

Mapping Brand Personification: A Systematic Cartography of the Literature

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Abstract:

Brand personification is a widely used marketing strategy that involves assigning human-like qualities to a brand in order to create a unique and relatable brand personality. Concerning the different strategies of brand personification that can be used, such as anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and teramorphic brand personification, in addition to the plethora of frameworks and theories, this study aims to fill the current lack of systematic categorization in the field. This study presents a mapping review of the existing academic literature on brand personification and classify the different approaches based on their characteristics and applications. Our classification provides a framework for marketers and researchers to understand the different types of brand personification and their potential applications. Moreover, the study's findings reveal the existing research gaps in brand personification literature and provide perspectives for future research.

Keywords: *Brand personification, mapping, anthropomorphism*

1. Introduction

In 2007, General Motors aired an advertisement during the Super Bowl that emerged as a dominant trend. The ad featured an assembly-line robot that, after making a mistake, found itself unemployed. Subsequent to a thorough job search endeavor, he made a suicide attempt by jumping off a bridge. Although there were some supporters of the ad, GM received many complaints about the suicide scene. In fact, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention issued a statement calling it "dangerous and insensitive"(CNN, 2007). Within a week, GM removed the suicide scene from all TV and digital media. From a marketing perspective, the strong reactions to the GM Robot ad can be attributed to the use of personification. Personification refers to the attribution of human qualities to non-human entities (Inagaki & Hatano, 1987), and in this case, the robot was anthropomorphized and portrayed as a relatable and empathetic character. This created an emotional connection with viewers and elicited a response, which was heightened by the unexpected and dramatic suicide scene. Despite the prevalence of violent and sensitive themes in media, the use of personification in the GM Robot ad resulted in a notable response. This highlights the power of personification in eliciting an emotional response from viewers.

To increase brand awareness and make an impression on their target consumers, advertisers have often developed creative advertisements (Batra et al., 1995; Cornwell et al., 2016; Eastlack & Rao, 1986; Taylor & Costello, 2017). The employment of the brand personification (BP) approach is a marketing technique that fosters a distinctive brand character and brand distinctiveness (Fleck et al., 2014). According to Islam and Rahman (2016), brand image is molded by imbuing the brand with human-like traits, which fosters affective associations with the target consumers and consequently enhances emotional attachment (Aaker, 1997; Fleck et al., 2014; Fournier, 1998; Park & Kim, 2015). Delbaere et al. (2011) suggest that human-like traits and emotions generated by the brand contribute to brand preference and further strengthen the brand-consumer relationship (Fleck et al., 2014). Brand personification is "the use by a brand of a character with human-like characteristics in packaging, promotion, public relations, or other marketing related purposes" (Cohen, 2014) (p.3). The fundamental principle of BP involves endowing the brand with human-like traits, motivations, intentions, and emotions. Consequently, it generates beneficial reactions from consumers, including favorable branding and advertising results (Epley et al., 2007).

In the realm of marketing communication, the concept of brand personification involves employing a rhetorical device that imbues a brand with human characteristics and treating it as a living entity (Brown, 2011; Cohen, 2014). The employment of human or human-like attributes in brand personification encompasses a wide spectrum of characteristics, ranging from physical to personality traits that constitute the essence of human beings (Aaker, 1997; Landwehr et al., 2011). For instance, advertisements for car designs, like the Volkswagen Beetle, feature front grilles and headlights that resemble human faces with emotions. Similarly, Coca-Cola's hobbleskirt bottle has a curvy silhouette reminiscent of a woman's body, while characters like M&Ms for Mars Chocolate and like Tony the Tiger for Kellogg's Frosted Flakes embody human-like qualities, behaviors, and personalities, making them effective representatives for their respective brands.

The concept of personification has been present in literature and rhetoric for centuries, and Ricoeur et al. (1977) is one of many sources that discuss its use in communication. Ricoeur et al. (1977) discuss the concept of "figurative reference," which includes personification as one of many rhetorical devices that involve the attribution of qualities or characteristics to an entity in order to convey meaning or create an effect. Turner (1987) notes that these attributes can include intelligence, animation, beliefs, desires, intentions, goals, plans, psychological states, powers, and will.

2. Literature review and methodological approach

2.1 Mapping literature review and classification

In the field of marketing, conducting a literature review is crucial to gaining an understanding of the current state of research and identifying gaps in knowledge (Snyder, 2019). A literature review allows researchers to build upon existing theories, frameworks, and concepts, while also contributing to the development of new ones (Hulland & Houston, 2020; Paul & Criado, 2020). To ensure a comprehensive literature review that clarifies the existing literature on brand personification, we considered it important to use an appropriate methodology that includes mapping and classification of the literature. Mapping literature review in the marketing field, in the process of identifying and visualizing the relationships between different studies within a particular research area, has been previously conducted across a wide range of disciplines, including social media metrics and analytics (Misirlis & Vlachopoulou, 2018), consumer empowerment (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006) and arts marketing (O'Reilly, 2011). Additionally, classification of literature involves categorizing studies based on their content and research methods. This process helps identify common themes, theories, and frameworks within the literature and the gaps and inconsistencies between studies (Gordon, 1999). With respect to the latter, to identify gaps and overlaps in the literature (Paul et al., 2021), as well as understanding the evolution of research over time (Cronin et al., 2008), this research acts as a visual guide by analyzing the literature of brand personification throughout the history of its presence in academic research.

2.2 Brand personification

Since the development of personification as an *ad hoc* research gimmick that later set the foundations for the concept of brand personality (Avis & Aitken, 2015), many researchers have contributed to the evolution of the concepts. Throughout this evolution, Aaker (1997) set the cornerstone in the field with her seminal work on brand personality and sixteen years later, Cohen's (2014) taxonomies on brand personification revived academic interest. Several definitions of brand personification have been developed and proposed over the last years (Table 1). For the context of this research, brand personification is defined as "*a human-like portrayal of a product or brand that is designed to associate the brand with certain human characteristics*" (Aguirre-Rodriguez, 2014) (p.70). Putting in the center of brand personification, a first classification layer of brand personification strategies was defined: Anthropomorphism, Zoomorphism and Teramorphism (Chen et al., 2015). These three aspects are differentiated in

terms of the type of characteristics they attribute to a brand: human, animal or object characteristics.

Table 1: Definitions of Brand Personification

Concepts	Source	Definition	Examples
Brand Personification	Cohen, (2014)	Imbuing trademarked or otherwise proprietary-named products and services with a human form and/or human attributes, including a generally distinctive physical appearance and personality.	
	Aaker, (1997)	The strategies used by advertisers to imbue a brand with personality traits.	Jolly Green Giant.
	Ricoeur et al., (1977)	A figure of speech in which inanimate objects are characterized in terms of human attributes, thus representing the object as a living and feeling person.	
	Delbaere et al., (2011)	Visual personification pictures in an ad that metaphorically represent a product engaged in some human behaviour.	
	Lawler, (1983)	A general category that covers an extensive range of metaphors, each picking out different aspects of a person or ways of looking at a person, having in common that they are extensions of ontological metaphors and that they allow us to make sense of phenomena in the world in human terms – terms that we can understand based on our motivations, goals, actions and characteristics.	Inflation
	Aguirre-Rodriguez, (2014)	A human-like portrayal of a product or brand that is designed to associate the brand with specific human characteristics	
Anthropomorphism	Brown, (2011)	Where the product or brand is given the name and characteristics of a human being.	Uncle Ben, Mr Tayto.
Zoomorphism	Chen et al., (2015)	Zoomorphism refers to marketers using animals with human qualities to advocate brands.	Coca-Cola's polar bears, Tony the Tiger for Kellogg's Frosted Flakes
	Brown, (2011)	Where the product or brand is aligned with a wild or domesticated animal.	Jaguar cars, Dove soap.
Teramorphism	Chen et al., (2015)	The personification of inanimate objects as spiritual figures with human-like characteristics, by which marketers can depict brands as if they were humans.	Spokes-candies for M&M's and Mr Peanut for Planters.
	Brown, (2011)	Where the attributes of an imaginary, supernatural or prodigious creature are bestowed on goods or services.	Fairy Liquid, Monster Munch.

2.3 Taxonomy

Based on Aaker (1997), brand personification can be categorized as verbal and visual. Verbal brand personification could be internal or external (Chu et al., 2019). External personification involves portraying a brand or product's physical attributes, such as its attractiveness or luxuriousness, through strategic and intentional advertising expressions (Chu et al., 2019). Conversely, internal personification involves portraying a brand or product's character or personality traits, such as honesty, friendliness, or reliability (Chu et al., 2019).

Brown (2011) suggests three primary forms of personification, anthropomorphism, where the product or brand is given the name and characteristics of a human being (Uncle Ben, Mr Tayto); zoomorphism, where the product or brand is aligned with a wild or domesticated animal (Jaguar cars, Dove soap) and teramorphism, where the attributes of an imaginary, supernatural or prodigious creature are bestowed on goods or services (Fairy Liquid, Monster Munch).

Additionally, there are three distinct types of figurative relationships that may be established between a brand and a character. According to Brown (2011) those are the metaphorical, the metonymical and the simile. Metaphorical relationship is characterized by the integration of the brand name and embodiment, where the two are considered the same. Alternatively, a metonymical relationship may exist in which the personification serves as an endorser rather than an embodiment of the brand. Finally, a simile may also be utilized, which denotes a less permanent and more tenuous linkage or association (Brown, 2011).

Various mechanisms may be employed to attribute personality characteristics to brands. One approach involves the personification of a product, wherein it is presented to consumers in a manner that emulates the characteristics of a living entity (Fleck et al., 2014). An alternative mechanism for instilling personality traits in a brand is through the association of its presentation with a "real person", spokespersons (Fleck et al., 2014). According to Sung and Kim (2021), communication is another mechanism which can imbue a brand with personality. According to Fleck et al. (2014), spokespeople or endorsers could be someone famous to the target group, an expert in the product's industry or an employee. Table 2 summarizes the types of endorsers proposed by Fleck et al. (2014).

Table 2. Types of Endorsers (Fleck et al., 2014)

Type	Internal to the Firm	External to the Firm
Known	CEO	Celebrity
Unknown	Employee	External expert

Cohen (2014) suggests two categories of brand personification strategies: one focuses on the relationship between the personified character and the brand and the other involves a "reality continuum". The first classification scheme creates five approaches, listed below (Cohen, 2014)

1. Brand personification is a character who personifies the brand.
2. Brand personification is a character who is a spokesperson for the brand.
3. Brand personification is a character who serves as an ambassador for the brand.
4. Brand personification is a character who serves as a mascot for the brand.

5. Brand personification is a character who has some other relationship to the brand

On the other hand, the second categorization outlines the veracity of a human character (referred to as modality in linguistic contexts) that can range from animated illustrations to actual individuals (Cohen, 2014)

1. Cartoon Characters Used to Personify Brands
2. Brands Personified by Costumed Actors as Fictional Characters
3. Brands Personified by Nonperson-Specific Representatives of “Real People”
4. Brands Given a Human Face by a Fictitious Human Figurehead
5. Brands Given a Human Face by Real People That May Be Viewed as “Depersonalized” as a result of the Passage of Time or Other Factors
6. Brands Personified by Real People Who Personify Their Brand
7. Brands Personified by Consumers Themselves

In Figure 1, the overall mapping of personification is presented, illustrating the various dimensions, strategies, and types of brand personification, providing a comprehensive visual representation of the concept. We utilized Miro online platform to design the mind map presented below.

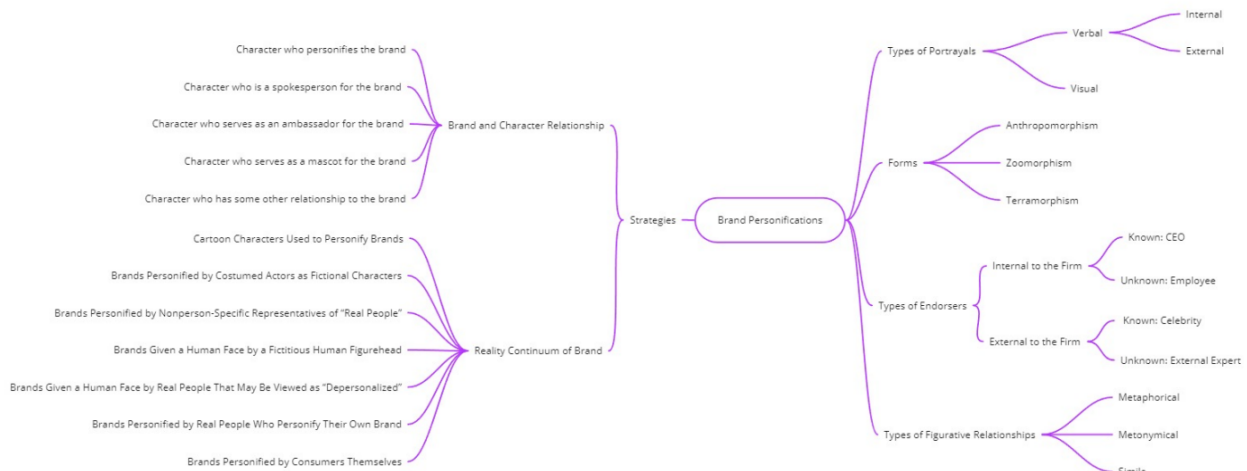


Figure 1: Overall Mapping of Personification

The image presented above depicts a comprehensive overview of the various classifications pertaining to Personification as documented in literature. Notably, the Personification concept is segmented into multiple categories, based on distinct criteria. Cohen (2014) established 12 categories based on the character's relation with the brand. In 1997, Aaker (1997) proposed verbal and visual personification based on portrayals. (Brown, 2011) classified BP into anthropomorphism, zoomorphism and teramorphism, based on the attributions imputed to the character. Furthermore, Brown identified three figurative relationships between the brand and the character. Ultimately, Fleck categorized spokespersons into four distinct groups based on their popularity and the relation with the firm.

3. Discussion, Implications and Future Research

The present study sets out to systematically review and categorize the existing literature on brand personification. We identified various brand personification strategies through a mapping literature review and classification approach, including anthropomorphism, zoomorphism, and teramorphism. We also highlighted the different relationships between personified characters and brands, such as metaphorical, metonymical, and simile relationships. Furthermore, we explored the diverse mechanisms to attribute personality characteristics to brands, including product personification, association with natural persons or spokespersons, and communication techniques.

The findings of this study have several practical implications for marketers and researchers, seeking to leverage the power of brand personification. First, the provided classification framework helps marketers better understand the different types of brand personification and their potential applications. This knowledge can aid in developing more effective and targeted marketing strategies that leverage brand personification to create stronger connections with consumers.

Second, this review contributes to the existing literature by providing a comprehensive overview of the various definitions, concepts, and approaches related to brand personification. This systematic categorization can guide future research by identifying gaps and inconsistencies in the current body of knowledge. Specifically, our review revealed limited research on the role of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and augmented reality, in facilitating the development and execution of brand personification strategies. For instance, as the world consistently experiences digital transformation, chatbots and voice assistants represent an exciting area of research, as they allow brands to engage with consumers in a more personalized, human-like manner. Investigating the effectiveness of these technologies in building strong brand-consumer relationships through personification can provide valuable insights to marketers. Additionally, the rise of social media and influencer marketing has created opportunities for brands to collaborate with influencers to personify their brand. Future research can explore the impact of such collaborations on brand equity, consumer perceptions, and overall brand performance. Also, exploring the interplay between brand personification and other marketing communication tools, such as storytelling, and user-generated content, can shed light on how these elements can be effectively integrated to create a cohesive and powerful brand image.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of considering the degree of reality in brand personification. As suggested by Cohen (2014), the continuum of reality ranges from representations of real people to fantasy, person-like creations. Future research could examine how the degree of reality in brand personification influences consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. For example, researchers could investigate whether more realistic personifications lead to stronger consumer-brand relationships or whether abstract, fantastical personifications evoke more significant curiosity and engagement.

In an increasingly competitive environment, where brands continually vie for consumer attention and loyalty, brand personification can be a powerful differentiator. By understanding and applying the various brand personification strategies and approaches discussed in this study,

marketers can create unique, relatable, and engaging brand personalities that resonate with their target audience and foster long-lasting consumer-brand relationships.

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