The role of gender in brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters

Brand anthropomorphism, which refers to brands being perceived as having human-like qualities, has been found to yield several brand benefits, such as brand loyalty, commitment and a willingness to spread positive word-of-mouth. These benefits make it a valuable consideration in the marketing domain. However, like other sets of beliefs, not all anthropomorphic beliefs have the same strength: they can range along a continuum from strongly held to weakly held anthropomorphic beliefs, thus affecting the degree to which they yield brand benefits. Yet the literature to date often appears to have explored this variance by comparing the anthropomorphic beliefs of personified non-human stimuli (which are mostly gender-neutral) with those of non-personified stimuli, or by exploring individuals’ general propensity to anthropomorphise. However, based on the dehumanisation literature, the gender of human beings has been found to play a role in the degree to which human beings are denied humanness. It can be anticipated, therefore, that the perceived gender of non-human stimuli is also likely to play a role in the degree to which they are attributed humanness. Although research on brand anthropomorphism has increased in recent years, little is known about the variance in the actual occurrence of the brand anthropomorphism of specific non-human brand stimuli, such as brand spokes-characters, using a gendered lens. Since brand anthropomorphism has been found to yield several brand benefits, especially in the profit sector, it may also be a viable strategy for NPOs to consider as they strive to increase patronage in a competitive landscape.

An empirical study was therefore conducted by Jade Verbeek, a Doctoral student in the Department of Marketing Management to explore the role of gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters in an NPO context. The data was collected from participants and respondents residing in South Africa who were over the age of 18 years. Since gender played a pivotal role in this study, equal gender quotas were set for these participants and respondents. A multi-method approach using both qualitative and quantitative methods, to address the primary purpose of this study, was used which entailed three phases. First, unstructured interviews were conducted to explore the design of personified and gendered brand spokes-character stimuli. Second, based on the feedback from the unstructured interviews, the brand spokes-character stimuli were revised and were subsequently used as the stimuli in a focus group, in order to probe discussions and to unearth deeper meanings associated with these personified and gendered stimuli. Third, a survey questionnaire administered via an online panel was conducted to explore the role of gender in brand anthropomorphism in an NPO context. Three scenarios were created, in which only the gender (female, gender-neutral, or male) of the brand spokes-character
stimulus used in each, changed. A total of 600 respondents were recruited from a convenience sample, in which 200 respondents were respectively exposed to one of the three scenarios.

This study’s main finding arising from multiple analysis of variance (ANOVAs), multi-group moderation structural equation modelling (SEM), and mediation, provides evidence that brand anthropomorphism is an effective element in a marketing strategy, based on its potential to yield long-term business success for brands particularly within the non-profit sector. The findings of this study also revealed the importance of eliciting brand anthropomorphism by being mindful of the role that gender plays in it: not only did brand anthropomorphism differ based on the acknowledged gender of the brand spokes-characters representing an NPO, but the influence of brand anthropomorphism on the subsequent brand outcomes also differed based on potential donors' gender. Gender, therefore, could cause variation along the continuum on which brand anthropomorphism occurs, between strongly held to weakly held anthropomorphic beliefs. This therefore highlights the importance of gender as another notable determinant of anthropomorphism, particularly brand anthropomorphism, which has been found to have several important implications for both theory and practice.

*The research was conducted by Jade Verbeek, as part of the fulfilment of the requirements of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree with specialisation in Marketing Management in the Department of Marketing Management, under the supervision of Dr Liezl-Marie van der Westhuizen and Prof Melanie Wiese.*