fournier, Freling and Forbes, and Puzakova et al all reference evidence from the branding literature to support humanlike brand theory. However, as will be seen, these references are problematic, and there is also both direct and indirect examples in the branding literature that suggest that consumers *ordinarily* thinking of brands as humanlike is, at the very least, unlikely.

The emphasis on consumers *ordinarily* thinking of brands as humanlike relates to a particular source of evidence for the humanlike brands, which is research that is founded in the use of projective methods. All three articles cite work founded in projective methods, with the following cited in one or more of the articles as evidence of the humanlike brand; Blackston (1993, 1995), Plummer (1985), Rook (1985, 1987), Lannon (1993), Sherry, McGrath and Levy (1993) and Levy (1985).

As an illustration, Blackston, Lannon and Plummer, are all practitioners who utilised projective methods in their brand research, and all of their work includes research derived from the projective method of brand personification. This is an associative projective method (see Helkkula & Pihlström, 2010 for classification of projective methods) in which the researchers ask consumers to think of a brand as if it were a person, and then ask the consumer to describe the ‘person’, and sometimes consumers are even asked to think of the imagined ‘person’ in a fantasy situation (Blackston, 1993). Another associative method is used by Plummer (1985), which is to imagine the brand as an animal, and other examples of associative methods includes cars (Levy, 1985). As such, in all of these examples of practitioner literature, there are indeed cases of brand animism and anthropomorphism. However, the use of this work as evidence in support of the humanlike brand is problematic.

The problem with research based upon projective methods is that this does not represent how consumers *ordinarily* think of brands. Zaltman and Zaltman (2008, p37) make the point clearly in relations to associative projections, and O’Guinn and Muniz (2009) describe the use of ‘neo-Freudian’ projective research as ‘odd’, and are dismissive of the idea that consumers might perceive a humanlike brand when they say that:

“We know of no compelling evidence that humans, without being coaxed or demanded to do so, think of brands as humans or humanlike.” (p174).
It is notable that Fournier’s (2009) ‘retreat’ from humanlike brand theory appears in the same volume as the O’Guinn and Muniz critique humanlike brand theory, possibly suggesting that Fournier retreated from humanlike brand theory as a result of the critique. The point is that, the research founded on projective methods is not in any way representative of the way that consumers ordinarily think of brands. For example, whilst it is relatively easy to ‘coax’ consumers to think of brands as if they were people, it is also possible to coax them to think of brands as animals. This in no way indicates that consumers think of brands as if they are animals. In other projective research, it is quite possible that human characteristics might be associated with brands, but associations such as user-imagery (the data generated from personification, van Hoof, Walenberg, & de Jong, 2007) are very different from the humanlike brand, which purports that the brand itself is humanlike and animate.

When looking at the three articles, the real concern is that, outside of the results of projective methods, no other empirical evidence is presented for the humanlike brand excepting other brand personality or brand relationship articles. For example, Freling and Forbes cite Aaker (1999), Fournier (1998) and their own research on brand personality (T. Freling & L. Forbes, 2005). The lack of citations of evidence of the humanlike brand from outside of the brand personality and brand relationship literature, and outside of projective research, raises a significant concern. This is best expressed by Freling and Forbes, who say the following:

“[…] there is a limited body of work that indirectly documents the practice of anthropomorphic thinking in a branding context, demonstrating that consumers attribute human properties to their possessions, goods, products and services […]” (p152)

The first problem is that they discuss a ‘limited body’ of evidence, and the second problem is that this is not even for brands. As Freling and Forbes are brand personality theorists who are detailing humanlike brand theory, it would be reasonable to expect that they could present a large body of evidence to support humanlike brand theory. After decades of intense scrutiny of brand perceptions, there should be a voluminous body of literature to support the humanlike brand. After all, consumers perceiving brands as humanlike entities is not an immediately intuitively plausible notion, and would thus surely have garnered significant comment and notice. Of course, it is possible that the many researchers studying brands simply missed these perceptions, but this is improbable. Furthermore, there is both direct and indirect evidence which suggests that consumers do not think of brands as humanlike.

One study which strongly suggests that brands are not perceived as humanlike is rather oddly cited by Puzakova et al as evidence in support of the humanlike brand. This is the research of Yoon et al (2006), who utilised fMRI scans as method of assessing whether people use the same judgement mechanism for brands as for people. Utilising adjectives taken from brand personality scales, they combined these on flash cards with the names of people, brands or a designation of ‘self’ (e.g. Sprite + cheerful, Billy Joel + sincere, self + annoying). Their purpose was to identify whether the medial prefrontal cortex, associated with judgements about people, or the left inferior prefrontal cortex, associated with judgements about objects, would be activated. The conclusions of the study were quite clear:

“Overall results of the present fMRI investigation support the contention that consumers do not process descriptive judgements of products in the same manner as those for humans.” (p36)

Aside from their use of the word ‘products’ (when they presumably mean brands), their research conclusion serves to raise questions about the humanlike brand. Furthermore, there has been the application of full human personality inventories to brands, including the Five Factor Model (Caprara et al., 2001) and the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (Shank & Langmeyer, 1994). In both cases, the models could not be validated for brands, and this is suggestive that consumers do not think of brands as humanlike.

However, it is the extension of brand personality research into other areas that indirectly raise serious problems for the humanlike brand theory. For example, Batra et al (2010) have developed the concept of category personality, in which categories are found to have humanlike associations. There have likewise been studies of destination personality (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; 2006), website personality (Chen & Rodgers, 2006), and even housing estate personality (Ibrahim & Ong, 2004). Are all of these entities with ‘personalities’ likewise perceived as humanlike entities? Again, this seems very improbable, in particular in the case of categories.

Finally, a study of Romaniuk and Ehrenberg (2003) presented consumers with a free choice survey method to assign brand personality traits to consumers, in which they ticked the box if it was applicable to the brand. This contrasts with the widely used Aaker (1997) brand personality scale in which respondents must present a rating of the brand against each trait. It is also worth noting that Aaker (1997) used brand personification as part of the process of developing the brand personality scale, which returns to the problems of projective methods. As such, whilst the Aaker scale appears to ‘find’ brand personality, Romaniuk and Ehrenberg found very few of the traits were seen as applicable to individual brands and, where traits were seen as applicable, in many cases they were applied equally to different brands in the same category. This finding seems to suggest that ‘category personality’ was a major influence.

Overall, the empirical evidence for the humanlike brand appears to be very weak. Above all else, the greatest problem is that, outside of brand personality and brand relationship research and projective research, there is no evidence of consumers thinking of brands as humanlike. Indeed, since the introduction of the humanlike brand, research on consumer perceptions of brands is ongoing. Despite this, it is interesting to see that in a recent article, Freling (Freling et al., 2010) still offers no citations of literature showing consumers ordinarily think of brands as humanlike. It is also interesting to note that humanlike brand theory is not included in the recent article, and that the disappearance of this theory is not commented upon.

CONCLUSIONS

Before concluding, the limited scope of the review must be emphasised. As a brief conference paper, it is not possible to offer a full and comprehensive review of the literature and the conclusions are therefore tentative. However, notwithstanding this limitation, the review presented here might serve to raise concern and doubts about the theory of the humanlike brand. In particular, there are question marks over the empirical foundation for the
humanlike brand, and theories of animism and anthropomorphism only support the humanlike brand theory if brands are perceived by consumers as akin to a deity or spirit. This latter point seems intuitively implausible. Furthermore, if brands are not perceived as humanlike, this raises broader questions about what exactly brand personality and brand relationships might be. Aaker (1997) and Fournier (1998) provided the foundations respectively for brand personality and brand relationship theory, but both papers were founded in humanlike brand theory. Without humanlike brand theory, what might explain the relevance of these concepts?

One indirect conclusion of the review is that clear brand definition and conceptualisation has potential to highlight inconsistencies in theory. Had Fournier considered humanlike brand theory in relation to the brand definition given in the paper, the inconsistency in the theory may have been identified. Likewise, in the case of Frelting and Forbes and Puzakova et al., had they provided a conceptualisation of the brand, this would have potentially provided an opportunity to note the lack of plausible exemplars in the animism and anthropomorphism literature. This serves to further highlight the importance of clarity of brand definition and conceptualisation in relation to branding theory and research (Avis, 2009).

Although the conclusions of this paper are tentative, the paper presents a springboard for a more comprehensive review of humanlike brand theory and evidence, as well as a more detailed and comprehensive review of animism and anthropomorphism theory in relation to branding. The paper might also serve to spur some debate and consideration of humanlike brand theory within the brand personality and brand relationship literature. For example, it may be possible to address or refute the points in this paper, or theorists may conclude that there are more fruitful theoretical justifications for brand personality and brand relationship theory. In either case, the paper contributes to branding literature by highlighting some problems in the theory and evidence for the humanlike brand.

APPENDIX

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