Knowledge About a Product’S Creator and Its Effect on Product Anthropomorphism

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This research proposes a novel antecedent of product anthropomorphism: the association of the product with its human creator, which results in the transfer of the creator’s essence to the product. The effect occurs when the creator is person rather than a company and when the creator has fundamentally human traits.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Consumers sometimes anthropomorphize products, imbuing a nonhuman object with humanlike characteristics (Aggarwal and McGill 2007; Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007; Guthrie 1993). According to the SEEK model (Epley et al. 2007), one key basis of anthropomorphizing is the activation of knowledge structures about humans. The current research focuses on a similar cognitive process, and proposes a novel factor—beliefs about human-essence transfer—as a key antecedent of anthropomorphism. We propose that people are more likely to anthropomorphize products when given knowledge about the person who created the product. We suggest that people believe that a person who creates a product endows that product with a small part of his or her own self. Once the creator is seen as residing in the product, the product is imbued with humanness. We call this the “Gepetto effect” after the classic children’s tale from Italy, The Adventures of Pinocchio (Collodi and Mussino 1968), which describes a woodcarver named Gepetto whose creation of a puppet becomes human.

We propose that consumers’ lay beliefs about the creation of a product often facilitate anthropomorphism of the product. The creation may be perceived to be the physical embodiment of the beliefs and character, the spirit and ambition, the goals and aspirations, and indeed, the humanness of its creator. Like conceiving a child is the unique instance where essence is transferred through one’s DNA to an offspring, the transfer of the creator’s essence to the product can be similarly perceived.

People often engage in magical thinking that a person has a hidden and unique essence composed of immaterial qualities that can leave one’s corporeal self and transfer itself on to an object through physical contact (Nemeroff and Rozin 1994). For instance, a T-shirt just tried on by a stranger is liked less and is less likely to be bought than when a T-shirt appears untouched (Argo, Dahl, and Morales 2006). We propose that touching may not be necessary because when an individual creates something, the individual is the origin and source of all causal forces acting upon the creation and is entirely responsible for the manifestation of those causal forces on the object. According to the property transmission hypothesis, “causes tend to impose their own properties on effect objects” (White 2009, p. 775). That is, a creator imposes his or her properties on a product. Further, the properties most likely to be transmitted are those that relate to perceptions of human essence. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1 When a product is seen as being created by a person, it is more likely to be anthropomorphized than when the product is not seen as being created by a person.

Empirical Evidence
Two studies test the hypothesis. Study 1 uses photographs of the actual creator of Roomba as well as the product itself, and creates six different morphs of the two pictures such that each succeeding morphed picture reduced the proportion of the creator’s image. Half the participants were told that the pictured individual was the creator and the other half were told the picture was of a random person. Participants viewed all 8 of the photos including the two pictures without the morph, and indicated the extent to which they saw the person or the product. Results show that participants ‘saw’ more of the person in the morphed photos when they thought the person was the creator of the product than when they thought that the person was a random individual, and this effect was significant when the visual of the person was less obvious.

Study 2 exposed participants to a brief description of four different products (Roomba, Deep Blue, Clocky (a wheeled alarm clock), and Pillow Mate (a torso-shaped pillow). Participants were asked to draw a sketch of the four products. Results revealed more anthropomorphized images were drawn when the participants thought that the product was created by a person than by a company – for three of the four product types.

In sum, across the two studies using different measures we find converging evidence in support of the premise that if a product is associated with a person as its creator, then that product is more likely to be anthropomorphized compared to a product that is not associated with its creator. This effect seems to occur because the essence of the creator gets transferred to the product through the very act of product creation.

Our research contributes to the burgeoning anthropomorphism literature by proposing a new antecedent of anthropomorphism. In addition to its theoretical value, our research highlighting the “Gepetto effect” has practical implications for marketers who may be able to encourage buyers to anthropomorphize inanimate products—via information that links the product with its creator.

REFERENCES
Collodi, Carlo and Attilio Mussino (1968), The Adventures of Pinocchio, Project Gutenberg.