HOW BRAND ANTHROPOMORPHISM INFLUENCES AUTOMATIC BEHAVIOR IN RESPONSE TO BRAND PRIMES: A VALIDATION OF THE PARTNER OR SERVANT ROLE ATTRIBUTED TO ANTHROPOMORPHIZED BRANDS.

Research Proposal Presented to the
DMCC – Dialog Marketing Competence Center
University of Kassel
European Master in Business Studies

By
Tiberio Samuel Avancini Pinheiro
Kassel, Germany - October, 2012
Abstract

Title

How brand anthropomorphism influences automatic behavior in response to brand primes: a validation of the partner or servant role attributed to anthropomorphized brands.

Keywords

Consumer psychology; brand relationship; anthropomorphized brands; automatic social behavior.

Background

The research of Aggarwal and McGill (2012) puts forward an innovative framework for the understanding of the relationship between automatic behavior and anthropomorphized brands. The use of the partner / servant role distinction should be seen as instrumental to the validation of the theoretical approach the authors propose. Considering the pioneering condition of such distinction, further research is required in order to support the generalizability of their findings.

Purpose

The current research has the objective of validating the partner or servant role attributed to anthropomorphized brands through the analysis of how brand anthropomorphism influences automatic behavior in response to brand primes.

Methodology

Experiment (to take place in Kassel, Germany) – two factor design with brand conception (anthropomorphism, object) being manipulated and likeability being measured as the between-participants factors. Dependent variable: subsequent behavior of participants.

Introduction

The current research has the objective of validating the partner or servant role attributed to anthropomorphized brands through the analysis of how brand anthropomorphism influences automatic behavior in response to brand primes.

According to Aggarwal and McGill (2012), “[…] the conception of brands as partners and servants is interesting in its own right and might, in time, provide a useful contribution to the brand relationship literature, going far beyond our theoretical account. However, much future work is needed to validate the relevance and operation of this distinction.” (p. 321)

The research of Aggarwal and McGill (2012) puts forward an innovative framework for the understanding of the relationship between automatic behavior and anthropomorphized
brands. The use of the partner / servant role distinction should be seen as instrumental to the validation of the theoretical approach the authors propose. Considering the pioneering condition of such distinction, further research is required in order to support the generalizability of their findings.

Building on Aggarwal and McGill (2012) theoretical framework, the present study intends to partially replicate the authors’ research, identifying one partner or servant brand (depending on the pretests’ results) in order to assess the behavioral effects of anthropomorphized brand primes. By doing so, we expect to confirm the validity of the partner or servant brand role definition.

As variables of the study, brand conception (anthropomorphism or object condition) will be the independent one, brand likeability the moderating factor and subsequent behavior (in non-related context) of participants the dependent variable.

The hypotheses guiding the work are as follows:

- “H1: For partner brands that are liked, consumers are more likely to assimilate their behavior to the brand image when primed with an anthropomorphized brand compared to a nonanthropomorphized brand; for partner brands that are disliked, consumers are more likely to contrast their behavior from the brand image when primed with an anthropomorphized brand compared to a nonanthropomorphized brand.” (Aggarwal and McGill [2012], p. 312)

- “H2: For servant brands that are disliked, consumers are more likely to assimilate their behavior to the brand image when primed with an anthropomorphized brand compared to a nonanthropomorphized brand; for servant brands that are liked, consumers are more likely to contrast their behavior from the brand image when primed with an anthropomorphized brand compared to a nonanthropomorphized brand.” (Aggarwal and McGill [2012], p. 312)
Literature Review

Automatic Behavior

Cognitive Approach

The study of automatic social behavior gained relevance with the work of Bargh, Chen and Burrows (1996). According to the authors, based on the theoretical framework of cognitive behavioral assimilation, individuals take on a behavior consistent with the trait being primed. Such priming may occur in two ways: directly, resulting from the presence in the environment of behaviors relevant to a given trait, or by means of stereotypes incorporating the trait.

With respect to the trait mental activation through priming of social groups stereotypes, the authors suggest that this mechanism increases the likelihood that the individual will act in accordance with the behavioral characteristics present in the stereotype in question. For example, exposing individuals to words connected to the mental representation of a given stereotype unconsciously influences subsequent behavior. Importantly, the mechanism determining the behavior is based on the content of the primed stereotype, not on the words used as stimuli. In one of the experiments, the stimuli related to the elderly stereotype activated the mental representation of such stereotype, leading participants to behave in a manner consistent with the stereotype being primed. More specifically, although the stimuli make no reference to slow locomotion, participants walked more slowly after the priming, a trait included in the stereotype of the elderly. Similarly, in another experiment performed by the authors, participants primed with elements of rudeness interrupted a dialogue faster as compared to those who did not receive such stimuli. Conversely, participants primed with politeness related words interrupted the dialogue less frequently.

In short, "[...] the activation of a trait construct or a stereotype in one context resulted in behavior consistent with it in a subsequent unrelated context. The participants were not aware of the influence or potential influence of the priming events on their behavior. [...]" (Bargh, Chen and Burrows, 1996, p. 239).
An alternative theoretical framework suitable for the analysis of automatic social behavior is the “motivated preparation to interact” approach (Cesario, Plaks, E. and Higgins 2006). According to the authors, it is not the direct expression of the primed stereotypical traits which causes the automatic behavior, but rather the preparation to interact with a representative of the primed social group. Therefore, the priming of social categories has the potential to generate either consistent or opposed behaviors regarding the traits relevant to the stereotype.

This argument is exemplified with the behavioral hostility of the participants primed with traits linked to the stereotype of gay men, since gays are commonly associated with behaviors of lower hostility. This result points to the non-assimilation of the activated stereotypical trait, because the most effective way to interact with a gay man, assuming that the goal is to get rid of him, would be behaving in a contrastive way to the stereotype representation, i.e. with greater hostility. A central category in this scheme is the measure of the implicit attitude of the individual in relation to the primed stereotype, in that it moderates the automatic behavioral effects.

Anthropomorphism

Brand Personality

Anthropomorphism can be defined as the practice of attributing human characteristics and behaviors to inanimate objects. An instance of anthropomorphism in the marketing domain is the discussion of the various dimensions that constitute the personality of a brand (Aaker, 1997), building on the study of the "Big Five" dimensions of human personality, therefore constituting a case of analogy. Aaker (1997) concludes that consumers perceive the existence of five distinct dimensions of brand personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness.
Brands and Social Roles

Another case of anthropomorphism in the field of marketing takes place when consumers attribute certain social roles to the brands which they have a relationship with, for example, a friend or business partner role. Aggarwal (2004) investigated this phenomenon and found that the type of relationship consumers establish with brands influence their assessment about them.

More precisely, such an assessment will be moderated by the degree of obedience to the rules specific to each relationship. In case of violation of the norm, the tendency is to negatively evaluate the brand. Thus, individuals engaged in a communal relationship perceive helping the partner as a way to show consideration and appreciation, so that the benefit received should not be comparable to the benefit granted, in order to avoid the understanding that there is an outstanding debt and to acknowledge the unique needs of the partner.

Anthropomorphized Brands and Automatic Behavior

Goal-Motivated Automatic Behavior

According to study by Fitzsimons, Grainne, Chartrand, and J. Fitzsimons (2008), the exposure of consumers to brands produces automatic behaviors motivated by goals. In the experiment, participants primed with the Apple brand (linked to the concept of creativity) achieved better performance on a creativity test, compared to participants primed with IBM brand (for which creativity is not a distinctive attribute).

The underlying logic consists of the role of goal-motivated processes in the behavioral effects of brand primes. In the case of the Apple brand, which is related to creativity, the individual who possesses creativity as a personal goal and is primed to the Apple brand will be led to a process of unconscious pursuit of this attribute, thus generating an automatic behavior motivated by the achievement of a personal desire.

Automatic Behavior Motivated by the Preparation to Interact

Aggarwal and McGill (2012) proposed a model which articulates, on the one hand, the process of brand anthropomorphizing and, on the other hand, automatic behavior as preparation for social interaction. A central variable in the analysis is the assignment of social roles to brands
by consumers. The authors suggest the use of two opposite roles, partner and servant, in their experiments, as a way to validate the mechanism proposed by their framework.

The results suggest that, for partner brands, the behavior of individuals assimilates the image reflected by the brand when there is a positive attitude towards the brand, but contrasts with it when the brand is disliked. Therefore, the attitude towards the brand acts as a moderating variable concerning the effects of brand priming on behavior. From the point of view of the theory of motivated preparation to interact, the assimilation of the behavior of a partner brand signals the intention to get closer and work together, while the behavioral contrast reveals a wish of getting away from the brand, since the partner role requires a convergence of behaviors in order to make working together possible.

On the other hand, in the case of brands perceived as servants, there is a reverse effect of the personal attitude (liking or disliking the brand) on the behavior arising from the brand prime. That is, an anthropomorphized servant brand generates assimilative behavior to the brand image in the presence of a negative personal attitude and contrasting behavior when such attitude is positive. For the purpose of an effective interaction with humanized brands, an assimilative behavior indicates that the brand's help is unnecessary, and hence the individual wants to get away from it. On the contrary, a contrasting behavior to the brand signals the desire to approach it, since the nature of the relationship requires complementary behavior for the interaction to be successful.
Methodology


General Procedures

All studies are to take place in Kassel, Germany. The target participants are students of the University of Kassel, to be recruited on a voluntary basis through posters placed at strategic locations of the university campi and through social media. Estimated sample size for: 1) pretests: at least 20 subjects per test; Experiment: at least 70 subjects.

Study Type: Pretest (1)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Study Objective</th>
<th>Procedure</th>
<th>Estimated Time of Implementation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selection of Brands</td>
<td>1) Participants are shown one set of 50 brand names.</td>
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<td>2) Participants are asked to indicate the first two words/associations that come to mind as they read each of the 50 brands.</td>
<td>Beginning of December, 2012</td>
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<td>3) Selection of brands is restricted to those with a single dominant association; over 50% to one association and no other association (other than product category or price mentions) greater than 10%.</td>
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### Study Type: Pretest (2)

<table>
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<th>Study Objective</th>
<th>Procedure</th>
<th>Estimated Time of Implementation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand Role Perception</strong></td>
<td>To assess the extent to which the brand is seen in a partnership role (like a partner, works with the consumer, coproduces) and a servant role (like a servant, an assistant, like an outsource), using 1–7 scales.</td>
<td>Beginning of December, 2012</td>
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### Study Type: Experiment

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<th>Study Objective</th>
<th>Procedure</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>To test Hypothesis 1 or 2</strong></td>
<td>1) Participants are told that they will be responding to a variety of short studies being conducted by different researchers.</td>
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<td>2) For the first of the studies related to the present experiment, participants are told that the researcher is interested in finding out how people think about different brands and products. In the anthropomorphism condition, participants are encouraged to imagine that the brand has come to life as a person and to think of the sort of person the brand would be in terms of its personality, physical appearance, opinions, approach, profession, conversational style, and so forth.</td>
<td>Beginning of January, 2013</td>
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<td>3) In the object condition, the participants are instructed to describe the brand in as much detail as possible and are encouraged to think of all the features, benefits, characteristics, and different aspects of the brand they may have heard about.</td>
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<td>4) The participants have up to two pages of space to write their open-ended responses. To ensure that this manipulation does not lead to any differences in engagement with the task or degree of elaboration, a</td>
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A comparison of the word count across the two conditions is to be performed.

5) Next, the participants are asked to respond to a short scenario purportedly designed by another researcher. This question is the dependent variable for the experiment.

6) The participants are asked to think back to the primed brands and to rate their liking for the brand. Three questions (like the brand, admire, fit in your life) are combined into a single “liking” measure. Next, a number of other unrelated studies are to be administered, after which a few demographic measures are taken. Finally, the participants are debriefed and thanked for their participation.

### Data Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective 1</th>
<th>Procedure</th>
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<tr>
<td>To assess if there are any significant differences in brand liking due to brand conception.</td>
<td>An ANOVA conducted across the brand conception conditions with brand liking as the dependent variable.</td>
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<th>Objective 2</th>
<th>Procedure</th>
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<td>To test hypotheses 1 or 2</td>
<td>1) A regression analysis to be first run with a dummy variable for brand conception (anthropomorphism p 1, object p 0), the continuous brand liking measure, and the interaction of the two as the three independent variables. Participants’ behavior to be included in the regression as the dependent variable.</td>
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<td>2) In order to decompose the interaction, further analysis to be conducted at one and a half standard deviations above and below the mean of liking, as suggested by prior research (Aiken and West 1991; Fitzsimons 2008).</td>
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<td>3) “The results reveal that the object and control conditions do not differ</td>
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significantly. As a consequence, we are able to use the object condition as a control condition to indicate assimilation or contrast of the brand association […]" (Aggarwal and McGill [2012], p. 315)

Overview of Chapters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 1</th>
<th>Introduction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>Literature Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>Studies – Results and Discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>General Discussion and Future Research</td>
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Plan of Work

- Beginning of December, 2012: Implementation of two Pretests
- 20 December 2012: Handing in first draft of intermediate presentation
- Beginning of January, 2013: Implementation of two Experiments
- Mid-January, 2013: Data Analysis
- 22 January 2013: Intermediate Report Deadline
- 23 & 24 January 2013: Intermediate Presentations
Bibliography


