I Anthropomorphize Therefore I Am: a Metaphorical Explanation to the Reflectional Functions of Product Anthropomorphism

Crystal. T Lee, National Chengchi University, Taiwan
Yung-Cheng Shen, National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan
Lien-Ti Bei, National Chengchi University, Taiwan
Cacelert. Wei-Hao Yang, National Chengchi University, Taiwan

The current study investigates the issue of literal anthropomorphism to advance our understanding of this important phenomenon and finds that some individuals may use anthropomorphic possessions as a way to project ideal self-concept for managing relationships, whereas others may use anthropomorphic possessions as a means of affirming their actual self-concept.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017253/volumes/v42/NA-42

[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/.
Anthropomorphism is the assignment of human characteristics or behaviors to non-human objects, concepts, symbolic concepts (e.g., brands), phenomena and animals (e.g., Epley et al. 2007). Gurtner (1993) distinguished two forms of anthropomorphism: Partial anthropomorphism, in which a person partially projects some personality traits to the anthropomorphized object, but does not consider the entity a human being as a whole, and Literal anthropomorphism, in which individuals not only project human traits to the object, but also assume the object to be an actual person. A review of prior literature reveals that while partial anthropomorphism has been intensively studied, issues in literal anthropomorphism have not yet been much explored so far. The current study investigates the issue of literal anthropomorphism to advance our understanding of this important consumption phenomenon.

Literal anthropomorphism can help consumers build relationships with their possessions (e.g., Chandler and Schwarz 2010). The present study proposes that in order to develop intimate relationships with their possessions, consumers may anthropomorphize the product to reveal their identities and differentiate themselves from others.

A total of 23 informants participate in the face-to-face interviews. Two trained raters coded the data independently, with the third rater resolving inconsistent coding between the two raters. Overall, the inter-rater reliability was relatively high at 80.90%, 88.81%, 84.86% for content coding, causal relationship coding, and overall coding, respectively.

In describing the personification of animals, Kwan et al. described two types of animal personification in which people project human personality traits to animals: egocentric anthropomorphism and homocentric anthropomorphism (Kwan et al. 2008). Parallel with this distinction, the current study suggests that consumer would engage in either egocentric anthropomorphism (see possessions as self) or homocentric anthropomorphism (see possessions as other humans). The following analyses present the result based on these two types of anthropomorphism.

Homocentric anthropomorphism – Possession’s role as others

Anthropomorphic possession as friends

One of the informants, Tom perceives his post card possessions as best friends, knowing that they are always there for him: “These postcards become very good friends of mine. I would love to meet new (postcards) friends from many different countries or cities. I meet these postcards, and I like to talk to them. The first one you saw was from Korea. I have a friend who lives in Korea I asked him to send me a postcard, and here it is. I remember I said: “Hey! Look I just got a new Korean friend! Nice to meet you!” Eventually, we build up friendship.”

Anthropomorphic possession as family members

The informant Sunflower anthropomorphized her car “Silver” as her child. Giving Silver a responsibility in her family means that she is pulling together towards a harmonious family: I called my Renault 21”Silver”. For years she has been accompanying me, and I can never truly express my gratitude enough. I have so many great memories with my husband and my children, thanks to Silver. One of my best memories was my family trip to the Kenting beach. My kids, my husband, and I were together in “Silver”, and we were talking, laughing, and having magic moments.”

Anthropomorphic possession as partners

Homocentric anthropomorphism is the means that helped Ken to survive the emotional roller coaster of his mind-numbingly tiresome job. This study recognizes that desire for control motivates Ken to anthropomorphize his scooter as a “reliable partner”: “When I am riding my T-Max, I get my passion for life back again. I twisted the throttle around until I could feel the grip throb in my hand. My wife always shouts me in the back when I pulled over for speeding. Whenever I looked at my T-Max, my faithful little steed, I feel I could break some rules sometimes. My T-max is not just a friend to me, but also a highly reliable partner.

Egocentric anthropomorphism- Possession’s role as extended self

Possession as ideal self

Elaine anthropomorphizes her Elmo and uses Elmo to remind herself of the person she wants to be, and reconnects with the representation of her ideal self whenever she begins to anthropomorphize Elmo as a real person: “I want to be the person who can light up a room, make people laugh and feel like friends with each other. People pay more attention to me when they think I am up to something. I must have something that represents me and the very “me”….. Here is Elmo. Elmo is actually the ideal reflection of me.”

Possession as Actual self

The informants who anthropomorphized their possessions as their actual selves become attached to the possession, reporting that their possessions to be more like who they truly are. Projecting humanlike attributes to the vehicle helps Amy convey her actual self: “My license plate number is 3118. I think she is such a vital part of me and my life. Therefore, I named her (the car) by her plate number, 3118. With that little car, my world expanded. I drove to work alone, enjoyed the music and scenes on the way. Sometimes I spread myself too thin; I think I just need a little space to think. I feel alive, relaxing here with my 3118. Everything was alright until a few years later when my son had seriously injured in a car accident while driving his friend’s car. It made me feel heartbroken and guilty. I should have been able to protect him and his friends if I gave him my car. I just gave 3118 to my son last year. Now, 3118 helps protect my son as I do.”

This study found that some individuals may use anthropomorphic possessions as a way to project ideal self-concept for managing social relationships, whereas others may use anthropomorphic possessions as a means of affirming their actual self-concept. In sum, egocentric anthropomorphism enables consumers to view possessions as representing themselves, both ideal and actual. Homocentric anthropomorphism enables consumers to view possessions as others. Given these preliminary results, further research should be conducted to investigate related issues brought up by the present findings.
REFERENCES