Humanized Products in TV Ads: How Anthropomorphism Can Elicit Emotions, Enhance Attitudes, and Affect Purchase Likelihood

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The propensity to attribute human characteristics to the non-human is known as “anthropomorphism” (Guthrie 1993, 62). The findings of our study show that a product presentation causing anthropomorphism can be a very effective advertising strategy due to the elicitation of positive emotions. Anthropomorphism can also influence purchase behavior.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“Look at me, touch me, caress me …” says Giulietta. Giulietta’s desire is not unusual in a human relationship. But Giulietta is not a woman: She is an Alfa Romeo car, and this is a TV commercial – a typical example of a growing trend in advertising to humanize objects in order to evoke positive attitudes. But do consumers really perceive objects as human beings? And does this advertising strategy really lead to more effective advertising?

The propensity to attribute human characteristics to the non-human is known as “anthropomorphism” (Guthrie 1993, 62). In some research, the term is used to describe the visual appearance of objects (e.g. Brown 2011; Nowak and Rauh 2008). In order to differentiate between product presentation and the evaluative tendencies of viewers, in this paper we follow Delbaere et al. (2011) in distinguishing between humanizing as an advertising technique and the process of anthropomorphism that it triggers.

Some researchers concentrate on attitudinal effects (Aggarwal and McGill 2007), others focus on the crucial role of emotions elicited by the human-like appearance of diverse objects, including robots (Riek et al. 2009; Zhang et al. 2010), computer-interface agents (Wang et al. 2007) and cars (Landwehr et al. 2011). As far as we are aware, Delbaere et al. (2011) are the only researchers to date who have looked at the relevance of humanized products in advertising. Their investigation, which focuses solely on print advertising, shows that such personification leads to stronger affective responses and attributions of brand personality. In our study, by contrast, we investigate TV commercials, whose moving images make them more “vivid” than “static” print ads. This, we argue, allows them to perfect the technique of humanizing products and evoke more intense emotions. Moreover, Delbaere et al. (2011) look exclusively at the role of loneliness as a factor influencing anthropomorphism. By contrast, we make an additional contribution by controlling for the other psychological determinants of anthropomorphism proposed by Epley et al. (2007), namely the need for cognition, the need for closure, the desire for control, social disconnection, and the desire for attachment. Our first hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 1: A human-like product presentation will lead to a positive attitude toward the ad () if it is mediated by positive emotions.

Miesler et al. (2010) demonstrate that the front view of a car elicits more positive emotions and a greater willingness to pay than the side view, but only when controlling for the personal tendency to anthropomorphize. Furthermore, Chandler and Schwarz (2010) find that consumers who anthropomorphize their vehicles are less willing to replace them. Caporael (1986) assumes that the judgment “this object is like me” induces high affect, accompanied by anthropomorphic behavior. We therefore hypothesize that the effect assumed in H1 is evoked by an inner process of anthropomorphism, triggered by product presentation:

Hypothesis 2: Initiated anthropomorphism leads to positive emotions that are accompanied by positive attitudes toward the ad and the brand () and which affect purchase likelihood.

We also analyze whether this is true for all subjects or only for those with specific psychological factors.

METHOD

We tested our two hypotheses in an online survey (n = 131). Subjects watched one of two TV commercials and then evaluated them. Via a pretest, we confirmed that the two commercials differed significantly from each other (p < .001) with regard to the human-likeness of the product. In the experimental condition, the commercial showed a series of everyday objects with implied faces expressing different emotions. The final object was the front view of an Audi A4, likely to be seen as a face due to the activation of a human face-schema by the preceding objects. In the control condition, only side views were shown, as they evoke less anthropomorphism (Miesler et al. 2010).

RESULTS

To test H1, we conducted a mediation analysis following the bootstrapping approach of Preacher and Hayes (2004) using the PROCESS tool (Hayes 2012). We investigated the supposed role of emotions mediating the effect of human-like product presentation on . The analysis revealed a significant relationship between the human-likeness, computed as a dummy variable, and (b = .5401, p < .05), showing a more favorable attitude toward the “humanized” commercial. This effect was mediated by positive emotions (b = .5023, LLCI = .1383, ULCLI = .8974), indicated by the absence of zero in the confidence interval. As the direct effect was not significant when controlling for emotions (b = .0378, p > .10), an indirect-only mediation by emotions was confirmed (Zhao et al. 2010).

Only the experimental commercial triggered anthropomorphism; we therefore investigated H2 with this group only (n = 63). Structural equation modeling using SMARTPLS 2.0 (Ringle et al. 2005) revealed that anthropomorphism leads to positive emotions (β = .2261, p < .05), which positively influence (β = .7727, p < .01). This in turn causes a positive (β = .6747, p < .01), which results in a higher purchase likelihood (β = .6322, p < .01, .3997). The Fornell Larcker criterion confirms discriminant validity. We also controlled for the above-mentioned psychological determinants (NFC, etc.), but found no effect on the propensity to anthropomorphize.

DISCUSSION

The experiment provides support for our hypotheses. A product presentation causing anthropomorphism can be very effective due to the elicitation of positive emotions and its impact on purchase behavior. The psychological factors proposed by Epley et al. (2007) appear to be of little relevance, so this advertising strategy can be used to reach a broad audience. We chose a commercial featuring indirect product humanizing, as this is less likely to be considered ridiculous by viewers than more obvious personifications – a speaking razor, say. Further research could look at situations in which a prod-
uct personification is exaggerated and becomes absurd. We tested the role of anthropomorphism with respect to a technical product, as we wished to extend previous research. However, it would also be worth investigating this advertising technique with respect to food products, as here emotional bonding could have both negative (e.g. obesity) and positive consequences (e.g. healthier nutrition).

REFERENCES


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