The Influence of Anthropomorphism on Product Attributes Processing and Consumer Preference

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The current research proposes that anthropomorphism—seeing humanlike characteristics in nonhuman agents—increases consumer preference for physically superior products. This effect occurs because consumers perceive anthropomorphized products similarly to person perception which often relies on physical cues.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Anthropomorphism, defined as imbuing non-human objects with humanlike characteristics (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007), is often adopted in marketing communications. Prior research has shown that specific appearance designs can enhance the effectiveness of anthropomorphism in marketing (e.g., when the grille of a car resembles the mouth of a friendly person). The current research goes beyond the specific physical attributes of specific products and documents a general elevated effect of anthropomorphism on consumers’ preference for products with superior physical attributes (e.g., products with a more attractive appearance design or packaging design). Further, this research reveals a new mechanism that drives the influence of anthropomorphism on consumer preference. Specifically, anthropomorphizing a product prompts consumers to perceive the product in the same way as they perceive a person (i.e., by relying on a person’s physical features). Consequently, product anthropomorphism increases the perceived importance of physical attributes in consumers’ assessment of the product. In the next section, we review key findings in the literature and elucidate how and why anthropomorphism impacts consumer preference. Then we present three studies that test our propositions.

Recent research in marketing shows that anthropomorphism induces consumers to apply knowledge in human schema in processing information about products and brands. For example, Aggarwal and McGill (2007) find that product anthropomorphism leads consumers to evaluate the product based on human schema congruity. Consistent with findings in marketing literature, research in neuroscience shows that the same neural systems involved in making judgments about humans are activated when people make anthropomorphic judgment about non-human agents (Castelli et al. 2000). We thus posit that consumers are likely to use the way they comprehend a person to understand a product when the product is anthropomorphized. It is fairly common in our daily life that people form impressions about other people based on their physical appearance (Asch 1946). Person construal research by Freeman and Ambady (2011) shows that appearance cues, such as facial and body features, are often the first input that people access when they form impressions about other people. Empirical studies in the literature have demonstrated many cases that people rely on a person’s appearance to make judgments in a wide range of contexts such as strategic games playing (Tingley 2014), criminal sentencing (Porter, Brinek, and Gustaw 2010), political voting (Antonakis and Dalgás 2009), and business practice (Gorn, Jiang, and Johar 2008). Based on prior research on anthropomorphism and person perception, we propose that anthropomorphizing a product would increase the importance of the physical attribute in consumers’ product evaluation and choice. As a result, in a decision context involving the trade-offs between physically superior product and functionally superior product, anthropomorphizing the product would increase consumers’ preference for products with superior physical (vs. functional) attributes. We first test the importance of physical attributes using the information search paradigm in experiments 1a and 1b, and then examine the downstream effect on consumers’ product preference in experiments 2 and 3.

Experiment 1 served as an initial test of our proposition that anthropomorphism enhances the importance of the physical attributes of a product using the information search task (Jacoby 1977). If anthropomorphism enhances the importance of physical attributes in consumer judgment and decision, we then expect that consumers would allocate more resources (e.g., money and time) to search information about the physical attributes when the product is anthropomorphized. We manipulated anthropomorphism using the method from Aggarwal and McGill (2007). Participants first read product introductions which were written either in first person language or in the third person language. Next, participants proceeded to an information search task in which they need to allocate limited forum coins (experiment 1a) or time (experiment 1b) to view product information about physical attributes and functional attributes. Results of experiment 1 reveal that participants allocated more money (experiment 1a) and time (experiment 1b) to acquire information about physical attributes when the product was anthropomorphized.

Experiment 2 aimed to the test the downstream effect of anthropomorphism on product preference. Participants were asked to describe a pack of cereal as either human or product, a method adapted from Aggarwal and McGill (2012). Next, all participants were presented with information of two options of packaged cereal involving the trade-off between the physical attribute and the functional attribute. Specifically, cereal A, the physically superior option, was rated as five-star for the package design and four-star for nutrition, whereas cereal B, the functionally superior option, was rated as four-star for the package design and five-star for nutrition. Then participants indicated their choice between the two options. Results of experiment 2 suggest that anthropomorphizing the cereal increased participants’ choice share for the physically superior product option.

Experiment 3 aimed to replicate the downstream effect of anthropomorphism on product preference and to test the mechanism. The procedure was identical to experiment 2 except for the following two changes. First, we used the laptop computer as the target product. Laptop A, the physically superior option, was rated as five-star in the appearance design and four-star in battery life. Laptop B, the functional superior option, was rated as four-star in the appearance design and five-star in battery life. Participants indicated their preference for the laptops on an eight-point scale (1 = strongly prefer A, 8 = strongly prefer B), which served as the dependent variable. Second, we added questions measuring the importance of physical attributes. In support of our hypothesis, participants in the anthropomorphism condition reported greater preference for the physically superior laptop than did those in the non- anthropomorphism condition. Moreover, a mediation analysis following Hayes (2012, Model 4) confirmed the mediating role of the perceived importance of physical attribute.

The present research contributes to the literature of anthropomorphism by documenting novel effects and mechanism for product anthropomorphism, and advances the understanding of consumer decision-making involving the assessment of a combination of physical and functional attributes.
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