AN UNEXPLORED AMBIVALENCE IN ANTHROPOMORPHISM RESEARCH: HOW MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS WITH A PERSON/OBJECT PAIRING HUMANIZES THE OBJECT AND DEHUMANIZES THE PERSON

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Abstract: We present the first empirical integration of anthropomorphism and dehumanization, two intrinsically linked processes representing the extent to which human schemas are activated about a particular target. Across three experiments, we demonstrate that pairing a person with an object (e.g. product, real or fictional brand) in an ad while focusing respondent attention on the object results in its being anthropomorphized and, replicating prior research, causes superior evaluations of the ad. However the same pairing, while focusing respondent attention on the person in the ad, leads to inferior ad evaluations through a process of dehumanization. By incorporating the literature on dehumanization, we are able to examine these diverging consequences, empirically describe for the first time an underlying ambivalence tied to anthropomorphism as a marketing tactic and propose an array of research questions to motivate future scholarly inquiry.
Theoretical Framework

It has become common in academic and practitioner research to recommend that marketers pursue a strategy of anthropomorphizing products and brands (e.g. Bonchek & France, 2016; Kervyn, Fiske & Malone, 2012). Such a practice whereby objects are ‘humanized’ through a variety of tactics has been shown to result in superior affective and evaluative responses to associated products and brands (Delbaere et al., 2011; Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). Recently, there has been a turn to understanding the potentially negative effects of such a tactic. For example, research has shown that in the context of product failure, anthropomorphized brands can suffer disproportionately (Puzakova, Kwak & Rocereto, 2013) and anthropomorphized products can contribute to diminished consumer self-control (Hur, Koo and Hofmann, 2015).

We extend this line of inquiry by presenting the first empirical integration of anthropomorphism and dehumanization, two processes that are intrinsically linked yet have only been investigated separately. We demonstrate that pairing a person with an object (e.g. brand, product) in an ad while focusing respondent attention on the object results in its being anthropomorphized and, replicating prior research, causes superior evaluations of the ad. However the same pairing, while focusing respondent attention on the person in the ad, leads to inferior ad evaluations through a process of objectification or dehumanization. By incorporating the literature on dehumanization, we are able to examine these diverging consequences and empirically describe for the first time an underlying ambivalence tied to anthropomorphism as a marketing tactic.

Methods and Results

We postulate that when seeing an object paired with a person, consumers will anthropomorphize the object because the pairing will ease the accessibility of their homocentric pool of knowledge, displacing judgement of the target toward the measured concept of humanness (i.e. assimilation effect; Herr, Sherman & Fazio, 1982)

H1: Compared to advertisements that contain only an object, advertisements that pair an object and a person will lead to superior evaluations through perceptions that the product/brand is more humanlike (i.e. anthropomorphized).
Marketers are frequently accused of dehumanization. For example, advertising often objectifies women, implicitly inviting audiences to focus on their bodies (Archer, Iritani, Kimes, & Barrios, 1983; Hall & Crum, 1994), and objectifies both men and women by using sexualized portrayals (Baker, 2005; Daniel & Bridges, 2010). In addition to contributing to negative stereotyping, these representations reduce perceptions of personhood (Hall & Crum, 1994; Schwarz & Kurz, 1989). If anthropomorphism and dehumanization are complementary processes – a claim that has been proposed but that lacks strong empirical support (Bain et al., 2013; Epley & Waytz, 2009) – the act of pairing an object with a person should cause dehumanization because the accessibility of a respondent’s homocentric pool of knowledge will be inhibited, displacing the target away from the measured concept of humanness (i.e. contrast effect; Herr, Sherman & Fazio, 1982):

**H2**: Compared to advertisements that contain only a person, advertisements that pair an object and a person will lead to inferior evaluations through perceptions that the person is less humanlike (i.e. dehumanized).

In three studies, we test these hypotheses using experimental designs. We show that to cause a person to anthropomorphize an object, it may not be necessary to employ overt tactics such as attaching human features (e.g. limbs, faces) or directing respondents to think of brands in human terms (e.g. personality). The evidence suggests that proximity is enough: across three studies, merely pairing an object with a person can cause the former to be rated as more ‘human’, improving evaluations of both the ad and the object. This effect persists with familiar or fictional brands, and regardless of whether the depicted object and person are touching.

**General Discussion**

The pattern of results carries polarizing practical implications. For example, a product brand manager might value the improvement in evaluations that comes with anthropomorphizing a brand using a paired person, not caring about dehumanizing that person who is presumably well paid for their appearance. However, a manager of people, such as a sports agent in charge of a human brand (Thomson, 2006), might have the opposite concern. Related, is a celebrity who endorses a product brand dehumanized enough as to make him unlikeable? Indeed, many so-called ‘lifestyle bloggers’ (e.g. Chiara Ferragni) possess attractive personal qualities and with growing popularity, often accept money to promote brands. Do their endorsement activities undermine the very personal
qualities that caused them to become successful in the first place? Are there ways that such bloggers and other human brands can continue to be appreciated as human beings even while they enrich themselves through their sponsorships?