Spending Time With Mr. Lexus and Paying Money to Doughboy: the Effect of Time and Money on Preference For Anthropomorphized Products

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The desirability of anthropomorphized products depends on the salience of time vs. money in consumers’ minds and the consumers’ goal. We demonstrate that consumers prefer anthropomorphized products when primed with time (vs. money). However, when the product is goal-specific, consumers prefer the anthropomorphized product after being primed with money.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Anthropomorphism, or attributing human characteristics to nonhuman entities, has ancient roots in religion, fables, and art. Anthropomorphism has also been pervasive in consumer psychology. One reason people readily anthropomorphize nonhuman entities is that it satisfies their basic need to form social connections (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). As such, marketers routinely endow products with human traits to enhance their appeal. Indeed, consumers are less willing to discard anthropomorphized products because products seen through an interpersonal perspective are associated with thoughts of social relations—unlike inanimate products, which tend to be associated with instrumentality (Chandler & Schwarz, 2010). However, we believe that extant research linking preference for anthropomorphized objects with social connection captures only half the story by ignoring the context of consumers’ interactions with products. We posit that preference for anthropomorphized products also depends on two such contextual factors: the goal behind the consumption of a product and the behavioral norms salient at the time.

Recent research has shown that manipulating the salience of time versus money can affect people’s sociality and instrumentality considerations. Activating the concept of time increases people’s desire for social interaction (Mogilner, 2010) and feelings of personal connection (Mogilner & Aaker, 2009), suggesting that it triggers behavioral norms consistent with social connectedness. In contrast, activating the concept of money reduces desire for social intimacy (Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006) and increases the functional use of social relationships (Fiske 1992; Vohs, Mogilner, Newman, & Aaker, 2012), suggesting that it triggers behavioral norms consistent with instrumentality.

In this research, we suggest that exposure to a desirable anthropomorphized product will make salient the goal of forming social connections, leading people to prefer it over a nonanthropomorphized counterpart, especially if they are simultaneously exposed to the concept of time (vs. money), which should make salient behavioral norms that encourage interpersonal relationships. Conversely, exposure to a functional goal or a quintessentially functional product will highlight the goal of instrumentality, leading people to prefer anthropomorphized products if they are also exposed to the concept of money (vs. time). The salience of money primes norms that sanction the functional use of a humanlike product, whereas the salience of time primes norms that deem it inappropriate to “use” a human—or humanlike object—instrumentally. People are naturally inclined to form social connections with humanlike objects, but when the object is meant to fulfill an instrumental goal, forming a social connection will no longer be the default response. We tested these hypotheses across three studies.

In Study 1, we examined whether being primed with time (vs. money) indeed increases people’s preference for anthropomorphized products in the absence of an overt instrumentality goal. Participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk; N = 127; 56% male, 44% female; mean age = 51.7 years) were shown an advertisement for a Lexus car with text written in first- or third-person (manipulation of anthropomorphism; Aggarwal & McGill, 2007) and were prompted to consider either spending time or spending money on it (Mogilner & Aaker, 2009). Participants then evaluated the car. Six participants were excluded for failing an attention check. A main effect of the prime emerged after controlling for age and gender, F(1, 115) = 11.15, p < .01; importantly, this effect was qualified by an interaction between the prime and anthropomorphism, F(1, 115) = 4.24, p = .04. Participants exposed to the anthropomorphized car preferred it when primed with time (M = 6.95) than with money (M = 5.59), t(59) = 3.14, p < .01; there were no differences between conditions in preferences for the nonanthropomorphized car (M_time = 6.56; M_money = 6.01), t(58) = 1.31, p = .20.

We predicted that these effects of time versus money would reverse when participants viewed products through the lens of a functional goal. In Study 2, participants (MTurk; N = 118; 58% male, 42% female; mean age = 31.8 years) completed a scrambled-sentence task with time-related or money-related words (Mogilner & Aaker, 2009). Participants were then given an explicit functional goal of baking cookies for an event and were asked to choose between Nestle and Pillsbury cookie-dough brands. Pillsbury served as the anthropomorphized brand, being associated with the popular Doughboy mascot. Pretest ratings confirmed that Pillsbury (M = 3.93) was perceived as more animate, alive, and humanlike than Nestle (M = 3.12), t(151) = 5.35, p < .001. As expected, significantly greater proportion of participants primed with money chose the anthropomorphized Pillsbury brand over the nonanthropomorphized Nestle brand (47.6%) than those primed with time (27.3%), χ² (1, 118) = 5.15, p = .02.

Arguably, the use of real brands in Study 2 could have affected their perceptions on factors other than anthropomorphism. Therefore, in Study 3, we used a product that is consumed only for instrumental reasons: a flu vaccine. As in Study 2, participants (MTurk; N = 109; 60% male, 40% female; mean age = 31.1 years) were primed with time or money through the scrambled-sentence task. Next, they read a short message about flu prevention written in first-person (anthropomorphized) or third-person (nonanthropomorphized), alongside an illustration of a syringe with “eyes” added in the anthropomorphized condition. Participants then rated their likelihood of getting vaccinated. Results revealed an interaction between the prime and anthropomorphism, F(1, 105) = 3.97, p = .05. In the anthropomorphized condition, participants primed with money reported a greater likelihood of being vaccinated (M_money = 57.82) than those primed with time (M_time = 29.92), t(51) = 2.85, p < .01; in the nonanthropomorphized condition, the type of prime made no difference (M_money = 47.19; M_time = 47.83), t(54) = .66, p = .51.

Extending prior work showing that the concepts of time and money make salient behavioral norms consistent with social connectedness and instrumentality, respectively, this research reveals that preference for anthropomorphized products depends on the consistency between the consumption goal and the behavioral norms salient at the time. Moreover, this research contributes to the theoretical understanding of anthropomorphism and shows how the properties of objects, the goals of individuals, and behavioral norms interplay to jointly influence people’s preferences.
REFERENCES


