Personification in Advertising

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PERSONIFICATION IN ADVERTISING

Using a Visual Metaphor to Trigger Anthropomorphism

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ABSTRACT: All forms of personification draw on anthropomorphism, the propensity to attribute human characteristics to objects. In an experiment, we show that visual personification—pictures in an ad that metaphorically represent a product as engaged in some kind of human behavior—can trigger anthropomorphism. Such personification, when embedded in an ad, appears to lead to more positive emotions, more positive attributions of brand personality, and greater brand liking. Implications for advertisers are discussed.

During the 2007 Super Bowl broadcast, General Motors unveiled a commercial to introduce GM's power train warranty. In the ad, a robot working on an assembly line at a GM plant is fired after dropping a screw. The robot's repeated attempts to find other employment prove fruitless until finally, it jumps off a bridge into an icy river. Suddenly, we see the robot wake up; it was all a nightmare. The voice-over tells us that *everyone* at GM is "obsessed with quality" these days.

Although this ad was lauded by some (Williams 2007), GM immediately began fielding complaints from consumers and advocate groups calling for this "robot suicide" ad to be pulled from the air and from Web sites. Less than a week after the commercial first aired, GM agreed to modify the ad to remove the suicide scene (Farhi 2007).

It may seem incredible that a public bombarded daily with images of real human beings facing famine, terrorism, and war would object to an ad that humorously depicts the removal of a defective piece of factory equipment. However, we can more readily understand the powerful response to this advertisement once we grasp the nature of the persuasive technique being used: *personification.* This rhetorical device is powerful because it taps into the deeply embedded human cognitive bias referred to as anthropomorphism—the tendency to attribute human qualities to things.

This paper focuses on personification created through visual images in print advertising. We demonstrate that this kind of personification can encourage consumers to anthropomorphize. Once engaged, this anthropomorphism makes an emotional response more probable, and increases attributions of brand personality. With brand emotions and personality elicited, liking for the brand shifts upward.

We also show that nothing so vivid or dramatic as an enactment of suicide is required for personification to have a measurable impact on consumer response to brands. Rather, in the experiments to be reported, the positive effects are accomplished by subtle visual alterations to static print ads that represent the product as engaged in human behavior. The tacit and implicit nature of personification is among the features that may recommend it to advertisers who seek to evade consumer resistance to more obvious attempts to cater to the anthropomorphic tendency, as seen, for instance, in ads that employ spokes-characters.

PERSONIFICATION

Historically, personification has been defined as a figure of speech in which inanimate objects are characterized in terms of human attributes, thus representing the object as a living and feeling person (Ricoeur 1977). These human attributes can include any aspect or element of "intelligent, animated beings, like beliefs, desires, intentions, goals, plans, psychological states, powers, and will" (Turner 1987, p. 175). The reason that personification can be comprehended by consumers is because of anthropomorphism—the cognitive bias whereby people are prone to attribute human characteristics to things. In terms of a model of communication, personification is a *message* characteristic—an option that can be added to a message, while anthropomorphism is an inherent *audience* characteristic—one that allows this particular message option to be effective.

However, rhetorical personification goes beyond tapping into anthropomorphism because it also invokes metaphorical processing. The comparison of an object to a human being

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FIGURE 1
Plus Personification Ad

Helps Dry Skin

Plus
Skin Cream

constructs a metaphor, that is, the object is compared to a person in order to transfer some personal attribute or human quality to the object. For example, "the drums were weeping today" asserts that drums are like people to emphasize the sadness of their sound (Turner 1987). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) identify personification as one of the most common and instinctive metaphorical expressions because the shared and basic experience of humanness provides an opportunity to express many different ideas by comparing things to living entities. Fundamentally, then, personification is a particular kind of metaphor. Consequently, understanding the impact of personification in advertising requires a dual model, because consumer response to personification is necessarily an amalgam of anthropomorphism and metaphorical processing, as developed below.

Anthropomorphism in Advertising

Anthropomorphism is "seeing the human in non-human forms" (Aggarwal and McGill 2007, p. 468). Some people identify human faces in the clouds, others attribute human motivations to their pets, others name their cars, and so forth. Advertisers have attempted to trigger anthropomorphism for more than one hundred years, relying on consumers' exposure to fable and folklore to promote understanding of their attempts (Hill 2002). One of the most explicit attempts to incite anthropomorphism, with a long history in advertising, is the spokescharacter. A spokescharacter is an animate being or animated object that is used to promote a product (Phillips 1996); examples include Mr. Peanut, the Pillsbury Doughboy, the M&M chocolate candy characters, and the Michelin Man.

Almost all of the currently popular advertising spokecharacters were invented and introduced to the public during or before the 1960s (Dotz and Husain 2003). The introduction of new spokescharacters has slowed to a trickle, as contemporary consumers appear to find colorful cartoon characters to be both unsophisticated and irrelevant to complex modern buying decisions (Shalit 2000). As consumers now deem spokescharacters to be too obvious (or "cheesy," to use the vernacular), advertisers are confronted with a dilemma. How can the benefits of anthropomorphism be realized, now that consumer ennui with spokescharacters has rendered this time-honored approach increasingly less effective? In this context, personification emerges as a logical alternative, tacit where spokescharacters are explicit, and able to harness the benefits of metaphorical processing in ways that cartoon characters cannot.

Personification as Rhetorical Figure

Personification, like all other metaphors, is a member of the category of expressions known formally as rhetorical figures. In general, a rhetorical figure may be defined as an artful deviation from expectation in the *style* of an ad that is also not judged as an error by consumers (McQuarrie and Mick 1996). For example, the moisturizer ad in Figure 1 deviates from expectations. The consumer encountering this ad has to solve a little puzzle to make sense of it, because the ad meaning goes beyond a literal interpretation ("Why does the package have a straw stuck into its dispenser?"). However, consumers have encountered these kinds of deviations in ads many times before and have learned to comprehend this style of picture as a visual metaphor ("oh, it's like the package is drinking water from a glass").

Once the puzzle is resolved in this way, consumers may infer that Plus is as full of moisture as if it had just sucked down a glass of water. Such inferences can be considered to be an elaboration of the ad's content. A lengthy stream of research has established that rhetorical figurers do induce higher levels of elaboration, relative to equivalent ads that lack a rhetorical figure (e.g., McQuarrie and Mick 1996; Mothersbaugh, Huhmann, and Franke 2002; Toncar and Munch 2001). The elaboration effect has been shown to be stronger for visually presented rhetorical figures (McQuarrie and Mick 1999), including visual metaphors (McQuarrie and Phillips 2005). Of particular relevance to this study is the finding that the elaboration elicited by rhetorical figures tends to reduce counterarguing, and perhaps source derogation as well (Huhmann, Mothersbaugh, and Franke 2002).

Personification, understood as a visual metaphor and a rhetorical figure, holds promise as a way of overcoming the problems now associated with spokespersons and other explicit attempts to trigger anthropomorphism. As a rhetorical

figure—a tacit and implicit attempt at persuasion—ads with personification may be less susceptible to counterarguing and less subject to source derogation than the use of cartoon characters, animated figures, or other explicit attempts to get consumers to anthropomorphize in response to the ad.

With the example in Figure 1 as illustration, we can define the elements of metaphorical, visual personification as follows:

1. Objects in a two-dimensional, photorealistic image are arranged in such a manner that one perceptual response may be to see a portrayal of some human action by an object;
2. The portrayal of human action is provided without any object in the picture being represented as a character (e.g., by giving it a face);
3. The portrayal of human action, once perceived, simultaneously invokes a metaphor in which the particular human action is relevant for an attribution of qualities to the product/brand.

In sum, we propose that this kind of artfully deviant arrangement of visual elements, as seen in Figure 1, is sufficient to trigger an anthropomorphic response. No words are needed. Nor does anything so explicit as a cartoon face have to be pasted on the product.

H1: Photorealistic pictures in an ad that show a product engaged in human behavior (i.e., a visual metaphor of personification) can trigger anthropomorphism in the absence of a verbal cue and without use of an animated character.

Advertising Outcomes of Personification

Few marketing studies have explored the effects of anthropomorphizing a product's form on consumer response. Based on the scant literature on spokescharacter advertising, the outcomes of personification might include (1) increased attributions of brand personality, and (2) increased emotional connections with the brand. The primary benefit of spokescharacter advertising is thought to be the emotional connection that the character builds between the brand and the consumer, often for low-involvement products where little emotional connection exists naturally (Phillips 1996). Qualitative research indicates that spokescharacters positively influence both the emotions expressed in response to the characters and perceptions of the brand's personality (Callcott and Phillips 1996).

These intermediate outcomes of anthropomorphism would appear to be beneficial to advertisers. Previous studies indicate that developing a personality for a brand builds strong, well-liked brands (Aaker 1997); likewise, another way to build strong brands is to foster an emotional relationship between consumer and brand (Fournier 1998). Human relationships are based on attributions of personality and on emotional

connections. Logically, then, triggering an anthropomorphic response could support both of these goals.

H2: Brands featured in ads that use personification will elicit (a) more attributions of brand personality, and (b) more emotional response than brands featured in ads that do not use personification.

To the extent that the personality attributions and emotional responses are positive, then, ceteris paribus, brand attitude will be more positive for personification ads as well. Some prior research supports this proposition (Aggarwal and McGill 2007). The argument rests on perceptual fluency, which is the ease with which consumers can identify and process the physical features of a stimulus, such as shape (Lee and Labroo 2004; Labroo, Dhar, and Schwartz 2007). Thus, when consumers engage in anthropomorphism, they process the ad that triggered this response more easily. This fluency occurs because consumers have a lot of experience and knowledge of human beings, their actions, and their personalities, and the accessibility of these schemas helps them to comprehend what they see in the ad. The pleasure and ease associated with fluency then lends a positive cast to the emotional responses and brand personality attributions that follow from anthropomorphism. In consequence, summative measures of advertising outcomes, such as brand attitude, are expected to be more positive.

H3: Brands featured in ads with personification will be liked more than brands featured in ads with no personification.

Obtaining an unconfounded test of H3 presents some difficulties, however. Recall that personification is expected to produce positive advertising outcomes via two distinct routes: by triggering anthropomorphism, and by means of artful deviation, a property it shares with all figurative metaphors. This dual route presents both empirical and theoretical challenges. If we were simply to demonstrate that ads with personification yield a more positive brand attitude than control ads that lack both personification *and* metaphor, then we cannot know whether this finding is a result of personification triggering metaphoric processing, or a result of personification triggering anthropomorphism, or some combination of the two.

A possible solution is to include metaphors that are *not* personification metaphors within the study design as additional control stimuli. For example, the ad in Figure 1 could be redrawn so as not to represent human behavior directly; instead, water could be shown pouring into the bottle straight from a faucet. The same metaphorical comparison would be invoked ("There's a lot of moisture in Plus skin cream"), but now there would be no personification. Such a nonpersonification *metaphor* might also produce positive outcomes, relative to a nonmetaphorical, nonpersonification ad, but would not achieve the dual benefits of personification, which draws on both metaphorical *and* anthropomorphic processing.

The expectation, then, is that a personification metaphor would outperform an otherwise equivalent nonpersonification metaphor on a measure of brand attitude, in view of its double benefit. It is important to test the source of this advantage, however, via a mediational analysis in the spirit of Baron and Kenny (1986). Specifically, any advantage of personification metaphors with respect to brand attitude should be a function only of the greater impact that personification metaphors have on creating emotional response and attributions of brand personality, relative to nonpersonification metaphors. If there were still to be an advantage of personification metaphors, relative to nonpersonification metaphors, after partialling out the effect of positive brand attributions and emotions, then the theoretical explanation of personification laid out in this paper would be incomplete. Alternatively, the methodology might be flawed, as for instance, by deliberately incorporating weak or not particularly deviant nonpersonification metaphors (Phillips and McQuarrie 2009), and thus stacking the deck. Hence, we test the following mediational hypothesis:

> H4: *The impact of personification metaphors on brand attitude, relative to nonpersonification metaphors, is mediated by the impact of personification on emotional response and brand personality attributions.*

In summary, based on the existing literature on anthropomorphism and spokescharacters in advertising, it seems likely that if consumers can be cajoled into thinking about a brand in human terms by means of metaphorical personification, they will be more likely to make a variety of personality attributions concerning it and make more emotional connections to the brand. In turn, because of the positive bias created by the underlying fluency processes, these emotions and personality attributions are likely to be positive, and will be manifest as a positive shift in brand attitude.

PILOT STUDY

The purpose of the pilot was to examine whether personification executed visually in an ad would trigger anthropomorphic responses in the absence of other visual or verbal cues.

Based on examination of a sample of hundreds of print ads, four different personification ads across four different product categories were selected for pilot testing; the use of four different ads ensured that the results could not be attributed to a particular product, picture, or message. To prepare the stimuli, we first removed all ad text and any logos; we then added a plain text product identifier (e.g., "snack bar"). We constructed four pairs of these images by matching two actual ad images. Each image pair had the same product identifier and all eight images took the form of a visual metaphor as discussed in McQuarrie and Mick (1999) and Phillips and

McQuarrie (2004). Within each pair, one metaphor conformed to the definition of personification given earlier, as judged by the authors. The image portion (but not the text) of the two ad stimuli reproduced in Figure 2 provide an example of the kinds of personification and nonpersonification images tested.

Dependent Measures

Participants rated each image on two 5-point scales anchored by "It's as if the product was *alive*/The product is portrayed as an *inanimate* object," and "It suggests the product is like a *person* / There is *no suggestion* the product is a person." To determine whether participants detected the metaphorical character of the ads, they completed a 5-point scale, anchored by "artful, clever" versus "straightforward, matter of fact," which had been used as a manipulation check of "figurativeness" in prior studies of rhetorical figures (e.g., Mothersbaugh, Huhmann, and Franke 2002). Open-ended questions then asked participants to identify the primary message of each ad.

Results

Participants readily anthropomorphized the personification images, supporting H1. They were significantly more likely to agree that the personification images portrayed the product as alive ($X_{personification}$ = 3.79, $X_{visual\ metaphor}$ = 2.03, t = 25.72, $p < .001$), and suggested it was a person ($X_{personification}$ = 3.78, $X_{visual\ metaphor}$ = 1.67, t = 20.63, $p < .001$). In addition, all eight pictures were perceived to have the artful deviation characteristic of metaphors (means > 3.0), and matched sets of ads were identified as having the same primary message.

MAIN STUDY

Participants and Procedure

A total of 188 undergraduate students received a booklet containing advertisements and rating scales; one participant was dropped due to excessive missing data, leaving 187 for analysis. The instructions stated that participants would see a set of ads for new brands not yet on the market and that their responses would determine in part whether any of these new brands would actually be launched.

The first ad in the booklet was not part of the experimental design, but simply an example to acquaint participants with the "rough and unfinished" character of the ads to be shown. Participants then saw the four experimental ads one at a time and, with the ad visible on a facing page, rated each one on a series of scales. They were then shown the four ads again, and rated them on another set of scales. After completing a variety of individual difference measures, participants were dismissed.

FIGURE 2
Mills Personification and Matching Nonpersonification Metaphor Ads

Stimulus Development

A professional artist worked with the eight images tested in the pilot. The four products advertised were moisturizer (Figure 1), a snack bar (Figure 2), a snack mix, and bleach. In the experiment, three ad versions were created for each of these products, one where the image used personification, one where the image used another kind of visual metaphor, and a third version where the only image was a large photo of the product package. For each version, a headline was added above the picture and a fictitious brand name and product identifier were added below the picture. Thus, all the ad versions in a set make the same verbal claim, one that does not prime anthropomorphism (Table 1).

In the personification condition, the ads contained photo-realistic pictures of products engaged in human behavior (as explained in Table 1). In the visual metaphor–only condition, the ads contained a visual metaphor that provided the same benefit or claim as the personification ad, but without using personification. Finally, the control ads had neither personification nor any other metaphor but presented only the headline and the package shot.

Dependent Measures

Participants were asked to give their reaction to the advertised brand on three 7-point scales anchored by "positive/negative," "I liked/disliked it," and "very good/bad product." These items were averaged to create a measure of brand attitude (coefficient $\alpha = .94$).

Next, participants were asked to give specific impressions they might have of the advertised brand and were reminded that "every brand builds up a distinct personality by means of its ads—a set of subtle associations. And different brands have different personalities." They then completed 24 5-point rating scales anchored by "not at all descriptive/extremely descriptive." Each scale consisted of a modifier drawn from either the five-factor model of Aaker (1997) or the seven-factor expanded model of Ambroise et al. (2005). The complete list is given in the Appendix; examples include "charming," "honest," "sensual," and "tough." In contrast to much previous research on brand personality, our interest lies not in the factor structure of the 24 items, nor in profiling the specific personality of individual brands (which were all fictitious, and thus had no brand equity at the outset), but with the degree to which brands exposed under the three different experimental conditions acquired any personality at all. To this end, initial analyses focused on the average of the 24 items (coefficient $\alpha = .93$).

The third dependent measure was taken after each ad was presented a second time. Here participants were told: "Sometimes an ad tries to evoke an emotional response so that the advertised brand will be associated with that emotion. But not all ads seek an emotional response, and different brands try to associate themselves with different emotions." Fourteen emotions selected from the positive scales compiled by Bruner, James, and Hensel (2001) were then presented, preceded by the stem, "to what extent did *you* feel each of these emotions in response to *this* ad?" The six-point scales were anchored by "not at all/very strongly" (see the Appendix). As with brand personality, our primary interest is not whether a participant experiences any particular emotion in response to a given treatment condition, but how much emotion is experienced in the aggregate across different treatment conditions. Initial analyses use the average of the 14 items (coefficient $\alpha = .95$).

TABLE 1
A Description of the Experimental Ads Used in Study 2

Brand name	Product	Headline	Rhetorical personification image	Rhetorical figure image	Control ad image
Plus	Moisturizer	"Helps dry skin"	Moisturizer bottle drinking water from a straw	Moisturizer bottle being filled with water from a faucet	Moisturizer bottle
Mills	Fruit and nut bars	"The perfect combination"	Fruit and nut each wearing wedding rings	Fruits and nut arranged on a necklace	Box of fruit and nut bars
Landers	Snack mix	"For a light snack"	Crispy snack sitting on a lounge chair	Crispy snack replaces hot-air balloon	Bag of snack mix
Excel	Bleach	"Gets shirts really white"	Shirt pouring bleach into washing machine	Shirts replace street lights	Bottle of bleach

Moderators

The rationale for including moderator variables was to determine the extent to which any hypothesized effects involving personification might depend on individual differences. Participants completed the eight-item Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence scale of Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989); high-scoring participants may be more responsive to personification appeals, as they are to testimonials (Martin, Wentzel, and Tomczak 2008). Next was a four-item loneliness measure (Hughes et al. 2004); feelings of social isolation might make a participant more eager to seek a relationship with a personified brand (Epley et al. 2008). Finally, a common stereotype is that young women are more interpersonally oriented than young men, which implies that personification appeals may be differentially effective across genders.

Design

The implemented design is analogous to a Latin square. Each participant saw only one version from any given ad set, but saw one ad for each of the four brands. Two ads were controls, one presented a personification metaphor, and one presented a nonpersonification metaphor. A total of eight different orderings of the brands were used. For every order where brand A was given the personification treatment and brand B the nonpersonification metaphor treatment, there was another order where the reverse assignment occurred.

Analysis

The basic design takes the form of a three-level, within-subjects MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance) with Helmert contrasts. The scores for the two control ads were first averaged together, so that the three levels correspond to personification metaphorical, nonpersonification metaphorical, and the nonpersonification, nonmetaphorical control treatment. Within the MANOVA, the Helmert contrasts compare the personification metaphor to the nonpersonification metaphor, and then compare the mean of both metaphorical treatments to the control treatment mean.

Subsequently, the moderator variables were each analyzed in a 2×3 two-factor MANOVA (scaled measures were split at the median). Here the test of interest concerns the interaction between the individual difference variable and the treatment conditions.

Results

Treatment Effects

The average brand personality score was significantly higher for the personification treatment versus the metaphor-only treatment, $X_{\text{personification metaphor}} = 2.94$, $X_{\text{visual metaphor only}} = 2.78$, $F(1, 186) = 8.47$, $p < .005$. Likewise, the two metaphor treatments generated a significantly higher brand personality score as compared with the control treatment, $X_{\text{control}} = 2.28$, $F(1, 186) = 195.66$, $p < .001$. It does not seem likely that this perception of more personality is driven by some accidental synergy between particular personality descriptors selected and the personification metaphors used, because the personification mean is nominally higher than the nonpersonification mean for 22 of the 24 brand personality items. The two brand personality items where the personification mean was *not* higher help to reject the idea that a simple response set, rather than an actual judgment, is driving the brand personality ratings. Thus, brands receiving the personification treatment were not rated as more "outdoorsy" than those receiving the metaphor-only treatment. This testifies that a judgment was being made, because two of the nonpersonification metaphors

show an outdoor scene, while none of the personification ads do. Second, brands receiving the personification treatment were not judged to be more "daring" than those receiving the rhetorical treatment; in turn, one of the nonpersonification ads, and none of the personification ads, shows a daring act (i.e., a balloon ride).

The most parsimonious explanation for the brand personality findings is that participants become more likely to attribute virtually any human personality characteristic to a brand, once it has been fluently anthropomorphized in an ad in response to the trigger of personification. All humans have personalities, and personified brands acquire a modicum of a broad range of personality traits simply by being personified.

The averaged emotions scale was also significantly greater for the personification treatment relative to the nonpersonification metaphor treatment, $X_{\text{personification metaphor}} = 3.40$, $X_{\text{visual metaphor only}} = 3.13$, $F(1, 186) = 9.47$, $p < .005$. And the mean of the two metaphor treatments was significantly higher than that of the control treatment, $X_{\text{control}} = 2.15$, $F(1, 186) = 212.96$, $p < .001$. Similar to the brand personality items, all 14 individual emotion scales were nominally higher for the personification treatment versus the nonpersonification treatment. This suggests that the effect is not being driven by an accidental synergy between particular emotions and some feature of the personification treatments. The explanation again is that when a brand is fluently anthropomorphized through personification, participants reflexively experience that brand in a more emotional way. Their relationship with the brand takes on an emotional hue.

Finally, the personification treatment produced a significantly more positive brand attitude relative to the metaphor-only treatment, $X_{\text{personification metaphor}} = 3.42$, $X_{\text{visual metaphor only}} = 3.14$, $F(1, 186) = 4.57$, $p < .05$. Both figure treatments produced a more positive brand attitude relative to the control treatment, $X_{\text{control}} = 2.17$, $F(1, 186) = 136.56$, $p < .001$. Thus, H3 is supported. This experiment confirms that there are benefits to triggering anthropomorphism that carry through to positive evaluations of the advertised brand.

Moderator Variables

Each of the five moderator variables was tested against each of the three different dependent variables in a 2×3 MANOVA. In no case was a significant interaction (i.e., $p < .05$) found. Relative susceptibility to normative influence, loneliness, and gender failed to moderate the impact of personification on either perceived brand personality, experienced emotion, or brand attitude. The failure of these individual difference variables to moderate the impact of personification is consistent with the idea that anthropomorphism is a fundamental tendency of human cognition.

Mediation Analysis

To test H4, concerning the mediating effect of brand personality and emotional response with respect to the impact of personification on brand attitudes, we conducted a regression analysis that required reconfiguring the dataset.[1] For Group 1, the brand attitude score was defined as the brand attitude score achieved by the personification treatment, while for Group 2, it was the score achieved by the nonpersonification metaphor. The same assignment was made for the brand personality and emotion scores and then the two groups were stacked to create a data set with twice the number of cases as the original ($n = 376$). A dummy variable, indicating whether the attitude score came from the personification metaphors or the nonpersonification metaphors, was then added to facilitate the tests of mediation.

A series of regression analyses was run on this stacked data set to implement the Baron and Kenny (1986) procedure. First, brand attitude was regressed on the dummy variable. This produced an R^2 of .01, $F(1, 372) = 3.92$, $p < .05$, indicating that brand attitude was higher for the personification metaphors versus the nonpersonification metaphors ($B = .28$). This finding was expected, given the significant Helmert contrast between the two in the MANOVA. Next, the brand personality and emotion scores were regressed on the dummy variable. As expected, each of these was a significant predictor ($p < .05$ in each case). Finally, brand attitude was regressed on the dummy variable, the brand personality score, and the emotion score together. The β coefficient for the dummy variable in this regression, now .08, was no longer significant ($t = .7$, $p = .48$). This indicates that the anthropomorphism-associated outcomes of personification—brand personality and emotional response—did mediate the impact of the personification versus nonpersonification metaphor treatment on brand attitude.

DISCUSSION

This paper provides evidence that personification in print advertising can be a powerful persuasive tool. Personification metaphors, defined as photorealistic images that portray a product engaged in human behavior, encouraged consumers to anthropomorphize. Personification metaphors also made a positive emotional response to the brand more probable, and produced more positive attributions of brand personality, relative to what other visual metaphors, not using personification, could accomplish. These outcomes, in turn, led to increased liking for the brand.

With respect to advertising practice, visual personification appears to offer an excellent tool for advertisers who seek to build brand personality and create an emotional connection with consumers. The fact that personification can trigger the benefits of anthropomorphism without words is an important

consideration as advertisers increasingly use visual, rather than verbal strategies (McQuarrie and Phillips 2008; Phillips and McQuarrie 2002). In addition, as consumers grow more resistant to spokescharacters and similar explicit attempts, personification offers a more subtle way to achieve the benefits of anthropomorphism.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Opportunities going forward can best be grasped if we place this research in a historical context.[2] In the early decades of advertising scholarship, under the influence of the Theory of Reasoned Action and related approaches, researchers were prone to assume that the purpose of advertising was to transmit information on positively evaluated brand attributes (Taylor 1999). Later, stimulated partly by approaches such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the field came to recognize that there was at least one other route to successful advertising outcomes. This alternative route, variously termed peripheral, heuristic, or transformational, did not depend on the successful transmission of information about positively evaluated attributes. In consequence, some advertising researchers shifted focus toward studying *how* the advertisement communicated instead of *what* it communicated. Message style became as much a focus as message content, and this paper's demonstration of positive effects for personification can be seen as but the latest in an ongoing effort to uncover the full set of effective stylistic devices used in advertising.

This study met its objective of showing that personification can, under specific conditions of ad exposure, produce selected positive outcomes. But no such experimental demonstration can support a conclusion that personification is the best strategy, in all situations, for all kinds of advertisers. It seems more likely that personification will be effective in some but not all situations. In fact, the accumulation of studies of individual stylistic devices almost begs for integration into a larger theoretical model that specifies the most important moderating factors that determine when personification, or any other stylistic device, might be effective.

Unfortunately, our attempts in this project to identify variables that could moderate the impact of personification were notably unsuccessful. This failure may hold lessons for future attempts to develop an integrative theory of factors that can moderate the impact of message characteristics generally. We followed the mainstream of social psychological research by investigating enduring *individual differences* as moderators: specifically, gender, loneliness, and susceptibility to interpersonal influence. The consumer and advertising literatures contain countless examples of such measured differences across people. It is interesting to note that our failure to find a moderating impact for individual difference variables is likewise not unique. This raises the question: Might it be more productive

in future advertising research to give individual differences a rest, and consider instead other kinds of moderators?

The message strategy literature has identified an important alternative class of moderators (Rossiter, Percy, and Donovan 1991; Taylor 1999). These models focus primarily on *situational* factors rather than enduring personal traits of the audience. Taking Taylor's (1999) model as an example, one important situational factor is the degree of importance the purchase holds for the consumer. Another dimension of the Taylor model distinguishes among buying motives, as in the distinction between informational and transformational motives (Rossiter, Percy, and Donovan 1991), corresponding roughly to whether the consumer, in making a purchase, is seeking to remedy a bothersome problem or seek out some desired pleasure. A third dimension concerns whether the purpose of the advertising effort is to transmit particular pieces of information or to engage the consumer in an experience (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zanantonello 2009). The message strategy literature thus focuses on the intersection between consumer and product situational factors when generating hypotheses about whether a particular kind of message will or will not be effective.

Returning to personification, none of the dimensions in the Taylor model were manipulated in our experiment. Thus, all of the products included would be expected to score relatively low on the importance dimension for most participants. Purchase motivation was not manipulated, nor was there any manipulation that opposed the goal of transmitting information to the goal of engaging the consumer. Although many laboratory studies reported in this journal also neglect to manipulate the dimensions of the Taylor strategy wheel, our lack of success with the individual differences variables that we did carefully select and measure provides food for thought. Perhaps going forward, advertising researchers should spend less effort on grouping experimental participants in terms of their individual differences, and instead invest that energy on manipulating the importance of the purchase, the motive for buying, and the goal of the message, in addition to the stylistic device of interest. A better understanding of the boundary conditions on each particular device might be the result.

Future research on personification in particular would do well to consider this alternative approach to the identification of moderating factors. The General Motors robot example with which we began suggests that personification might be effective for high- as well as low-involvement purchases, but absent an experimental test, there is no way to be sure. By the same token, the present experiment does not show whether personification is more or less effective at transmitting information on specific attributes (e.g., that this product can moisturize the driest skin, or that this snack bar has a nutty, fruity taste). Nor does the experiment show whether personification is more or less effective when informational rather than transformational

buying motives are induced. The experiment does suggest that these sorts of manipulation might provide a more productive path for future research on personification than attempting to find some new set of individual differences that could function successfully as moderators.

Finally, an important limitation of the present research is the reliance on scaled measures of brand personality and emotional response. The risk is that participants might not have spontaneously made any of the brand personality or emotional responses recorded, absent the suggestive impact of being prompted over and over by the scaled items. In future research, qualitative interviews, projective tests, or even response latency could provide converging evidence that triggering anthropomorphism via the device of personification does spontaneously lead to brand personality attributions and emotional connections.

It appears that advertisers do well to consider how they might harness anthropomorphism in those strategic contexts where it may be an appropriate message strategy. As Turner notes: "We are people. We know a lot about ourselves. And we often make sense of other things by viewing them as people too" (1987, p. 21).

NOTES

1. The Latin Square design does not permit any readily interpretable mediational analysis unless reconfigured as described.

2. This discussion stems from helpful suggestions made by an anonymous reviewer.

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APPENDIX

Items Used to Measure Brand Personality and Emotion Measures

Brand personality	Emotional responses
Charming	Alive
Cheerful	Amused
Daring	Confident
Down-to-earth	Delighted
Friendly	Energetic
Glamorous	Enthusiastic
Honest	Happy
Imaginative	Independent
Intelligent	Lighthearted
Nice	Playful
Outdoorsy	Proud
Reliable	Soothed
Sensual	Stimulated
Sophisticated	Strong
Spirited	
Stylish	
Successful	
Tough	
Traditional	
Trendy	
Upper-class	
Up-to-date	
Warm	
Wholesome	