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Pushing the Envelope of Brand and Personality: Antecedents and Moderators of Anthropomorphized Brands

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ABSTRACT

The tendency for consumers to perceive brands as actual human beings has significant implications in the area of branding. However, there is a large gap in the marketing literature regarding the process and conditions that may influence the degree to which consumers perceive brands as complete human beings. The present research introduces the concept of anthropomorphized brands and discusses the psychological mechanisms that underlie the process of brand anthropomorphization. Our study builds on the three-factor theory of anthropomorphism to explain how self-concept/brand image congruity may influence the inference process of brand anthropomorphization. Furthermore, we suggest that sociality and effectance motivation variables may moderate the relationship between self-concept/brand image congruity and anthropomorphized brands. Theoretical and managerial implications are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Anthropomorphization has been explored in various academic disciplines: a religious context (Gilmore 1919), application to pets (Cheney and Seyfarth 1990), and even to gadgets (Epley et al. 2008). Among philosophers, the concept of anthropomorphism has been discussed for more than two thousand years. Anthropomorphization theory has also significant implications in marketing research. For example, Fournier (1998) claims that individuals experience little difficulty in assigning personality features to brands; Levy (1985) and Plummer (1985) provide evidence that consumers easily view brands as possessing human characteristics. It is a widely accepted notion that consumers form different types of relationships with brands (Fournier 1998). However, for a brand to become an actual partner in the relationship, it must be perceived as a complete, literal human.

As marketing practitioners direct their promotional campaigns to attempt to persuade consumers to view brands as fully human, no reasonable explanation has been provided in regards to potential key variables that may impact consumers' ability and motivation to perceive brands as humans. Furthermore, a considerable number of psychological theories have been employed in order to better understand consumer-brand relationships (e.g., theories of love (Shimp and Madden 1988) or trust (Hess 1995)) without exploring the phenomenon of brand anthropomorphization, its antecedents, and underlying psychological mechanisms.

The anthropomorphization phenomenon has been extensively noted in varying streams of literature, but it has not received meaningful psychological account within the consumer behavior literature. Moreover, researchers in various fields of social science have been considering anthropomorphization as an invariant psychological process. Following this tradition, marketing researchers who have utilized the notion of somehow personalized or humanized brands have considered the process of consumers prescribing human characteristics to nonhuman objects as a chronically occurring consumer judgment. However, the three-factor anthropomorphization theory introduced by Epley et al. (2007) posits that different people are more or less likely to anthropomorphize objects, and that the anthropomorphization process is greatly determined by the accessibility of human knowledge, by the pres-

ence of specific situational cues, and by individuals' motivation at the time of judgment.

In summary, the purpose of the present study is threefold: 1) to advance the theory of anthropomorphization by introducing the notion of anthropomorphized brands in marketing research and explaining how anthropomorphized brands are different from other existing marketing brand concepts (e.g., brand personality); 2) to examine the antecedents of anthropomorphized brands; 3) to investigate the moderating roles of sociality motivation and effectance motivation on the relationship between self-concept/brand image congruity and anthropomorphized brands. The overall conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

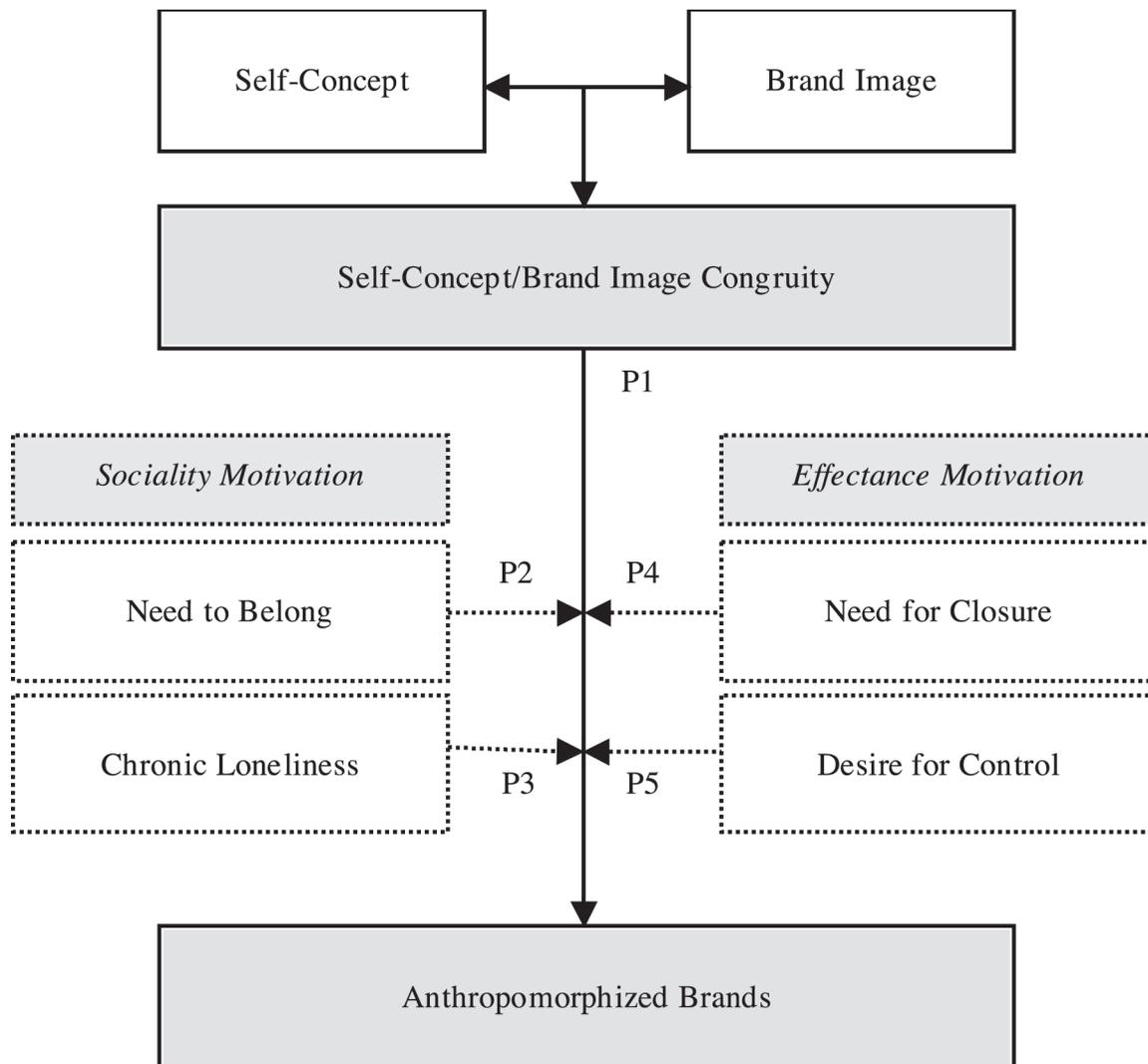
CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND PROPOSITIONS

Anthropomorphization and Anthropomorphized Brands (AB)

Marketing communication efforts have encouraged consumers to view brands in human terms (Aggarwal and McGill 2007; Yoon et al. 2006). There is evidence in the marketing literature that consumers may perceive humanlike features in products and brands (Aggarwal and McGill 2007; Tremoulet and Feldman 2000). The psychological process of imbuing brands with personalities is referred to by Aaker (1997) as *animism*. In marketing research, animism and anthropomorphism are frequently used interchangeably to demonstrate the process of product or brand animation. For instance, Fournier (Fournier 1998) refers to theories of animism when discussing the anthropomorphization process. However, social psychologists explicitly differentiate between the two psychological processes. For example, Guthrie (1993) describes animism as a person's wishful thinking of instilling life into objects when some motion or noise from the object is discerned. More importantly, the author defines anthropomorphism as the perception and recognition of humans in objects in the surrounding environment. Additionally, Epley et al. (2007, p. 865) argue that, "anthropomorphism involves more than simply attributing life to the nonliving (i.e., animism)". Consequently, prescribing selective human characteristics to nonhuman objects or merely simply enlivening nonhuman objects (animism) is not synonymous with viewing these objects as complete humans (anthropomorphism).

Furthermore, results of a qualitative study regarding consumer-brand relationship formation conducted by Fournier (1998) show some evidence that consumers may form relationships with brands. Extensive research in consumer behavior supports the notion of the existence of strong consumer-brand relationships (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Aggarwal and McGill 2007; Kim, Lee, and Ulgado 2005). However, Fournier (1998) argues that, in order for a brand to serve as a viable relationship partner and become a legitimate member of a consumer-brand bond, a brand should possess multiple qualities of a human being, embracing emotionality, thoughtful behavior, soul, and feelings. The fact that consumers form strong relationships with brands suggests that individuals perceive these brands as complete humans. Therefore, in the present paper, we apply the notion of anthropomorphization to brands and define anthropomorphized brands as *brands perceived by consumers as actual human beings with various emo-*

FIGURE 1
Conceptual Model



tional states, mind, soul, and conscious behaviors that can act as prominent members of social ties.

More than a decade ago, marketing scholars explored the concept of brand personality (BP) (Aaker 1997). Consumers' perceptions of brand personality became an extensively utilized phenomenon in the practitioners' world. Multiple examples can be identified in the brand world, such as sincere brands (e.g. Hallmark and Ford) (Smith 2001) or exciting brands (e.g. Mountain Dew and BMW) (Aaker et al. 2004). For example, Aaker (1997) states that Dr. Pepper is considered to possess a nonconforming, unique, and fun personality.

In the psychology and marketing literature, personality is commonly defined as the consistency of an individual's behaviors and reactions to surrounding stimuli (Kassarjian 1971). "Anthropomorphism involves going beyond behavioral descriptions of imagined or observable actions" (Epley et al. 2007, p. 865). More specifically, the anthropomorphization of nonhuman objects means perceiving them as absolute humans (Epley et al. 2007). This

involves attributing mind (intentions, effortful thinking, and consciousness) (Gray, Gray, and Wegner 2007), soul (Gilmore 1919), emotional states (Leyens et al. 2003), and behavioral features (Epley et al. 2007). Additionally, anthropomorphism entails the inference process of unobservable human features. Many characteristics of human nature are not readily recognizable, and personality, though being an essential observable part of humans, does not exhaust the transcended concept of humanness (Haslam et al. 2005). Furthermore, Haslam et al. (2005) argue that uniquely human characteristics involve human-nonhuman comparisons, while personality, being the differentiator of humans, is relevant to only person-to-person comparisons. Also, personality develops within the course of life. However, humanness is inherent to humans from the moment of birth. Thus, BP represents only one facet of the multiple components of AB. Additionally, in the marketing literature, BP has been defined as the set of human features that are associated with a brand and strictly applicable to brands (Azoulay and Kapferer 2003). This definition of BP substantially limits the

range of personality characteristics that can be attributable to humans. Therefore, this fact provides additional evidence that the AB concept transcends the construct of BP.

Self-Concept/Brand Image Congruity

Self-concept theory, being the subject of psychological and sociological academic interest for many decades, has multiple implications in marketing research (Aaker 1999; Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Hong and Zinkhan 1995; Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993; Rocereto, Kwak, and Puzakova 2008; Sirgy 1982). There are many conceptualizations of self-concept in the consumer behavior literature. One such definition is that, "the self is what one is aware of, one's attitudes, feelings, perceptions, and evaluations of one's self as an object" (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967, p.24). Another definition of the self comes from the nineteenth century when James (1890, p.291) conceptualized the self as, "...a sum of all that he (man) can call his, not only his body and psychic powers, but his clothes and his house...". It is obvious from James' definition that the self goes beyond one's personal perception of their own inner state, but includes external elements that a human owns. The self is extremely important and valuable to individuals, and they are expected to behave in ways that protect and enhance their self-concept (Kleine et al. 1993; Sirgy 1982; Underwood 2003; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). One way to extend and bolster a consumer's self-concept is through the symbolic meanings of brands that consumers possess (Belk 1988; Kassarijian 1971). That is, consumers are able to strengthen their own self-concept by owning brands whose symbolic images are congruent with important aspects of one's own self-concept. Therefore, the present study elaborates on the notion of self-concept/brand image congruity that is defined as the level of congruity between key elements of one's own self-concept and brand image.

The tendency for consumers to utilize brands as symbols in expressing one's self-concept arises from the fact that consumers imbue brands with human personality traits (Aaker 1997). Consumers make evaluations of brands based upon the perceived similarity between their own self-concept and perceived human personalities that they view in brands. If the result of such self-concept/brand image evaluations is positive, that is, in cases wherein consumers perceive the images of brands as being similar to their own self-concept, then they may develop higher levels of brand preferences and brand loyalty and will seek to own and surround themselves with brands that are congruent with their own self-concepts (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Hong and Zinkhan 1995; Kassarijian 1971). In the present study, we argue that self-concept/brand image congruity may be positively associated with consumers' perception of AB. We provide the psychological account for the relationship between self-concept/brand image congruity and AB further.

Self-Concept/Brand Image Congruity as an Antecedent to AB

According to Epley et al. (2007), the primary determinant of nonhuman object anthropomorphization is the activation of individuals' self-knowledge or human category knowledge, that is, the accessibility of the human cue at the point of judgment. The elicitation of human knowledge, in general, or self-knowledge, in particular, is based to a great extent upon the physical disability of humans to imagine how to be an object, and individuals' natural tendency to merely experience what it is to be a human due to their sensory limitations (Epley et al. 2007). Guthrie (1993) argues that individuals are extremely sensitive to the availability of any human cue and are very proficient in detecting its presence. Additional reasoning that Epley et al. (2007) provide is that egocentric knowledge is automatically accessible in making judgments for both humans and nonhumans. Psychology literature provides evidence

that supports the notion that self-knowledge operates naturally in the inference processes. For example, Tremoulet and Feldman (2000) show that similarity in motion may stimulate the anthropomorphic processes, and Dennett (1982) demonstrates that facial features or voices may increase the anthropomorphic induction processes. There is a support for the claim that human schema is primed by human cue in marketing literature, as well. For example, in Aggarwal and McGill's (2007) study, the process of product anthropomorphization occurs when human self-schema is activated by the physical appearance of the front of a car that closely resembles the human feature of a smile or of the shape of a bottle that emulates the human physical shape. Furthermore, as the three-factor theory of anthropomorphism postulates, human category or self knowledge application and anthropomorphic inference are likely to be corrected by giving further thought to the object of induction. Thus, when nonhuman information about brands is present, consumers may exhibit the tendency to cognitively process that information and to overcome the anthropomorphic representations of brands in their minds.

Building on the three-factor theory of anthropomorphism (Epley et al. 2007), we argue that when individuals identify that a brand possess aspects of their own unique human personality, the availability of the human cue activates human category knowledge. Sequentially, specific human personality dimension of a brand elicits consumer's self-schema that entails the same personality characteristics (Sirgy 1982). Similarly, previous research has shown that, based on the self-consistency motivation theory (Epstein 1980), consumers approach brands by making comparisons between their own self-concept and the images of these brands (Sirgy 1982). Successively, when making these comparisons, consumers are applying their self-knowledge to brands. When accessible at the point of judgment, human knowledge or self-knowledge may give a consumer a hint to make anthropomorphic inferences about brands. However, at this point, consumers may consider the other non-anthropomorphic brand features that allow for the overcoming and correcting of the initial inference pursuant to AB. For example, consumers may notice some non-anthropomorphic representation in an advertisement, such as the unrealistically fast movements of the image representing the brand in an advertisement that do not resemble the human motion, or a brand message using, instead of the words "family of products" (contains human cue), the words "line of products" (does not contain anthropomorphic cue) (Aggarwal and McGill 2007).

A consumer's consequential psychological process results in making decisions about the level of perceived similarity or dissimilarity between one's own self-concept and the image of a brand that has been defined above as self-concept/brand image congruity. Self-concept/brand image congruity is based on the notion of values that consumers project to brands (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Sirgy 1982). Furthermore, voluminous research has shown that brand value is derived from the symbolic meaning of a brand and is embedded in consumers' affective components of their attitudes (Belk 1988; Richins 1994; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Thus, when consumers are making comparisons between their own self-concepts and images of brands, they are comparing their own values with those of the values that a particular brand image carries.

On the other hand, marketing researchers have given sparse consideration to the dehumanization theory that has received the vast attention of scholars in psychology and sociology (Haslam et al. 2007). This theory has been primarily applied to explain racial and ethnical intergroup antagonism, conflict, and violence. Haslam et al. (2007) suggest that the dehumanization theory may be applied, not only to the realm of ethnocentric intergroup problems, but also to the interpersonal context, that is, the dehumanization phenomena

can be present in subtle and everyday forms. The central position of dehumanization theory is that if individuals perceive the values of the outgroup as being dissimilar to the values of their ingroup, then they are likely to deprive the outgroup of humanness (Schwartz and Struch 1989). Schwartz and Struch (1989) discuss that values reflect the group humanness and convey the group's humanity. Translated into the interpersonal context, dehumanization theory postulates that when the values of other individuals significantly differ from the values of one's self, then the dehumanization process is likely to occur (Haslam et al. 2007). In the present study, we argue that when consumers' human category knowledge or self-knowledge is primed, they are likely to make anthropomorphic inferences about brands and to perceive these brands as being completely human. Consequently, we posit that dehumanization theory may explain consumer-brand relationships as well. In the light of dehumanization theory, we claim that when brand values are incongruent with consumers' values, consumers are likely to overcome and correct their anthropomorphic inferences of AB. On the contrary, when self-concept/brand image congruity is established, that is, in cases wherein consumers perceive their own values and the values of the images of brands as being congruent, consumers exhibit the tendency to perceive AB without further correction.

Additionally, voluminous research has shown that self-concept/brand image congruity results in affective responses towards brands (Belk 1988; Klein, Kleine, and Allen 1995; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Similar streams of research support the notion that consumers experience high levels of attachment toward brands that are most congruent with their own self-concept (Kleine et al. 1993; Richins 1994). In addition, consumers are expected to be more loyal to brands that are more congruent with their own self-concept (Bhattacharya, Rao, and Glynn 1995; Underwood 2003). As ample marketing literature suggests, attitudinal loyalty provides a strong barrier against competitor attempts to persuade consumer switching behavior that is based upon superior functional features of brands or any situational influences (Oliver 1999). Consequently, in the present paper, we propose that consumers' positive affective states "protects" consumers' perception of AB from correction to the perception of non-AB through subsequent possible cognitive non-anthropomorphic considerations. In the absence of congruity, consumers may observe nonhuman features of brands and access some alternate nonhuman representations that may switch their perception of AB to non-AB (Epley et al. 2007).

P1: Self-concept/brand image congruity is positively associated with anthropomorphized brands.

The Moderating Role of Sociality Motivation

Sense of social connection or belonging is one of the most important human values (Kahle, Beatty, and Pamela 1986) and significantly influences one's success and mental health (Adler and Brett 1998). Prior research has shown that individuals satisfy their need for social connections with evident ease, for example, by establishing close connections with religious objects or pets (Epley et al. 2007). Here, we argue that individuals may satisfy their need for social connections through forming affective bonds with AB. First, the state of sociality motivation may increase consumers' social cues accessibility involving humanlike features in brands, influencing the inference process of brand anthropomorphization. Second, sociality motivation stimulates individuals to energetically search for any clues of social connections. Previous marketing research literature suggests that brands may satisfy the need for social connections. For instance, consumers experience the feeling of intrinsic connection through membership in brand communities

(Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Moreover, individuals whose need for social connection is not satisfied experience the same pain as physical pain (MacDonald and Leary 2005). To recover from this social pain, individuals may tend to anthropomorphize nonhuman objects, and they are more likely to perceive AB. Thus, we propose that consumers who exhibit a high level of the individual need for belonging, and those with higher level of chronic loneliness may have the tendency to anthropomorphize brands.

Need to Belong Generally, the need to belong can be defined as the desire to establish interpersonal attachments (Pickett, Gardner, and Megan 2004). Although the need to belong is an important individual difference variable inherent to consumer behavior literature, it has been neglected in recent marketing studies. However, it has received vast consideration in social psychology. Social psychology researchers have established the fact that individuals' need to belong is the fundamental motivating principle that results in the crucial consequences related to social performance (Smith and Mackie 2000). In support, Leary (1990) argues that the lack of belonging may result in negative outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, or low self-esteem. Prior social psychology research demonstrates that when individuals' needs to belong are unmet, then the social monitoring system assists individuals in adjusting to social information and stimulates the behavior that may lead to social connections (Pickett et al. 2004). Thus, individuals become very attentive and accurate in detecting social cues in the environment. More specifically, Gardner, Pickett, and Brewer (2000) experimentally find that when individuals' need to belong are not satisfied, they exhibit increasing attention toward social vs. nonsocial information. This increased attention to social cues in social psychology literature has been termed as the interpersonal sensitivity that is defined as, "the ability to sense, perceive accurately, and respond appropriately to one's personal, interpersonal, and social environment" (Bernieri 2001, p.3). According to Epley et al.'s (2007) theory, increased sensitivity to social cues may lead to higher degrees of anthropomorphization. That is, consumers who are high in the need to belong may tend to observe humanlike features and human cues more frequently and, therefore, anthropomorphize brands more actively than those who are low in the need to belong.

P2: The relationship between self-concept/brand image congruity and AB is moderated by the need to belong. That is, for consumers who are high in the need to belong, self-concept/brand image congruity will have higher positive association with AB than for their counterparts.

Chronic Loneliness The fact that individuals differ in the extent to which they feel chronically lonely, that is, the degree to which they experience a persistent lack of social inclusion (Pickett et al. 2004), has been well established in the social psychology literature (Cacioppo et al. 2006). Similar to research relating to the need to belong, prior research regarding loneliness provides evidence that when individuals are chronically lonely, they prefer social information within their immediate environment as opposed to nonsocial information (Gardner et al. 2005). Chronically lonely individuals exhibit a tendency to be very creative in instilling humanlike agents within nonhuman objects (Epley et al. 2008). There is support for this notion in the social psychology literature. For example, in their study, Epley et al. (2008) show that after exposure to a loneliness stimuli, individuals tend to perceive gadgets with humanlike features, including the possession intentions, free will, consciousness, and experienced emotion.

Hollywood provides a particularly poignant scenario of the impact that chronic loneliness can have on the likelihood of the occurrence of AB. In the popular movie, *Castaway*, the character

played by Tom Hanks finds himself completely alone on a deserted tropical island following a plane crash. Completely void of any human contact for weeks, he inexplicably befriends a Wilson branded volleyball, whom he affectionately names “Wilson”. Throughout his extended solitude and increasing level of chronic loneliness, the character, more and more, views this inanimate object as slowly, yet clearly, evolving into a complete human being. The relationship between the character and the brand becomes so intense that the character is left utterly distraught at the “loss” of “Wilson” at sea.

Therefore, in the present study, we argue that for chronically lonely consumers, anthropomorphic cues are more readily accessible, more easily activated, and are utilized as a path to recover from the social pain caused by social disconnection. That is, chronically lonely consumers are more prone to fulfill the social connection gap with AB and form various types of social relationship with AB. In sum, chronically lonely consumers may tend to be more likely to perceive brands as complete humans, as members of their social ties, and are less likely to overcome or correct their anthropomorphic representations, because such correction of initial anthropomorphic inferences will result in the severance of the pre-established social connection with these brands and cause a recurrence of social pain.

P3: The relationship between self-concept/brand image congruity and AB is moderated by chronic loneliness. That is, for consumers who are high in chronic loneliness, self-concept/brand image congruity will have higher positive association with AB than for their counterparts.

The Moderating Role of Effectance Motivation

The perception of AB by consumers is substantially influenced by effectance motivation—motivation of individuals to act and cooperate effectively in the surrounding environment (Epley et al. 2007). A growing body within psychological research suggests that individuals differ in their motivation to feel efficaciously in their immediate environment (White 1959). Effectance motivation has emerged from the desire of consumers to comprehend and predict their environment, along with an inherent need to reduce its uncertainty. We propose that anthropomorphism satisfies consumers’ desire to efficaciously understand the symbolic meanings of brands. Efficaciously motivated individuals, while observing millions of marketing messages in their environment, will tend to seek meaning through the anthropomorphization process. More specifically, Dawes and Mulford (1996) argue that individuals are inclined to anthropomorphize to increase both the comprehensibility and the predictability of nonhuman objects’ behaviors in the same way as egocentric knowledge serves as a reference point in making judgments regarding the behavior of another individual. Self knowledge in the anthropomorphic processes increases the individual’s controllability of the environment (Burger and Copper 1979) and assists in finding better explanations regarding ambiguous elements within their current environment. Therefore, the extent to which consumers demonstrate their desire to master their environment (Harter 1978) will influence the anthropomorphic tendencies of persons to see humans in brands. In the present study, consumers’ effectance motivation is represented by such individual differences traits as the need for closure and the desire for control that may both affect the likelihood of anthropomorphization.

Need for Closure The need for closure is an individual difference trait that explains the extent to which a person desires the precise answer to one’s inquiry vs. ambiguity and disorder (Kruglanski and Mayseless 1988). Individuals who are high in the need for closure display the tendency to instantaneously acquire

primarily available cues in their environment and to make judgments based on these cues without engaging in an effortful search for additional and more meaningful information in their environment (Kruglanski and Webster 1996). Thus, individuals who are high in the need for closure are highly motivated to comprehend existing situations and stimuli, immediately abandoning any further cognitive incentives. Considering the apparent ease of self-knowledge accessibility, as has been discussed a forehand, and the ease of seizing upon first available cues, we argue that consumers high in the need for closure tend to perceive brands as humans to a greater extent than those consumers who are low in the need for closure. That is, marketing communication efforts entailing any human cue are utilized by consumers in the formation of impressions and in anthropomorphic judgments about brands. Individuals experience negative affect if their need for closure is undermined or threatened and, therefore, we argue that consumers with a high need for closure exhibit higher sensitivity to any anthropomorphic representations of brands and even facilitate the anthropomorphic representations in their minds. According to Kruglanski and Webster (1996), consumers will be prone to “freeze” their initial anthropomorphic inductions about brands. Thus, those consumers with a high need for closure will not tend to overcome and correct their first anthropomorphic inferences regarding the humanness of brands, because they will rather be motivated to seek a quick, primarily available resolution and, consequently, preserve this resolution from any extant interferences (Kruglanski and Webster 1996).

P4: The relationship between self-concept/brand image congruity and AB is moderated by the need for closure. That is, for consumers who are high in the need for closure, self-concept/brand image congruity will have higher positive association with AB than for their counterparts.

Desire for Control The desire for control construct has received scarce attention in the consumer behavior literature. On the opposite, the construct has been examined by many psychological theorists. For example, Adler (1930) and Burger (1992) propose a striving or motivation of individuals to demonstrate their ability to control the events in their lives. More generally, the concept of control is a commonly accepted driving force of humans that is defined as the psychological need to display the superiority and competence over situations (White 1959). Psychological research has provided evidence that individuals are not identical in terms of the desire for control, and they will exhibit different levels in their general desire to gain control over situations and objects (Burger and Copper 1979). Satisfaction of the desire for predictability of situations and mastery of the environment evokes positive emotions in individuals. For example, previous studies have investigated the role of perceived control in relationship to service quality (Hui and Bateson 1991) where it has been shown that the opportunity to cognitively reinterpret situations and display competence positively affects consumers. Therefore, desire for control motivates consumers to create order regarding the elements of their surroundings, which also allows for the predictability of consequent interactions with brands in the future. In other words, individuals high in the desire for control will tend to predict and comprehend nonhuman objects through the process of anthropomorphization. Consumers with a high degree of the desire for control will possess stronger proclivity to explain brands’ behaviors through anthropomorphic representations of brands and, particularly, through attributions of intentions and desires to brands (Burger and Hemans 1988). The result of such attributional activity will facilitate individuals’ perception of acting efficaciously in their environment (Epley et al. 2007). Moreover, the existence of hu-

mans in brands for consumers who are high in the desire for control will serve favorably in increasing individuals' desire for efficacious functioning due to the clear understanding of brand behavior at the current stage and in the future. Taken jointly, these results suggest the following proposition:

- P5: The relationship between self-concept/brand image congruity and AB is moderated by the desire for control. That is, for consumers who are high in the desire for control, self-concept/brand image congruity will have higher positive association with AB than for their counterparts.

DISCUSSION

Although marketing practitioners frequently persuade consumers to view brands as if they are real humans, in the present study, we argue that the marketing literature has been lacking the concept of consumers' perception of brands as complete humans. We theoretically introduce the concept of anthropomorphized brands in the consumer behavior literature. We further theorize the important antecedents (i.e., self-concept/brand image congruity) and moderators (i.e., effectance motivation and sociality motivation) of AB. Establishing the notion of consumers' perception of AB discloses new avenues for research pursuant to the creation of consumer-brand relationships and provides new perspectives for understanding these relationships in light of psychological theories of social interaction between consumers and brands. Prior research has shown that the process of brand anthropomorphization occurs in an automatic manner. However, research in social psychology has provided evidence supporting the variability of anthropomorphism. Thus, the major contribution of the present paper is to provide a psychological account for the mechanism of brand anthropomorphization.

Future empirical testing of the propositions defined in this paper should provide significant insights for both academic researchers and practitioners regarding what factors may influence consumers' perceptions of brands as fully, literally humans. The theoretical underpinning of the present paper may shed light into the manner in which self-concept/brand image congruity influences the perception of brands as humans. Furthermore, the theoretical findings of the present paper illustrate a more clear understanding of the manner in which the relationship between self-concept/brand image congruity and AB can be moderated by individual differences of personality traits.

Future directions for marketing researchers might be to delve deeper into the understanding of the drivers of AB. For example, one potential line of research may investigate the manner in which the physical appearance of products or the increasing number of interpersonal contacts may influence the development of AB. Moreover, there are additional avenues for future examination regarding how advertising variables and marketing communication efforts may impact the inferences about AB. Furthermore, future research may better clarify under what conditions consumers may have formed strong bonds with their brands and even have become to identify themselves with these brands, however, still may have not yet transcended their perceptions of these brands as complete humans.

Although, in the present paper, we argue that self-concept/brand image congruity is the driver of AB, future research may be directed towards the investigation of whether similarities between one's own self-concept and the images of brands may not only strengthen the self, but also create 'the other' that is the important part of actualization, maintenance and construction of the self. Specifically, a fruitful line of future inquiry is the examination of the underlying psychological processes that make the anthropo-

morphized brand lead consumer-brand relationships and contribute to consumers' identity transformations under the conditions of the increasing individualization of society.

Additionally, while we argue in the present paper that effectance motivation may moderate the relationship between self-concept/brand image congruity and brand anthropomorphization due to the better prediction and control over brands' unexpected behaviors and contingencies, future research should explore in greater detail a wider range of factors and more specific mental processes occurring in consumers' minds that lead to the intensification of the anthropomorphization processes and perceptions of brands as actual humans with various subject-to-change goals, evolving needs, and relationship effort requirements versus mere perceptions of brands as commercial entities with the dominant goal of delivering market value to their owners. As brands and their products are converting into more sophisticated and intricate entities, consumers may suffer more from being baffled with the escalating brands' complexities. Consequently, during the rapid diffusion of innovation and technologically advanced brands, individuals' effectance motivation may play an especially important role as consumers' need for closure and control is triggered further. Therefore, additional research should address these important questions regarding under what particular conditions do consumers' perceptions of brand as real humans become more difficult than the perceptions of brands as a profit-making unit.

In conclusion, the present paper advances the marketing literature regarding the development of strong consumer-brand relationships. We believe that this study is a first step in gaining a better understanding of the mechanisms that underlie the process of brand anthropomorphization, a process that is a crucial element in establishing legitimate relationships between consumers and brands. The practical implications of these findings show that, in an attempt to create anthropomorphized brands, marketing practitioners may follow the laws and principles of consumers' interpersonal/social relationships with brands in order to eventually push the envelope of brands and human personality.

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