“That’S Embarrassing!” Effects of Brand Anthropomorphism on Intimate Disclosure

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We investigate how brand anthropomorphism impacts consumers’ disclosure of intimate information to brands. Three experiments demonstrate that brand anthropomorphism decreases intimate self-disclosure. This effect occurs because anthropomorphized brands are perceived as capable of evaluating others, which increases consumers’ embarrassment when self-disclosing. Indirect questioning moderates the effect of anthropomorphism on self-disclosure.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

1. Introduction
Marketers typically strive to collect information about their consumers in an attempt to foster consumer-brand relationships. However, research has revealed that consumers are generally reluctant to divulge information about themselves to brands, especially when the information requested becomes intimate. In light of this consumer disclosure reluctance, several marketing studies have investigated the factors influencing disclosure behavior (Acquisti, et al., 2012; John, et al., 2011; Moon, 2000; White, 2004). Although these studies offer insights into the conditions under which consumers are more likely to self-disclose, a thorough Q of how particular brand positioning strategies might affect consumer propensity to reveal information to the brand is still missing from the literature.

One positioning strategy that marketers frequently use to foster relationships with consumers is brand anthropomorphization, the act of endowing the brand with humanlike characteristics. Approximately 31% of the brands in the IRI marketing dataset pursue this strategy (see Kwak, Puzakova, & Rocereto, 2015). Given the high prevalence of brand anthropomorphization, the lack of research about its effect on self-disclosure is striking.

Anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized) brands facilitate consumer-brand relationships because they provide quasi-social experiences (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012). Once a brand is anthropomorphized, it becomes possible for consumers to enter into a quasi-social relationship with it. Social interactions are pleasurable and lead consumers to experience positive affect (Wang, Baker, Wagner, & Wakefield, 2007). However, research has begun to illuminate unexpected drawbacks of employing an anthropomorphic strategy. In specific contexts such as product wrongdoing (Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocereto, 2013), this positioning strategy has been shown to lead to negative consumer response because anthropomorphized brands are perceived as being mindful. Considering that people are generally reluctant to engage in intimate self-disclosure because of fear of embarrassment (White, 2004) and that brand anthropomorphization leads to the perception that the brand is capable of evaluating others (Epley & Waytz, 2009), we expect that rather than facilitating consumer-brand exchanges, an anthropomorphic brand positioning strategy might have a negative effect on consumer intimate self-disclosure.

2. Studies
Across three experiments, we provide evidence that brand anthropomorphism negatively influences consumers’ disclosure of intimate information. These effects stem from the perception that anthropomorphized brands are mindful and capable of evaluating others, thereby eliciting higher consumer embarrassment associated with intimate self-disclosure. We further demonstrate that indirect questioning (i.e., asking respondents to answer questions from the perspective of another person) offers a good tactic to mitigate the negative effects of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure, because it reduces consumer embarrassment.

All three experiments examined actual consumer disclosure to a brand rather than mere disclosure intentions, thereby obtaining data most closely resembling real consumer behavior. Consistent with prior research (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Collins & Miller, 1994; Moon, 2000), self-disclosure was measured along two dimensions, namely depth and breadth. Depth refers to the quality of information disclosed and was measured using independent judges. The judges rated each disclosure using a five-point scale (1 = “low intimacy”; 5 = “high intimacy”). Depth refers to the quantity of information disclosed and was measured using a simple word count.

Study 1 investigated whether brand anthropomorphism negatively influences the consumer disclosure of intimate information. We employed a 2 (brand: anthropomorphized vs. non-anthropomorphized) × 2 (question: intimate vs. non-intimate) between-subjects experiment. 150 participants recruited from Mechanical Turk online panel (46% female; M Age = 32 years) were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. We gave participants the cover story that they would be participating in two related studies. In the first study, participants received information on a fictitious dating brand; they were shown either an anthropomorphized or non-anthropomorphized version. We manipulated brand anthropomorphism with a combination of visual and verbal humanlike elements. Participants learned that the brand was a European dating site that planned to expand to North America and that, as part of the expansion strategy, it had designed a survey to gain insight into how North Americans feel about themselves and about romantic relationships. Participants were then asked to complete the brand survey. Consistent with prior research (Jourard & Jaffe, 1970; Moon, 2000), the survey consisted of three questions on romantic relationships that were either low or high in intimacy.

The second study was a questionnaire from the experimenters in which participants were asked to provide their reactions to the brand survey they had just completed and their general beliefs about the brand; this included the manipulation check questions and control variables (i.e., general propensity to self-disclose, product involvement, and gender). Results revealed that participants disclosed less intimate information to the anthropomorphized brand than to the non-anthropomorphized one. These effects occurred both in terms of disclosure depth and breadth.

Study 2 served four purposes. First, we aimed to replicate Study 1 with a different product category and to a different disclosure topic. Second, we tested whether embarrassment mediates the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on consumers’ disclosure of intimate information. Third, we examined an alternative account according to which consumers are less likely to trust an anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized) brand, feeling that it might have a humanlike mind with an evil intention to misuse intimate information (Puzakova, et al., 2013). We employed a 2 (brand: anthropomorphized vs. non-anthropomorphized) × 2 (question: intimate vs. non-intimate) between-subjects experiment. 184 participants, recruited from Mechanical Turk online panel (all women; M Age = 33 years) were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. Participants received information on a fictitious feminine brand. The manipulation of brand anthropomorphism was similar to that of Study 1. Participants learned that the brand produced sanitary napkins and that, as part of its research and development program, it was conducting a survey to gain insight into feminine hygiene issues. Participants were then invited to complete the brand survey. The survey consisted
of four questions on feminine hygiene issues that were either low or high in intimacy. Participants were then redirected to a questionnaire from the experimenters in which they were asked to provide their reactions to the brand survey they had just completed; this included the manipulation check questions as well as questions related to embarrassment, brand trust, and control variables (i.e., mood, product involvement, involvement with feminine hygiene, and gender). The results of Study 2 replicated the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure. These effects again occurred both in terms of disclosure depth and breadth. Importantly, Study 2 provided insight into the process through which brand anthropomorphisms intimate self-disclosure via embarrassment. In addition, we strengthened our theorization by ruling out an alternative account according to which consumers are less likely to trust an anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized) brand.

In Study 3, we examined whether indirect questioning mitigates the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure. In addition, we aimed to further reveal the role of embarrassment as an underlying mechanism by showing that the moderating effect of indirect questioning on self-disclosure occurs through embarrassment. The rationale for this study was that if an anthropomorphized brand decreases the disclosure of intimate information because it elicits higher embarrassment, then the negative effect should be reduced when the consumer’s self is perceived as less threatened, that is, when consumers are asked intimate information in an indirect way. We employed a 2 (brand: anthropomorphized vs. non-anthropomorphized) × 2 (questioning method: direct vs. indirect) between-subjects experiment. 95 undergraduate students from a North American university (62% female) were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and followed procedures identical to those reported in previous studies. Participants received information on a fictitious clothing brand. They learned that the brand was a European clothing brand that planned to expand to North America and that, as part of the expansion strategy, it had designed a survey to gain insight into North Americans consumers. The manipulation of brand anthropomorphism was similar to that of the previous studies. The questioning method was manipulated between participants. We told participants that the brand was planning to create an advertising campaign aimed at North American consumers. The campaign would aim to illustrate very intense romantic relationships. For this reason, information about how North Americans feel about very intense romantic relationships was sought. Insights from people’s real life experiences would provide inspiration for the advertisements. Accordingly, the brand survey consisted of four highly intimate questions. Consistent with prior research (Fisher, 1993; Fisher & Tellis, 1998; Sengupta, et al., 2002), we asked participants to answer the questions from their own perspective (direct condition) versus from the perspective of the average North American (indirect condition). Participants were then redirected to a questionnaire from the experimenters in which they were asked to provide their reactions to the brand survey they had just completed; this included the manipulation check questions as well as questions related to embarrassment and control variables (i.e., general propensity to self-disclose, mood, product involvement, self-image concerns, and gender). The results of Study 3 showed that the questioning method (direct vs. indirect) moderates the effect of brand anthropomorphism on consumers’ disclosure of intimate information. These results underscored our key assertions that brand anthropomorphism negatively affects intimate self-disclosure (both in terms of depth and breadth) when questions are asked in a direct style and that indirect questioning mitigates this negative effect. More importantly, Study 3 showed that when consumers are asked for intimate information in a direct way, brand anthropomorphism increases embarrassment and consequently lowers self-disclosure. In contrast, when consumers are asked for intimate information in an indirect way (i.e., about a typical other), the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on embarrassment and subsequently on disclosure disappear.

3. Theoretical Contribution
This research contributes to the marketing literature in four important ways. First, we are the first to demonstrate that brand anthropomorphization has important implications for consumers’ self-disclosure to brands, an issue that currently receives considerable attention in both the marketing literature and in practice. In doing so, the present work extends the recent line of research that shows negative effects of brand anthropomorphization in diverse domains, such as computer games, product wrongdoing, price fairness, and risk perception (Kim, Chen, & Zhang, 2016; Kim & McGill, 2011; Kwak, et al., 2015; Puzakova, et al., 2013). Second, we investigate the moderating effect of the questioning method (direct vs. indirect) and show that indirect questioning mitigates the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure. Third, we elucidate the mechanism underlying these effects. Specifically, we demonstrate that embarrassment mediates the interactive effect of brand anthropomorphism and questioning method on intimate self-disclosure. Fourth and importantly, most consumer research focuses on one side of the consumer-brand relationship: how consumers perceive a brand. In contrast, the current paper taps into the other side of the relationship: the inference made by the consumer about how the brand might perceive him or her. We thus provide a more complete picture of the relationship between a brand and a consumer and, in particular, of the consumer-brand dialogue occurring inside the consumer’s mind (Blackston & Lebar, 2015).

4. Managerial Implications
Our research shows that brand anthropomorphization, a positioning strategy commonly employed by marketers to better connect with consumers, has an unintended and adverse effect on consumers’ disclosure of intimate information. We do not suggest that marketers should avoid the use of anthropomorphic strategies but rather that they should be aware of the negative consequences of these positioning strategies.

Furthermore, our results offer marketers guidance as to how to overcome the unintended negative effect of brand anthropomorphism and to more efficiently grasp the benefits of this positioning strategy. Specifically, we show that indirect attempts to obtain intimate information facilitate consumers’ propensity to self-disclose.

Finally, it is not uncommon for marketers to ask consumers to engage in relatively intimate self-disclosure. For example, online dating sites typically ask (potential) members to respond to surveys regarding their feelings about relationships and sex. Online dating sites are extremely popular among consumers; brands such as Match.com, eHarmony, or OkCupid gather more than 30 million users who produce an unprecedented amount of data (Statistic Brain, 2016). Similarly, the condom brand, Durex, regularly conducts sex surveys as part of their research program by asking thousands of adult consumers how they feel about sex and what impact this has on other aspects of their lives (Durex, 2012). Beyond relationship-related and sexual information, asking consumers about their income, food habits, alcohol consumption, body type, medical information and even their age is also likely to be perceived as intimate. Thus, our findings have relevance to many sectors, including the banking, food, beverage, clothing, and very importantly, public health industries.
5. Limitations and directions for further research

Future research should examine the extent to which the negative effect of brand anthropomorphism on intimate self-disclosure occurs if the brand gradually escalates from superficial to intimate questions. Moon (2000) found that consumers are more likely to disclose intimate information to a computer when they have first been “warmed” up through introductory questions. In contrast, Acquisti, et al. (2012) found that a question appears to be more (less) intimate if preceded by a more innocuous (a more intimate) question, which ultimately affects a respondent’s propensity to answer the question. An exploration of the order in which questions of varying intimacy are asked and how this order alters the effect of brand anthropomorphism on consumer self-disclosure is therefore an important avenue for further research.

Additionally, we conducted our studies using fictitious brands. This allowed us to cleanly manipulate brand anthropomorphism while controlling for preexisting perceptions of and relationships with an existing brand across conditions. Further research could delve deeper by employing existing brands with which consumers have developed a relationship. White (2004) showed that consumers with relatively deep (vs. shallow) relationship perceptions were more reluctant to divulge intimate information. We therefore expect that employing existing brands would further enhance the negative effect of brand anthropomorphization on intimate self-disclosure.

REFERENCES


