Brand Anthropomorphization: a Homocentric Knowledge Activation Perspective

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We describe a four-stage process of brand anthropomorphization, which begins with primary cognition and proceeds through secondary cognition stages. Two types of anthropomorphized brand perceptions are formed—one that is transient and one that lasts longer. Stronger forms of brand anthropomorphization, going beyond brand personality attribution (e.g., weaker forms), exist.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We describe a four-stage process of brand anthropomorphization, which begins with primary cognition and proceeds through secondary cognition stages. Two types of anthropomorphized brands' perceptions are formed—one that is transient and one that lasts longer. Stronger forms of brand anthropomorphization, going beyond brand personality attribution (e.g., weaker forms), exist.

Consumers' perceptions of brands as human may have important implications in the area of branding. At present, we do not know much about the process that influences the degree to which consumers perceive brands as complete human beings. Social science researchers have considered anthropomorphization as an automatic psychological process that does not vary among individuals, and marketing researchers who have explored the notion of humanized brands (e.g., brand personality), have also considered the process as a chronically occurring consumer judgment (Fournier 1998). However, the anthropomorphization theory introduced by Epley et al. (2007) posits that the tendency to anthropomorphize objects is a phenomenon varying in strength depending on different domains, contexts, and individual differences.

This research contributes to the literature in the following three manners. First, we fill a gap in the marketing literature by extending consumers’ perceptions of brands as fully human, instead of as merely possessing personality traits. We show that consumers consciously report their anthropomorphic perceptions of brands and behave toward them as if they, in fact, possess human traits. Second, we go beyond the idea that anthropomorphization is explained by the qualities of the target (i.e., morphological features of a product (Aggarwal and McGill 2007)) and show that the characteristics and motivations of perceivers are an important component of the process of anthropomorphization. Third, we introduce a process of brand anthropomorphization. Finally, we delineate the outcomes of the brand anthropomorphization process for consumer behavior.

Deriving our argument from related research in social and neuropsychology, and from the results of in-depth interviews (8 focus-group interviews (n = 21) and three one-to-one in-depth interviews), we posit that the process consists of two phases: a) primary cognition and b) second-order cognition. In the first phase, we argue that the concurrent activation of human knowledge (i.e., highly accessible and salient brand personality attributions) and a strong emotional arousal triggered at a specific moment of consumer-brand interaction make individuals anthropomorphize brands. Amygdala, the neural structure in the brain, participates in both emotional processing and complex social judgments, including anthropomorphism (Heberlein and Adolphs 2004). Thus, the processing of social information and emotionally arousing stimuli are causally related. In fact, we observed that respondents experienced strong emotional arousal at their first encounters with brands, and, concurrently, they possessed accessible social (e.g., brand personality) knowledge about the brands that they perceived in human terms. A less stable initial perception of anthropomorphized brand (AB) is formed at the end of the primary cognition stage.

In the secondary-order cognition (metacognition) stage, a more enduring perception of AB is formed. At the metacognition phase, individuals evaluate their initial judgment and identify their thoughts as favorable or unfavorable (Petty et al. 2007). When consumers find that their AB perceptions are favorable or desirable, they will be motivated to refine their existing thoughts of afferent AB. We define the refinement process of afferent AB as the process through which consumers engage in more complex attribution of human capabilities to the initial afferent AB judgment. The relevant literature and the results of in-depth interviews have shown that AB refinement agents such as sociality motivation, effectance motivation, and brand love-dependency operate as drive states which facilitate the perception of brands as human. In turn, high cognitive capacity leads to the correction of the initial perception of brand as a transient human to the perception of brand as a commercial entity.

In the refinement stage, we find that consumers project mind, intentions, emotions, and spirit to brands. Consumers also show signs of parental solicitude by viewing their brands as little brother or son. That is, individuals feel the desire to treat a brand with the same social conventions that they would give to another human. The fourth stage ends with the formation of stable, long-lasting perception of brand as a human. Finally, AB perceptions have important theoretical and practical implications. Specifically, consumers who anthropomorphize their brands trust the brands more, expect higher performance, forgive the brands’ transgressions as they would forgive a friend, care for them with parental solicitude, and are willing to spend extra for brands’ accessories. Brands also consciously affect consumers’ manner to behave. Deeper understanding of the nature of anthropomorphic brand judgment presents rich material for more effective marketing communications.

This is an exploratory, qualitative study, and future research should further empirically test the process presented across a wider variety of respondents. We believe that the theory of anthropomorphism may be extended by incorporating the activation of not only human knowledge structures but also self-knowledge representations. We also believe that there are additional avenues for future examination regarding how specific marketing communication efforts may impact consumers’ perceptions of brands as empathic or moral and, subsequently, influence further inferences regarding brands in human terms.

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