Introduction

Mr. Clean is a line of cleaning products owned by Procter and Gamble since 1958. Over the years, Mr. Clean has strengthened its human persona by appearing as the police officer “Grimefighter”, as a “changed man” when a new formula was introduced, and most recently, in the 2013 “Origin” commercial, as someone who has been working hard from his childhood days to serve the cause of fighting grime to help others. This is just one example of a brand that has been given human form and characteristics with the implicit belief that endowing brands with such humanlike traits makes for a more successful brand performance in the marketplace (Aggarwal and McGill 2007; Shaffer 2014). Presumably, this is because consumers would be more likely to relate to the brand in a personalized manner and form relationships with it as if it was a human being.

Understanding how and why consumers anthropomorphize products and brands sheds light on the efficacy of anthropomorphism as a marketing strategy and as a building block for the formation of brand relationships.
In this chapter, we review recent work in psychology and marketing to explore how and why anthropomorphizing brands affect the relationships that consumers form with brands. We then propose a theoretical model that a) links anthropomorphism and brand relationships, and b) offers directions for future investigation in this area.

Although marketers have long employed a number of differentiation tools, such as brand equity (Keller 1993), brand image (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986), and brand personality (Aaker 1997; Plummer 1985) to create and sustain strong brands, research in the past two decades has focused on a relatively novel yet potent phenomenon of brand differentiation: brand relationships (Fournier 1998). This line of research suggests that people sometimes form relationships with brands in much the same way they form relationships with other people in social contexts (Aggarwal 2004; Fournier 1998; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Seminal work by Fournier (1998) suggests that consumer-brand relationships traverse a wide spectrum of relationship types – from casual acquaintances, to close friendships, arranged marriages, committed partnerships, flings, one-night stands, and secret affairs. Other researchers have noted that the norms that underpin different types of relationships are unique, and depending on the relational type, consumers’ evaluation of the brand will depend on whether the brand’s actions are consistent with the norms of that particular type of relationship (Aggarwal 2004).

The relationship metaphor, borrowed from social psychology to gain insights into consumer behavior, has fascinated both researchers, as well as practitioners, resulting in a
recent flurry of research activity in the area. It is interesting to note that most of the work in the area has focused on understanding the consequences of forming different relationship types, and often uses relationship types as a moderating factor to explain differences in consumer behavior. Surprisingly, however, research on consumer-brand relationships is relatively silent on the antecedents of different types of relationships, and how they are formed. Arguably, brand anthropomorphism is an important antecedent factor for the formation of consumer-brand relationships. Understanding why people tend to so easily view non-human entities as humanlike, and how this tendency affects the way brands are evaluated can be very insightful, and help us to better understand the very interesting phenomenon of consumer-brand relationships.

**What is Anthropomorphism?**

Although research on anthropomorphism in marketing only emerged within the last two decades, the concept of anthropomorphism extends back centuries. Some of the earliest evidence of anthropomorphism is an ancient sculpture from over 30,000 years ago, showing a human body with the head of a lion (Dalton 2003), suggesting that humans have long been imbuing non-human entities (e.g., a lion) with human attributes. The word anthropomorphism originates from the Greek words “anthropos” (human) and “morphē” (shape or form)); that is, anthropomorphism is the phenomenon by which non-human entities are given human shape or form. Epley, Waytz and Cacioppo (2007: 864) note that anthropomorphism is the “tendency to imbue the real or imagined behavior of non-human agents with human-like characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions”.
Anthropomorphism pervades human judgment and is prevalent in almost all cultures and aspects of human life, particularly in religion, art, and storytelling.

Most religions (with the notable exceptions of Judaism and Islam) tend to reflect human form in the images of gods, goddesses, and other divine entities. The Greek philosopher Xenophanes famously said that if horses and cattle could depict their gods, their gods too would look like horses and cattle, respectively. It is not surprising, then, that anthropologists like Guthrie (1993) suggest that anthropomorphism is a phenomenon that comes very naturally and easily to humans, and that the human brain has an innate tendency to see the “human” in natural phenomenon and events. Anthropomorphism also pervades literature across diverse cultures such as the Indian *Panchatantra* and the Greek *Aesop’s Fables* – both of which are collection of stories about anthropomorphized animals that highlight useful everyday principles of life. More recent classics, such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Jungle Book*, and the popularity of movies like *The Lion King*, as well as the variety of Disney characters, such as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, also highlight the pervasiveness of anthropomorphism in literature and art.

Anthropomorphism is pervasive in our modern day life in part due to the numerous ways in which marketers often encourage consumers to see their products and brands as humans by imbuing brands with human-like personalities and imagery (Aaker 1997; Biel 2000). There are countless examples of anthropomorphized representations of brands, such as Mr. Peanut, Tony the Tiger, the Michelin Man, the Pillsbury Doughboy, or the
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Geico Gecko. Brands are even given names that strongly signal specific roles and familial relationships, such as Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben’s or Dr. Pepper. All this is done presumably to make the brands more endearing and desirable to the consumers and ultimately to entice consumers to choose these brands over others. It is not surprising then that consumers are able to form a variety of different relationships with brands – relationships that range from casual acquaintances, to close friendships, committed partnerships, flings, and one-night stands (Fournier 1998). These types of relationships that consumers form with brands necessitate that the consumers first perceive the brand as human-like or possessing human-like qualities. After all, what would it mean to form a close friendship with a brand if the consumer does not perceive the brand to possess qualities similar to that of human friends? Indeed, it is likely that imbuing a brand with human traits activates a human schema, which then increases the likelihood of anthropomorphizing the brand (i.e., a consumer is then more likely to perceive the brand as a complete human). Subsequently, if the brand is seen as a person, it is more likely that a consumer will form a relationship with the brand. Further, the humanlike attributes of a brand (e.g., its personality traits) can influence the types of relationships that consumers form with the brand.

In the following sections, we examine why people anthropomorphize inanimate entities, and how this tendency can affect the way consumers evaluate and engage with products and brands. We outline future lines of research and offer predictions about how anthropomorphism can influence the types of relationships that consumers form with brands. The goal of this chapter is to use the interesting phenomenon of brand
anthropomorphism to better understand the process by which consumer-brand relationships are first formed and then nurtured over time.

**Why Anthropomorphize?**

Why do people have this tendency to ascribe human-like characteristics to non-human entities? Three explanations have been offered for the tendency to anthropomorphize (see Guthrie [1993] for a review). One explanation is that doing so comforts people by providing relationships or companionship. This view sees anthropomorphism as stemming from wishful thinking; people who wish to have more relationships in their everyday lives use products to fill the void left by a scarcity of human relationships. A second explanation is that people anthropomorphize to make better sense of the world around them. People use what they are familiar with—their knowledge of themselves—and ascribe human-like characteristics to events or entities to better account for outcomes and things that they know less about. Finally, Guthrie (1993) suggests that anthropomorphizing may be seen as a cognitive and perceptual strategy akin to making a bet that the world is human-like: a bet that has more upside potential than downside risk. From an evolutionary perspective, making this bet may have allowed humans to develop a mechanism to help people identify potential predators (Guthrie 1993). While this mechanism may yield false positive results, such as identifying a tree with human-like limbs as an enemy, the upside is that it would also lead to correctly identifying predators if and when they were around in the environment – something crucial for survival. In addition, the tendency to anthropomorphize may be a developmental trait, where young
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children learn about human interactions and relationships, and then overgeneralize them to interactions with non-humans (Guthrie 1993).

Building upon the propositions by Guthrie (1993), Epley et al. (2007) later proposed a three-factor model to explain why people anthropomorphize so readily. The first factor is the accessibility and applicability of anthropocentric knowledge. From a cognitive perspective, when people view objects that share traits with humans (e.g., physical shape, movement, voice, etc.), the human schema becomes more readily accessible, which increases the likelihood of the object being anthropomorphized by the observer. Thus, people tend to engage with the environment around them by using self-knowledge and human category knowledge. For example, the similarity of a non-human object’s movement to human movement leads observers to perceive the object as being alive (Tremoulet and Feldman 2000); in addition, if the speed of the object is more in line with natural human speed, then the object is more likely to be perceived as being human-like (Morewedge, Preston, and Wegner 2004).

Consistent with this explanation, marketers often take advantage of human schema activation by employing brand characters and mascots. Brown (2010) finds that marketers are most likely to use stylized human beings as brand characters or mascots, followed by domesticated animals. Further, the popularity of the brand animal is directly correlated with the species’ physiological (shape) and psychological (presence of mind) distance from humankind. Even when the object is completely inanimate – that is, the object is without a conscious mind and without movement – observers are still able to
detect human-like features. When faced with a row of soft drink bottles of varying sizes, consumers prefer to see them as a “family” of products rather than a “line” of products (Aggarwal and McGill 2007). Humans also have a strong tendency to detect faces in inanimate objects (Guthrie 1993), likely because recognition of faces and facial expressions is crucial for successful social interactions. Consumers are able to identify facial expressions on cars (with headlights as eyes and the grille as a mouth), and the emotion that they perceive from the expression affects how they evaluate the car (Aggarwal and McGill 2007; Landwehr, McGill, and Herrmann 2011; Maeng and Aggarwal 2014; Windhager et al., 2008).

While the first factor noted by Epley et al. (2007) is cognitive and based on people’s knowledge structures, the second and third factors provide a motivational perspective. The likelihood of an individual anthropomorphizing an object depends on two motivational states of the individual: sociality motivation and effectance motivation. Humans have a need for affiliation and belongingness (Baumeister and Leary 1995), and when this need is activated (i.e., when people feel lonely or isolated, and hence are eager to seek out and form social connections), there is an increased likelihood of anthropomorphizing non-human objects. Consistent with this, Puzakova, Kwak, and Rorereto (2009) suggest that certain personality traits may increase the likelihood of anthropomorphizing: consumers who have a high need for belonging and those who rate highly for chronic loneliness may have a stronger tendency to anthropomorphize brands and use anthropomorphism as a way to fulfill their needs for social connections. Epley et al. (2008) demonstrate in a series of experiments that people who are lonely compensate
for their lack of social connections through anthropomorphizing animals, and even gadgets, thereby creating a sense of connection with these nonhumans.

The sociality motivation also affects the way consumers perceive anthropomorphized objects. The innate desire for social connection suggests that, when individuals perceive the object to be human-like, they employ social norms typically used in social interactions. For example, when consumers consider their old products as being imbued with human-like characteristics, they are less willing to replace them with newer models (Chandler and Schwarz 2010) because it is socially inappropriate to get rid of “friends” or “family members” when they get old. When people perceive a non-human entity to have a presence of mind, they are more likely to treat the entity with care and concern (Waytz, Cacioppo, and Epley 2010), and because of this, when an anthropomorphized object delivers an emotional appeal (e.g., a humanized light bulb saying, “I am burning. Please turn me off!”), individuals are more likely to comply (Ahn, Kim, and Aggarwal 2014).

The third factor – effectance motivation – arises from individuals’ need to understand and predict their environment and reduce uncertainty. Similar to making inferences about other people’s behavior by using the self as a reference point, individuals anthropomorphize non-humans in order to comprehend and predict the behavior of objects (Dawes and Mulford 1996). By using a familiar reference point (i.e., human behavior), individuals feel that they have more control over their environment, and are better able to explain ambiguous elements in their surroundings (Burger and Copper 1979). Epley et al. (2008) identify the need for control as a personality variable that
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determines the likelihood of anthropomorphizing. Individuals who have a high need for control are more likely to anthropomorphize animals whose behaviors are unpredictable – which suggests that anthropomorphizing these animals enables their behavior to become more understandable. Puzakova et al. (2009) posit that having a high need for control induces consumers to explain brands’ behaviors through anthropomorphic representations (e.g., intentions, desires) of the brand. Kim and McGill (2011) provide some evidence in support of this proposition: products that are seen as being risky (e.g., a slot machine) are preferred only when the product is anthropomorphized, because humans, especially those who feel empowered, can exert control over other (more predictable) humans, but not over (more unpredictable) objects. Furthermore, Guthrie (1993) notes that anthropomorphic propensity increases during times of uncertainty and rapid technological change, which likely explains why complex products like computers are ascribed with human-like traits and are treated as similar to humans (Nass and Moon 2000; Nass, Fogg, and Moon 1996).

In sum, the human tendency to anthropomorphize non-human entities, driven by a need to make sense of the world around them, begins in early childhood and is likely rooted in evolution. Observers are more likely to anthropomorphize objects when features of the object activate the human schema (e.g., through human-like movement or facial expressions, etc.). Factors internal to the observer can also affect the likelihood of anthropomorphism. That is, when individuals are motivated to form social relationships, or when they are motivated to understand the behavior of non-human objects, they are more likely to view objects as more human-like. Consumers may also prefer personified
products and brands for similar reasons: 1) the product/brand would fit with their activated human schema, 2) the product/brand can satisfy the need to form social connections, or 3) the product/brand would be more predictable and controllable.

**Consumer Evaluation of Anthropomorphized Products and Brands**

Much of the literature on anthropomorphism focuses on the reasons why individuals anthropomorphize and the circumstances under which anthropomorphism is more likely to occur, as outlined above. The authors of the paper that first brought anthropomorphism to the attention of consumer behavior research argue that “products that can be ‘humanized’ are often seen as stronger candidates for long-term business success” (Aggarwal and McGill 2007). Delbaere, McQuarrie, and Phillips (2011) posit that advertising that uses anthropomorphism (in the form of inanimate spokescharacters, mascots, and brand animals) are more likely to elicit positive emotional responses from consumers. They go on to demonstrate that consumers like brands that induce anthropomorphic feelings, and that consumers form positive attributions of these brands’ personalities.

However, simply anthropomorphizing products – that is, imbuing products with human-like traits – does not always increase positive evaluations. The relationship between consumers and brands/products is more nuanced. The types of roles that brands play and the features and functions of products also need to be taken into consideration. For instance, consumers prefer cars that have “aggressive eyes” and a “smiling mouth” to cars that are simply smiling (Landwehr et al. 2011). In a recent series of experiments, we
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find that desire for social connection does not always increase liking for anthropomorphized products (Wan and Aggarwal 2014). In fact, when the product is seen as being primarily functional and serving a specific purpose, desire for social connection decreased preference for these products, presumably because “using” a “person” to complete a task is socially inappropriate. These results are consistent with recent work that distinguishes between two different roles assigned to brands of being a servant or a partner to the consumer (Aggarwal and McGill 2012). Servants are brands that are bought or used to serve a particular goal: the onus of accomplishing the job of satisfying the consumer’s need is on the brand – the brand is outsourced to do the task, as it were. Partners, on the other hand, are brands that are seen as co-producers of fulfilling the consumers’ needs along with the consumers themselves. We suggest that consumers with a need for social connection may find some roles to be more desirable than other roles (Wan and Aggarwal 2014). That is, when a product is seen in instrumental terms and is meant to serve a specific purpose, it is more likely to be perceived as a servant when anthropomorphized. And since servants do not fit in the “friend” schema, such an anthropomorphized product would not receive strong positive evaluations. On the other hand, if a product is meant to be consumed for its own sake, it would more likely be perceived as a partner when anthropomorphized, and hence seem more desirable.

Recent research has further noted the negative downstream consequences of brand humanization (Puzakova, Kwak, and Rocerto 2013). This research suggests that an anthropomorphized brand can lead to lower consumer evaluations when the brand faces negative publicity due to wrongdoings. Consumers who believe in personality stability
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(i.e., entity theorists) view anthropomorphized brands that undergo negative publicity less favorably than non-anthropomorphized brands. In contrast, consumers who advocate personality malleability (i.e., incremental theorists) are less likely to devalue an anthropomorphized brand from a single instance of negative publicity. Kim and McGill (2011) find that consumers who perceive themselves as having little power prefer non-anthropomorphized risky products such as slot machines compared to consumers who are high in power, who prefer anthropomorphized risky products.

The findings outlined here suggest that merely anthropomorphizing products and brands is not always the best strategy to improve evaluations; the attributes and purpose of the brand and product need to be considered. Consumers are not always more likely to form positive relationships with products and brands simply because they are human-like. For example, weak relationships between the consumer and brand may result if the consumer’s consumption goals does not match the type of “person” the brand is. Furthermore, the relationships between the brand and consumer may even turn sour after a brand’s wrongdoing if consumers believe in the stability of personality traits. The attributes of the consumer and the attributes of the products and brands need to be taken into account during the formation of positive relationships, and when determining whether or not anthropomorphism would be effective in improving brand evaluations.

**Implications of Anthropomorphism for Brand Relationships**

While anthropomorphizing brands will not always lead to the formation of relationships
with brands, anthropomorphism is a necessary antecedent of brand relationships. That is, brands must be viewed as humans – humans who have intentions, emotions, and agency – in order for consumers to form relationships with them. It is still not fully understood what determines the particular types of relationships consumers form with brands, but understanding why consumers anthropomorphize and the contexts in which anthropomorphic products and brands will be favored provides interesting avenues for future research. In the following sections, we propose some possible factors and contexts in which brand anthropomorphism can inform and guide consumer-brand relationships. We examine the potential role of three anteceding variables of anthropomorphism – knowledge accessibility, sociality motivation, and effectance motivation – and other individual and contextual factors in affecting the formation of consumer-brand relationships (see Figures 1a, b, and c for a conceptual model).

**Knowledge Accessibility**

As noted before, one cognitive factor that leads to a greater likelihood to anthropomorphize is when people are confronted with stimuli that make the knowledge about human schema more accessible, such as when products are endowed with features that resemble human traits. When that happens, people interact with brands much as they might interact with people, since that seems the natural and right way to behave. Of course, depending upon the particular stimuli that are incorporated in the products, the type of human schema that is made salient might differ, resulting in a different type of interaction and relationship being forged with that brand. For example, work by Aggarwal and McGill (2007) shows that a smile is associated with the schema of a
spokesperson, but a frown is not, and it is this schema congruity that leads to a preference for a car that is smiling and presented as a spokesperson over the one that is frowning and presented as a spokesperson.

**Personality Traits (of products).** Brands are perceived to have distinct personality traits, just as people do (Aaker 1997), and these brand personality traits are likely to result in different relationships being forged with the brand. While there is little empirical work in consumer behavior that links anthropomorphism with brand personalities, it is worth recognizing that imbuing a brand with human personality traits would activate the human schema and increase the chance of anthropomorphizing a given brand. Further, the types of personality traits a brand possesses can influence the types of relationships that consumers form with the brand. Prior research on brand personality shows that sincere personality leads to a durable long-term committed partnership, while an exciting brand personality leads to a fling-like relationship (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). Nobre, Becker, and Brito (2010) report that brand personality is a strong positive predictor of consumer-brand relationships on the dimensions of passion and intimacy-loyalty – that is, when consumers perceive a brand to possess human traits such as intensity and confidence, they are more likely to form passionate and intimate relationships with the brand. More recent research finds that the ratio of width to height of car-faces follows the same pattern of preference as the ratio of width to height of human-faces: the higher the ratio, the greater the attribution of dominance to the anthropomorphized cars (Maeng and Aggarwal 2014). However, unlike dominant human-faces that are less preferred, dominant car-faces are favored since possessions are more likely to be seen as reflective
of the self, thereby helping people feel more empowered and strong. Thus, through activating consumers’ human schema, brand personalities can guide the formation of unique and distinct consumer-brand relationships.

Gender (of products). As noted earlier, prior research has noted that computers are sometimes seen in gender stereotypical ways, especially if they are associated with male or female voices (Nass, Moon and Green 1997). More recent work suggests that use of different languages might lead to different levels of anthropomorphism, as well as different attribution of male versus female traits to non-human objects. Thus, work by Kim et al. (2014) suggests that gendered languages, such as French that assigns male or female gender to objects like tables, chairs, etc. (by using he or she to refer to them), are more likely to lead to anthropomorphism compared to more neutral languages like English (that use “it”). Furthermore, depending upon whether a product is referred to as a “he” or a “she”, it is assigned more male or female stereotypical traits. Consumers might then form different types of relationships with products and brands depending upon the language used in the particular country, as well as whether the product is referred to as a “he” or a “she”. Clearly, the use of brand characters, and assigning them male or female form such as a the Michelin Man or the Land O’Lakes woman is likely to lead to different types of relationships being forged with these brands.

Sociality Motivation

As noted earlier, one underlying motivation as to why people tend to anthropomorphize
non-human entities is in order to fulfill the need for social connections. There are social and individual contexts where the sociality motivation might be particularly strong, which would then result in greater likelihood of forming strong relationships with brands.

Culture. There is a plethora of research in psychology and marketing highlighting the relevance and value of examining cross-cultural differences, and how those differences influence consumer behavior (see Markus and Kitayama [1991] for a review). One factor that has been identified as a key dimension that separates different cultures is the concept of self-construal, or the extent to which people perceive themselves to be independent versus interdependent. The main distinction between these two types of self-construal is that independent people focus relatively more on themselves while interdependent people focus relatively more on others around them. The interaction of culture and the need for social connection provides an interesting context to examine the formation of consumer-brand relationships. One may argue that because people in interdependent cultures value social relations more (Markus and Kitayama 1991), they would be more likely to anthropomorphize brands and form intimate/close relationships with such anthropomorphized brands. Conversely, interdependent people might perceive themselves to already have sufficient functional relationships in social domains, and thus they may not need to rely on brands to fulfill their sociality needs. As such, independent rather than interdependent consumers might anthropomorphize more and form more close relationships with brands as substitutes for human relationships.
Gender (of consumers). Gender research suggests that women respond better to appeals of togetherness and interdependence, compared to men (Wang et al. 2000), while men respond better to appeals of separateness and independence, compared to women. Furthermore, women are more likely to consider brands as active relationship partners, compared to men (Monga 2002). While both men and women consider how they act toward brands, women (and not men) also consider how brands act toward them. These findings suggest that women might, in fact, be more likely, relative to men, to anthropomorphize brands and then form close relationships with these anthropomorphized entities. Other related work sheds further light on the issue by noting that, within the interdependence context, women focus more on the relational aspects of interdependence, whereas men focus more on the collective aspects of interdependence (Gabriel and Gardner 1999). This research then suggests a more nuanced hypothesis, outlining that women might be more likely to form more dyadic consumer-brand relationships, while men might be more likely to form relationships at a group level akin to the idea of brand communities, noted by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001).

Personality Traits (of consumers). It has been noted in past research that certain personality traits, such as chronic loneliness, increases the propensity to anthropomorphize as way to compensate for lack of human connections (Epley et al. 2008; Puzakova et al. 2009). If this is the case, then one would expect that people who show these personality traits might also be more likely to seek out and form close and durable relationships with brands on an ongoing basis.
Technology. One crucial aspect of our fast changing world is the role of technology and the extent to which technology is integral to our everyday living, as manifested in our usage of many different ‘avatars’ to represent our digital selves. Prior research suggests that machines are also gender stereotyped (Nass, Moon and Green 2006), given personalities like human personalities (Nass et al. 1995), and treated with politeness (Nass, Moon, and Carney 1999) and with norms of social interaction such as reciprocity (Moon 2000). President Obama’s recent visit to Japan where he infamously bowed to a robot, saying later that “they were too lifelike”, further demonstrates how normal and easy it might be to form social connections with machines, especially those that take on a physical form that resembles human form. Other examples like voice recognition technology, fingerprint sensors, and the iPhone’s Siri function all show the great strides that technology has made in our everyday lives. As technology advances to simulate humans in shape, speech, action, and performance, people will be more likely to anthropomorphize these gadgets and relate to them just as they would to other people.

Effectance Motivation

The effectance motivation suggests that people have a great need to make sense of the world around them and reduce uncertainty so they have better control over their environment. Consequently, situations that naturally offer greater risks or uncertainties are likely to lead to a greater likelihood of anthropomorphism, which, in turn, might lead to a greater likelihood to form relationships with these products or brands. However,
because the motivation is not driven by a need for social connection, it is likely that the types of relationships formed as a result of effectance motivation are qualitatively different.

Uncertain or Risky Contexts. Prior research has found that risky contexts lead to a preference for products that are anthropomorphized. Thus, Kim and McGill (2011) show that in a high-risk context, such as gambling, people prefer a slot machine that is anthropomorphized, compared to the one that is not anthropomorphized. Further, they observe this effect only for those consumers who perceive themselves to be high in power, suggesting that the preference for the anthropomorphized slot machine is driven by a desire to exercise “control” over the unpredictable machine. Conversely, those low in power like the anthropomorphized slot machine much less, suggesting that they fear being controlled by a humanized entity that is more powerful than them, particularly in a context that is seen as high risk. This suggests that if we were to identify naturally occurring or otherwise high-risk contexts and situations, consumers may be more likely to relate to anthropomorphized products there, especially if they feel empowered. Thus, doctors and other health practitioners who are in high risk situations and often feel empowered might prefer anthropomorphized products to help them meet their goals. Others who might be in similar situations include frontline workers in various domains, such as the military, firefighting, education, etc. Presenting the products and brands that these people work with as anthropomorphized entities might forge stronger relationships and more effective performances.
Personality Traits (of consumers). Recent work has identified two personality traits as being associated with greater propensity to anthropomorphize as a way to understand and to control the environment: the need for closure and the need for control (Epley et al. 2008; Puzakova et al. 2009). Given this, one can argue that people who are high on these two personality traits are not just likely to anthropomorphize brands, but also likely to form a certain type of relationships with the brands around them. Arguably, the need to control would lead these people to try and “use” the brands to manage their environment better around them. The question that future researchers might find worthwhile to examine is whether such consumers are more likely to form asymmetrical and unequal relationships with brands, akin to treating the brands as slaves or servants.

Brand Roles. Sometimes consumers think of brands in the role of a partner, and at other times think of brands in the role of a servant (Aggarwal and McGill 2012). As explained previously, servant brands are used to serve a particular goal, and partner brands are perceived as collaborators and co-producers of fulfilling consumers’ needs. While a social connectedness motivation might be more likely to lead to perceiving the anthropomorphized brand as a “partner” to the consumer, the effectance motivation is likely to make salient the need to control the environment, resulting in a greater likelihood of forging a servant-like relationship with the anthropomorphized brand. Wan and Aggarwal (2014) find evidence supporting this proposition by showing that when consumers expect the brand to serve a specific function, they consider its usefulness and
instrumentality, and tend to prefer anthropomorphized brands “to get the job done”.

Arguably, when consumers feel less empowered, but think of the brand in terms of instrumentality, they may prefer a “boss” brand, especially if it is seen as a benevolent master, much like a luxury brand that is desirable.

**Conclusion**

Although anthropomorphism as a concept is as ancient as religion, research in the consumer domain on anthropomorphism did not emerge until recent years. The use of anthropomorphism in advertising is still increasing in popularity because companies believe they will have an edge over their competitors if they personify their products and brands (Shaffer 2014). However, Shaffer (2014) warns practitioners that modern consumers may be oversaturated with conventional anthropomorphic advertisements, which use the typical talking animal or other anthropomorphic spokescharacter (e.g., GEICO’s talking gecko). Consumers may view these types of advertisements as too blatant or “cheesy”. This does not at all suggest that eliciting anthropomorphic feelings in consumers is ineffective in influencing consumers’ preference and engagement with such brands and products; in fact, Shaffer (2014) encourages marketing managers to explore methods by which one may induce anthropomorphism in more innovative ways. He cites a series of ads for IBM as innovative, as they use more subtle ways to elicit anthropomorphism (e.g., an ad with captions reading, “Trains now queue for passengers”). The large restaurant chain, Subway, used a particularly novel form of anthropomorphism in a product placement on a television show. Subway has engaged in
many blatant product placements on various network television shows (e.g., NBC’s “Chuck”, CBS’s “Hawaii Five-0”). In 2013, Subway went so far as to literally humanize its brand and inserted the human character “Subway” into the storyline on NBC’s comedy “Community”. The “Subway” character even formed a fling-type relationship with one of the main characters of “Community”, which was later reflected by that character’s mixed positive and negative attitude toward actual Subway sandwiches.

Understanding the efficacy of anthropomorphism in a marketing context and how it influences the formation of brand relationships is more important than ever, especially with the continual growth of social media. Brands now have an actual voice through social media platforms, and can engage one-on-one with consumers in real time. Direct interactions with brands through Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, and the indirect observation of brands’ interactions with other consumers would easily allow consumers to ascribe personality traits to brands and to view brands as possessing intentions and emotions. Even Mr. Clean has “his” own Facebook and Twitter accounts, where “he” writes in the first-person and makes cleaning related puns. Social media makes it simple for consumers to engage with brands, and through repeated interactions, consumer-brand relationships are more likely to be formed. The propensity to anthropomorphize will rise as consumers try to make sense of the modern world that is characterized by rapid technological changes and other uncertainties. The question is whether, in this fast-paced and technology-focused world, the types of relationships that we develop with others, including brands, will prove to be more long-term and fulfilling or merely a means to achieve some other goals that we cherish more.
References


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FIGURE 8.1A

Knowledge Accessibility → Anthropomorphism → Type of Brand Relationship

- Personality traits of brands
- Gender of products
FIGURE 8.1C