Humanizing brands: When brands seem to be like me, part of me, and in a relationship with me

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Abstract

We review a growing body of research in consumer behavior that has examined when consumers humanize brands by perceiving them as like, part of, or in a relationship with themselves. One research stream shows that sometimes consumers perceive brands as having human-like forms, minds, and personality characteristics. A second stream identifies ways that a consumer perceives a brand as being congruent with or connected to the self. Finally, a third highlights that consumers can view brands in ways that are analogous to the types of relationships they have with people.

We review research in these three areas and point out connections among these research streams. In part, we accomplish this by showing that factors associated with the SEEK model, which are designed to explain anthropomorphic tendencies, are also relevant to other ways of humanizing brands. We identify major propositions derived from this research and several areas for which additional research is needed. We conclude with recommendations for the many opportunities for expanding our conceptual and empirical understanding of this domain.

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Keywords: Anthropomorphism; Branding; Brand personality; Brand-self-congruity; Brand attachment; Brand relationships

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Introduction

In the past 20 years, we have witnessed a growing literature that can be subsumed within the domain of “humanizing brands”. This broad topic comprises three subdomains shown in the bottom half of Fig. 1. Each subdomain has developed somewhat independently, in part because each assumes a different reference point. Anthropomorphism, the first of these subdomains, takes a human-focused perspective, examining consumers’ perceptions of brands as having human-like qualities. Here, researchers have studied brands as having (1) human-like features or physiognomy (as when one perceives a handbag as having features that resemble a human face); (2) a human-like mind (as when one infers that a computer has its own intentions and motives); and (3) a human-like personality (e.g., the brand is friendly). A second stream adopts a more self-focused perspective, examining not how the brand is like people in general, but rather how it is specifically like oneself. This subdomain includes work on the perceived congruity between the brand and the self, as well as the extent to which consumers are connected to the brand (brand-self connections). A third subdomain takes a relationship-focused perspective, examining how consumers’ relationships with brands can resemble their relationships with people. This work acknowledges that consumers have different types of relationships with brands and that such brand relationships can vary in their strength and affective intensity, as well as in the relationship norms that guide them. Our paper aims to summarize the literature in this domain, integrate this research, and identify issues that the field should address in moving this perspective forward.

We review the expansive yet relatively recent literature pertaining to each subdomain sequentially, following Fig. 1. We first discuss background research from psychology on individuals’ general tendencies to humanize non-human entities. We then review branding research that has emphasized the human-focused, self-focused and relationship focused perspectives shown in Fig. 1. In reviewing each area, we also show that factors noted in the upper portion of Fig. 1 help us understand the conditions under which these tendencies are most likely to operate. We also draw connections between and within the subdomains, showing linkages and common drivers that might otherwise remain obscured given the relative independence of each stream’s development. We conclude with a set of propositions that reflect accumulated knowledge, and we discuss future research opportunities in the domain of humanizing

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brands. Fig. 1 and the propositions noted in Table 2 provide the broad overview of our understanding of research on humanizing brands.

Whereas considerable research has focused on branding, our review is necessarily selective. We emphasize articles in the field of consumer psychology rather than articles that highlight managerial issues. We consider consumer research on such topics as goals and branding (e.g., brands as cultural symbols, brand extensions, brands and social signaling, and brands and self-expression) only to the extent that they bear on the topics in Fig. 1. Our review emphasizes brands as opposed to unbranded possessions (i.e., non-branded products people own), though some findings extend to the context of unbranded possessions.

A general framework for understanding research on humanizing non-human entities

Before reviewing the three research streams that investigate how consumers’ humanize brands, we provide a broader perspective on this domain. Specifically, the tendency for people—“to attribute humanlike capacities to other agents” (Waytz, Epley and Cacioppo 2010, p. 58)—varies, even if that agent is human or nonhuman. At issue is not whether a human brand (e.g., Taylor Swift), an organization (e.g., the United Way) or a branded product (e.g., Mazda) should be treated as human, but rather whether these entities are humanized in consumers’ minds. Brands may be humanized because they are made and sold by people, and in fact, in some cases, are people (i.e., celebrity brands). As such brands might be regarded as social categories in much the same way that occupational groups (e.g., lawyers), ethnic groups (e.g., Asian Americans), and genders are regarded as social categories (Waytz & Young, 2012). Notably, and regrettably, members of certain social categories can be dehumanized (which is the opposite of humanization), as when members of that category are perceived to be objects rather than people. Recent consumer psychology literature has focused on when, why and to what effect humanization occurs, rather than dehumanization, an emphasis that is reflected in our review.

People can humanize both human and nonhuman targets, but the term anthropomorphism is restricted to humanizing nonhuman agents or events (Waytz, Cacioppo, et al., 2010; Waytz, Epley, et al., 2010). We might perceive that a Mazda’s front grill makes it look like our Uncle Charlie, and we might describe it as having a human-like personality (e.g., it is “sassy”) and a “mind of its own”. Given that anthropomorphism can be seen as the extreme version of humanization and that theorists have often identified anthropomorphism as the precursor to developing a relationship with the brand (Fournier, 1998), a model of anthropomorphism should provide a basic framework for understanding the consumer psychology literature on brand humanization.

Drivers of Humanizing Brands (adapted from Epley et al., 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Drivers</th>
<th>Sociality Motivation</th>
<th>Effectance Motivation</th>
<th>Elicited Agent Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dispositional</td>
<td>Chronic Loneliness</td>
<td>Need for power</td>
<td>Trustworthiness of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low self-Esteem</td>
<td>Need for control</td>
<td>Chronic trait accessibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public self-consciousness</td>
<td>Regulatory focus vs. prevention focused</td>
<td>Entity orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational</td>
<td>Situational loneliness</td>
<td>Self-enhancement motivations</td>
<td>Schema congruity (perceived similarity to humans)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intimacy-enhancing strategies</td>
<td>Brand enablement benefits</td>
<td>Longer brand relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental</td>
<td>Attachment styles</td>
<td>Desires for autonomy</td>
<td>Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abstract reasoning skills</td>
<td>Desires for competence</td>
<td>Availability of alternative theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>Cultural orientation (individualism and collectivism)</td>
<td>Desires for uncertainty avoidance</td>
<td>Experiences</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Norms</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Identities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Domain of Humanizing Brands

Human-Focused Perceptive (Anthropomorphism): Brands as Having Human-like...
- Features/Physiognomy
- Mind
- Personalties/Traits

Self-Focused Perspective: Brands as Like Me/ Connected to Me
- Brand-Self Congruity
- Brand Self Connections

Relationship-Focused Perspective: Brands as Relationship Partners
- Brand Relationship Types
- Brand Attachment and Aversion from Betrayal
- Brand Relationship Norms

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Outside of a branding context, Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo (2007) have developed a model that identifies factors that drive individuals’ tendencies to anthropomorphize objects. According to their SEEK (Sociality, Effectance, and Elicited agent Knowledge) model, the tendency to perceive non-humans in human-like terms is facilitated by an individual’s knowledge of people and how they behave (called elicited agent knowledge in the top half of Fig. 1). Factors that enhance the accessibility of this knowledge enhance anthropomorphizing tendencies. Knowledge representations related to humans “guide inferences about the properties, characteristics and mental states of nonhuman agents” (Epley et al., 2007, p. 871). This process is often automatic, occurring outside of one’s awareness. When people become cognizant of having anthropomorphized an object, they often correct for having done so, though the correction or adjustment to their cognitions may be insufficient.

Countering such correction tendencies are two motivational factors that can increase the tendency to view non-human objects in human-like terms: the drive for a social connection (a sociality motivation) and the desire to make sense of and/or gain control over one’s environment (an effectance motivation; see the top half of Fig. 1). For example, activation of a sociality motivation occurs when individuals who are lonely, are low in self-esteem, or come from a more individualist culture show greater anthropomorphizing tendencies (see Fig. 1). Reflecting activation of an effectance motivation, factors like the need for power, the need for control and competence and the desire to avoid uncertainty have been linked with tendencies to anthropomorphize.

Agent knowledge and the sociality and effectance motivational forces described by the SEEK model can be activated by dispositional, situational, developmental, and cultural factors. As Fig. 1 shows, a sociality motivation might be triggered by individual difference variables that are part of one’s enduring character (e.g., chronic loneliness), situational factors stimulated by context (e.g., situational loneliness), developmental factors learned early in life (e.g., attachment styles), or cultural factors (e.g., individualism and collectivism). As our review suggests, the factors that represent the model (elicited agent knowledge, sociality motivations and effectance motivations) help us to understand not just when and why consumers anthropomorphize brands but also when they might humanize brands in other ways (e.g., seeing brands as like or connected to the self; regarding brands as relationship partners). Next we examine each of the three research streams identified in the lower half of Fig. 1.

The human versus nonhuman research stream

Perceiving a non-human object as having human-like features, a human-like mind or human-like traits has been labeled “anthropomorphism” (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008; Epley et al., 2007). Following Fig. 1, we review consumer research that has examined brands as being “like us” as a result of having human-like features, human-like personality characteristics, and/or a human-like mind.

Brands with human-like features

Human-like features of brands include having a human name, gender, or human-like physical characteristics (e.g., a face). A number of the studies described below show that consumers can perceive a brand in such anthropomorphic terms. Furthermore, several factors identified in Fig. 1 seem to enhance the likelihood that consumers do so.

Consistent with the notion of agent knowledge, consumers are more likely to perceive a brand as having human-like features when the brand is depicted in a way that activates a “human” schema, creating some degree of perceived similarity to humans. A number of studies in consumer research have used visual, verbal and/or rhetorical devices to induce anthropomorphic tendencies. Notably, marketers appear to use such devices; giving certain brands a human name (e.g., Amazon’s Alexa), a human, gendered voice and accent (Siri), or a human form (the Michelin Man).

Activating agent knowledge through visual cues

Some studies have induced anthropomorphism of a brand through visual cues; for example, by making the brand’s features resemble a human face (e.g., Hur, Koo, & Hofmann, 2015; Kim, Chen, & Zhang, 2016) or body (e.g., Kim & McGill, 2011; Touré-Tillery & McGill, 2015) or by representing it as an avatar (Nowak & Rauh, 2005). Depicting a set of soda bottles as a “product family” induces greater tendencies to anthropomorphize compared to describing them as a “product line” (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007, study 2). Images that show the brand engaged in typically human actions, such as sunbathing, can also increase human schema accessibility and stimulate anthropomorphism (Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocereto, 2013). Brand characters, like the Pillsbury Doughboy, Tony the Tiger and the Jolly Green Giant, strongly evoke a human schema and hence increase perceptions of the brand as human-like (Wan & Aggarwal, 2015). When consumers imagine that the brand has come to life (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Kim & Kramer, 2015) or has human personality characteristics (Chandler & Schwarz, 2010), they are also more prone to anthropomorphize.

Activating agent knowledge through verbal devices

A variety of verbal marketing tactics also seem to activate human schemas and encourage consumers to perceive brands in human-like terms. Giving the product a human name (Eskine & Locander, 2014; Waytz, Heafner, & Epley, 2014), describing the product in the first person (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Puzakova et al., 2013), and labeling the brand as gendered (e.g., Chandler & Schwarz, 2010; Waytz et al., 2014) increase consumers’ tendencies to anthropomorphize brands. Websites that use avatars who speak, have a gender, and follow social conventions (e.g., interacting with the audience by asking questions or saying “goodbye”) also increase anthropomorphic tendencies (Nowak & Rauh, 2005). Sociality motivations may increase these tendencies. For example, describing the brand in human relationship terms (e.g., “the brand is a great ally”) or using closeness-implying pronouns (e.g., “we” versus “you and the brand”) when describing the brand can enhance

**Activating agent knowledge through rhetorical devices**

Rhetorical devices that use visual or verbal metaphors or similes to convey a particular meaning about the brand can increase anthropomorphic tendencies by activating agent knowledge. One such device, called “personification,” depicts the brand as engaging in human-like actions, even when the image does not have a human-like form or physiognomy (e.g., a face) (Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011). Another type of rhetorical device is the representation of the brand as filling the role of a human character (or archetype) in stories or ads. Brands have been portrayed by marketers in the roles of the “hero” (coming to the consumer’s rescue), the “outlaw” (breaking the rules of other brands), the “care-giver” (taking care of the consumer’s physical and mental health) and the “magician” (performing miracles that other brands cannot), among others (Mark & Pearson, 2001). Indeed, consumers’ stories about brands often depict brands in these anthropomorphic roles (Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008). Representing a brand in biographical form as an “underdog” (passionate, determined, under-resourced, arising from humble beginnings, and having some success despite struggling against the odds) is another rhetorical device that may increase consumers’ tendencies to perceive the brand in human-like terms (Paharia, Keinan, Avery, & Schor, 2011). Current research on the role of brand archetypes is limited, making this area a fruitful one for understanding how consumers perceive, connect with and form relationships with brand in human-like ways. This is particularly so given the emphasis that practicing marketers are placing on the importance of storytelling as a method for developing brand perceptions (e.g., Gunelius, 2013).

**Other drivers**

Other research identifies additional drivers of anthropomorphic tendencies beyond the activation of agent knowledge. Relevant to the sociality motivations shown in Fig. 1, Ghuman, Huang, Madden, and Roth (2015) suggest that consumers in collectivist cultures (e.g., China, India) have stronger anthropomorphic tendencies because people live closer together, making knowledge about humans highly accessible. In contrast, in non-collectivist cultures (e.g., the US), consumers are more frequently exposed to mechanical and technological items, thus making knowledge about humans comparatively less accessible. Relevant to the effectance motivations shown in Fig. 1, Kim et al. (2016) observed that consumers enjoyed a computer game less when an anthropomorphized helper facilitated their actions. The use of a helper made individuals feel less autonomous in their actions, undermining the extent to which winning could be attributed to the individual.

**Effects of perceiving brands as having human-like features**

In general, consumers tend to form more favorable attitudes toward brands whose features are anthropomorphized (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007, 2012; Kim & Kramer, 2015). As a consequence, and as a prelude to other effects noted in Fig. 1, consumers might be more likely to view the brand as similar to or connected to the self, or to engage in a relationship with the brand when it is (vs. is not) depicted as having human-like features. We discuss these effects later in the paper.

**Brands with human-like minds**

As the preceding material implies, depicting a brand with human-like features can elicit consumers’ perceptions that the brand can form intentions, make moral judgments, form impressions or evaluate others, have self-serving motives, and have free will (e.g., Epley & Waytz, 2010; see Fig. 1). The fact that some brands (Alexa, Siri, Watson) are called “intelligent agents” may enhance such perceptions. Some research suggests that anthropomorphizing a brand’s features prompts the inference that it has a human-like mind. For example, brands depicted as having human-like features tend to be more negatively evaluated (relative to those that do not display such features) when the brand engages in a transgression (Puzakova et al., 2013). This effect might occur because the consumer attributes intentionality for the action and a lack of goodwill to the anthropomorphized brand.

Although viewing a brand as having a human-like mind is likely less common and probably more subject to self-correction than perceiving a brand as having human-like features, several studies described below suggest that consumers can act or react toward a brand as if it had a human-like mind. Regarding a brand as acting with intentions, forming judgments, acting with free will or acting with benign or self-serving motives can influence how consumers evaluate the brand’s actions, and how consumers choose to interact with the brand in the future. These effects are described next.

**Trustworthiness**

If consumers judge a brand as having an anthropomorphized mind, they might be more inclined to judge the brand in terms of its trustworthiness. Trustworthiness implies that the anthropomorphized brand understands the consumer, that it acts morally and with goodwill, and that brand will use its free will in ways that benefit (or are at least benign to) the consumer. Consistent with this idea, Waytz et al. (2014) observed that passengers’ trust in a car was greatest for those who drove an anthropomorphized self-driving car because the car seemed more human-like and more mindful than human car drivers or drivers of a non-anthropomorphized self-driving car.

However, whether anthropomorphizing a brand affects trust positively or negatively may depend on (1) how much consumers trust other people in general, (2) how deeply consumers process the brand’s advertising message and (3) the baseline for comparison (whether the anthropomorphized brand is compared to a non-anthropomorphized brand or a human agent). People who have low trust in companies are more likely to trust non-anthropomorphized brands than anthropomorphized ones (Eskine & Locander, 2014), perhaps because the anthropomorphized brand looks more human and hence seems less trustworthy than the non-anthropomorphized brand. Yet, people who generally regard others as untrustworthy tended to evaluate peripherally processed marketing messages more positively and...
attribute more goodwill to the brand when the message comes from anthropomorphized vs. human messengers (Touré-Tillery & McGill, 2015). Perhaps this is so because the anthropomorphized brand looks “less human” in comparison with the human spokesperson. High trust consumers tend to trust the human spokesperson more than the anthropomorphized brand, but only when they processed the advertised message attentively. Message attentiveness may have enhanced consumers’ abilities to correct for having made anthropomorphic judgments.

**Fairness**

An additional judgment suggesting that consumers can regard brands as having an anthropomorphized mind is the extent to which consumers judge the brand and its actions as fair. Using IRI data, Kwak, Puzakova, and Rocereto (2015) examined the effect of consumers’ beliefs that the brand had a mind of its own on perceptions of the fairness of price changes. The more the brand was perceived as having a mind of its own, the more consumers were likely to regard a brand that increased its price as unfair and one that decreased its price as fair. Agentic consumers (those focused on the self) were most likely to conclude that a brand that increased its price was trying to take advantage of them, as contrasted to communion-oriented consumers (those focused on unity with others).

**Attributions of credit or blame**

If consumers view anthropomorphized brands as having intentions, their reactions to consumption experiences may impact whether they attribute credit versus blame (responsibility) to the brand for positive versus negative outcomes. Anthropomorphized brands can even take some of the blame for the consumer’s own bad behavior. For example, consumers exhibit less self-control when a tempting dessert is anthropomorphized because they regard the anthropomorphized product as an agent that intentionally supports their indulgence (Hur et al., 2015; see also Kim et al., 2016). This diffuses responsibility for lack of self-control, and thus, the conflict consumers feel from indulgence.

**Interacting with the brand as if it had a human mind**

Additional research finds that consumers, perhaps subconsciously, can interact with brands as if they had human-like minds. Specifically, consumers seem to want to have an effective interaction with brands that are (vs. are not) anthropomorphized, even though they are unaware of this desire. They are more likely to assimilate (act similar) to an anthropomorphized brand that they like and to contrast (act different) from an anthropomorphized brand that they dislike (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012). Furthermore, activation of agent knowledge via schema congruity between the brand and a human affects the degree to which individuals attempt to present themselves in a better light (Sproul, Subramani, Kiesler, Walker, & Waters, 1996). For example, people behave in a more relationship-supportive way in a computerized game when the computer screen is depicted with human-like eyes (Haley & Fessler, 2005). Ahn, Kim, and Aggarwal (2014) observed that depicting cause-related brands as having human-like features created more compliance with the message (i.e., donations to the cause), because consumers anticipated more guilt from not complying with the anthropomorphized brand. Similarly, people show more concern for an object when it is (vs. is not) anthropomorphized (Tam, Lee, & Chao, 2013). Individual differences in anthropomorphism tendencies also affect how wrong people feel it is to harm inanimate objects like computers or motorcycles (Waytz, Cacioppo, et al., 2010; Waytz, Epley, et al., 2010).

**Factors impacting perceptions of brands as having human-like minds**

Related to effectance motivations in Table 1, people who perceive themselves as low in power felt more vulnerable to risky outcomes when a brand was (vs. was not) given human-like features (Kim & McGill, 2011). In contrast, people who perceive themselves as high-power felt less vulnerable when the brand’s features were (vs. were not) human-like. High-power people were less likely than lower power people to feel the brand could exert control over them. Also related to an effectance motivation, people seem to imbue even an abstract entity like “time” with a human-like mind (e.g., “time has a will of its own,” May & Monga, 2014, p. 924). Perhaps underlying this judgment is the lack of effectance associated with time (i.e., time is difficult to control).

**Brands with human-like personalities**

To the extent that consumers humanize brands, they may characterize them as having human-like personality traits (see Fig. 1). Research using FMRI imaging techniques suggests that a brand’s personality traits activate areas of the brain associated with implicit reasoning, imagery and affective processing – processes that should be implicated if consumers are thinking about brands and relating to them in human-like terms (Chen, Nelson, & Hsu, 2015). Consumers’ representations of brand personality seem to reflect cognitive categories that are activated (though not necessarily constructed) when consumers are exposed to the brand. Indeed, these researchers were able to predict which brands consumers were thinking about based on the brain activations associated with personality judgments.

**Specific brand personality traits**

Because there are many human-like personality traits, classifying them into a few broad groups offers a systematic and manageable way to identify similarities and differences across brands. Fiske and colleagues (e.g., Kervyn et al., 2012; Malone & Fiske, 2013) suggest that two evaluative criteria loom large in people’s categorizations, descriptions, and judgments of others: warmth and competence. Warmth, which relates to the characteristics of another (e.g., warm, friendly, sincere, trustworthy, moral), is judged first. Judgments of warmth are linked with benevolent intentions (i.e., a warm entity is more likely to have my best interests at heart). Competence judgments, on the other hand, relate to assessments of another’s ability and include traits like intelligence, skill, creativity and efficacy. People judged as warm and competent (cold and incompetent) are judged most (least) favorably, while warm/incompetent and cold/competent
people elicit more ambivalent judgments. Fiske and colleagues suggest that consumers use these same traits to evaluate brands (Kervyn et al., 2012; Malone & Fiske, 2013). Consistent with these ideas, Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner (2010) find that non-profit brands are perceived to be warmer but less competent than for-profit brands. The most admired brands are perceived to capture these ideas, Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner (2010) find that consumers use these same traits to evaluate brands.

Other work has examined traits that include but go beyond warmth and competence, often with a focus on how brand personality should be measured. Table 1 identifies items used in various brand-personality measurement studies and relates them to Fiske et al.‘s warmth and competence dimensions. In her pioneering work in the area, Aaker (1997) examined the brand personality characteristics associated with well-known

Table 1
Brand personality dimensions and characteristics.

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Warmth</strong> (e.g., warmth, trustworthiness, friendliness, helpfulness, sincerity)</td>
<td>Sophistication (Upper class) (upper class, glamorous, good-looking, charming, feminine, feminine, smooth)</td>
<td>Emotional stability/ Agreeableness (cold, level-headed, light-hearted, patient, relaxed, serene, stable, tranquil)</td>
<td>Integrity (honest, positive influence, committed to the public good, reputable reliable)</td>
<td>Likeableness (e.g., funny, warm, easy, bubbly, smooth, family-oriented, sentimental, playful, cheerful, simple, honest)</td>
<td>Female brand personality (e.g., elegant, glamorous, upper-class, charming, feminine)</td>
<td>Agreeableness: Unassuming/ingenuous; calculating: crogant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conscientiousness</strong> (Competence)</td>
<td>Competence: Reliable (reliable, hardworking, secure), intelligent (intelligent, technical, corporate), Successful (successful, leader, confident)</td>
<td>Competence (e.g., reliable, successful, confident, popular, well-made, stable, leading, efficient, satisfying)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Competence (e.g., reliable, successful, confident, popular, well-made, stable, leading, efficient, satisfying)</td>
<td>Male brand personality: (adventurous, aggressive, brave, daring, dominant, sturdy)</td>
<td>Domain: Assured/Dominant, Unassured/submissive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agreeableness</strong></td>
<td>Agreeableness: Likeableness (cold, level-headed, light-hearted, patient, relaxed, serene, stable, tranquil)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Intelligence</strong></td>
<td>Intelligence (caring, loving)</td>
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<td><strong>Openness</strong></td>
<td>Openness: Imaginative (imaginative, unique, up-to-date)</td>
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<td><strong>Extraversion</strong></td>
<td>Extraversion: Extroversion/Aggressiveness (conscious, constant, efficient, precise, productive, regular, reliable, scrupulous, active, competitive, dominant, energetic, happy, lively, results, strong, creative, fanciful, informed, innovating, modern, original, recent, up-to-date)</td>
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<td><strong>Consciousness</strong></td>
<td>Consciousness/ Sophistication (conscious, constant, efficient, precise, productive, regular, reliable, scrupulous, active, competitive, dominant, energetic, happy, lively, results, strong, creative, fanciful, informed, innovating, modern, original, recent, up-to-date)</td>
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<td><strong>Excitement</strong></td>
<td>Excitement/Prudence (daring, trendy, exciting); Prudence (sponted, cold, young), Abstractive (imaginative, unique, up-to-date, up to date), independent, contemporary</td>
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<td><strong>Ruggedness</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Unique to US Consumers</strong></td>
<td>White collar (corporate, professional, technical) and Androgyny (feminine, masculine, expensive)</td>
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<td><strong>Unique to Korean Consumers</strong></td>
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A set of measurement development studies resulted in the 42 empirically derived brand personality items identified in Table 1. These characteristics mapped onto 15 brand personality “facets” (underlined in Table 1). In turn, these facets were captured by 5 global factors: sophistication, sincerity, excitement, competence, and ruggedness (in boldfaced italics in Table 1).

Some research has examined whether brand personality characteristics correspond to major personality characteristics observed in humans. Research on human personality has identified five overarching dimensions that encompass a large number of distinct personality traits (e.g., Digman, 1990). These “Big 5” traits are openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. Yet, when consumers were asked to describe brands using the Big-5 personality scale, only a two-factor
solution emerged (Carpara et al., 2001). As Table 1 shows, these factors correspond with the Big 5’s agreeableness trait and the conscientiousness/extraversion/openness traits, respectively.

Several studies have examined whether the dimensions identified by Aaker generalize to other contexts (see Table 1). Venable et al. (2005) developed a personality scale specifically for the non-profit context. This research revealed a factor labeled “nurture” that did not emerge in Aaker’s (1997) study of for-profit brands. Cross-cultural studies also suggest differences in the traits used to describe brands, suggesting that cultural orientation (see Fig. 1) might affect when and how consumers characterize brands in terms of their personality traits. For example, Sung and Tinkham (2005) found that American and Korean consumers share similar personality perceptions of the same brands on five factors (sophistication, likeableness, trendiness, competence, ruggedness). However, each culture also showed unique factors. Specifically, traits comprising the likeableness factor for Koreans included fewer high arousal traits (e.g., bubbly), leading authors to use the term “passive likeableness” to describe the likeableness traits used by Koreans. As Table 1 shows, “ascendancy” was also unique to Koreans, while “white collar” and “androgyne” were unique to US consumers. Other work examines brands as having “male” and “female” personality traits (Grohmann, 2009).

Whereas the above-cited studies focus on positive traits and build on Aaker’s work, Sweeney and Brandon (2006) developed a circumplex model that includes negative as well as positive personality characteristics. Their model incorporates the dimensions of dominance (dominant-submissive), extraversion (extraverted-introverted), nurturance (warm-cold), and agreeableness (unassuming-arrogant). Sweeney and Brandon (2006) also replicated the “nurture” factor identified by Venable et al. (2005).

Debate over brand personality and its measurement

Brand personality has stimulated considerable research, but some researchers have criticized Aaker’s scale for including traits beyond personality characteristics, such as social class associations (e.g., upper class), cultural factors (e.g., Western), gender characteristics (masculine, feminine) and abilities (competence) (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). However, Aaker’s work is not alone in this wide-ranging approach. These “non-personality” characteristics are relevant to—and, in terms of competence judgments, perhaps essential for—brands. Moreover, Table 1 shows convergence in the diverse traits that consumers use to characterize brands, despite different theoretical approaches, different brands, and different cultures. Some criticize Aaker’s (1997) scale for its empirical (vs. theoretical) derivation (Bao & Sweeney, 2009). Nevertheless, the Aaker scale demonstrates marginally better predictive validity than the circumplex approach advocated by Bao and Sweeney. Aaker’s scale also offers substantial richness by virtue of its scope and integration (see Table 1).

Factors impacting brand personality impressions

Additional work has examined the conditions under which consumers form judgments of a brand’s personality. Related to the activation of agent knowledge, using visual cues that activate a human schema can affect brand personality perceptions (Landwehr, McGill, & Hermann, 2011). Specifically, compared to car brands with a downturned grille, brands with an upturned grille are evaluated as friendlier. The depiction of the grille, coupled with a depiction of the shape and angle of the headlights, impacts perceptions of the brand’s aggressiveness. Relatedly, personified images of brands encourage more positive brand personality impressions (brand as cheerful, charming, glamorous, stylish, etc.) than do non-personified visual metaphors (Delbaere et al., 2011). Avatars are rated as more intelligent and credible when they are (vs. are not) anthropomorphized (Nowak & Rauh, 2005). Consumers judge websites that use avatars as more “social”, referring to an aspect of a brand’s personality that might be relevant to how consumers perceive brands as like them or as potential relationship partners (Wang, Baker, Wagner, & Wakefield, 2007). Seeing one’s car in human-like terms also enhances judgments of its “warmth” (Chandler & Schwarz, 2010).

Also related to agent knowledge, chronics (people for whom a given personality trait is chronically accessible) are more likely to update their impressions of a brand’s personality compared to non-chronics (Johar, Sengupta, & Aaker, 2005). Additionally, individual differences in knowledge about how changeable people are (also called entity orientation) affect brand personality impressions (see Fig. 1). Compared to entity-oriented theorists, incremental theorists are more likely to update information about a brand’s personality when they encounter a low-fit brand extension because they believe that personalities are malleable (vs. fixed) (Mathur, Jain, & Maheswaran, 2012). Park and John (2012) observed that entity theorists respond more favorably to ads that signal intelligence and sophistication (desirable personality associations) than incremental theorists do, because entity theorists seek opportunities for self-enhancement (a sociality motivation in Fig. 1). Using a brand with a desirable personality signals to others that the user is like the brand (intelligent and sophisticated). Incremental theorists responded better to brands that suggest self-improvement, consistent with an effectance motivation in Fig. 1. Since incremental theorists believe their personalities are malleable, they are open to appeals that suggest that the brand can “teach them how” to become more desirable.

Brands that are perceived to have male personalities are associated with different traits than are brands with female personalities (Grohmann, 2009), as might be consistent with agent knowledge regarding differences between men and women. Perceived self-complexity also appears to influence consumers’ preferences for co-brands with distinct personality types (Monga & Lau-Gesk, 2007). When consumers were induced to think about themselves in complex terms, they preferred co-brands that combined distinct personalities.

Related to the sociality motivational driver is the role of attachment style in brand personality impressions (see Fig. 1). Individuals with a high anxiety/high avoidance attachment style show a greater preference for brands with exciting (vs. sincere) brand personalities, because they want to avoid intimate relationships. Individuals with a high anxiety/low avoidance attachment
style prefer brands with sincere (vs. exciting) personalities because they have a positive view of others and the brand’s sincerity symbolizes the person they would like to be (Swaminathan, Stilley, & Ahluwalia, 2009).

Related to an effectance motivation is the role of regulatory focus on preferences for brands with specific personality characteristics. Consumers like brands with a sincere personality better when they are exposed to prevention-framed (vs. promotion-framed) messages, perhaps because prevention-framed messages prime thoughts about desires to be with others who will support the individual in times of need. In contrast, brands with a sophisticated personality are better liked when a promotion-framed (vs. prevention-framed) message is used (Kim & Sung, 2013), perhaps because a promotion focus activates thoughts about one’s ideal self.

Effects of brand personality

Imbuing a brand with a personality appears to affect judgments beyond those noted in Fig. 1. Brand personalities (including assessments of the brand’s warmth and competence) help consumers to distinguish among brands (Kervyn et al., 2012; see also Malone & Fiske, 2013), thus enhancing the cultivation of distinct brand images (Yang, Cutright, Charrand, & Fitzsimons, 2014; see also Dommer, Swaminathan, & Ahluwalia, 2013). Moreover, brand personalities predict consumers’ brand attitudes (Eisen & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013) and brand equity (Valette-Florence, Guizani, & Merunka, 2011).

Summary

In sum, considerable research has investigated consumers’ tendencies to perceive a brand as having human-like features (e.g., a name, gender, physical characteristics), human-like personality traits (e.g., warm, extraverted, agreeable), and/or human-like intentions. Such perceptions can influence inferences about a brand’s trustworthiness, fairness, or blame worthiness. Activation of a human schema using visual devices, verbal devices and rhetorical devices can facilitate these perceptions. Sociality motivations (e.g., collectivism) and effectance (e.g., consumers’ differences in their felt power, their autonomy) also influence the extent to which anthropomorphization occurs. Perceiving a brand as “like us” can enhance brand evaluations and attitudes, and foster interactions that support an effective interaction with the brand.

The self-focused research stream

In addition to viewing brands as having human-like features, minds or personalities, consumers may perceive a brand as being “like me” (having brand-self congruity) or as being “close to me” as a person (having brand-self connections) (Fig. 1). This perspective on humanizing brands adopts a self-focused perspective. Here, the brand is interwoven into consumers’ sense of self—who they are, who they have been, and who they might become. This incorporation into the self is likely to increase tendencies to humanize the brand because people attribute personality traits that are perceived as central or typically human to themselves more than to other people (Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee, & Bastian, 2005). For example, beliefs that one is sincere may lead to inferences that an owned brand is also sincere (Weiss & Johar, 2013).

Brand-self congruity

Research finds that consumers perceive congruities between the brand and aspects of themselves (i.e., the brand is perceived as similar to me or like me; Sirgy, 1982). Indeed, research finds that consumers can perceive a congruity between the brand and the self in terms of personalities (e.g., Fennis & Pruyn, 2007), user or usage congruity (Liu, Li, Mizerski, & Soh, 2012), gender (Grohmann, 2009), reference group identification (e.g., White & Dahl, 2007), and cultural identification (Deshpande, Hoyer, & Donthu, 1986).

Moreover, brand-self congruity may affect or be affected by perceptions of the brand in human-like terms (hence the double arrow shown in Fig. 1). For example, and suggestive of a relationship between brand-self congruity and anthropomorphism of a brand’s mind, greater personality congruity between a car brand and the self increased consumers’ expectations that the car brand would be reliable, would play an important part in consumers’ lives, and would treat consumers well (Kressmann et al., 2006). A meta-analysis of brand congruity effects revealed a significant effect of brand personality congruity on brand attitudes, intentions, and purchase (Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak, & Sirgy, 2012), perhaps setting the stage for consumers’ conceptualization of the brand as a potential relationship partner (Wan & Aggarwal, 2015). These effects were stronger when congruity reflected similarity between the brand personality and the consumers’ personality than when it reflected the congruity of the brand’s personality with the personality of typical brand users.

The factors that motivate consumers to anthropomorphize brands (see Fig. 1) also appear to affect consumers’ perceptions of the brand as similar to the self. Related to agent-self-knowledge, knowledge about the extent to which personalities are stable or malleable affects brand-self congruity. Park and John (2010) found that entity theorists (those who believe that personalities are stable and do not change across time and situations) perceived themselves as more good-looking, feminine, and glamorous after using a Victoria’s Secret shopping bag (studies 1 and 3). They also viewed themselves as more intelligent, more hardworking, and more of a leader after using an MIT pen (studies 2 and 4). These findings suggest that entity theorists may be sensitive to evaluating brands’ personalities in terms of their congruity to the self.

Sociality motivations may also influence considerations of brand-self congruity and effects of congruence. Aaker (1999) observed that agent knowledge (knowledge of one’s own personality) and sociality motivations (individual differences in self-monitoring) impact whether and to what extent consumers perceive brands as similar to the self. Aguirre-Rodriguez et al.’s (2012) meta-analysis also showed that brand self-congruity effects were greater when consumers had a self-enhancement...
consumers’ self-views when self-confidence is temporarily shaken or cast in doubt (Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009). Such shaken self-confidence should activate a motivation for effectance (see Fig. 1). Self-confidence is restored when consumers have the opportunity to choose a product whose personality matches their own. Also possibly eliciting an effectance motivation is the perception of oneself as an underdog (one who has struggled against the odds to become successful). Consumers who strongly identify as underdogs themselves react favorably to brands with underdog-type brand biographies (Paharia et al., 2011).

Brand-self connections

Meaning of brand-self connections

Researchers have suggested that consumers can feel connected to a brand in a way that goes beyond being similar to or like the brand. However, the precise meaning of “brand-self connections” is a bit elusive, as this concept has been used to reference terms that, while potentially related, have distinct elements. For example, to some, brand-self connections reflect congruities (or similarities) between the image of the brand and the image of the self, as when consumers view a brand as connected to their sense of self because it is trendy like they are (e.g., Chaplin & John, 2005).

The term brand-self connection has also been used to reference the extent to which a brand resonates with one’s identity (e.g., Escales & Bettman, 2003, 2005). Not only is the brand similar to the self, but also its associations can be appropriated from the socio-cultural system to reflect or construct one’s actual or ideal identity. This perspective might be called identity resonance. To the extent that consumers feel that they are like others who use the brand (i.e., have a self-verification goal) or feel that they want to be like others who use the brand (i.e., have a self-enhancement goal) they are more likely to form a strong connection between the brand and the ideal or actual self. By using brands that reflect self-enhancement and self-verification goals, consumers gain emotional benefits in the form of enhanced self-esteem and the liberty to use the brand for purposes of personal expression.

Fournier (1998) (see also Keller, 2001) offers a somewhat broader perspective, which might be called goal resonance. Here, the brand is not only important to one’s identity but also relevant to one’s life tasks, themes or current concerns. Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, and Iacobucci (2010) and Park, Eisingerich, and Park (2013a) go further to describe brand-self connections as the extent to which the brand overlaps with or is included in the self; that is, the extent to which the brand is me and I am the brand. According to these authors, brand-self connection varies in closeness, from complete overlap between the brand and the self to extreme distance between the brand and the self. As the overlap between the brand and the self increases (given the brand’s resonance with goals, life tasks, themes or current concerns), consumers come to view the brand as part of themselves, thus viewing the brand’s resources as their own. In turn, with overlap, consumers are willing to devote their own resources to the brand because it is part of themselves and of who they are. This perspective is also consistent with Aron’s self-expansion theory as applied to brands, where closeness is revealed in a Venn diagram showing the self as overlapping with the other entity (e.g., the brand). Park et al. (2013a) assume that, as brand-self closeness increases, the positivity or valence of one’s relationship with the brand also increases. They suggest that the sense of self can expand to include the brand as part of the self (Reimann & Aron, 2009). This view is consistent with Belk’s (1988) notion that consumers may regard products and brands as extensions of the self.

To a certain extent, these different ways of thinking about brand self-connections are undoubtedly related. When a brand is seen as similar to the self, consumers may come to use the brand to signal aspects of their own identity. As brands become more embedded in the consumer’s higher-order goals, life projects and themes, brand-self connections may be further strengthened. At some point, the brand is so closely connected to the consumer that it is seen as part of the self. Although definitions of brand-self connections as a construct differ, many papers that empirically examine this construct operationalize it similarly, with items reflecting the extent to which the brand is “connected to the self” and reflects “me and who I am” (e.g., Chaplin & John, 2005; Escales & Bettman, 2003, 2005; Park et al., 2010, 2013a).

Definitional issues notwithstanding, the discussion above suggests that the field has opportunities to examine various dimensions along which brand-self connections can be described and to examine the relative impact of these dimensions on brand-self closeness. For example, does brand-self closeness vary as a function of the number of brand-self connections, their valence, their salience, and/or their importance to life goals? Which factors have the greatest impact on overall judgments of brand-self closeness?

Factors impacting brand-self connections

Consistent with the notion of agent knowledge and effectance motivations, the tendency to develop brand-self connections appears to begin between middle childhood and early adolescence (Chaplin & John, 2005). It is at this stage where consumers’ self-concepts develop and they comprehend who uses a brand, what personality a brand has, and what the brand says about one’s identity. Children are likely to develop a more abstract understanding of the brand, its similarity to the self, and the extent to which it can serve as an identity marker as their reasoning processes develop with age.

Individuals also form stronger brand-self connections to brands whose meaning is conveyed in the form of a story. Such narrative processing, involving the brand as an actor in the story, may activate agent knowledge (Escalas, 2004). Brand-self connections are believed to deepen as brand interactions increase in frequency (Park et al., 2010, 2013a; Reimann, Castano, Zaichkowsky, & Bechara, 2012). Reflecting agent knowledge,
longer brand relationships provide more opportunities for consumers to understand the brand’s benefits and integrate the brand’s meaning into one’s sense of self.

Consistent with a sociality motivation, brand-self connections are strong for brands that are central to one’s identity, reference group membership and status (Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2005). The tendency to form brand-self connections may be particularly strong in the case of brands that symbolize membership in an in-group, as such brands provide a social signaling function (Chan, Berger, & van Boven, 2012; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). In contrast, consumers perceive more distance from brands that are tied to outgroups/dissociative reference groups (White & Dahl, 2007).

Consumers’ brand-self connections also are stronger for nostalgic than non-nostalgic brands, perhaps because nostalgic brands link an individual to people and events of his or her childhood or early adulthood (Kessous, Roux, & Chandon, 2015), thus serving sociality motivations. Brand-self connections also can be facilitated through methods designed to enhance customer intimacy (activating a sociality motivation). For example, Liu and Gal (2011) found that consumers felt closer to a company when company representatives asked for their advice about the product versus when asked for their expectations for the product.

When materialists are reminded of their own death, the importance of brands in staving off loneliness (a sociality motivation) may be salient, leading materialistic consumers to import importance of brands in staving off loneliness (a sociality versus when asked for their expectations for the product.

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When materialists are reminded of their own death, the importance of brands in staving off loneliness (a sociality motivation) may be salient, leading materialistic consumers to form stronger brand-self connections (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Wong, 2009). The importance of brand-self connections also may vary by self-construal. Brand-self connections appear to be more important as drivers of brand attitudes for consumers from independent (vs. interdependent) cultures (see Fig. 1). For consumers from interdependent cultures, a brand’s country of origin appears to be more important than brand-self connections in driving brand attitudes (Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007).

Consistent with an effectance motivation, stronger brand-self connections are likely to arise when the brand enables the self (Park et al., 2013a). This could occur when the brand protects customers and makes them feel powerful in overcoming problems, or when the brand enhances how efficacious consumers feel in resolving challenges (Park & John, 2014). Conversely, when consumers are connected to the brand, they seem to react to a brand failure as if it were a personal failure. Consumers who are strongly connected to a brand may feel greater threats to their self-esteem when the brand fails compared to consumers who are less strongly connected to the brand (Cheng, White, & Chaplin, 2012). Moreover, as brand-self connections increase, consumers are less forgiving of a brand that transgresses against them or acts in unethical ways (Trump, 2014), perhaps because the brand transgression activates agent knowledge and/or views of the brand as having an anthropomorphized mind that acts unfairly and in morally inconsistent ways.

The perceived congruity between the brand and the self also affects brand-self connections. In a longitudinal study of new product adoption, Lam, Ahearn, Mullins, Hayati, and Schillevaert (2013) observed that the perceived personality congruity between a consumer and a new brand predicted the extent to which consumers identified with the brand. Identity was indicated by the extent of overlap between the brand’s identity and their own (which might be regarded as an indicator of brand-self connections). Those whose personalities were perceived as congruent with the brand also showed higher rates of growth in brand identification over time.

Effects of brand-self connections

Consumers appear to show stronger and more positive brand attitudes (Moore & Homer, 2008) and greater brand loyalty (Tsai, 2011) as the brand becomes closer to the self. This appears to be particularly true when there is high congruity between the consumer’s gender and gender’s relevance to the product category, as well as when the brand is symbolic of a desired in-group (Moore & Homer, 2008). These findings hint at the potential relationship between brand-self connections and consumers’ view of brands as relationship partners. We discuss this topic next.

Summary

Research investigating a “self-focus” has examined when the brand is congruent with the self (the brand is like me) and when the brand is connected to the self (the brand is close to me). These are related issues since brand-self congruity can influence brand-self connections (see Fig. 1). Sociality motivations prompted by such factors as congruence with one’s ideal self, ingroup relevance and nostalgia, and effectance motivations, prompted by such factors as concerns about self-efficacy and shaken self-confidence, also influence the conditions under which brands are regarded as connected to the self.

The relationship-focused research stream

In addition to the previously discussed human-focused and self-focused perspectives on humanizing brands, some prior work has studied the humanization of brands from a relationship perspective. Following Fig. 1, we review research suggesting that consumers relate to brands in ways that are analogous to their relationships with people, even if the brand is concretely associated with an object (e.g., a Big Mac). If a person treats an object like a human, then it implies that s/he attributes human mental capacities, such as intentions and feelings, to the object, or perhaps that the object has intentions and feelings about the person (Waytz, Cacioppo, et al., 2010; Waytz, Epley, et al., 2010). Of particular interest to consumer psychologists is a relationship described as brand attachment and its potential to impact the consumer’s feelings of brand betrayal when the brand transgresses. Moreover, just as consumers have relational norms that guide relationships with other people (e.g., exchange norms, communal norms), they also appear to have relational norms that guide their brand relationships.

Brand relationship types

Fournier (1998; see also Fournier, 2009) pioneered the idea that consumers can think about their relationships with brands
in a manner that is analogous to their relationships with people. Some brand relationships are strong and positive (e.g., committed partnerships, best friends). Others reflect brand relationships for which consumers have a strong aversion (e.g., enmities). Still others (dependencies) reflect ambivalent relationships, such as when consumers need the brand but feel controlled by it. Secret affairs also reflect a brand relationship characterized by ambivalence. Consumers feel passion toward such brands despite anticipating others’ disapproval.

Brand relationships also vary in power (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). Sometimes, a consumer perceives that power is equally shared with the brand (as with committed partnerships and best friendships). In other cases, a brand has power over consumers who are dependent on the brand (i.e., enslavement). Conversely, the consumer can have significant power over the brand. In such cases, consumers view themselves as “masters” and they regard the brand as the “servant” (e.g., Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; Kim & Kramer, 2015; Miller, Fournier, & Allen, 2012). The types of brand relationships may emanate from consumers’ perceptions of the brand as having a human-like mind and competencies that can be used to exert control (power) over the consumer.

Consistent with the sociality motivation that drives anthropomorphism tendencies, consumers who are lonely may be more likely to develop a positive relationship with a brand (Long, Yoon, & Friedman, 2015). However, more research is needed to understand why consumers form certain types of relationships with brands and the dimensions along which various types of brand relationships can be differentiated. Will consumers who are low in power (effectance motivation), lonely (sociality motivation), high in attachment anxiety (sociality motivation), or high in entity orientation (personal agent motivation) be more likely to call brands “best friends” and less likely to regard them as “enemies”? Research that links the study of brand relationship types to the other factors identified in Fig. 1 could add substantial richness to this domain.

Some of the aforementioned constructs in Fig. 1 are also related to brand relationship types. For example, consumers appear to gravitate to brands with unique and exciting personalities when forming a positive brand relationship (Smit, Bronner, & Tolboom, 2007). Moreover, in the case of “fling”-type relationships, consumers appear to gravitate toward those brands with exciting personalities (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004).

Most brand relationship work has focused on positive brand relationships (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012), chiefly those characterized as best friendships or committed partnerships. The study of negative brand relationships, particularly those in which power is unequally distributed, has received less attention by researchers. More generally, research should move beyond typologies to develop an overarching theory that explains when and why certain types of relationships prevail, what causes changes in relationships (as when a best friendship becomes an enmity), and why. The discussion below hints at several factors that might be relevant to the development of this overarching theory.

**Brand attachment**

Recent research has studied a positive brand relationship called brand attachment. Brand attachment has been described as the strength of the bond connecting the consumer to the brand (Park et al., 2010). Brand-self connections (or brand closeness) appear to be critical to attachment-based relationships. As consumers perceive a close connection between the brand and the self, they are likely to become attached to it in a way that is analogous to interpersonal attachment (see Fig. 1). This effect has been observed with person brands (i.e., celebrities; O’Guinn, 1991; Thomson, 2006), product brands (Park et al., 2010; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005) and place brands (Debenedetti, Oppewal, & Arsel, 2014).

Park et al. (2010) argue that brand attachment requires not just brand-self connections/closeness but also brand prominance (or salience), which can be independent of brand-self connections. Prominance reflects the degree to which the cognitive and emotional bonds that connect the brand to the self are highly salient in consumers’ memories. When brand attachment is strong, the brand is interwoven into consumers’ autobiographical memories and is frequently encountered in light of its connection to (and resonance with) the self and one’s goals (Park et al., 2010). When brand attachment is strong, consumers not only regard the brand as part of the self, they are also willing to invest resources (time, money, reputation) in the brand to ensure that their brand relationship remains positive.

By separating prominance from brand-self connections, Park et al. (2013a) identify states beyond attachment. Specifically, in their view, the opposite of brand attachment is brand aversion, which arises when consumers experience negative brand-self connections to a brand that is prominent in memory. Ambivalence describes a state in which a prominent brand creates an approach-avoidance conflict. Consumers are indifferent to brands for which prominance is moderate to low and for which brand-self connections are neither extremely close nor extremely distant.

Park et al. (2010, 2013a) developed a brand attachment scale showing that brand self-connections and brand prominance are both important to the measurement of brand attachment. Their scale also shows that brand attachment predicts outcomes like brand loyalty and brand advocacy behaviors. (See also Jiménez & Voss, 2014, for a discussion of scales assessing brand attachment).

Increasingly, researchers have examined the construct of brand love, which seems to predict many of the same effects as those predicted by brand attachment (described shortly). However, prior research also suggests that the perceived connection between the brand and the self (e.g., brand-self distance) and brand prominance better predict feelings of closeness to the brand than does brand love (Park et al., 2013a, 2013b). The extent to which consumers devote resources to the brand may differentiate brand attachment from brand love, which tends to be self-centered (vs. relationship focused; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). Unfortunately, the term “brand love” is a bit nebulous, as it has been used to refer to (a) a state that seems similar to brand attachment (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), (b) a psychological state that reflects pleasure (i.e., feeling sexy, romantic, sentimental and warmheart; Laros
Factors impacting brand attachment

Effectance and sociality motivations (see Fig. 1) also appear to impact the extent of consumers’ brand attachments. Dunn and Hoegg (2014) find that consumers are more likely to become attached to brands when they are afraid (but not sad, happy or excited), because people cope with fear by seeking out others (people or objects) for comfort and support (a sociality motivation). In such cases, consumers’ belief that the brand has shared their (fearful) experiences drives brand attachment. Nevertheless, fearful individuals may be inclined to affiliate with other people rather than brands when people are present.

Also consistent with a sociality motivation, consumers are more likely to become attached to brands that enrich the self; that is, brands that help consumers develop, maintain and promote a desired identity and a coherent sense of self (Park et al., 2013a). Consistent with this notion, the more a place (e.g., a retail store) fulfills consumers’ sociality motivations (e.g., the more customers bond with service employees), the greater consumers’ attachment to that place becomes (Brocato, Baker, & Voorhees, 2015). Dommer et al. (2013) find that, when low self-esteem consumers feel socially included, they develop stronger attachments to brands that reflect status or superiority within a group. In contrast, social exclusion leads low self-esteem consumers to develop stronger attachments to brands that reflect their individual tastes.

Some research suggests that attachments to brands can, in some situations, compensate for deficiencies in interpersonal relationships, which may be related to a sociality motivation. The tendency to become attached to possessions, for example, is impacted by loneliness. Pieters (2013) observed a bi-directional relationship between loneliness (which should evoke a sociality motivation) and attachment to possessions. Specifically, loneliness inclines consumers to develop greater attachments to their possessions (i.e., exhibit greater materialism) as substitutes for relationships with other people. In turn, materialism may isolate consumers from others, thereby fostering greater loneliness. Elderly consumers may be more inclined to develop attachments to brands as relationship partners (Jahn, Gaus, & Kiessling, 2012), perhaps because the mobility limitations of elderly people give them fewer opportunities to connect with other people.

As to effectance motivations, Park et al. (2013a) suggest that consumers become increasingly attached to brands that enable the self, providing a sense of self-efficacy, power, and competence, as well as brands that entice the self, by providing cognitive and experiential pleasure. Consumers are also predicted to become attached to brands that enrich the self because they reflect strongly held values or desired self-identities. The former perspective accords with an effectance motivation. Similarly, Proksch, Orth, and Cornwell (2015) find that brand attachment is positively affected by the degree to which the brand makes consumers feel competent.

Blending effectance and sociality motivations, consumers became more attached to celebrities who enhanced consumers’ feelings of autonomy (which should be related to an effectance motivation) and relatedness (which should be related to a...
sociality motivation) (Thomson, 2006). Interestingly, competence (which should also be related to an effectance motivation) was found to be unrelated to attachment strength. This null finding might be due to the fact that the study focused on celebrities, who may be less effective than other brands when it comes to actualizing on effectance motivations.

Brand personalities may also affect brand attachment. One of the few studies using longitudinal data found such an effect. In this study, brand attachment was indicated by the extent to which consumers were committed to the brand, felt a strong brand-self connection, regarded their brand relationship as intimate, and were satisfied with the brand (Aaker et al., 2004). Consumers’ relationships with (i.e., attachment to) sincere brands deepened over time. In contrast, their relationships with exciting brands were more like flings, short-lived and intense. However, this effect was contingent on whether the brand had or had not transgressed against the consumer (e.g., inadvertently erased the customer’s online photo album). Attachment to sincere brands was negatively affected by a transgression, but attachment to exciting brands was somewhat rejuvenated following a transgression.

Finally, the perceived congruity between the brand and the self (see Fig. 1) also affects brand-self connections and brand attachment. A qualitative study revealed that brand-self connections and brand attachment increased as the congruity between the brand and the self-concept increased (Japutra, Ekinci, & Simkin, 2014). Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger (2011) found that the impact of personality congruity was greatest when effectance motivations were high – specifically when consumers lacked self-esteem or were high in public self-consciousness. The consistency between the brand’s personality and the consumer’s personality is related to brand attachment (Orth et al., 2010). Ghuman et al. (2015) found a positive relationship between the degree to which a brand is anthropomorphized and the perceived quality of the consumer-brand relationship.

Brand aversion and brand betrayal

The opposite of brand attachment is brand aversion. Here, consumers regard a brand that is highly prominent in memory as distant from (vs. close to) the self. Consumers might be averse to brands that reflect dissociative reference groups with whom they do not wish to affiliate (White & Dahl, 2007). However, recent research suggests that brand aversion can also be created when a brand to which consumers are attached violates consumers’ trust. Researchers have labeled this state “brand betrayal” (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008), a state also used to describe human relationships where implicit relationship norms are violated.

Since attachment-based brand relationships evolve over time, consumers come to trust the brand as the brand relationship deepens. Although brand attachment and strong/close brand-self connections can insulate the brand from the repercussions of minor brand failures (Donovan et al., 2012), there are limits to consumers’ tolerance of brand transgressions (Schmalz & Orth, 2012; see also Loken & John, 2010; Wan, Hui, & Wyer, 2011). When the brand violates the fundamental norms that guide the brand relationship, the state of attachment changes to one of betrayal. With betrayal the valence of the relationship changing from one of extreme closeness to one of extreme distance (i.e., aversion; e.g., Grégoire & Fisher, 2008; Wiggins & Yalcin, 2015). Feelings of brand betrayal can be so negative that consumers take revenge against the brand (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008; Johnson, Matear, & Thomson, 2011).

To date, limited research has examined whether the motivational drivers that stimulate consumers’ tendencies to perceive brands in human-like terms (see Fig. 1) affect the intensity of brand betrayal. One study focusing on attachment styles found that when a brand engaged in a transgression, anti-brand reactions were greater as the attachment style was characterized by greater levels of anxiety and avoidance. Consumers who were high on these attachment style dimensions experienced greater loss of benefits and self-esteem than other consumers as a result of the brand’s transgression (Thomson, Whelan, & Johnson, 2012).

Brand betrayal has spurred recent interest, but much remains to be learned about what causes consumers to feel betrayed by brands and how firms can recover from this negative affective state. If strong brand attachment moderates the relationship between a brand’s actions and betrayal, firms risk losing their best customers (and rousing them to take revenge) when their transgressions are perceived as a betrayal. Future work on when and why consumers will experience betrayal and how firms can recover is clearly important in order to better understand how consumers relate to brands in human-like terms. Opportunities to advance our understanding of brand betrayal and its relationship to the topics noted in Fig. 1 are numerous, since the study of brand betrayal is still in its infancy.

Feelings of brand betrayal may be more likely to arise when consumers make anthropomorphic inferences about brands as having a human-like mind and acting with intentionality. In other words, inferring that the brand has intentionally misled them (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015), exploited them (Sayin & Gurhan-Canli, 2015), violated fairness-related relational norms (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008), behaved in a highly unethical way (Schmalz & Orth, 2012; Trump, 2014) or shown disloyalty toward them (Luedicke & Pichler-Luedicke, 2015) may increase the intensity of consumers’ feelings of brand betrayal.

Brand relationship norms

A fruitful direction for understanding brand attachment and brand betrayal, as well as other brand relationship states and brand relationship types, draws on theories about social relationship norms. Aggarwal (2004) proposes that brand relationships vary in terms of the norms that guide them; specifically, whether and to what extent they are based on “exchange” or “communal” norms. Exchange relationships involve a shared understanding that a relationship is based on a quid pro quo mode of interaction. Exchange relationship norms dictate a match between what customers give to obtain and interact with the brand (e.g., price paid, time spent) and what the brand provides in return (e.g., brand benefits, service benefits). Consumers for whom exchange relationship norms are salient become unhappy when a relationship is out of balance in terms of the give–get interchange, such as

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when the consumer puts more (e.g., more money, more time, more effort) into the brand relationship than he/she gets in return.

Communal relationship norms, on the other hand, are based on a shared understanding that a relationship partner (e.g., the brand) receives benefits or accrues costs depending on what the other relationship partner (e.g., the consumer) needs at a given point in time. With communal relationships, the brand is part of one’s “in group”. Contributions to the partner (i.e., the consumer’s contributions to the brand or vice versa) are made on behalf of the consumer-brand unit (vs. one’s self-interests). For example, if one member of a brand relationship (e.g., the consumer) needs help, communal relationship norms would dictate that the brand would proffer help without the expectation of compensation. What is new and relevant to the relationship norm literature are the ideas that (a) brand relationships can be communal in nature, (b) different relationship norms may be more vs. less salient in a given situation or for a particular type of consumer, and (c) a mismatch between the type of relationship norm implied by the brand’s action (i.e., exchange) and the type of relationship norm expected by consumers (i.e., communal) can damage brand relationships.

Summary

Consumers sometimes relate to a brand in human-like ways, with distinctions across types of relationships based on brand closeness/distance, brand prominence, relationship valence and relative power in the relationship. Research has studied consumers’ feeling of attachment to the brand, perhaps partly because of its significant consequences to marketers, which range from brand loyalty and defending the brand against criticism to brand aversion and taking vengeance against the brand. A promising research direction involves comparing brand relationships guided by communal norms to those guided by exchange norms (Aggarwal, 2004). Considering the growing focus of research on brand attachment, it is not surprising that the effects of sociality motivations (e.g., loneliness, brands as group status markers, self-esteem) on how consumers relate to brands have been more thoroughly studied compared to those of effectance motivations (self-efficacy).

Future research directions for this general domain

As we show in this review, a substantial and recent body of research has examined consumers’ perceptions of brands in human-like terms. Activity in this young field reveals a promising trajectory, with most studies published within the last decade and with considerable potential for future research on important issues. In Table 2, we present a set of propositions that summarize research findings to date. We use these propositions to develop some concluding thoughts.

Throughout this review, we have identified specific future research directions. Here, we identify a set of research directions that relate to the domain of humanizing brands as a whole, including the propositions noted in Table 2.

Human or human-like?

Whereas the literature reviewed above suggests that consumers can perceive and relate to brands in human-like terms, two considerations must be kept in mind when carrying this research forward. First, the fact that consumers can relate to brands in human-like terms should not be taken as evidence that they always do (see Aggarwal, 2004; Alba & Lutz, 2013; Batra et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2012; Park et al., 2013b). Individuals may correct for anthropomorphic tendencies when they become cognizant of having done so (even if the correction is insufficient).

Indeed, there is an opportunity in consumer research to demarcate the boundaries of human and brand relationships. Swaminathan and Dommer (2012) suggest that brand relationships typically involve an economic exchange, whereas most human relationships do not. As such, compared to interpersonal relationships, consumers may have more of an exchange than a communal orientation toward brands. Moreover, whereas individuals can feel betrayed by relationship partners who are unfaithful to them, consumers do not seem to believe that brands experience feelings of betrayal or other negative responses to the consumers’ polygamous brand relationships (though see Luedicke & Pichler-Luedicke, 2015, who find different results).

Is humanizing brands an accelerating trend?

The recency of research supporting P1 might suggest that consumers’ humanization of brands is a contemporary phenomenon. It may be partly true in that brands have played an increasingly important role in the modern marketplace. Additionally, social changes may have enhanced consumers’ motivations, abilities or opportunities to humanize brands, which raises numerous questions. Have consumers as a whole become more dependent on brands for enhancing a sense of effectance? Have societal changes, such as greater stress and time pressure, or more shallow human relationships, led contemporary consumers to relate to brands differently today than in previous generations? Do consumers look to brands as sources of emotional gratification more now because consumers receive less emotional support elsewhere? Do consumers look more to brands as relationship partners because global competition creates a worldview of unpredictable, hostile or tenuous relationships among people? Have wealth and high standards of living in the West made for a more entitled population that looks to the marketplace for certain types of brand relationships (e.g., relationships where the consumer is the master and the brand the slave)? Consumer research can benefit from historical, sociological, and political science perspectives (as well as psychological perspectives) on whether and to what extent consumers’ relationships with brands today differ from those of prior generations, and if so, what drives these differences.

P1 also raises the question of whether technological innovations interact with societal changes to offer more opportunities for consumers to view brands in human-like terms. The increasing tendency for consumers to spend more time alone (e.g., Putnam, 2000), coupled with the aging of the population and needs for...
assisted living tools, herald the advent of robots with human features, voices, and actions, as well as the increased use of virtual reality and technologies, like self-driving cars, all of which will likely further impact our perception and experiences of brands. Such technological advances may actually exaggerate consumers’ tendency to see brands in human-like terms because they cue human knowledge schemas, they offer a way to connect socially and they offer a way to exert control over an increasingly complex world. For example, as consumers become increasingly dependent on technology and brands to perform functions that previously required human skills (e.g., reading maps, mathematical calculations, translation), these dependencies may lower effectance in certain domains of our lives. A reduced sense of effectance may heighten consumers’ tendencies to anthropomorphize brands, as prior research suggests. A tendency to humanize may be even more pronounced with the development of algorithms that “learn” customers’ habits and can be customized to the consumer’s needs (see Kozinets, 2015, for a discussion).

What else impacts tendencies to humanize brands?

P2 suggests that dispositional, situational, development, and cultural factors related to agent knowledge and motivations for sociality and effectance can heighten consumers’ tendencies to humanize brands. Indeed, in this review, we have identified a set of variables that can be broadly subsumed within the categories of sociality motivations, effectance motivations and elicited agent knowledge. These constructs appear to influence whether, when, and why consumers perceive and relate to brands in human-like terms (see Fig. 1). For example, we see that consumers are more likely to perceive and relate to brands in human like terms when situational (e.g., situational loneliness), dispositional (e.g., chronic loneliness), developmental (e.g., attachment styles) and cultural factors (individualism/collectivism) activate a sociality motivation.

Yet, other variables that reflect these higher-level factors noted in Fig. 1 offer additional opportunities to test the boundaries of the model. For example, individual differences in introversion/extroversion, an instantiation of sociality motivations, might predict that introverts (who gain less emotional energy from interactions with people) are more likely to humanize brands than extraverts. Relatedly, research might examine whether consumers are more likely to humanize brands when they interact with the brand themselves versus when they observe others with the brand. In sum, we have the opportunity to build theory by examining other situational, dispositional, developmental and cultural factors that are associated with sociality motivations, effectance motivations, and elicited agent knowledge.

What bi-directional causality relationships exist among constructs?

P3 suggests that the various ways in which people humanize brands (as shown in Fig. 1) can be mutually reinforcing. Yet alternative paths that reflect the causal relationships between these ways of humanizing brands have yet to be studied. For example, whereas consumers may be more likely to see a brand as having a personality after they anthropomorphize it, does the evocation of the brand as having a personality enhance anthropomorphism tendencies? Whereas seeing the brand as having an anthropomorphized mind and being trustworthy might enhance brand-self connections and attachment, is it possible that greater levels of brand attachment enhance perceptions of the brand as a trusted partner? Future research should consider the potential for bi-directional relationships among the constructs identified in Fig. 1, particularly as brand relationships develop over time.

What would a broadened set of relationship types reveal?

Consumers’ relationships with brands vary on a number of dimensions (P6), among which include brand-self connectedness,

Table 2

Summary propositions.

P1: Consumers can humanize brands in the following ways:
- By perceiving them in anthropomorphic ways (with human-like features, minds, and personalities)
- By perceiving them as similar to or connected to the self
- By perceiving them as relationship partners

P2: The humanization of brands (in ways suggested by P1) can be heightened by a variety of dispositional, situational, developmental, and cultural factors related to activated agent knowledge, motivations for sociality and motivations for effectance.

P3: The various perspectives on how consumers humanize brands are inter-related and may be mutually reinforcing. That is, consumers may feel greater congruity between the brand and the self and stronger brand attachment as they anthropomorphize the brand more.

P4: Marketers can use a variety of visual, verbal and metaphorical tools to activate knowledge of a “human” schema and, thereby, enhance consumers’ tendencies to perceive brands in anthropomorphic ways.

P5: Consumers can perceive brands as having human-like personality traits, although these traits differ from the “Big 5” traits that describe human personalities.

P6: Consumer-brand relationships vary in their degree of brand-self-connectedness, brand prominence, attachment, relative power, and the communal versus exchange norms that undergird the brand relationship.

P7: The act of humanizing brands has the potential to contribute to human happiness.
- Consumers often, but not always, form positive attitudes and attachments toward brands that they humanize.
- Brand-self connections developed by the brand’s relevance to various life goals (e.g., satisfying needs for safety and control), power (effectance motivations), connections to others, expression of one’s identity (sociality motivation), and sensory stimulation incline consumers toward brand relationships characterized by stronger attachment and minimal aversion.

P8: Consumers exhibit considerable variation in their attachment to brands. They are indifferent to many brands, and may experience a state of ambivalence or aversion with respect to others.

P9: Brand relationships are dynamic. Certain types of brand transgressions can turn a state of extreme happiness (brand attachment) into unhappiness (brand betrayal).
prominence, attachment, power, and relationship norms. Yet, as Fournier and Alvarez (2012) note, we have tended to focus on brand relationships characterized by strong levels of attachment. This is not surprising given the importance of attachment-based brand relationships to marketers. Yet, as these authors eloquently note, there is clearly opportunity to study brand relationship types and forms beyond brand attachment. For example, under what conditions is power unequally distributed such that the consumer feels dependent on the brand (as when the brand has more power than the consumer) or the consumer feels that the brand is a slave (where the consumer has more power)? How does the brand relationship change when an exchange relationship evolves to a communal one?

How does humanizing brands influence consumer happiness?

When consumers perceive, relate to and treat brands positively, marketers enjoy numerous benefits. These include brand loyalty and commitment, enhanced consumer willingness to disparage competing brands, greater willingness to spread positive WOM, and a willingness to pay a price premium. These potential benefits can justify increasing consumer attachment and brand anthropomorphism as goals for marketing managers, even if the firm has relatively few attached customers or customers that anthropomorphize the brand.

Whereas marketers might benefit when strong brand attachments form, P7 suggests that consumers could be happier when they become attached to brands that satisfy various life goals (in particular, brands that enable, enrich and entice those goals). Yet, one cannot help but ask whether, when, and why brand relationships induce greater degrees of happiness than human relationships do. Is it psychologically healthy for consumers to form attachments to brands? Does evidence of brand attachment signify an absence of other sources of gratification in consumers’ lives?

How does humanizing a brand change over time?

P9 suggests that brand relationships are dynamic. Yet, little is known about the dynamic nature of brand relationships. Research on brand betrayal is a step in this direction, but basic questions remain. Recent research points to the importance of studying velocity or change in brand relationships (e.g., Harmeling, Palmatier, Houston, Arnold, & Samaha, 2015), which is a useful step in this direction. We have yet to understand what drives the pace at which brand relationships develop, what psychological, social and marketplace factors can create an ebb and flow in these relationships, and when certain types of brand relationships (e.g., flings) morph into different relationship types (e.g., dependencies). A study of how brand relationships evolve over time will likely require the development of novel constructs, such as relationship volatility, stability, productivity, interdependence, immutability, and discontinuity. Important questions exist at the interface of consumer research and marketing on how brand relationships can maintain consumers’ passion and excitement, how they can be revived after a period of dormancy, and what factors encourage relationship continuity despite marketplace mishaps (mishaps that evoke brand betrayal as well as those that evoke other feelings, like abandonment, exploitation, and rejection).

Also related to P9 is understanding the role of ownership. Whereas brand ownership provides opportunities for the development and potential deepening of brand-self connections, we know little about how or whether ownership issues impact perceptions of brands as having human-like characteristics, traits, or minds. Do anthropomorphization tendencies increase as brand relationships develop and/or products are owned over longer periods of time? Owning a product may facilitate its being perceived as a human-like entity, but this sense of its human-like qualities may not transfer over to identical replacements. Research on the process by which consumers detach from brands to which they have previously been attached would also help us understand the dynamic nature of brand relationships. Moreover, once consumers have detached from a brand (e.g., one’s childhood Barbie dolls), is it possible that factors related to sociality (e.g., nostalgia), effectance (shaken self) and elicited agent knowledge (e.g., entity orientation) facilitate re-attachment?

How does humanization of products differ from humanization of brands?

Finally, although our focus has been on the humanization of brands, at the product level, consumers are also capable of humanizing product categories (e.g., cars as a product class vs. VW’s as a brand). Developmental issues related to brands generally being more abstract categories and being learned later in life, may lead to different tendencies to anthropomorphize products (e.g., computers) vs. brands within a product class (e.g., Mac’s).

One might also ask whether consumers are likely to anthropomorphize an individual branded possession (e.g., my VW Beetle) more so than the brand? Some research suggests the opposite, at least for services. That is, humanizing a brand may decrease the likelihood of humanizing any one of the brand’s individual service providers. People who attribute a group mind to a company (e.g., Burger King) are less likely to attribute a mind to individual employee (Waytz & Young, 2012). These distinctions between a product class, a brand and an individually branded product are relevant for the propositions shown in Table 2, and raise interesting research questions. Do consumers develop deeper or more differentiated personality impressions of brands than of products? How does characterizing a marketplace entity as a brand versus a product impact brand self-congruity and brand attachment? Will consumers feel a greater sense of betrayal when a brand or a product acts in ways that counter relationship norms? In short, while P1–P9 delineate a set of issues related to brands, whether all these hold true to the same extent for products remains to be seen.