



ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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Anthropomorphism and Consumer Behavior

Discussion Leader: Tina Kiesler, California State University, Northridge

ACR 2005 Roundtable: Anthropomorphism and Consumer Behavior Discussion Leader: Tina Kiesler, California State University, Northridge Russell W. Belk, University of Utah Tanya L. Chartrand, Duke University Deborah Cours, California State University, Northridge Gavan J. Fitzsimons, Duke University Eric Greenleaf, New York University Katrin Harich, California State University, Fullerton Deborah D. Heisley, California State University, Northridge Vicki G. Morwitz, New York University Debra Lynn Stephens, University of Portland Abstract: Anthropomorphism is the tendency of people to make attributions of humanlike characteristics to animals and nonhuman entities. Research on pets and possessions indicate that humans easily attribute humanlike qualities to nonhuman entities. However, the antecedents, processes, and consequences of anthropomorphism in a consumer context are not yet well understood. The general purpose of this roundtable is to provide an open discussion of research ideas, approaches, and issues for ACR members interested in research on anthropomorphism and consumer behavior, with the goal of further developing this area of inquiry.

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ROUNDTABLE
Anthropomorphism and Consumer Behavior
 Tina Kiesler, California State University, Northridge

Anthropomorphism is the tendency of people to make attributions of humanlike characteristics to animals and nonhuman entities. Research on humans' perceptions of pets (e.g., Hirschman 1994; Holbrook et al. 2001; Sanders 1990, 1993) and possessions (Kiesler and Kiesler 2005; Wallendorf, Belk and Heisley 1988) indicates that humans easily attribute humanlike qualities and attributions to nonhuman entities. Yet, consumer researchers have scant knowledge of the antecedents and consequences of consumers' attributions of humanlike qualities to nonhuman entities such as pets, possessions, advertised brands and brand-related characters.

Anthropomorphic creations abound in the marketplace. Engineers and product designers often mimic the human form in products such as the Koziol Pot Scrubber, the friendly face of the front of a Volkswagen Bug, and the Honda Asimo Robot. Advertisers and brand consultants often mimic the human form in their logos, such as TiVo and the Mac startup icon, as well as their nonhuman endorsers such as the Pillsbury Dough Boy and the Michelin Man. Assumptions about the effects of anthropomorphism influence strategic decision making by organizations. Consider for instance that until 2004, the Pittsburgh Zoo did not publicly name its animals, fearing the public would think of wild animals as pets or people (Fahy, 2004). The Pittsburgh Zoo assumed negative effects of anthropomorphism. However, an alternative positive effect could be an increase in potential visitors' perceived attachment to the animals and thus to the zoo and its educational mission. Clearly, a greater understanding of anthropomorphism and consumer behavior can provide insight for a wide range of applications while also contributing to our general understanding of consumer cognition.

An animated roundtable discussion among consumer researchers resulted in the following research questions ripe for further inquiry.

- *Why do people anthropomorphize?* Whether conscious or subconscious, consumers' motives may influence the likelihood of anthropomorphism, the conditions (antecedents) under which anthropomorphism is more or less likely to occur and the type and degree of the consequences of anthropomorphism.
- *What are the antecedents of anthropomorphism in a consumer context?*

- *What are the consequences of anthropomorphism in a consumer context?* Our discussion noted that consequences may be positive (such as increased attachment to an anthropomorphized entity) or negative (as might occur if one feels negative affect towards an anthropomorphized entity due to a perceived negative humanlike characteristic).

Figure 1 graphically represents the relationships among the research questions posed in the roundtable discussion and it serves as a framework for future research on anthropomorphism in a consumer context.

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FIGURE 1
 A General Framework for Anthropomorphism Research in a Consumer Context

