

The Effects of Anthropomorphism on Consumer Goal Pursuits

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FP/10/18
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Abstract

Anthropomorphism, imbuing non-human entities with human-like qualities, is pervasive, and over the years, has garnered significant scholarly attention in diverse streams of business literature. Likewise, much of consumer behaviour and decisions are guided by their goals and therefore, work on consumers' goal pursuits has seen a constant growth in the past few decades. Despite dense and prolific bodies of literature on both anthropomorphism and consumer goals, research at the intersection of these two domains has been very limited. The present dissertation fills this gap. The two essays of this dissertation explore how anthropomorphism can be used to facilitate consumer goal pursuits. While the first essay explores a non-conscious route of goal activation through anthropomorphism of healthy food, the second essay reports a conscious increase in motivation in individuals when they anthropomorphise their personal goals as a dependent person.

Anthropomorphism is a commonly used strategy in branding, product design, packaging and advertising, and is widely used in various industries, including the food industry. Be it the Pillsbury Doughboy, Britannia Milk Bikis cookies or smiling faces made with ketchup on sandwiches, anthropomorphism is often used by food marketers to draw consumers' attention and interest. Prior research reveals that anthropomorphism of tempting food can lower self-control in dieters (Hur et al., 2015) and food anthropomorphism in general can reduce consumption intention and actual consumption of the anthropomorphised food due to the immorality associated with eating such food (Schroll, 2022). While the impact of anthropomorphism indulgent food and food in general on consumption behaviour towards the anthropomorphised food has been studied, the effects of anthropomorphism of healthy food on consumers' behaviour towards the anthropomorphised entity and their subsequent health goal pursuit are left unexplored. The objective of Essay 1 is to explore these unanswered questions. Specifically, Essay 1 addresses the following research questions: Does anthropomorphism of healthy food influence consumers' pursuit of health goals, both in terms of immediate purchase intention towards the anthropomorphised healthy product and subsequent health-goal-directed behaviour? If so, what is the possible mechanism of such an effect?

Drawing from literatures on social priming and non-conscious goals, we hypothesize and empirically demonstrate that anthropomorphism of healthy food (compared to non-

anthropomorphised healthy food) activates health goals, that in turn, elicit higher purchase intention towards such anthropomorphised offerings and healthier subsequent behaviour. Furthermore, we show that this effect is more pronounced in health-conscious individuals than in less health-conscious individuals.

Essay 2 explores another common application of anthropomorphism in marketing communication. We often anthropomorphise or personify our dreams or long-term goals as dependent entities in common parlance. For example, motivational speeches and self-help books are teeming with anthropomorphic metaphors such as “nurture your dreams,” and “feed your dreams.” Marketers and policy makers too use similar taglines for their ad campaigns. For example, Kellogg's India's 'Nourish Your Dreams' campaign and UNESCO's “Protect the Goal” campaign in Uganda. Essay 2 aimed to investigate whether such anthropomorphism of one's personal goal as a dependent person (through visualization and metaphors) can motivate the individual to pursue the goal. If so, how and for what kind of goals.

Drawing from psychological empowerment, caregiving, and parenting literatures, we hypothesize and show that anthropomorphising goals as dependent entity can improve consumers' motivation levels by increasing their psychological empowerment. Further, this positive effect on motivation is moderated by the specificity of the goal such that the effect is stronger for non-specific goals than for specific goals.