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When Humanizing Brands Goes Wrong: the Detrimental Role of Brand Anthropomorphization Amidst Product Wrongdoings

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Anthropomorphization of a brand, followed by negative brand performance, triggers less favorable attitudes toward the brand. This phenomenon is attributed to the fact that the anthropomorphization makes individuals see an entity as mindful and fully accountable for its actions. Implicit theories of personality are found to moderate this relationship.

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The Detrimental Role of Brand Anthropomorphization amidst Product Wrongdoings

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Prior research has established that anthropomorphization of a brand has positive implications for consumers' perceptions and behaviors. For instance, human qualities of emotionality and thought of the M&M brand's characters transfers to the M&M brand, creating a point of differentiation and connection with consumers. What consequences does the marketing tactic of anthropomorphizing a brand have when the brand catches the glare of negative publicity arising from negative brand performance? In September of 2008, independent sources indicated that traces of melamine, a poisonous substance, could be potentially present in M&M's candies. Would consumers' reactions to the incidents of negative media coverage have been different if the M&M brand had been non-anthropomorphized in its marketing promotions?

Our research demonstrates that anthropomorphization of a brand triggers less favorable attitudes toward the brand when consumers are exposed to information regarding negative brand performance. This phenomenon is attributed to the fact that the anthropomorphization of an entity makes individuals see this entity as mindful and intentional, and, thus, to be fully accountable for its actions. In times when people did not attribute intentional capacities strictly to humans, animals and objects alike were subjects for prosecution (Berman 1994; Epley and Waytz 2009). In turn, greater responsibility for an action created greater willingness to punish a target of negative behavior. Prior research in marketing has also established that a firm or a brand's wrongdoings, determined to be intentional, are perceived more negatively than actions categorized as accidental (Folkes 1984; Klein and Dawar 2004). Evidence from previous research indicates that consumers may perceive the locus of responsibility for a failure as external, that is, brand-related, or internal, or context-related (e.g., consumer, external suppliers, retailers); (Laufer and Gillespie 2004). Given negative brand performances, brands that are depicted with anthropomorphic features are more likely to be viewed as committing intentional acts than brands positioned without humanized elements.

Furthermore, our research extends the premise that people apply social beliefs to agents that are being anthropomorphized and interpret the actions of humanized entities in light of this social knowledge. Specifically, we theoretically conceptualize and empirically demonstrate that consumers' implicit theories of personality affect their perceptions of anthropomorphized brands when the brands catch a glare of negative publicity. Researchers in social psychology suggested that a fixed view of personality is associated with a greater emphasis on relying on others' traits in predicting their behavior across various situations (Chiu et al. 1997). By contrast, individuals, who endorse an incremental theory stance, take into account contextual information, do not expect that the same behavior recurs across situations, and are less likely to change their perceptions of transgressors based on a single incident (Dweck and Molden 2008). Precisely, individuals who believe in personality stability view anthropomorphized brands that undergo consumers' backlash from negative performance less favorably than non-anthropomorphized brands. The opposite holds true for consumers who accept the incremental view of personality malleability. That is, consumers who believe in incremental theory, view anthropomorphized brand more favorably than non-anthropomorphized when they deal with negative information about the brand.

We examine hypothesized effects in two experiments. Experiment 1 investigates whether anthropomorphizing a brand creates less favorable perceptions of a brand when consumers learn negative brand information. The results of Experiment 1 demonstrate that a brand represented with humanlike features (e.g., human visual elements of the product, ad copy written in the first, as opposed to in the third person) creates less favorable attitude toward and less trust in the brand. Experiment 2 explores the moderating role of implicit theory of personality. Implicit theory of personality was manipulated by having respondents read an article supporting either entity or incremental theory. The findings of Experiment 2 reveal that anthropomorphized, as opposed to non-anthropomorphized, brands trigger negative reactions from consumers that advocate entity theory stance. They also attribute greater responsibility to the anthropomorphized versus the non-anthropomorphized brand. In contrast, we found that incremental theory proponents have more positive attitude toward the anthropomorphized brand and do not attribute greater brand responsibility for negative brand actions. They are more likely to allow the possibility of inconsistent behaviors, and therefore, are less likely to be negatively affected by the information regarding negative brand performance.

In conclusion, previous research is silent to the question of how the anthropomorphization of a brand affects consumers' perceptions if the brand undergoes public backlash, arising from factual negative information. To our knowledge, this research represents the first theoretical and empirical documentation of the negative effect of brand anthropomorphization on consumers' attitude toward the brand adversely envisaged by mass media.

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