Is She My New Friend? the Effect of Social Exclusion on Consumer Preference For Anthropomorphized Products

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This research demonstrates that experiencing social exclusion increases consumers’ preference for anthropomorphized products. This effect is driven by consumers’ perception that the product provides a new social connection, and is moderated by brand personality such that the effect is diminished when the product implies a tough personality.

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Anthropomorphism: New Insights and Implications

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Paper #1: The Effects of Anthropomorphization on Brand Personality Perceptions: A Motivational Account
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Paper #2: Is She My New Friend? The Effect of Social Exclusion on Consumer Preference for Anthropomorphized Products
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Paper #3: When Consumers Meet Humanized Brands: Effect of Self-construal on Brand Anthropomorphism
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SESSION OVERVIEW

Anthropomorphism occurs when people imbue nonhuman agents (e.g., their pets) with human-like characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions. In marketing, companies often aid this process of anthropomorphism by creating human-like representations of their brands (e.g., the Michelin Man). Consumers are also known to anthropomorphize brands (Delbaere, McQuarrie, and Phillips 2011; Puzakova, Kwak, and Rocereto 2012). However, the unique effect of each of these is unknown as is the interaction of the two. This special session attempts to answer this question. In doing so, it advances our understanding of anthropomorphism in the marketing context. The four papers offer new insights on the antecedents and consequences of product anthropomorphism, document novel effects of anthropomorphizing a product on consumer behavior, and examine the mechanisms underlying these effects. This session has implications for brand positioning, advertising, consumer well-being and self-control.

The four papers focus on how anthropomorphism influences consumer behavior and contribute to the literature from different perspectives. First, Chen, Sengupta and Adaval use a motivation-based framework to examine the antecedents of brand anthropomorphism. They show that sociality and effectance motivation prompt consumers to humanize brands and endow them with different personalities. The personality traits that brands are endowed with are often those that alleviate the underlying motivational needs. They also provide implications for brand positioning by showing that consumers with salient sociality (effectance) motivations indicate higher willingness to pay when a brand emphasizes a sociality (functionality) positioning. While the first paper documents the novel antecedents of brand anthropomorphism, the next two papers stress the consequences of anthropomorphizing products on consumer preference. Chen, Wan and Levy examine how consumers respond to products communicated in an anthropomorphic manner as a function of their psychological state of being socially excluded or included. They show that experiencing social exclusion increases consumers’ preference for anthropomorphized products, because these products are perceived to provide an opportunity for social re-affiliation. Their studies further demonstrate that this effect is diminished when the brand exhibits a tough personality, which signals higher chance of future rejection. Hsieh et al. take a different perspective to examine different types of anthropomorphism in marketing communication and their impact on consumer decision. Their studies reveal that consumers with an interdependent self-construal are more likely to purchase a brand that is anthropomorphized as a partner (vs. servant). This effect occurs because partner brands exhibit an intention to cooperate, which is consistent with the goals of the interdependent self. Finally, Hur, Koo and Hofmann document negative effects of anthropomorphizing products. They find that anthropomorphizing tempting products hampers consumer self-control, because consumers are less likely to identify self-control conflicts, leading to higher chance to indulge in temptations.

Despite the fact that anthropomorphism is pervasive in marketing communication, scholarly research about how anthropomorphism influences consumer behavior is still at an early stage. The proposed session will advance our understanding of the antecedents and consequences of product and brand anthropomorphism and the process by which consumers anthropomorphize products. By offering new insights and implications, we believe that the special session will stimulate discussion and future research on how to better understand the motivations underlying anthropomorphism and its consequences.

The Effects of Anthropomorphization on Brand Personality Perceptions: A Motivational Account

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Anthropomorphism refers to the tendency that people have to imbue nonhuman agents with human-like characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions (Eppl y, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007). Past research suggests that consumers humanize objects such as brands when they have access to human-like knowledge structures while making brand judgments (Aggarwal and McGill 2007; Kim and McGill 2011). In contrast to the cognitive perspective (i.e., the influence of salient knowledge structures) that informs most of the extent consumer literature in this area, the present research draws on recent findings in psychology (Eppl y et al. 2007) to provide a motivational account of anthropomorphism. This perspective argues that the salience of certain motivations (e.g., a need for sociality and a need for control or effectance over one’s environment) facilitates the process of anthropomorphism. We apply Eppl y et al.’s framework to a marketing context and, more importantly, advance the original conceptualization by merging it with relevant insights from the brand personality literature (e.g., Aaker 1997; Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner 2010). Specifically, we argue that while sociality and effectance motives both lead consumers to humanize a brand, they differ in the type of human-like traits that the brand is endowed with. We further posit...
that these different antecedents of brand humanizing have distinct consequences on the effectiveness of brand positioning strategies.

Our conceptualization is based on the idea that different underlying motivations (such as the desire for sociality arising out of feelings of loneliness or the desire for effectance arising out of feelings of not being in control) should yield different brand personality perceptions. Based on the idea of motivated perception (Balcells and Dunning 2006; Changizi and Hall 2001), we hypothesize that the specific motivation that causes consumers to humanize a brand should lead them to endow the brand with the particular human-like trait that can alleviate the underlying need. According to Aaker (1997; Aaker et al. 2010) consumers humanize brands along distinct personality dimensions, such as excitement, competence, sincerity, etc. Consider, for instance, two such brand personality traits: “warmth” and “dependability”. Our theorizing predicts that consumers for whom a sociality motivation has been made salient – e.g., via chronic or momentarily induced loneliness – will think of the brand as a “warm” person because doing so will help to alleviate loneliness. Therefore, when compared to a baseline condition in which no such motivation has been made salient, those with a sociality motivation should rate the brand higher on warmth but should show no difference in dependability perceptions. The reverse should be true for consumers with an effectance motivation, made salient either through chronic or momentarily induced need for control. By thinking of the brand as a “dependable” person, such consumers will be able to satisfy their need for control. Accordingly, compared to a baseline condition where no such motivation is salient, consumers with an effectance motivation should rate the target brand higher on dependability – but not on warmth.

Results from four studies provide convergent support for these arguments, and their implications. Study 1 examined the basic proposition that high sociality or effectance motivation can increase a person’s tendency to humanize a brand. Participants first recalled a personal experience that made them feel lonely (inducing a sociality motive) or helpless (inducing an effectance motive). A third, baseline condition, did not induce any such motive. Then, all participants were asked to draw a picture of an unknown brand. The brand was endowed with more human-like features given a salient sociality or effectance motivation relative to the baseline condition.

In Study 2, participants first went through the same motivation manipulation as in study 1. Next, they were exposed to an unknown brand and were asked to indicate their perception of brand personality along three dimensions – warmth, dependability, and outdoorsy (which was assessed as a control dimension). As predicted, lonely (helpless) participants perceived the unknown brand to be warmer (more dependable) than those in the baseline condition. No differences were obtained for the control “outdoorsy” dimension. Study 3 was identical to study 2 but replicated the above findings using an open-ended measure in which participants spontaneously listed human-like adjectives that best described the brand.

Finally, Study 4 both reinforced and built on our conceptualization to examine a key consequence of anthropomorphization, relating to the effectiveness of brand positioning. If an underlying motivational need is met by a brand humanizing exercise, it should remove the need to humanize a subsequent brand, rendering motivational appeals for that brand ineffective. To test this, participants’ salient motivation (sociality/effectance/baseline) was manipulated as before. Next, they were exposed to either a brand humanizing task, or a geography task. The former task offered an opportunity for participants to satisfy their salient motivational need through the brand humanization, but the latter task did not. For the latter participants therefore, the initial motivation should remain salient. Next, all participants were asked to evaluate a different product from the one that they had previously humanized – a smart phone calendar application called MyCalendar. This was described either as a great social (functional) app that facilitates the user’s social (work). The key dependent variable was willingness-to-pay (WTP) for this application. Results revealed a three-way interaction involving motivation, opportunity to humanize, and brand positioning on WTP. As expected, when participants had completed a brand humanization task prior to the calendar evaluation task, their sociality/effectance motivations were satisfied. Consequently, participants’ WTP estimates for MyCalendar were not influenced by brand positioning. In contrast, the geography task had presumably left participants’ sociality/effectance motivations unfilled and these should remain salient while performing the calendar evaluation task. In accord, lonely participants indicated higher WTP when the ad for MyCalendar emphasized a sociality vs. a functionality positioning, with a reverse pattern obtaining for helpless participants. All effects were significant at p < .05.

In sum, this research uses a motivational-based framework to provide a new look at both the antecedents and consequences of brand anthropomorphism. In doing so, we advance basic theoretical knowledge regarding the processes underlying brand anthropomorphism and offer insights into the brand personality literature.

Is She My New Friend? The Effect of Social Exclusion on Consumer Preference for Anthropomorphized Products

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Anthropomorphism, defined as the tendency of seeing human characteristics in non-human agents (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007), is often used in marketing communications. For example, marketers might create a human representation for its brand (e.g., the Energizer Man), or use human terms to describe products’ features in advertising. Past research has suggested that one major motivation for people to anthropomorphize is the desire for social affiliation (Epley et al. 2007). For instance, Epley et al. (2008) found that participants who were primed to feel lonely, compared with those in fear or control conditions, were more likely to describe their pets using supportive anthropomorphic traits. However, it is not clear how experiencing social exclusion, the state of being cut off, ignored, or isolated by other individuals or social groups (Baumeister 2005; Williams 2007), will influence consumers’ preference for products communicated in an anthropomorphic manner. The current research examines this question.

Research in branding has suggested that people can form relationships with products in a similar way to how they form relationships with other people (Fournier 1998). Thus, when socially excluded consumers see human characteristics in the product, they may show more interest because connecting with the anthropomorphized product represents an opportunity for social affiliation. One’s interest in connecting with the product should be exhibited in their product attitudes. Therefore, we predict that socially excluded consumers, compared with socially included consumers, will exhibit greater preferences for anthropomorphized products, but not for non-anthropomorphized products.

However, excluded persons are needy but vulnerable (Maner et al. 2007). They desire new social affiliation, but also want to protect themselves from being rejected again. Downey and Feldman (1996) found that people highly sensitive to rejection tended to avoid social interactions and had more hostile intentions towards others who they believe might reject them. These findings suggest that excluded consumers may not exhibit greater preference for the
anthropomorphized products if the product is imbued with human characteristics that imply the possibility of rejection. Some brand personalities (Aaker 1997) may represent good opportunities for social affiliation while others may not. For example, a friendly personality depicts a kind and approachable image, whereas tough personality describes a less approachable image. Since excluded consumers would be reluctant to approach people with a tough personality due to the fear of being rejected again, we expect that these consumers would have similar reaction towards tough anthropomorphized products. Seeing the product with tough brand personality is expected to reduce their interest in having a relationship with the product. This prediction is consistent with Epley et al.’s (2008) finding that excluded participants did not describe their pets using non-supportive anthropomorphic traits (e.g., devious) more than participants in fear or control conditions. Therefore, we hypothesize that social exclusion will increase preferences for anthropomorphized brands that represent a friendly personality, but not a tough personality.

Empirical results from three studies support our hypotheses. Study 1 employs a 3 (social exclusion vs. social inclusion vs. control) x 2 (anthropomorphism: human vs. object) between-subjects design. Participants first recalled a recent experience in which they felt social excluded, socially included, or a control condition in which they were shopping in the supermarket. Then they were instructed to do an ostensibly unrelated product survey in which an energizer battery was presented for evaluation. The battery was communicated either in human form (i.e., the energizer man image with a first person introduction) or in object form (i.e., the pure object image with a third person introduction). As predicted, excluded participants, compared with those in inclusion and control conditions, provided more favorable evaluations of an anthropomorphized battery, but not a non-anthropomorphized battery.

Study 2 tested the moderating effect of brand personality on excluded consumers’ attitude towards anthropomorphized products. A 2 (social exclusion: exclusion vs. inclusion) x 2 (anthropomorphism: human vs. object) x 2 (brand personality: friendly vs. tough) between-subjects design was employed. Participants first performed a ball-tossing game online (Williams, Cheung and Choi 2000) that manipulated social exclusion. Exclusion participants received far less ball tosses from their partners than included participants did. After completing the game, participants completed an ostensibly irrelevant product survey in which they were asked to evaluate a clock, which was presented either in first person with human facial features, or in third person without human facial features. The clock was described visually and verbally as either friendly or tough in its personality. As expected, results in friendly conditions replicate the finding in study 1, and this effect is diminished in tough conditions, supporting the moderating role of brand personality.

Study 3 examined the underlying mechanism in a 2 (social exclusion: exclusion vs. inclusion) x 2 (anthropomorphism: human vs. object) between-subjects design. The brand personality is manipulated within-subject in the choice task. Following manipulation of social exclusion (rejection or acceptance of a friend request in a social network website), participants provided thoughts about two sub-brands of Walker mint candy: bright princess and dark queen. The two sub-brands represent different personalities: friendly and easy to approach versus cold and difficult to approach. Participants were asked to describe what kind of person versus what kind of product the brands are (Aggarwal and McGill 2012), which manipulates anthropomorphism. Then participants were instructed to choose one between the two candies. To test the underlying mechanism, participants responded to a series of items including the extent to which the candy can become their new friend. As expected, the choice share of friendly candy is significantly higher among excluded participants who humanized the candy, compared to all other three conditions. Results of mediation analysis supports that the perceived social re-affiliation opportunity drives this effect.

In sum, this research demonstrates novel effects of using anthropomorphism in marketing by showing when and what types of anthropomorphism are effective in influencing consumer response. We also identify new behavioral consequences of social exclusion, and contribute to the branding literature by documenting new antecedents of relationship building between consumers and brands.

When Consumers Meet Humanized Brands: Effect of Self-construal on Brand Anthropomorphism

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Anthropomorphism is the attribution of humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions to nonhuman objects (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007). It enables a brand to assume a social role as a relationship partner (Fournier 1998), as in a partnership, a fling (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004), an exchange, a communality (Aggarwal 2004), etc. Our research investigates how consumers with different self-construals exhibit differential purchase intentions towards brands that assume different social roles.

Further, we attempt to understand the underlying process by examining the different intentions underlying each social role brands assume. Some consumers feel entitled to their needs being met by brands and even demand special treatment thereof while others display flexibility and accommodation in dealing with brands when problems arise (Fournier 2009). In accord, we posit that anthropomorphized brands aim to satisfy consumers’ internal needs and/or cooperate with consumers. In particular, we further argue that a partner brand intends to cooperate with consumers as well as satisfy their internal needs, while a servant brand’s intentions are geared more towards satisfying consumers’ internal needs (Aaker et al. 2004; Braun and Zaltman 2000; Aggarwal and McGill 2012).

Self-construal literature offers insight on how consumers with different self-construals value different brand intentions. Self-construal has been viewed as the extent to which an individual perceives himself or herself as autonomous and independent of others or as embedded within a broader social network comprising of connection with others (Markus and Kitayama 1991). These different self-construals are labeled independent and interdependent respectively. Cooperating with others is an expression of and enhancing the interdependent self, as doing so is conducive to achieving the goal of fitting in. In contrast, expressing one’s inner attributes and focusing on one’s needs is conforming with the independent self, as doing so enables individuals to feel unique and autonomous (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Consequently, we predict that interdependents will prefer brands that exhibit a cooperation intention and independents will prefer brands that intend to satisfy consumers’ internal needs. Since partner brands exhibit both intentions and servant brands intend to satisfy consumers’ internal needs, we expect that consumers with an interdependent self-construal will express greater purchase intention for a partner than for a servant brand, while independent consumers’ purchase intention will be similar for the two.

Study 1 which tested this prediction was 2 (brand anthropomorphism: servant vs. partner) x 2 (self-construal: independent vs. interdependent). 104 undergraduate participants (49 women, M_{age} = 21) from a US public university were randomly assigned them to one of two anthropomorphism conditions. In the
servant (vs. partner) condition, participants read that the HTC T5 brand (i.e., a fictitious brand under HTC) works for (vs. with) them and helps them perform many tasks (e.g. navigate the road; adapted from Aggarwal and McGill 2012). Purchase intention, the key dependent variable, was elicited using 3 items (“I would like to buy HTC T5;” “I would like to recommend HTC T5 to other people;” “I would like to switch to HTC T5 from other smartphones”; α = .88). Covariates and control variables included affect. Self-construal was measured using the scale developed by Singelis (1994) towards the end of the questionnaire. We found a significant two-way interaction between anthropomorphized social role and self-construal (β = .55, t = 2.11, p < .05). Consumers with an interdependent self-construal (one standard deviation above the mean) were more likely to purchase the brand when the brand was described as a partner than when it was described as a servant ($M_{\text{partner}} = 3.87$ vs. $M_{\text{servant}} = 3.21$; $t = 2.06$, $p < .05$); independents (one standard deviation below the mean) were indifferent between a partner and a servant brand ($M_{\text{partner}} = 3.34$ vs. $M_{\text{servant}} = 3.68$; $t = -1.03$, $p > .30$).

We also investigate a boundary condition of the above effect. Self-brand connection refers to the extent to which individuals have incorporated a brand into their self-concept (Escalas 2003). Aaker et al. (2004) have documented that partner quality is associated with high self-connection. Thus, we theorize that when consumers strongly identify with a brand (i.e., their self-brand connection is high), the consumer-brand relationship resembles a partnership, regardless of the brand’s perceived intention. Under such circumstances, independents and interdependents will not display differential preferences toward a brand. Specifically, we hypothesize that the two-way interaction between self-construal and type of brand anthropomorphism observed in study 1 will be restricted to settings involving low, and not high, self-brand connection.

Study 2 tested this prediction and was a 2 (brand anthropomorphism: partner vs. servant) x 2 (self-construal: independent vs. interdependent) x 2 (self-brand connection: low vs. high) design. 142 participants recruited from an online panel (68 women, $M_{\text{age}} = 34$) were randomly assigned to an independent or interdependent self-construal condition (Trafimow et al. 1991), and one of two manipulations of anthropomorphized brand roles (partner vs. servant) based on participants’ a) listing a laptop brand that is like their partner (vs. servant), and b) explaining the partnership (vs. service; adapted from Aggarwal and McGill 2012). Subsequently, respondents indicated their purchase intention as earlier ($\alpha = .80$), responded to control and confounding measures, and finally to the self-brand connection items (Escalas and Bettman 2005). We found a three-way interaction between self-construal, anthropomorphized brand roles, and self-brand connection ($\beta = -.64$, $t = -2.93$, $p < .01$). Contrast analysis revealed that among consumers with a low self-brand connection, those with an interdependent self-construal were more likely to purchase the partner than the servant brand ($M_{\text{partner}} = 5.80$ vs. $M_{\text{servant}} = 4.60$; $t = 4.20$, $p < .001$), while those with an independent self-construal were equally likely to purchase the servant and the partner brands ($M_{\text{partner}} = 5.25$ vs. $M_{\text{servant}} = 5.68$; $t = -1.48$, $p > .13$); consumers with a high self-brand connection were equally likely to purchase the partner and the servant brands, regardless of self-construal ($p > .3$).

When Temptations Come Alive: How Anthropomorphization Undermines Consumer Self-Control

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Anthropomorphism is defined as imbuing the behavior of nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007). A major conclusion from the extant research on anthropomorphism is that anthropomorphizing non-human agents leads to more favorable attitudes toward those agents (Epley et al. 2008; Gong 2008). Moreover, previous consumer research has shown positive effects of anthropomorphism in consumer contexts (Delbaere, McQuarrie, and Phillips 2011); for example, consumers are less willing to replace a product when they think about it in anthropomorphic terms (Chandler and Schwarz 2010).

However, what if an anthropomorphized product is one’s temptation? None of the prior research has specifically looked at consumer self-control settings, that is, situations in which the anthropomorphized object may be both desirable and at the same time detrimental with regard to consumers’ self-control goals. For instance, how would dieters respond to anthropomorphized high-caloric cookies that hurt their long-term weight-loss goals?

We propose that anthropomorphization of temptation products hampers consumer self-control by decreasing identification of a self-control conflict. According to a number of formulations (Myrseth and Fishbach 2009; Hofmann et al. 2012), successful self-control rests on the concerted interplay of at least two internal processes: the detection of conflict and the recruitment of control to adjust thought, emotion, or behavior in accordance with one’s higher order goals. Consequently, there are two main reasons for self-control failure: a failure to detect motivational conflict in the first place; and, once conflict is detected, a failure to muster up enough control resources to resolve such motivational conflict. The focus of this work is on the primary problem of conflict identification, and we predict that anthropomorphizing temptation decreases the likelihood of conflict identification. Anthropomorphized temptation could be seen as having intentions to tempt people and as having more control over people’s decisions (Waytz et al. 2010). When faced with an anthropomorphized temptation, people may therefore undergo a certain shift in their attributional focus away from an internal attribution of responsibility towards an external attribution on the tempting product itself. As a consequence of losing an internal focus, people may become less likely to detect a self-control conflict and, consequently, less likely to engage in consumer self-control.

Four studies tested our predictions with diverse anthropomorphism manipulations and goal-contexts. Study 1 employed a 2 (temptation product: anthropomorphized (AM) versus control) between-subject design. Participants evaluated high-caloric cookies (tempting product) that were either in a humanlike shape (AM) or in a round shape (control) and reported the extent to which they identify self-control conflicts in consuming the cookies. As predicted, participants in the AM condition felt less conflicted toward eating cookies than those in the control condition.

Study 2 was designed to examine the effect of anthropomorphizing a tempting product on conflict identification and subsequent self-control behavior. The study employed a 2 (temptation product: AM versus control) between-subject design and we used a similar manipulation of anthropomorphism to Study 1. Participants were presented with photographs of the cookie products that were either anthropomorphized or not, and rated how conflicted they were about consuming the products. Upon completion of the
study, participants were offered to take candies (small chocolate bars) as many as they wanted, serving as a measure of self-control. As predicted, participants in the AM condition felt less conflict toward consuming the products, and took more candies than those in the control condition.

As our theory assumes that the conflict people experience toward consuming the product is part of the self-control process, we predicted that anthropomorphism would not disrupt conflict identification if people do not hold a higher-order goal that conflicts with a target product. In Study 3, therefore, we manipulated the salience of a higher-order goal, and tested whether this goal salience moderates our effects. We employed a 2 (goal prime: focal versus control) × 2 (temptation product: AM versus control) between-subject design. To gain more confidence in our effects, we also moved to a different goal context (academic goals for college students) and employed a different manipulation of anthropomorphism by naming the product and having it talk like a person. Participants were primed with either a focal (academic) or a control goal (health/diet). They then evaluated a temptation product (TV gadget) that was either anthropomorphized or not, and reported self-control conflicts and willingness to pay for the product. As predicted, when participants were primed with the focal goal, those in the AM condition identified less conflict and were willing to pay more for the product than those in the control condition. In contrast, when participants were primed with the control, unrelated goal, anthropomorphizing the product did not yield any effect on self-control conflicts or willingness to pay.

Study 4 tested the underlying mechanism of our effects: people make less internal attribution of their own possible behavior as they shift responsibility to the temptation agent. In addition, we accessed participants’ chronic dieting goal strength and tested whether individual differences in goal strength would moderate the effect. Thus, the study employed a 2 (temptation product: AM versus control) between-subject design, with one self-report variable (dieting goal strength). Participants reported self-control conflicts and degrees of internal attribution toward consuming the cookie product, which was either anthropomorphized or not. Lastly, they reported how often they were on a diet. As predicted, we found a two-way interaction on both conflict and internal attribution: the stronger participants’ dieting goals were, the less conflict they felt toward consuming the cookie, and the less internal attribution they made about their possible consumption, when the cookie was anthropomorphized versus not. The decrease in internal attribution also mediated the effect of anthropomorphism on conflict identification.

Taken together, four studies demonstrate that anthropomorphizing a tempting product decreases the likelihood of identifying the product as temptation, which conflicts with a goal that offers long-run benefits. Then, the decrease in conflict identification leads to more indulgence in temptations and greater willingness to purchase the product. So, what happens when your temptations come alive? It could significantly harm your self-control.

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