To Wink Or Not to Wink? the Role of Anthropomorphism, Power, and Gender Stereotypes in Luxury Branding

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Anthropomorphizing luxury brands can produce lower perceptions of brand sophistication. This is because cues of interpersonal closeness brought by brand anthropomorphization are contradictory to the signals of status, but only for consumers who are particularly concerned with the status signaling. The effects of gender and perceived power are also highlighted.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In attempts to find unique brand positioning strategies, luxury brands sometimes turn to the strategy of anthropomorphizing their brands by either humanizing product designs (e.g., Jean Paul Gaultier “Le Male” cologne; Kate Spade’s new collection with winking cosmetics cases) or activating human-schemas to communicate brand meaning (e.g., recent Jaguar ad showing the brand’s logo in a woman’s womb symbolizing a human embryo). Prior research shows that brand anthropomorphism generally creates positive outcomes, such as product likability (Aggarwal and McGill 2007), positive affect, and brand loyalty (Chandler and Schwarz 2010). Arguably, these effects occur since anthropomorphism entails attributions of human nature characteristics, such as interpersonal warmth, and leads to a feeling of social connectedness with this entity (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2008).

The question we address in this research is: Could these cues of interpersonal closeness brought by brand anthropomorphism hurt in some contexts, such as a luxury brand, or a product that offers uniqueness as its key benefit? We pose this question in light of several streams of prior research. First, research shows that luxury brands are positioned around creating social distance and being high status (Fuchs et al. 2013). Second, associating a luxury brand with actions that enhance social connectedness or protection of others (e.g., corporate social responsibility) results in a dilution of a luxury brand’s equity (Torelli, Monga, and Kaikati 2012). Relatively, activating the concept of money makes people feel more independent and powerful, and simultaneously, leads to lower desire for social connection (Vohs, Mead and Goode 2006). Given that luxury brand consumption serves a function of increasing one’s state of power, we propose that the cues of social connectedness induced via brand humanization can lead to lower product evaluation of luxury brands. We further posit that these possible negative effects of luxury brand anthropomorphism will hold only for consumers who are actively seeking to increase their social distance, and, thus, are more sensitive to the undesirable cues of social connectedness.

Our theoretical predictions are based on different streams of research. A first stream of research shows that people with low power are particularly attracted to luxury brands: state of low power is aversive, and people strive to reduce the feeling of powerlessness (Keltner and Gruenfeld 2003). One way to signal power is to demonstrate higher status (Rucker and Galinsky 2009), and owning luxury brands indicates that one has high status and power. Furthermore, we suggest that due to gender stereotypes, communal attributes (e.g., warm, caring) are generally viewed as more descriptive of females, and that these communal attributes are also viewed as being misaligned with high status and dominance, resulting in females being more likely to be linked with low status (Rudman et al. 2012). Thus, we propose that females who are low in power will be particularly more sensitive to the negative signal of brand anthropomorphism (being more concerned with the need to signal status)such that they would evaluate luxury brands that are anthropomorphized lower compared to brands that are not anthropomorphized. Study 1 tests this proposition.

Next, prior research shows that people have concomitant desires to fit in and stand out (Brewer 1991). Much like individuals with low perceived power, we propose that making a social goal to stand out salient could also lead to a heightened desire to acquire brands that signal status and social distance, and, therefore, result in a negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on perceptions of luxury brands. As noted before, this negative effect of brand humanization on brand perceptions would be especially salient for female consumers given the society’s ascribed low status of females (Ibarra, Carter, and Silva 2010). We test this proposition in Study 2.

Furthermore, because people frequently observe how powerful and powerless people act, they develop schemas and expectations for the roles associated with different levels of power (Rucker, Hu, and Galinsky 2014). Research also shows that people tend to ascribe to the behaviors tied to the expected power roles, and, thus, expect the powerful to be consuming luxury brands. Hence, we argue that people with the focus on the expectations of high power would develop more negative evaluations if a luxury brand is anthropomorphized, and that these effects will be no different for males versus females. This proposition is tested in Study 3.

Study 1 used a context of a fictional luxury watch that was either anthropomorphized or not. Subsequently, participants indicated their perceived sophistication of the product. A regression model using a bootstrapping approach showed that the females in low power prefer non-anthropomorphized product (–1 SD of power; β = −1.54, t(53) = 2.09, 95% CI [0.07, 3.02]), while those in high perceived power prefer the anthropomorphized product (+1 SD of power; β = −1.56, t(53) = −2.32, 95% CI [-2.91, -.21]). Study 2 examines the role of social goal of standing out on the effect of anthropomorphizing luxury brands. The results revealed that participants in the stand-out goal evaluated a humanized (vs. non-humanized) product as less sophisticated ($M_{Anthro} = 3.51, M_{NonAnthro} = 4.28; F(1, 108) = 7.13, p < .05$) compared to those in the ‘fitting in’ goal. Further, this effect was significant only for the females ($M_{Anthro} = 3.24, M_{NonAnthro} = 4.41; F(1, 108) = 6.41, p < .05$), but not for the males. Study 3 used anthropomorphism, power, and gender as the three between-subjects factors, and examined reactions to a luxury bag ad. As predicted, results revealed that respondents in the expectation of high power viewed a humanized product as less sophisticated than a non-humanized product, and this effect was significant for both males and females.

This research contributes to emerging literature on the negative effects of anthropomorphism in the marketplace (Kim and McGill 2011; Puzakova, Kwak, and Rocreto 2013). This research also contributes conceptually by highlighting the role of power and gender in the context of luxury product consumption. Finally, our research has important practical implications for the marketing of luxury brands.

REFERENCES


