Responses to Animal Anthropomorphism in Advertising Based on Character Similarity to Humans

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While humans have a long history of anthropomorphizing animals, the phenomenon has received little attention in consumer research. Results from an experimental study indicate that, while participants are indifferent between animal types when they are presented non-anthropomorphically, relatively dissimilar animals gain the most in terms of attitude favorability when presented anthropomorphically.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Throughout civilization, people have imbued creatures from the natural world with human traits and motivations. Marketers have capitalized on this tendency by creating a plenitude of anthropomorphic animal mascots for a variety of products and services. Yet, research examining anthropomorphism on consumer behavior is sparse. The purpose of this research is to understand which types of animals are portrayed anthropomorphically most often in marketing communications (based on their perceived similarity to humans) and how consumers’ attitudes are affected by such anthropomorphism.

Anthropomorphism is the process of assigning real or imagined human characteristics, intentions, motivations, or emotions to nonhuman objects, often motivated by explaining and understanding the behavior of those nonhuman agents (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2008). People do this with a seemingly unending array of things, including brands and television characters, to the extent that they sometimes form parasocial relationships with them (Fournier 1998; Russell, Norman, and Heckler 2004). Instead of leaving it up to individuals to anthropomorphize objects of consumption, marketers often create advertising mascots with the express intent of imbuing them with personality characteristics, in a sense anthropomorphizing the brand for the consumer (Aaker 1997).

Individuals help to make sense out of their world by organizing things in categories. Each category and subcategory has mental prototypes. Objects are stored in memory around these prototypes by both their similarity to the prototype and their similarity to other items in the category (Tversky 1977). People seem to be particularly adept at categorizing animals. Henley (1969; see also Tversky 1977) devised a study asking participants to rate the similarity of 30 familiar animals to each other. The results were plotted on a cognitive map where the animals that were perceived to be most similar to each other were closer to one another (i.e., closer in psychological distance) on the cognitive map. While Henley (1969) interpreted this cognitive map as having two axes of size and ferocity, one could also interpret this cognitive map as indicating each animal’s similarity to human beings. I characterize these animals as highly similar to humans (e.g., non-human primates such as monkeys and gorillas), moderately similar to humans (e.g., carnivorous animals such as lions and wolves as well as rodents and rodent-like animals such as rabbits), and relatively dissimilar to humans (e.g., hoofed mammals such as horses, goats, and deer). Results from a pilot study support this categorization.

A large body of research has converged on the finding that people like similar others, possibly due to an increased motivation to process information about close others (Aron, Aron, Tudor, and Nelson 1991). The foundational work in this literature stream was built on attitude similarity (Byrne 1971; Byrne, Clore, and Smeaton 1986; Heider 1958). This research has been subsequently extended to domains such as similarity in personality traits (Tesser and Campbell 1980; Tesser and Paulhus 1983) and biological characteristics (Chen and Kenrick 2002). Miller and colleagues (1998) found that even trivial similarities, such as a shared birthday, cause people to view others more favorably. In extending this similarity-attraction principle to animal images, the most obvious prediction would be that high-similarity animals would be viewed more positively than moderate-similarity animals, which would in turn be viewed more positively than low-similarity animals. Furthermore, all types of animals should be viewed more positively when presented in anthropomorphic form due to heightened levels of similarity to humans.

However, researchers have found that construal level can moderate the relationship between similarity and attraction. Less similar objects, because they are psychologically more distant, are construed at higher, more abstract levels (Liviatan, Trope, and Liberman 2008). Likewise, higher similarity leads to lower-level, more concrete construals. Thus, it is possible that nonanthropomorphic images of all animals would be assigned more abstract representations, such as “animal.” Therefore, due to lower similarity to humans among all animal types in nonanthropomorphic portrayals, there may be little or no preference for highly similar animals over less similar animals. However, because greater similarity leads to more concrete construals with more focus on secondary features, it is possible that anthropomorphizing animal images increases salience to the differences between the high, moderate, and low similarity animals, thus leading to differences in preference for anthropomorphic images but no preference among nonanthropomorphic images.

Additionally, Chen and Kenrick (2002) found that increasing similarity for outgroup members can have a more powerful effect on liking than increasing similarity for ingroup members. The authors argue that these effects are driven by lower levels of baseline similarity, and thus liking, in outgroups. Thus, enhancing similarity leads to a positive violation of expectations and increased attraction that does not occur for ingroups, whose baseline similarity is already high. In the context of this research, relatively dissimilar animals would have lower baseline similarity to humans, whereas moderately animals would have higher baseline similarity to humans, and highly animals would have the highest baseline similarity to humans. Therefore, it is possible that relatively dissimilar animals would benefit more from anthropomorphism than moderately similar animals, which would in turn benefit more from anthropomorphism than highly similar animals.

The purpose of this research is to explore how anthropomorphized animal images are used in marketing communications and how consumers respond to them based on their similarity to humans. Findings of content analyses indicate that animals that are perceived to be moderately similar to humans are more frequently used as anthropomorphic mascots than animals that are either highly similar or relatively dissimilar to humans. However, results from an experimental study indicate that, while participants are indifferent between animal types when they are presented nonanthropomorphically, relatively dissimilar animals gain the most in terms of attitude favorability when presented anthropomorphically. I argue that these results are driven by a lower level of baseline similarity to humans in the nonanthropomorphic form. Thus, enhancing similarity to humans via anthropomorphism leads to positive violation of expectations and enhanced attraction toward relatively dissimilar animal images. Consequently, animals that are relatively dissimilar to humans might be underutilized as anthropomorphic spokescharacters.