

# A Review of Brand Anthropomorphism Marketing Research

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**Abstract.** Brand anthropomorphism extends and develops the special relationship between consumers and brands by injecting human characteristics, motives, subjective intentions, behaviors and emotions into specific brands. Brand anthropomorphism, as a brand marketing strategy, plays a very important role in brand building and communication. Therefore, the current theoretical circle of brand anthropomorphic marketing is gradually heating up. In this paper, the literature of anthropomorphic brand marketing at home and abroad, the brand personified and anthropomorphic marketing concept, the brand personified the composition of the dimension and measurement, the brand personified as related variables, etc on the existing research results, and on this basis in the field of the future research direction was prospected.

**Keywords:** Brand anthropomorphism; Brand anthropomorphism marketing; Brand attitude.

## 1. Introduction

"Anthropomorphism" is a quite interesting phenomenon in the development of human language. It refers to the humanization of an inanimate object so that it can be regarded as a living, feeling person [1] (Aaker, 1997). Anthropomorphism satisfies individual social needs by establishing a "perceptive humanoid" connection with non-human entities: when people lack social connections with other people, they satisfy social needs through anthropomorphism [2] (Epley et al., 2007). Anthropomorphism enables consumers to perceive products or brands just like real people, and brings consumers pleasant emotional experience. It has the natural advantage of narrowing the distance between consumers and brands, and also provides them with the possibility of social connection. Brand anthropomorphism can create greater economic benefits for enterprises, and is also conducive to creating a good psychological environment for consumers to adapt to the brand, and deepen their impression on the brand. With the continuous development of Internet technology, many enterprises have brought anthropomorphism into the brand marketing strategy. Some personified brands have used virtual characters to communicate with consumers on Weibo and WeChat. The competitive advantage of brand anthropomorphism can be seen from the high popularity of Haier Brothers, Three Squirrels, Jiang Xiaobai and other brands. This corporate strategy of using anthropomorphism as the main means of brand promotion is called "brand anthropomorphism marketing" by researchers [3] (Wang Tao et al., 2014).

In recent years, the marketing field regards anthropomorphism as a construct that can be manipulated and measured, and focuses on the positive or negative effects of product personification on consumers' cognition, attitude and behavior [4]. In practice, brand anthropomorphic marketing can effectively make brands achieve differentiation and increase consumers' favorable impression on brands. But theoretically, the literature about anthropomorphism is scattered in various research fields, and the related research is still not mature enough. In this paper, the concept of brand anthropomorphism and brand anthropomorphism marketing, the dimension and measurement of brand anthropomorphism, brand anthropomorphism as a related variable are sorted out, and on this basis, the future research trend of brand anthropomorphism marketing is predicted.

## **2. Concept of brand anthropomorphism and brand anthropomorphic marketing**

### **2.1 The concept of brand anthropomorphism**

Guido (2015) defines brand anthropomorphism as "the brand or product has the same emotional, spiritual and behavioral social characteristics as human beings"[5]. Chinese scholar Wang Tao et al. (2014) believe that brand anthropomorphism is to add anthropomorphic elements (such as human-like appearance, voice, or some interactive means) to some parts of a brand or product, so as to make the brand or product closer to certain psychological needs of consumers and increase consumers' favorable impression on the brand [3]. Wang chun (2020) believes that brand anthropomorphism should be understood from the following two aspects : (1) all-round personification. Brand anthropomorphism is a kind of commercial behavior, is the enterprise of a kind of brand strategy, the purpose is to increase consumer positive attitudes to the brand, so not only will anthropomorphic elements embodied in products, but also gives people's feelings, will, emotion, etc to brand service, brand culture, marketing, advertising and all aspects of the brand and product related. (2) To leave an impression on consumers or stimulate consumers to interact with the brand clues. When consumers perceive the anthropomorphic stimulus, they can have an impression of the brand (product) or stimulate consumers to have further contact (interaction) with the brand (product) [6]. Zhang Yu et al. (2019) believe that consumers will comment, criticize and praise brands or products as a person [7]. Brand anthropomorphism mainly uses external, internal and social aspects to stimulate and stimulate people's perception of brand anthropomorphism [8] (Qiao Jun, Shi Huihui, 2020).

### **2.2 The concept of brand anthropomorphic marketing**

Gupta (2010) defines brand anthropomorphic marketing as a strategy to add anthropomorphic elements to brands and make brands or products exist in consumers' minds as convincing human roles so as to create value [9]. Wang Tao & Xie Zhipeng (2014) define brand anthropomorphic marketing as "corporate strategy that takes anthropomorphism as the main means of brand promotion". This definition clearly defines the subject, means and purpose of brand anthropomorphic marketing, but fails to cover different levels of anthropomorphic marketing, and the generalization of the object of anthropomorphic is not comprehensive. To be specific, the brand personified the hierarchy of marketing include explicit anthropomorphic and implicit anthropomorphic, without the personified as the main means of marketing, corporate/brand can also be achieved through the anthropomorphic metaphor technique in detail the purpose and effect of anthropomorphic, anthropomorphic marketing includes not only the product of anthropomorphic, also including the overall brand personified. The existing research mainly discusses the marketing effect of anthropomorphism from three aspects: consumer goodwill, consumer cognition and social connection [3]. Fang Yaqi(2020) points out that brand anthropomorphic marketing is a marketing behavior that enterprises/brands manipulate and satisfy consumers' anthropomorphic tendency, with the purpose of influencing consumers' attitude, behavior and even perception mode, so as to make brands profit [10].

## **3. Dimension and measurement of brand anthropomorphism**

### **3.1 Dimension of brand anthropomorphism**

At present, the division of brand anthropomorphic dimensions is mature and typical, including the two-dimension theory proposed by Aggarwal (2007) and the three-dimension theory proposed by Hagtvedt (2008). Domestic scholars Wang Tao et al. (2014) divided brand personification into two dimensions of anthropomorphism impression and social interaction through data analysis and selective coding. Table 1 shows the dimension of brand anthropomorphism.

**Table.1.** Brand anthropomorphism dimension division

| The dimension   | content                                                            | Scholors               |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| two-dimension   | Impressionistic cues, interactive cues                             | Aggarwal (2007)        |
|                 | Anthropomorphic impression dimension, social interaction dimension | Wang Tao et al. (2014) |
|                 | Brand (product) image, self-brand consistency                      | Guido (2015)           |
|                 | Interactive anthropomorphism, non - interactive anthropomorphism   | Puzakova et al. (2017) |
|                 | Personal anthropomorphism, relational anthropomorphism             | Huang Xin (2018)       |
|                 | anthropomorphism of power type, anthropomorphism of warmth type    | Zhong ke et al. (2018) |
| three-dimension | The external level, The inner level, The society level             | Hagtvedt (2008)        |

Two-dimensional theory: In the two-dimensional theory of Aggarwal (2007), impressionistic clues refer to the combination of design elements, such as text, pictures, audio and video, which are easy to be perceived by consumers, with products or brands, focusing on the expression of elements related to the external level of brand anthropomorphism. Interactive cues refer to giving interactive elements to products, such as emotional communication and language interaction between consumers and brands [11]. Wang Tao et al. (2014) proposed a theoretical framework of brand anthropomorphism based on the grounded theory research results: Enterprises can build and spread brands through anthropomorphism operations at two levels of anthropomorphism impression and social interaction, so as to obtain consumers' emotional preference and brand connection [12]. Guido (2015) divided brand anthropomorphism into product or brand external image brand anthropomorphism and self-brand consistency brand anthropomorphism according to the presentation level of brand anthropomorphism in his study. The product or brand image level refers to that the brand anthropomorphism is directly reflected by the external image of the product or brand, including having human body and human facial features. At the level of self-brand consistency, merchants make consumers perceive that the personified image of a brand can match its own image or that the personified image of a brand can show its own personality and characteristics by means of anthropomorphism [13]. Puzakova et al. (2017) according to whether the anthropomorphic brand show that interact with consumers' intention, anthropomorphic brand can be divided into main anthropomorphic brand and non interactive anthropomorphic, and found that under the background of social crowded environment, can lead to the social avoidance of consumer psychology, and thus for interactive anthropomorphic consumer brand preference [14]. Huang Xin (2018) conceptualized the definition of "personal anthropomorphism" and "relational anthropomorphism" based on practical cases of corporate anthropomorphism and the definition of personal identity and relational identity in self-identity theory. Personal anthropomorphic strategy is to position the brand as an independent individual consistent with the brand image. In anthropomorphic publicity, it emphasizes the "personal level" characteristics of the brand as a "real person", such as personality, attitude, values, etc. In anthropomorphic communication, it emphasizes "what kind of person I am". Relational anthropomorphic strategy is to position the brand as an individual with intimate relationship with consumers, such as friends, lovers and family members. "we" is often emphasized in anthropomorphic communication, and consumers can perceive the obvious relationship clues and interactive clues delivered by the anthropomorphic brand [15]. Zhong Ke et al. (2018) divided factor brand anthropomorphism into dynamic anthropomorphism and warmth anthropomorphism in detail based on the research results of brand perception based on stereotype content model [16].

According to the three-dimensional theory of Hagtvedt (2008), brand anthropomorphism can be divided into external, internal and social levels. The anthropomorphism on the external level is often

more intuitive, and is usually reflected in the brand by the intuitive factors such as human image, expression or behavior. The inner level of brand anthropomorphism (spirit, consciousness, etc.) goes deeper into consumers' hearts. Brand anthropomorphism of social dimension endows objects with human thoughts, motives, emotions, etc., and expresses them to consumers through interaction and communication. Brands play certain social roles in consumers' lives by means of communication and interaction, which is called the social dimension of brand anthropomorphism [17].

### **3.2 Measurement of brand anthropomorphism**

In the measurement of brand anthropomorphism, Xue Yunjian and Dong Xiangdong [18] adopted the scale of brand anthropomorphism impression cue and interaction cue developed by Aggarwal [11] (2007), which is mature at home and abroad, with seven question items. Wang Chun [6] (2020) in the stereotype content model is the theoretical basis of admiral brand anthropomorphic its divided into two types, that is, warmth and a competency-based, in the experimental part design, he mainly adopts the measurement item is mainly based on Chen Zengxiang and Yang Guangyu [19] (2017) put forward the measurement scale, the scale of the type of brand anthropomorphic to, In addition, the dimensions of competence (confident, skilled, intelligent, capable, efficient) and warmth (trustworthy, friendly, warm, warm, sincere) were used for manipulation test. Seven points were used for each question in the scale. Wang Xiao (2020) combined the dimension division of brand anthropomorphism impressionistic cues and interactive cues, and referred to the scale of Aggarwal [11] (2007) and Hagtvædt [17] (2008) to measure the impressionistic cues and interactive cues with four items respectively [20].

## **4. Brand anthropomorphism as a relevant variable**

### **4.1 Antecedent variables of brand anthropomorphism**

The antecedent variable of brand anthropomorphism marketing is closely related to the internal mechanism of anthropomorphism. From the perspective of cognitive graphic matching, it is easy to understand why the humanoid appearance features will stimulate the anthropomorphism of the object, which has been verified in many studies. In the absence of vivid spokespersons and verbal cues, visual anthropomorphic metaphors can also stimulate anthropomorphism. Although the cognitive schema theory of anthropomorphism is limited anthropomorphism, it provides a clear strategic guidance for the realization of brand anthropomorphism in marketing practice. In contrast, Epley et al. (2008)'s three-factor model of anthropomorphism integrates cognition and motivation, and constructs possible factors affecting anthropomorphism from multiple dimensions. In addition, from the perspective of social motivation and efficacy motivation, experimental studies have found that loneliness and need for control have a positive impact on anthropomorphism as antecedent variables [21]. Some scholars have also found that consumer personal traits as antecedent variables have an impact on anthropomorphism.

Starting from the context of social exclusion, Xu Hong et al. (2021) discussed the consumer tendencies of anthropomorphic brands of consumers with different characteristics, and introduced the need threat of belonging and the need threat of control as an intermediary explanation mechanism [22]. After experiencing social exclusion, different self-constructors have significant differences in anthropomorphic consumption tendencies. To be specific, interdependent self preferred warm anthropomorphic brand, while independent self preferred dynamic anthropomorphic brand.

### **4.2 The outcome variables of brand anthropomorphism**

In the current field of marketing, the result variables of brand anthropomorphism research mainly focus on consumers' brand attitude, brand experience, product evaluation or purchase intention.

Aggarwal (2007) pointed out that when the product presents anthropomorphic design, consumers' risk perception is reduced and their evaluation of the product is more positive [11]. Other studies have found that impressionistic cues positively affect brand cognition, which is one of the three dimensions

of brand loyalty, and contributes to the formation of attitude loyalty. Interactive clues from the perspective of brand intrinsic characteristics, interactive communication, to explore the results of two-way interaction between consumers and enterprises. The sense of social presence created by two-way interaction can stimulate consumers' "empathy state", so as to reduce consumers' perceived freedom of purchase, reduce their resistance, and improve their attitude towards the brand, and attitude change is conducive to improving behavior.

Feng Xiaoning et al. (2018) discussed the differentiation of anthropomorphic marketing effects from the perspective of gender. Men controlled by rationality and women dominated by sensibility will have certain differences in purchasing choices. The conclusion shows that for practical products, most men and women have the same purchase choice, that is, they prefer ordinary products and pay attention to product functions. For hedonic products, the effect of anthropomorphic marketing on female consumers is more significant. Therefore, hedonic brands targeted at women are most suitable for anthropomorphic marketing strategies [23].

Wang Xiao [20] (2020) From the perspective of the difference between generations of consumers, Wang Xiao (2020) explores the perception of consumers of different generations on the degree of product anthropomorphism. It is found that brand anthropomorphic interaction can make consumers fundamentally arouse emotional resonance, trust and like the brand more, and then establish emotional relationship with the brand, have purchase intention.

Dominique Braxton (2020) analyzed the theoretical background of brand anthropomorphism and concluded that when the brand image and store environment of service providers and retailers are consistent, customers' happiness will increase because of the sense of belonging and greater brand authenticity [24].

Zhu Liangjie et al. (2018) verified the mediating mechanism and boundary conditions of brand personification on promoting consumers' willingness to co-create value. Compared with non-personification, brand personification can promote consumers' value co-creation intention more effectively. However, this effect has boundary conditions. Only when consumers' values are consistent with their perceived brand values, brand anthropomorphism can promote consumers' willingness to co-create value more effectively than non-anthropomorphism [25]. Yang Hui and Wang Shuting (2020) conducted relevant studies on brand microblog personification and verified the positive effect between brand microblog personification and consumer value co-creation intention [26]. Empirical research shows that when consumers are in a positive mood, brand microblog personification is more effective than non-personification in enhancing consumers' willingness to co-create value. When consumers are in a negative mood, microblog personification has no significant effect on consumers' willingness to co-create value.

Zeng Sumei (2021) introduces brand personification into the context of virtual community, focusing on two types of brand personification (sincerity vs. Dynamic) on consumer forgiveness. It is found that compared with the dynamic anthropomorphism, the adoption of the sincere anthropomorphism strategy will obtain a higher willingness to forgive [27]. Zhou Yijin et al. (2021) considered the risk of brand role personification and focused on the reaction, acceptance of apology and its internal mechanism of "servant" and "partner" brand roles in the face of error crisis [28].

#### **4.3 Related mediating and moderating variables in brand anthropomorphism Research**

Kim and McGill (2011) paid attention to the differences between consumers at the personal level, and also pointed out that not all consumers tend to communicate with anthropomorphic things [29]. Wang Xuhui and Feng Wenqi (2016) studied the influence of anthropomorphism on brand equity through brand loyalty, brand association, brand cognition and perceived quality [30]. Zhou Fei and Sha Zhenquan (2017) believe that brand personification has a significant impact on consumers' perception of warmth, competence and psychological distance [31]. Liu Di and Wang Haizhong (2017) believed that consumers would produce bad results due to their sense of guilt when studying the negative effects of anthropomorphism of food objects [32]. Wu Shuilong and He Wenwen (2018) concluded that the increase of consumers' purchase intention to social anthropomorphic products is

caused by the mediating effect of enhanced cognitive fluency and weakened psychological reactance [33].

At the empirical level, Yunjian Xue and Xiangdong Dong (2018) proved that self-brand connection played a mediating role between brand personification and brand loyalty. Interactive cues of brand personification had a positive effect on brand loyalty, and self-brand connection played a complete mediating role. Impressionistic cues have a positive impact on brand loyalty, in which self-brand connection plays a partially mediating role [34]. Zhang Yu et al. (2019) discussed that the matching degree of product information type and anthropomorphic image would positively affect consumers' cognitive fluency, and thus their purchase intention [7]. Wang Chun (2020) believes that product type plays an intermediary role in the relationship between brand personification strategy and consumers' brand attitude, and consumers' cognitive level plays a moderating role in this process [6]. In addition, the degree of consumer perceived freedom, consumer synesthesia and prosocial environment also appear as mediating variables in anthropomorphism research.

## 5. Conclusions and future research prospects

Although scholars have conducted many exploratory researches on anthropomorphic marketing, there are still many limitations in the existing literature on anthropomorphic marketing because anthropomorphic has not been introduced into the marketing field as a theoretical subject for a long time. In this paper, future research should focus on the following aspects.

First, the concept of brand anthropomorphism is deeply discussed and a more systematic theoretical study is carried out. Brand personification can be regarded as a new brand promotion method, some commercial applications have received good response, but there are also a lot of examples that are not worth the loss. The existing literature on brand anthropomorphism is relatively scattered on the whole, and there is no systematic exploration of the concept of brand anthropomorphism. Where is the boundary of brand anthropomorphism? What marketing activities should be considered brand anthropomorphism? Do consumers of different personality characteristics and age levels react differently to brand personification? Why do manufacturers implement brand anthropomorphism? How to implement brand anthropomorphism? In what situations does brand anthropomorphism yield the highest returns? What is the internal mechanism of brand anthropomorphism? Existing studies lack systematic and holistic analysis of these issues, which are of great practical and theoretical significance and worthy of future research attention [36].

Secondly, current researches mostly investigate the influence mechanism of brand anthropomorphic marketing on other variables such as consumer attitude or behavior, but there are few researches on negative scenarios and negative effects. Whether all brands are suitable for anthropomorphism marketing is worth pondering. Therefore, future research can take brand personification types as a research direction to accurately study the marketing effects of brand anthropomorphism of different brand products.

Finally, brand anthropomorphism strategy and its application are studied from the perspective of enterprises. For manufacturers, creating commercial benefits through brand anthropomorphism is the primary task. The marketing value of brand anthropomorphism, the way of strategic promotion and the benefits to enterprises have not been studied so far. Therefore, future studies can use case analysis, interviews, experiments and other methods to focus on how brand anthropomorphism can better create brand value, improve brand performance, and ultimately increase product sales from the perspective of enterprises.

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