Childlike Anthropomorphic Characteristics in Products

Katarina Hellen, University of Vaasa, Finland

Maria Sääksjärvi, Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands

This paper focuses on childlike anthropomorphic characteristics in products. The results suggest that childlike anthropomorphic characteristics comprise four dimensions: sweetness, simplicity, sympathy, and smallness, which positively influence product evaluations and willingness to attach to a product. Unexpectedly, men perceived anthropomorphic characteristics as more sympathetic than women did.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1009833/volumes/v39/NA-39

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Childlike Anthropomorphic Characteristics in Products

Katarina Hellen, University of Vaasa, Finland
Maria Sääksjärvi, Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Anthropomorphism, the tendency to see humanlike qualities, such as faces, motivations, and emotions in non-human agents, has been studied in psychology and marketing (Epley, Waytz and Cacioppo 2007; Serpell 2002; Woodside, Sood, and Miller 2008). Previous literature on anthropomorphism has tended to address it as an aggregate concept. In actuality, literature on brand personality indicates that consumers do not perceive brands to just have “a human personality” but that they perceive personalities in more refined ways, for example “rugged”, “sophisticated” or “friendly” (Aaker 1997) indicating that people anthropomorphize in a more refined way that previously thought. In this paper, the focus is on anthropomorphism of a specific product—products with childlike characteristics and the purpose was to investigate the nature of childlike anthropomorphic products and consumer reactions to them. Childlike anthropomorphic characteristics are likely to be interesting for marketers as scholars have suggested that humans are deeply programmed to respond positively to children and that this positive reaction extends to adults, animals, and objects to which people attribute childlike features (Morreall 1991; Serpell 2002). These feelings invite people to bond and interact with babies (Langlois et al. 1995; Morreall 1991).

We conducted four studies to examine childlike anthropomorphism. Study 1 was in-depth interviews with consumers (N = 10), five females and five males, conducted to understand their associations with childlike anthropomorphism. After freely discussing the concept of childlike anthropomorphism, the respondents were shown a booklet with 12 childlike anthropomorphic products that they were asked to evaluate. The purpose of Study 2 was to generate dimensions and items for a scale of childlike anthropomorphism in products. To reach this purpose, we used our qualitative study (Study 1) and previous literature. Based on these sources we identified 70 items to that referred to childlike anthropomorphism. We included the items in a questionnaire in a random order. We asked a sample of students (N = 202, 36.8 % females, mean age = 21) to indicate the extent to which the 60 items described their perceptions of well-known products (1 = “not at all”, and 7 = “very much so”). 12 products in total were tested, ranging from purses to technical devices such as phones and laptops. The results showed that childlike anthropomorphism in products refers to four distinct dimensions: sweetness, sympathy, simplicity, and smallness.

In Study 3, we reduced the number of scale items by conducting both exploratory and confirmatory analyses. To test the stability of the scale, we employed a new sample of respondents (N = 224, 54.7 % females, mean age = 24). Each respondent evaluated one product. 75 participants evaluated the symbolic product (the pink purse), 73 participants randomly one of the 11 symbolic and utilitarian products. The questionnaire also included Thomson, MacInnis, and Park’s (2005) brand attachment scale. Simple regressions showed that childlike anthropomorphism had a positive impact on product evaluation. We also found a positive relationship between childlike anthropomorphism and willingness to attach. There were clear differences between the genders: women considered the products to be sweeter, whereas men considered the product to simpler and more sympathetic. No differences were found regarding smallness.

Across samples, it was demonstrated that childlike products have four separate dimensions—sweetness, sympathy, simplicity, and smallness. The results show that consumers are attracted to childlike anthropomorphic products, and that they are willing to attach to such products. The results also suggest a gender effect. Both men and women were found to react positively to childlike anthropomorphic characteristics, but they evaluated the dimensions of the scale differently. Across all the three quantitative studies, results show that men perceived childlike characteristics as more sympathetic than did women. This result may be based on that this characteristic in women is a mating cue for men (Baumeister 2010), as men are attracted to women who are perceived as kind and lovable as such qualities are taken as indications that they are good mothers and partners. Further, men are not as sensitive as women to detecting sweetness, who may perceive the childlike products as kind and helpless, triggering feelings of caretaking and protection.

REFERENCES

570 / Childlike Anthropomorphic Characteristics in Products


