CHAPTER 13

MY AUNT JEMIMA AND YOUR UNCLE BEN: BRANDS AS PEOPLE

By Pankaj Aggarwal

When I worked as Vice President Client-Servicing in the New Delhi office of J. Walter Thompson Advertising way back in the early nineties, one of the copywriters, Gene Hashmi, went to the country’s movie capital – Mumbai (then Bombay) – to ensure that his script was faithfully translated into a 30-second ad-film by the film producers hired by us for the job. Gene returned a week later and was proudly displaying a new tattoo that was adorning his somewhat hairy chest, right where his heart would be. The tattoo was a brand logo – the distinctive outline of the bitten-off apple – his favorite brand, the Mac. While I was not surprised that a copywriter who is immersed in highlighting the virtues of a plethora of brands 80-hours a week would be especially fond of one, it did seem a bit extreme to willingly and permanently allow your own body to be used as an advertising medium. Of course, it did not surprise me to see that later in the year, when we were computerizing the creative department and installing new workstations for everyone, Gene led the informal office movement against IBM, demanding that the creative department be given Macs instead. To Gene Hashmi, Apple Mac was not just a great computer. The brand meant a lot more. It represented a lot of things that Gene believed in personally and held in high regard – individuality, creativity, freedom, excellence, and success. Gene had a sort of relationship with Apple that brands can only dream of: passionate, intimate, and bordering on the fanatical. Somehow, the team at Apple had figured out the right mix of brand ingredients to appeal to Gene and others like him, which as we now know, would continue to engender equally passionate and emotional bonding for the brand over twenty years later. What is it that Apple
was able to put together that other brand managers may have overlooked? Can other brands too
get Gene Hashmis to flaunt their logos next their heart?

This chapter examines the role of brands in the lives of consumers and the type of
relationship that binds the two. Specifically, this research explores the broad framework of
perceiving brands-as-people, and examines the appropriateness of applying this metaphor in
better understanding consumer behavior and their interaction with brands. This chapter examines
the brands-as-people metaphor in two distinct ways. The first section examines the role of brands
as relationship partners to consumers, much like interpersonal relationship between two people.
The second section explores the relatively less studied but equally important idea of brand
anthropomorphism, that is, when the brand more overtly takes on a human form. The interesting
and somewhat unexpected ways in which brand anthropomorphism affects consumer behavior
will be discussed in this section. In addition to its theoretically rich contribution, the brand-as-
person metaphor also offers some unique insights for brand managers who are constantly looking
for practical ways to build deeper connections with their consumers, and to better understand the
multi-faceted interactions that consumers have with brands.

**Consumer-Brand Relationships and Norms of Behavior**

Even though marketing practitioners have long imbued brands with human traits with the
objective of making brands more endearing, distinctive, and desirable, academic researchers who
typically look at brands as passive, economically defined objects have only recently started
perceiving brands as partners in socially construed relationships. The idea that consumers think
of brands as relationship partners was first explored by Susan Fournier¹, a professor at Boston
University. Subsequent research too has emphasized the importance of understanding
consumers’ perspectives by examining different aspects of consumer-brand relationships. My own research extends this stream of work by exploring a specific dimension of the complex consumer-brand relationship space. My research proposes a predictive framework by suggesting that when consumers form relationships with brands, they use norms of behavior underlying these relationships as a guide in their brand interactions.

Norms of Behavior and their Role in Social Interaction

Social relationships carry with them norms of behavior that each relationship partner is expected to follow. Norms are typically not stated explicitly; they emerge from interactions with others and acquired by people in a social setting over long time periods of the socialization process. As these norms become internalized, they serve as a guide for everyday behavior, suggesting the right way for people to behave in novel situations. In addition, people also use these norms to judge behavior: social norms form the basis of societal expectations for our behavior, our expectations of others’ behavior, and our expectations of our own behavior. A particular action may be a part of the norms of one relationship and be regarded as appropriate by one person while the same action may be seen as a serious violation of the norms of another relationship and perceived to be improper by another person. For example, keeping a close tab on how much money one spends on a relationship partner may be in conformity of the norms of a commercial relationship but in violation of the norms of a relationship between family members. It is this adherence to or breach of the underlying relationship norms that informs our appraisals when we interact with our relationship partner.

The notion that relationship metaphor can help us understand consumer behavior is based on the insight that when consumers see brands as relationship partners, they are in fact, invoking
norms that underlie a particular relationship. And depending upon the relationship that they perceive with the brand, the norms that are salient would be different. These salient norms, then, serve as a lens to the consumers to guide them on the ‘right’ way to behave as well as to evaluate the brand’s actions. The main insight of my research on consumer-brand relationship is that the key to understanding consumer-brand interaction is a better appreciation of the norms that govern the particular brand relationship. My research has shown that relationship norms influence consumers’ responses depending upon the extent to which the brand’s actions are in violation of these norms and are seen as unfair. Further, relationship norms influence consumers’ information processing, their preference for self- versus other-chosen outcome, as well as their degree of loss aversion.

In my research, I have relied on the distinction made in the literature between exchange relationships and communal relationships based on the norms of giving benefits to others. Exchange relationships are those in which benefits to a partner are given with the specific expectation of receiving a comparable benefit in return. The receipt of a benefit incurs a debt or obligation to return a comparable benefit. People are concerned with how much they receive in exchange for how much they give. Such relationships involve a careful cost-benefit evaluation and the focus is on keeping track of inputs and outputs. Relationships between strangers and business partners are typical examples of this quid pro quo type of relationship. On the other hand, in communal relationships people give benefits to others to demonstrate a concern for that person and to express attention to their needs. They also expect others to demonstrate a similar concern for their own needs. Communal relationships focus on mutual support and cooperation thus taking a perspective that transcends emphasis on self-interest alone. Most family relationships, romantic relationships and friendships fall in this category. Although communal
relationships are not completely bereft of a sense of reciprocity, the distinctive aspect of this relationship is that each individual interaction is not scrutinized for balance of the transaction. Prior work by Margaret Clark and her colleagues has identified the distinctive norms of these two relationships, which have also been noted in my other work and is being summarized in Table 13.1.

Table 13.1: Norms of Exchange and Communal Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exchange Relationship</th>
<th>Communal Relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prompt repayment for specific benefits received is expected.</td>
<td>Prompt repayment for specific benefits received is not expected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desirable to give ‘comparable’ benefits in return for benefits received.</td>
<td>Less desirable to give comparable benefits in return for benefits received.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More likely to ask for repayments for benefits rendered.</td>
<td>Less likely to ask for repayments for benefits rendered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More likely to keep track of individual inputs and outcomes in a joint task.</td>
<td>Less likely to keep track of individual inputs and outcomes in a joint task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less like to keep track of others’ needs.</td>
<td>More likely to keep track of others’ needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divide rewards according to each person’s inputs and contributions.</td>
<td>Divide rewards according to each person’s needs and requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping others is less likely.</td>
<td>Helping others is more likely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requesting help from others is less likely.</td>
<td>Requesting help from others is more likely.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Accepting help with money is preferred to no payment.  
Accepting help with no monetary payment is preferred.

Less responsive to others’ emotional states.  
More responsive to others’ emotional states.

Interestingly, these two relationship types are not mutually exclusive: it is possible to have both a communal and an exchange relationship with someone simultaneously. For example, a business partnership with one’s brother is likely to lead to the salience of communal and exchange norms concurrently. One reason why such relationships are difficult to manage in practice is that people may often be uncertain about what norms to use in specific situations. Interestingly, given their commercial nature arguably all consumer-brand relationships are inherently exchange-like. However, some marketers often endeavor to position their brand as being focused more on the well-being of the consumers than on maximizing their own profits. Take for example, Virgin’s claims to be “the consumer’s champion,” in contrast with incumbents that do not have the consumers’ interest at heart (http://www.virginatlantic.co.za), as well as State Farm’s endeavour to be “a good neighbor” (http://www.statefarm.com) or Nationwide’s promise to be “on your side” (http://www.nationwide.com). Consequently, relationships with such brands may have an overlay of communal norms on top of the exchange norms that inform most commercial transactions. In my research, I have focused on the relative salience of exchange versus communal norms in a consumer-brand interaction. Further, in keeping with prior social psychology research, I have treated exchange and communal as two ends of a scale rather than two orthogonal dimensions. Next I describe two different projects that examine how relationship norms influence consumer behavior. The six studies conducted for these two
projects help us better understand some of the interesting ways in which norms of different relationship types influence consumer-brand interactions differently.

**Case 1: Relationship Norms as a Lens to Judge the Brand**

This research based on my doctoral dissertation proposes that when consumers form a relationship with a brand, brands too are evaluated as if they are members of a culture and need to conform to its norms: if the actions of the brand are in violation of the norms of a relationship then the brand is evaluated negatively, but if the actions are in conformity with the norms of a relationship then the evaluation is positive. The theoretical framework proposes that the perceived violation of relationship norms mediates the effect of relationship type on consumers’ attitudes and behavior. Three studies were conducted, among student participant groups, each examining a different aspect of request for help.

In this research I examined participants’ reactions to being charged a fee or no fee for a ‘special’ service rendered by a brand in response to a specific request made for that service by the consumer. The participants were first exposed to a description of a relationship between a consumer and a hypothetical bank aimed at triggering either communal or exchange norms. Next, the scenario described a consumer who sought help from the bank requesting it to write a letter to their utility company who had not received some money even though it had been cleared by the bank. The participants were then told that a week later the bank informed them that the issue with the utility company had been resolved for no charge, or for a fee of $20.00. A demand for a fee by the bank in response to a request for help violates the norms of communal relationship since the help is being given presumably for the fee rather than out of a concern for the consumer. This action, however, conforms to the norms of exchange relationship since the
fee highlights the quid pro quo nature of the relationship. Hence it was predicted that consumers’
reactions to being charged would be different across the two relationship types. The main
dependent variables were a three-item measure of reaction to brand’s action (willingness to pay,
appropriate action, good business practice) and a three-item brand evaluation measure (dislike-
like, dissatisfied-satisfied, unfavorable-favorable). The results found support for the proposed
hypothesis and indicated that, relative to exchange-oriented participants, communal participants
evaluated the brand and its actions more positively when the action was in keeping with the
communal norms but in violation of exchange norms (no fee was charged) than when the action
was in violation of the communal but in keeping with the exchange norms (fee was charged).

This research also examined consumer responses to receiving a comparable or
noncomparable benefit back from the brand in response to some help rendered to a brand.
Participants were first exposed to a brief description about a health club aimed at triggering
norms of either a communal or an exchange relationship. Next, the health club requested the
consumer to help them develop a website on healthy living by responding to a questionnaire
requiring an hour of the consumer’s time (nonmonetary help) or donating $15 for it (monetary
help). In return, the brand promised the consumer either a 1-hr.-free coupon – comparable to the
request for time but noncomparable to the monetary help, or a $15 discount coupon –
noncomparable to the request for time but comparable to the monetary help. Results of study 2
suggest that brand’s action elicited different consumer evaluations depending upon whether the
brand’s actions violated or conformed to the norms of the underlying consumer-brand
relationship. Since in an exchange relationship, benefits are given with an expectation of getting
comparable benefits in return, any such offer, in cash or otherwise, would be seen to be in
keeping with the relationship norms. Conversely, in a communal relationship, help is given to
show concern for the partner’s needs. A comparable benefit violates the underlying communal norms since it transforms the relationship into a tit for tat one while a noncomparable benefit would be in conformity with communal norms since it de-links the benefit given from the benefit received.

Finally, I wanted to explore not just another aspect of the helping norm but also to overtly examine the mediating role of relationship norm violation. For this purpose, a direct measure of participants’ perceived norm violation was taken, and a mediation analysis was done to explore if the brand evaluations were in fact influenced by the degree of norm violation experienced by the participants. This study examined if the length of time gap between help given and help sought caused participants in different relationships to respond differently. If a request for help by a partner was immediately countered with a return request, the debt created by the original help is paid off right away—the return request being seen as a quid pro quo would be in keeping with the norms of exchange relationship. However, return request that was delayed in time, being less likely to be connected to the original request, would be seen as a way to extract free help by the partner and hence be in violation of the exchange norms. On the other hand, an immediate return request was likely to be seen as a repayment for the original help and would thus be in violation of communal norms. Conversely, a delayed return request, being unconnected to the original request, was likely to be seen as an expression of a genuine need of the partner and hence be in keeping with the communal relationship norms. To test this, the participants read about a hypothetical coffee shop brand such that norms of either communal or exchange relationship were salient. Next, the participants read about a situation in which the brand asked the consumer to put up some promotion material on campus for them in response to the customer’s request to make a fresh cup of coffee, and this request was made either immediately
afterwards or a week later. The dependent variables were a) a measure of likelihood to agree to request; b) a three-item brand evaluation score as before, and c) a six-item measure of norm violation (felt cornered, felt irritated, felt exploited, care about them (reversed), happy to help (reversed), request was appropriate (reversed)). As expected, the results showed that, exchange consumers evaluated the brand less positively to a delayed request but more positively to an immediate request compared to the communal consumers. Further, the results also showed that the perceived level of norm violation completely mediated the effects on consumers’ assessment of brand and its actions.

Since communal relationships are likely to be more emotionally laden\textsuperscript{14}, it was important to examine if emotional attachment (rather than the relational norms) might have driven these results. To rule this out, measures of perceived affect were taken. In addition, the studies also ruled out uniqueness of monetary benefits and differences in quality perceptions across the two relationships as two supplemental alternative explanations. Overall, the results of this research supported the theory that a violation of or adherence to relationship norms influenced consumers’ evaluation of the brand.

**Case 2: Relationship Norms and Processing Brand Information**

This project examines differences in consumers’ strategies when they process brand related information\textsuperscript{7}, and suggests that norms of a communal relationship, relative to those of an exchange relationship, make individuals more likely to process brand information at a higher level of abstraction. Prior research suggests that people in an exchange relationship are more likely to keep track of their partner’s inputs rather than their partner’s needs\textsuperscript{12}. In a consumer-brand context, we expected this focus on others’ inputs in an exchange relationship to translate
into attention to nitty-gritty details about the brand enabling the consumers to track the balance of what they get for what they pay. In contrast, since consumers primed with communal norms do not look for immediate quid pro quo, these consumers are more likely to evaluate brands more holistically and attend to brand attributes at a higher level of abstraction.

This research tested the effect of relationship type on the level of abstraction of brand information, and used very different operationalizations of level of abstraction to provide strong converging evidence for the moderating role of relationship norms on consumers’ information-processing strategies. First, the context of a near versus far product extension was used to examine the level of abstraction at which consumers process the proposed extension. It was argued that in a communal relationship, people process information at a higher level of abstraction, perceive the far extensions as being similar to the original product category, and evaluate these extensions relatively positively. Conversely, in an exchange relationship, people process brand information at a lower level of abstraction, perceive greater dissimilarities between the proposed far product extension and the original category, and will be less likely than their communal counterparts to evaluate far product extensions positively. Scenario descriptions of a hypothetical relationship between two people were used to make communal and exchange relationship norms salient. Manipulation check measures were administered to ensure that the manipulation was effective and that affect was not driving any effects. In a presumably unrelated task, participants then evaluated a proposed extension for a product. Iced tea and toffee were the near and far extension for a cola product, but the far and near extension for a chewing gum product. The other pair of extensions was calculator (near/far) and fashion accessories (far/near) for a pen/jean manufacturer. The extensions were evaluated on a four-item scale (dislike-like, bad-good, low quality-high quality, unpleasant-pleasant). Results showed that the norms of
relationship moderate the degree to which far product extensions are seen as similar to the original product, as revealed by the differences in the evaluations of the product extensions: people evaluated the far extensions more positively when the norms of a communal rather than an exchange relationship were salient. These results supported the premise of differences in processing strategies adopted by consumers across the two relationship types.

Next, it was reasoned that if communal norms more than exchange norms make individuals process abstract brand information, then these encoding differences would be reflected in later memory measures. Accordingly, when presented with both abstract as well as more specific (or concrete) brand information, individuals in a communal relationship would overwhelmingly encode the abstract information, whereas those in an exchange relationship condition would attend more to the concrete brand information. It was expected that consumers in an exchange relationship condition would be relatively more likely to not only correctly recognize concrete brand information, but also be able to accurately detect inaccuracies. Further, it was expected that there would be no differences across the communal and exchange relationship group for accurate recognition of abstract information since communal participants would simply recall such information from memory while the exchange participants will use their memory of concrete information to generate this information. However, because exchange-oriented consumers are assumed to rely on generating the abstract and plausible information, they would be slower than communal consumers at identifying this information as shown by the response latencies. Participants were first presented with a relationship manipulation as before. Next, participants read a 450-word description about a hypothetical clothing store that contained both concrete and abstract brand information (e.g., “stores in 39 countries” vs. “it is an international brand”). Later, the participants completed a computer-based, multiple-choice
recognition task. Six of the 12 critical questions tested the participants’ memory for the concrete brand information presented earlier; the other six tested their memory for the abstract information. The results showed that as expected participants in the exchange condition had a higher likelihood to accept correct concrete brand information and a lower likelihood to accept incorrect concrete brand information relative to participants in the communal condition. Further, participants in communal condition, relative to those in an exchange condition, had faster access to both correct abstract brand information and plausible inferences. Together, these findings supported the overall premise that brand-related information is processed at a higher level of abstraction in a communal relative to an exchange relationship.

Finally, the following premise was explored: if the type of consumer-brand relationship influenced the level of abstraction at which the brand’s features are processed, then similar differences in abstraction will be revealed in the way in which a consumer described that brand to a third party. A scenario description was employed to first manipulate communal or exchange relationships with a hypothetical pen brand. Next, each participant was asked to describe the features of the pen to a friend. Two independent judges rated each feature for each participant on a seven-point concreteness-abstractness scale, with the higher score indicating a higher level of abstraction. For example, a feature like “color of the pen” or “ink flow” got a lower rating (1, 2, or 3), but a feature like “classy” or “style” received a higher rating (5, 6, or 7). Results showed that, as expected, participants in the communal condition listed brand features at a higher level of abstraction compared to those in the exchange condition. Control groups ruled out alternative explanations based on affect, differences in abstractness of the descriptions, perceived quality, amount of effort, and potential demand effects.

In sum, this research provided converging evidence in support of the hypothesis that
communal norms lead consumers to process brand-related information at a higher level of abstraction compared to exchange norms. This research, thus, highlights the fact that relationship norms guide consumers and suggest to them the ‘right’ way to conduct themselves in their interactions with the brand. Interestingly, the studies also show that the norms of relationship affect consumer behavior even if they have been made salient in a context that is unrelated to the subsequent interaction with the brand.

**Anthropomorphism, or When Brands Become Humanlike**

Anthropomorphizing, that is, seeing the human in nonhuman forms and events, pervades human judgment. People commonly see human features in natural formations as when they see faces in clouds, on the moon, or on the sides of mountains. They may attribute human goals, beliefs, and emotions to animals, for example, when people interpret the dynamics between two birds as reflecting the loving attention of newlyweds. As is perhaps more relevant to marketers, people see the human not just in nature but in artifacts as well. People sometimes see their cars as loyal companions going so far as to name them. They argue with, cajole, and scold malfunctioning computers and engines.

The pervasiveness with which products are seen in at least partially human terms has long been noted by researchers. Products are seen as having consciousness or a soul, an underlying defining essence, analogous to a genetic code, personality, relationships and even features of their makers or owners that have been transferred during production or use. In addition, research on uses and perceptions of technology has found that people often apply social norms of reciprocity in their interactions with computers, such that a computer that is easy to use creates in us a warm feeling, and may be described as “friendly, faithful or obedient.”
Further, Marketers often encourage this tendency in consumers to anthropomorphize brands and products. In some cases, marketers design an anthropomorphized representation of the brand, for example, Mr. Peanut, Tony the Tiger, and the Michelin Man. In other cases, marketers present the product itself in human terms, and may encourage consumers to think of their products in human terms, for example, by referring to them with personal pronouns “he” or “she” instead of “it,” by describing the product in first person instead of third, or by referring to their “product family” instead of their “product line.” But whether or not consumers see the products as human may depend on the presence or absence of features that convey a sense of humanity.

Although the tendency to anthropomorphize is pervasive, people do not anthropomorphize all objects nor are they able to anthropomorphize different objects with equal ease. The literature suggests that ability to anthropomorphize may depend on the presence of specific features. For example, movement in an object can create the impression that it is alive. Further, the timescale of this movement is important to the perception of humanity: things that dart about quickly may be seen less as human and more like insects whereas things that move very slowly such as clocks may seem to lack humanity in this regard. Thus, the human-like pace with which iRobot’s Roomba vacuuming robot moves may be why some consumers dress it up in costumes and others have bought a second Roomba so that their first one would not be lonely! Further, objects that are shaped like people are more likely to be anthropomorphized. Thus, the shape of a Coca-Cola bottle may be more easily anthropomorphized than a Coke can. Other features that signify human-ness include facial features, sounds/voices, intentionality, imitation, and communication ability.

Next, I give examples of research from two of my projects on anthropomorphism – one examining issues related to anthropomorphizing of the physical product, and the other examining
some unexpected effects of anthropomorphizing the brand rather than the physical product.

Case 1: Smiling Cars and Beverage Families

The primary question addressed in this research was whether an anthropomorphized presentation of a product affected its evaluation and, if so, how? Our central hypothesis was that when marketers encourage consumers to anthropomorphize a product, consumers bring to mind
their schema for human beings and that the product is evaluated in part by how well its features fit that human schema. Depending on the characteristics of the object, therefore, consumers may or may not be able to see the analogy suggested by the marketer to successfully anthropomorphize products. Thus, this research proposed schema congruity as a theoretical basis for examining the effectiveness of marketers’ efforts to anthropomorphize their products. This overall hypothesis was examined in two laboratory studies. In these studies, a human or an object schema was first triggered by encouraging participants to think of the product as being like a person or an object. Next, a new product was presented to them with a feature that was more or less congruent with the human schema. Finally, the dependent variables were administered.

Study 1 used a car as the target product. We first primed a human schema by depicting the car as speaking in the first person so that it could be seen as its own spokesperson. By contrast, we primed the object schema by describing the car in third person. We also manipulated the shape of a front grille of the car visual so that the edges pointed up to resemble a smile or down like a frown. Prior research suggests that a smile is more congruent with the general human schema than a frown: smiling faces are seen as more familiar. Further, a pre-test indicated that smiles but not frowns were perceived to be congruent with the spokesperson schema. We expected that the “smiling” car would be a better fit with the spokesperson schema than the “frowning” car. The type of schema (spokesperson, object), the type of facial feature (smile, frown) and the type of car model (Lexus, Thunderbird) were all crossed and randomly shown to 120 undergraduate students. The results confirmed our hypotheses: participants shown the human schema were more likely to see the car as person (2-item anthropomorphism score) and evaluate it more positively (15-item scale) when the target feature was more congruent (smiling) than less congruent (frowning) with the human schema. Further, the anthropomorphism
score partially mediated the product evaluations. Finally, there were no differences across the conditions on an 11-item affect score – ruling out mood as an alternative explanation.

In order to get deeper insights into the underlying mechanism and further validation of the schema congruity hypothesis, it was also decided to incorporate participants’ thought protocols. Thus, we primed participants with a person or an object schema by telling them about the product “family” or the product “line” of a new beverage. The visual showed four bottles that were either identical in size, or they differed in size as well as placed in a way so as to suggest different individuals (much like different members of a family). A pre-test confirmed that people expected members of a family to be different sized – suggesting different sized bottles to be congruent with the human schema. Ninety-two undergraduate students participated in this study and were shown a different schema (person or object) and bottle size (same or different). Results showed that participants in the person prime condition who saw different sized bottles were more likely to perceive the beverage as a person and evaluate it more positively relative to the other
conditions. Further, coding of the thought protocols showed that these participants made more schema-match related comments compared to the others. Finally, the anthropomorphism score (3-items) partially mediated the product evaluation (18-item) score. Also, since the bottle sizes (same vs. different) could not be mimicked, nor were they inherently better (or worse), this study ruled out product mimicry led emotional contagion, and contingent quality as two alternative explanations for the effects.

Results of this research also provided an additional nuance to our understanding by showing the two ways in which schema-based processing might influence consumers’ evaluations of a product. Thus, we examined the influence of category affect and explored conditions in which greater perceived congruity with a human schema would not necessarily lead to more positive product evaluations. As such, we primed two different human schema, good twins and evil twins. We expected no difference in participants’ ability to anthropomorphize the product across the positive (good twins) and negative (bad twins) schema conditions when presented with the congruent feature (i.e., same sized bottles). We, however, expected differences in the evaluation of the product depending on the affect associated with the schema. Findings for this study supported the view that the overall evaluation of the product may be influenced by schema congruity as well as by the “affective tag” associated with that schema. Hence, this study provided evidence of conditions in which anthropomorphizing the product did not lead to higher evaluations—participants evaluated the product that was anthropomorphized as “evil twins” less favorably than the product anthropomorphized as “twins.” This result reinforces the cautionary point that anthropomorphizing a product may lead to more positive evaluations only when the type of person brought to mind is associated with positive feelings.
Our research offers a framework to better understand the phenomenon of product anthropomorphism. This research also provided support for schema-congruity theory as the underlying theoretical basis for explaining consumers’ evaluations of anthropomorphized products. Our findings also offer marketing managers specific guidelines on how to ensure successful anthropomorphism of their products.

*Case 2: Anthropomorphized Brands as Partners versus Servants*

Research in social psychology has shown that automatic or non-conscious behavior may result from the activation of a social category. For example, it was noted that priming the concept of the ‘elderly’ led to participants walking more slowly since the elderly are associated with the trait of being slow. More recent research also found that participants exposed to the Apple brand behaved more creatively, and those exposed to the Disney brand responded more honestly to questions compared to controls. These results are interesting in that they show that effects previously observed for social constructs replicate in the domain of brands.

In this research, we argue that one reason for this effect may be that the iconic brands studied in earlier research were perceived much like people. That is, respondents may have anthropomorphized those brands. If this argument is correct, it implies not that social effects extend to inanimate objects and brands but that inanimate objects may sometimes extend into the social realm. That is, by anthropomorphizing brands, consumers open the door to “quasi social influences” in which brands elicit effects previously seen for responses to people. We examine this possibility by considering differences in assimilation or contrast with traits associated with brands that have been anthropomorphized compared to those represented only as things. To inform our theory, we relied on prior research in social psychology which shows that priming a
social group triggers goals corresponding to people’s desire for a successful social interaction. People show assimilation or contrastive behavior to the extent that the corresponding behavior achieves these interaction goals. Thus, priming ‘elderly’ led participants who like the category to walk more slowly, but if they disliked the category they walked faster presumably to get away.32

To test this framework, we proposed that brand prime will lead to assimilation or contrast from the behavior implied by the anthropomorphized brand’s image depending on consumers’ beliefs about how best to achieve their social interaction goals. Two moderators were proposed: liking for the brand, and perceived role for the brand – as a partner or as a servant. Consumers would show assimilative behavior with anthropomorphized brands perceived as partners if they liked them because in this case, assimilation–acting the same way as the brand–promotes getting along with and helping the partner. However, consumers show contrastive behavior with traits associated with anthropomorphized partner brands if they disliked them because such behavior pushes them away. Further, consumers show contrastive behavior with traits associated with servant brands they liked because successful interaction involves letting the servant “take care of the work.” Finally, consumers would show assimilative behavior with anthropomorphized servant brands they disliked as a signal that the brand was not needed to be around. On the other hand, brands that are not anthropomorphized would not be affected by liking or role (partner or servant) because the goals of successful social interaction are not triggered for objects, making the relevance and impact of these social factors inconsequential.

We tested our proposed framework in three studies. In our first study, we considered two partner brands, Kellogg’s and Krispy Kreme, near opposites on the healthy-unhealthy spectrum. Using an unrelated dependent variable that tapped into people’s healthy (taking the stairs) or unhealthy (waiting for the elevator) behavior, we found consumers to be more likely to show
assimilative behavior when they liked the anthropomorphized brand, and contrastive behavior when they disliked it. By using opposing trait associations, we showed reversal of the overall effect within study 1 itself. In study 2, we considered two servant brands: Volvo (associated with safety) and Discovery Channel (associated with knowledge). We expected consumers to be less likely to show assimilative behavior when they liked the anthropomorphized brand, and more likely to show assimilative behavior when they disliked it. For both brands, we found significant effects for unrelated tasks such as certainty equivalence for a risky gamble (Volvo) and responses to a set of SAT questions (Discovery Channel). In study 3, we manipulated perceived role of the brand, Volvo, under the pretext of testing two alternative advertising slogans that portrayed it either as a partner (works with you) or a servant (works for you). Results replicated the main effect in a more controlled environment.

This research is significant in its examination of an important yet a very under-studied phenomenon in consumer behavior: brand anthropomorphism. To our knowledge this is the first research that looks at the moderating effect of brand role on consumer’s behavior, highlighting the value of understanding how inanimate objects may extend into our social realm.

Conclusions

The four papers summarized here examine the ‘brands as people’ metaphor in the context of consumer-brand interactions to get insights about different aspects of consumer behavior. In this chapter I have described research examining two distinct aspects of the metaphor. The first section describes research that leans on the relationship metaphor using the interpersonal domain to get some unique insights into consumer-brand interactions. The second section describes the more general but eminently less studied area of anthropomorphism, or when brands and products
more overtly take on a human-like form. The key insight from these papers is that ‘brands as people’ is an extremely useful and versatile metaphor to get deeper understanding about consumer behavior. Our interactions with others in a social domain are so dominant that we often apply norms of social relationships to a brand context and we are very quick to ‘see’ the human in products and brands. The (mis)application of the human metaphor to brands is quite common, instantaneous and almost automatic, resulting in some very interesting and unexpected effects.

Although the ‘brands as people’ metaphor is a useful tool for understanding and for making predictions about consumer behavior, clearly, the research described here has merely scratched the surface. There remain many important questions that are still unanswered. How might norms get created in the first place? Why might some consumers form a communal while others form an exchange relationship with the same brand? How might one transition from one relationship type to the other? Relating back to an earlier chapter by Sridhar Moorthy, how might the type of relationship that consumers form with brands influence the expectations and the eventual success of a brand extension? As noted by David Dunne in his chapter highlighting the changes brought about by internet, consumers now are able to wield more control over marketers, clearly emphasizing that the role of relationships between brands and consumers becomes all the more critical. The consumer can no longer be seen as a passive player in this relationship – they are equal and active partners and will not hesitate to let their partner brand and the rest of the world know of how much they love their brands and also how much they hate them.

Similarly, there are important questions that one might ask relating to issues of product and brand anthropomorphism. Are service brands as easily anthropomorphized as product brands? What might be the potential downsides to anthropomorphizing a product or a brand?
When brands are anthropomorphized in a certain way, are the brand extensions their natural siblings? What might be cross cultural ramifications of brand anthropomorphism – are people from certain cultures more or less likely to anthropomorphize? Can brand anthropomorphism lead to gender stereotyping? In short, what are the different person, product, and context-specific factors that result in particular consumer-brand relationships and the ease with which brands may be anthropomorphized? The full power of the ‘brands as person’ metaphor to give insights into consumer behavior is only limited by future researchers’ imagination.

In addition to the way in which the brand is positioned in the marketplace, the dynamic and repeated interactions pursued by managers in the form of product design, ads, interactive media, direct mail, and telemarketing as well as the use of brand mascots and spokespersons are all potent tools to imbue brands with life, making them humanlike – our friends and partners, our servants and helpers. My research highlights to the managers some of the unique ways in which the relationships between consumers and brands influences how consumers behave, as well as the somewhat surprising downstream effects of endowing their brands more overtly with humanlike characteristics.
REFERENCES


