We contribute an understanding of anthropomorphization as a subjective attribution consumers make as a result of their lived experiences with advertising trade-characters. Our findings from 57 depth interviews extend anthropomorphism theory by discovering both agentic and passive anthropomorphism variation across overarching tropes: relatable self-identification, managing offense, and social connections.

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consumer narratives about advertising trade-characters.

Thus far, the marketing literature focuses on the consequences of anthropomorphization of products (Aggarwal and McGill 2007; Chandler and Schwarz 2010; Landwehr, McGill, and Herrmann 2011) and brands (Aggarwal and McGill 2012; Puzakova, Hyokjin, and Rocero 2013). Extant experimental research in consumer behavior (Kim and McGill 2011; May and Monga 2014) typically examines how one key personality attribute (e.g., a consumer’s need for control) influences anthropomorphization, but does not explore the broad array of life experiences and identity projects that shape consumers’ perceptions and the subsequent ways in which they anthropomorphize marketing symbols.

The first author conducted depth interviews with 57 informants, which generated 54 hours of audio-taped dialogue and 391 single-spaced pages of transcribed text. Each semi-structured interview began with a phenomenological approach (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989) and transitioned into a more structured discussion of individual trade-characters. This allowed us to explore both consumers’ broad descriptions of marketing, brands, and advertising within the context of their lives, and also the detailed meanings they shared about trade-characters.

To our knowledge, our research is the first to apply and extend Epley et al.’s (2007) three-factor theory of anthropomorphism to understand the ways consumers anthropomorphize marketplace entities. Our data uncovers that these three factors influence both agentic and passive anthropomorphization—social psychology thus far has only investigated the agentic form. Additionally, each of Epley and colleagues’ (2007) three factors corresponds to a differentiated trope (Spiggle 1994) that emerged from our empirical analysis: relatable self-identification, managing offense, and fostering social connections. These tropes encompass the diverse ways consumers agentically and passively anthropomorphize trade-characters.

Additionally, our research finds that when consumers anthropomorphize, they do not passively accept the meanings and/or traits that marketers attempt to convey in trade-characters, as previous studies assume (Connell, Brucks, and Nielsen 2014; Garretson and Niedrich 2004). Rather, consumers’ perceptions of trade-characters emanate from the intersection of their personal contexts, experiences, and identities (Belk 1988). In fact, we find that when informants anthropomorphize trade-characters to manage offense, it often results in what we term negative anthropomorphism. This construct involves consumers passing derogatory judgments and possibly even rejecting anthropomorphized trade-characters that violate their expectations or standards. Thus, characters like the Burger King that are purposefully created with offensive or strange characteristics may prove counterproductive to practitioners’ equity building goals.

In conclusion, our research advances an understanding of advertising trade-characters as symbols that are interpreted by consumers, whose meanings may incite anthropomorphization. This conceptualization moves beyond the prevailing assumptions that trade-character meanings are under the control of practitioners, merely to be absorbed by consumers. Furthermore, our findings advance anthropomorphism in the consumer behavior literature as subjective attributions grounded in consumers’ personal contexts and perceptions of advertising and brands.

REFERENCES


