Once Bitten, Twice Shy: Differences in Social Efficacy Affect the Perceived Efficacy of Anthropomorphizable Products

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In two experiments, we look at whether people's difficulties in maintaining social interactions with other humans also affect their judgments about nonhuman objects that can be subject to anthropomorphization, i.e. that are imbued with characteristics to be interpreted as human. Previous research shows that loneliness is a driver of the susceptibility to anthropomorphize. Differences in social efficacy can also lead to loneliness, but might not entail the need for others. We show that low social efficacy, chronic as well as induced, leads to reduced estimates of anthropomorphized products' ability to fulfill their designed function – but not that of nonanthropomorphic products.

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Once Bitten, Twice Shy: Differences in Social Efficacy Affect the Perceived Efficacy of Anthropomorphizable Products

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Anthropomorphism as a marketing practitioners' technique of imbuing brands and products with human-like qualities such as faces, names, and intentions, has longtime been used, and has proven to be efficient in the development of brand personality (Aaker 1997) and the building of brand relationships (Fournier 1998). Consumer literature has mainly dealt with the effectiveness of anthropomorphism as a practitioners' technique in influencing brand perceptions. The work by Aggarwal and McGill (2007) signals a recent shift in attention from brands towards anthropomorphic products, showing that a fit between the imbued human scheme and the nature of the products helps in anthropomorphizing the product, and that affect towards the evoked human scheme influences the evaluation of the product. A more fundamental shift is that lately, anthropomorphism–the evocation of the human scheme by means of the design or qualities of an object–has been studied from a more phenomenological stance. Instead of studying the anthropomorphic objects, research has turned its attention to the human mind where the anthropomorphization of the product takes place. This shift also comprises interest in the dispositional and situational drivers of anthropomorphization (Epley et al. 2008a; Epley et al. 2008b; Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007), and ultimately might allow us to understand some human reactions and behavior towards non-human objects in terms of their interpersonal correlates–think of irrational anger towards a failing tool or machine.

Epley and colleagues have conceived a three factor model of anthropomorphization, in which sociality motivations are one of the driving factors (Epley et al. 2007). When people are lonely, they seek human company, and this increases their susceptibility to anthropomorphization of non-human entities, like alarm clocks and pets (Epley et al. 2008a). This might lead to the inference that lonely people are more prone to anthropomorphization in consumer settings, and therefore unambiguously prone to preferring and seeking out products that are easy to anthropomorphize.

However, loneliness can be a result of difficulties in maintaining satisfactory social contact with other humans. Loneliness is usually considered to be co-driven by personal factors and circumstances (Jones, Freemon, and Goswick 1981; Leary 2001). Indeed, loneliness can be the result of social exclusion (Gardner et al. 2005; Leary 1990), rejection (Boivin, Hymel, and Bukowski 1995) and ostracism (Cacioppo and Hawkley 2005; Zadro, Williams, and Richardson 2004). Although people may want to reconnect to others to compensate

for the experiences of loneliness, social anxiety and fear of negative outcome might influence their attitude towards new social contacts (Maner et al. 2007). In short, some–not all–loneliness can be a result of poor social efficacy, this latter having profound effects on how people approach subsequent social interactions. With regard to anthropomorphization of products, we expect that lowered social efficacy will translate into lower a priori expectations towards the anthropomorph at hand. We tested this inference in two studies, one gauging for chronic social efficacy, the other using an experimental manipulation.

In the first study we built on Leary et al.'s Sociometer Theory (Leary et al. 1995), in assessing people's chronic efficacy in social interactions. This theory states that self-esteem is a gauge for people's perceived efficacy in their social interactions. We had participants evaluate the expected number of times (out of twenty) that they would indicate the same number (one to five) as a random number generator that was depicted as an ordinary personal computer. In the control condition, we explained that this was in fact a computer that drew random numbers. In the experimental condition, the depicted computer was added with three buttons, of which the configuration resembled that of a human face (one broad button at the bottom resembling a mouth, two at the top left and right corner of the screen to resemble eyes). Also, the description of the computer was altered to a more anthropomorphic one, by giving it a name–"Puck the pc"–and stating that it "has a number in mind". Afterwards, a trait measure of self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965) was administered. Results demonstrate that in the experimental condition, trait self-esteem is positively related to people's estimation of future outcomes the product will deliver–more than in the control condition.

In the second study, we manipulated social efficacy between subjects, using a task that evokes ostracism (Williams, Cheung, and Choi 2000). The product that had to be evaluated was an automatic vacuum cleaner, and we asked participants about their expectations about the efficacy of the product. We manipulated anthropomorphism by describing the product either in terms of its technical characteristics and product code "Samsung VC-RS60H"–in the control condition–or in terms of more human traits ("a helping hand in the household") and the more friendly name "Roomba"–in the experimental condition. A pretest earlier had ruled out differences in liking for the two descriptions. Consistent with study 1, results show that people's estimates of the product's efficacy are lower when they have been ostracized–but only in the experimental condition. A manipulation check confirmed that the manipulation was indeed successful in eliciting human qualities in the product, and that ostracism did not interact with the manipulation of ostracism, ruling out an explanation that would attribute the effects to ostracism leading to a greater susceptibility to anthropomorphize.

In these two studies, different operationalizations–visual and verbal as well as different objects–of anthropomorphism are used, and the anthropomorphization manipulation is checked. We show that differences in social efficacy affect a priori evaluations of the efficacy of products, and we rule out a potential alternative explanation–differences in the degree of anthropomorphization induced by ostracism–of these results. These studies bring anthropomorphization as a phenomenological process into the field of consumer research, relating the effects of anthropomorphization to the anthropomorphizing consumer, and fit the recent shift in attention from anthropomorphism in brands towards anthropomorphism in products. Future studies will further assess the exact nature–trust, anxiety, retreat–of these effects, by including process measures, and establish boundary conditions where the need for humans might overpower these effects.

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To Be American Is To Be Rich: Immigrants Use of Possessions Both in the US and in Their Native Countries to Convey Consumer Acculturation

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Consumer acculturation is a topic that has been investigated in our literature (Oswald 1999; Peñaloza 1994; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). It has been broadly defined as a "general term that encompasses intercultural interaction and adaptation and includes assimilation of a new culture, maintenance of the old culture, and resistance to both new and old cultures" (Peñaloza and Gilly 1999). Scholars have sought to better understand the process immigrants go through in terms of consumption when moving from one culture to another (e.g., Thompson and Tambyah 1999; Ustuner and Holt 2007). The author has looked at the role immigration policy plays on that consumer acculturation process (Coble, Jiménez, and Mason 2008). In the process, a question that has arisen is why some product categories are adopted quicker than others. Another pressing question is how those product categories are consumed when immigrants visit their native countries. Every year, small towns in countries such as Mexico are flooded with immigrants visiting with arms and cars full of possessions from countries such as the US. From the author's experience living in a small Mexican town, he has seen almost an inflated level of consumer acculturation in terms of the possessions returning immigrants have, the language they speak, and the currency they use. This brings to light several questions. If consumer acculturation is inflated, why? What new insight does that give us in terms of acculturation theory? Also, if acculturation is inflated, what is the mechanism behind that?

This paper will contribute to the consumer acculturation literature by examining the role different product categories play in the acculturation process and how that is lived both in the host country and back in the home country. Some questions to be address are "how are products adopted and consumed in the host country?" "when traveling back to their native countries, how do immigrants use possessions?" and "what type of possessions do immigrants value during the transition?" These questions should also address the bigger issue of what role different product categories play in the acculturation process.

Methods

To begin this study, key informants have been questioned regarding their experiences both in the US and back in their native countries. Through those initial interviews, several themes have started to emerge. They are the meaning of the American dream, the expectations of living and working in the US, and the opportunities for conspicuous consumption.

The contexts the author will use to better understand this phenomenon are a large city in the Midwest with a large population of Mexican Americans and a southern state of Mexico where hundreds of Mexicans return every year for the Christmas season. The author has conducted extensive fieldwork and interviews in the US city for other projects regarding immigration and marketing issues. He has worked with the Hispanic chamber of commerce, a local Spanish TV station, and is on the board of directors for the coalition of Hispanic organizations. The town in Mexico where the work will be conducted is small (about 8,000 people), but it was chosen because of the flood of immigrants that return every year for the Christmas season. The author has lived in this small town as an exchange student, but starting in the fall, he will spend extensive time there as a researcher, conduct semi-structured depth interviews, collect artifacts, and use field notes to investigate the consumer acculturation process the returning immigrants are going through as they return to their native country. The entire project will entail training local Mexicans who are returning immigrants to help with the interviews and interpretation of the findings. The work will be conducted both in the US and in Mexico. Interviews and fieldwork in the US will focus on the issues of product categories in the acculturation process. Work conducted in Mexico will center around the issue of the meaning of those products in the transition back home. This work should give us better insight into the acculturation process in terms of product categories and open the door to future work on re-acculturation.

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