The Role of Gender Congruity For Anthropomorphized Product Perception

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This research extends prior research on anthropomorphism by demonstrating a gender-schema congruity effect: when a human gender schema is primed that is congruent to consumers’ own gender, consumers show more preferential evaluations and are more likely to perceive the product as human, even when no schema-congruent product features are present.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Anthropomorphism refers to the tendency to attribute human-like characteristics, intentions, and behavior to non-human artifacts, such as products (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007). When consumers anthropomorphize products, this will enhance their evaluation and reduce their willingness to replace these products (Aggarwal and McGill 2007; Chandler and Schwarz 2010).

Prior research has used product-schema congruity to explain consumers’ evaluation of anthropomorphized products (Aggarwal and McGill 2007). They suggested that only if there is congruity between the activated human schema and the product’s features (e.g., two same-sized bottles with a primed twin schema), consumers are able to humanize the product, and anthropomorphism will increase product evaluation. Such product-schema congruity is thus considered to be crucial for anthropomorphism to be effective. However, for many products the opportunities to add schema-congruent product features are limited (Delbaere et al. 2011). Accordingly, the present research seeks to broaden our understanding of anthropomorphism by investigating when and why priming a human schema will encourage consumers to perceive the product as human, thereby positively affecting product evaluations, even when there is no product-schema congruity. Extending the anthropomorphism literature on twins and salespersons that are generally self-incongruent, this research uses self-congruity theory (Sirgy 1982) to explain the effects of humanizing a product through self-congruent gender primes (i.e., describing the product as male/female) on product evaluations.

This research focuses on gender because gender is a central part of consumers’ self-concept (Cross and Markus 1993). As a consequence, consumers prefer products that are associated with their own gender and avoid those associated with the other (White and Dahl 2006, 2007; Worth, Smith, and Mackie 1992). We propose that because of the importance of gender to the self-concept, consumers can readily see the human analogy suggested by the marketer if the human gender schema that is primed, is congruent to their own gender, regardless of the presence/absence of schema-congruent product features. Furthermore, the human gender schema that is primed contributes to the product’s symbolic image and will affect consumers’ product evaluations. We thus hypothesize a gender-schema congruity effect: when primed with a human gender schema that is congruent (vs. incongruent) to consumers’ own gender, consumers show more preferential evaluations (H1). In contrast, when a human gender schema is primed that is incongruent to a person’s own gender, (s)he may not readily see the analogy. Then, schema-congruent features of the product will help consumers to anthropomorphize the product successfully. Consequently, we hypothesize that product-schema congruity moderates the effect of gender anthropomorphism on product evaluations (H2). Finally, we hypothesize that the extent to which consumers perceive the product as human mediates the effects of gender-schema congruity and product-schema congruity on consumers’ product evaluations (H3).

Two experimental studies tested the hypotheses. Study 1 tested our basic premise that consumers’ evaluation of anthropomorphized products are more positive when the human gender schema that is primed is congruent to their own gender. The study used a 2(human gender schema: male vs. female schema) × 2(participants’ gender: men vs. women) between-subjects design. To prime the human gender schemas, we created product descriptions of a bottle perfume with either a male or female focus (e.g., “This little guy/girl is the decidedly young scent […] He/She has a family of 30ml, 50ml, and 100ml bottles”). This resulted in conditions of either low or high gender-schema congruity, depending on the gender of the participant. Participants read the product description, and subsequently, completed a multi-item product evaluation measure. The results revealed only a significant human gender schema by participant’s gender interaction. Comparing contrasts showed that male participants evaluated the product more positively when a male schema was primed, that is congruent to their own gender, than when an incongruent, female schema was primed. This gender-schema congruity effect on product evaluation was also identified for female participants. Specifically, female participants evaluated the product more positively when a congruent, female schema (vs. incongruent, male schema) was primed, supporting hypothesis 1.

In study 2, we extended these findings by investigating the gender-schema congruity effect alongside the effect of product-schema congruity. Furthermore, Study 2 provided insights in the underlying process of the gender-schema congruity effect by investigating perceived anthropomorphism as a mediator. The study used a 2(human gender schema) × 2(product features: black/blue vs. yellow/purple) × 2(product replicate: camera, car) mixed design and used male subjects. Product replicate was a within-subjects variable. Different colors were pretested to select products with masculine (black/blue color) and feminine (yellow/purple color) features (Grossman and Wisenblit 1999), resulting in products with features that were either congruent or incongruent to the activated human gender schema. Participants read the product description, in which a human gender schema was primed, together with a product picture, and subsequently, completed multi-item product evaluation and perceived anthropomorphism measures. Results revealed a main effect for human gender schema, providing additional support for the hypothesized gender-schema congruity effect (H1). Furthermore, a significant two-way interaction was found. Comparing contrasts showed that when primed with a human gender schema that is congruent to the participant’s gender (i.e., male schema), the presence of product-schema (in)congruent features in the product did not affect product evaluations or perceived anthropomorphism. However, when primed with a human gender schema that is incongruent (i.e., female schema), participants evaluated the product more positively and were more likely to perceive it as human when the product is endowed with a feature that is congruent with that human gender schema, than when it is endowed with a feature that is incongruent. Finally, regression analyses and Sobel tests showed that perceived anthropomorphism mediated the effects of gender-schema congruity and product-schema congruity on product evaluations. Together, these results support our hypotheses.

Our research contributes to the literature by demonstrating that product-schema congruity can only partly explain consumer response towards anthropomorphized products. Specifically, we demonstrate that products do not necessarily need to be endowed with schema-congruent features for product anthropomorphism to be effective. If a human gender schema is primed that is congruent to consumers’ gender, gender-schema congruity will positively influence product evaluations, even when there is no product-schema congruity.
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