ANTHROPOMORPHISM GOES DIGITAL IN THE BRANDING GAME – CAN IT SUSTAIN THE BRAND POWER?

Dr. R. Venkatesh[*]

Ms. Pallavi Sinha[**]

Abstract

With online marketing gaining ground in India, marketers are going digital in their promotion too. What better strategy can they employ than introducing mysterious, sensuous digital agents not only to promote their brand but also to keep consumers attached to the brands. Digital agents vary depending on the brand attitude and benefits that products offer to different market segments. This article explores the idea of creating "love mark" digital agents with various parameters and attributes for different categories of products and services.

[*] Professor, Alliance School of Business, Alliance University

[**] HCL Technologies, Chennai

Introduction:

Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics to non-human or non-living things, phenomena, material states and objects or abstract concepts. Examples include animals and plants and forces of nature such as winds, rain or the sun depicted as creatures with human motivations, and/or the abilities to reason and converse.

Humans feel more comfortable with forms and imagery that mimic theirown form. A product use can be explained through anthropomorphic form associated with it. Example – razors – angular forms convey masculinity while the curve form conveys feminity. Anthropomorphic forms can also project human values, example – a soft drink bottle that uses feminine shapes and projections project the values of health and vitality. (Carl DiSalvo, Francine Gemperle, 2003)

Digital Age Branding:

The internet has upended how consumers engage with brands. It is transforming the economics of marketing and making obsolete many of the function's traditional strategies and structures. For marketers, the old way of doing business is unsustainable.

ComScore has found 75% of the internet audience in India to be aged 35 years and below, promising to make it the youngest online population in the coming years.

Females formed 39.3% of the total audience, and the sharpest growth was observed among male and female segments in the age-group 15 to 24.

Consumers still want a clear brand promise and offerings they value. What has changed is when—at what touch points—they are most open to influence, and how you can interact with them at those points. In the past, marketing strategies that put the lion's share of resources into building brand awareness and then opening wallets at the point of purchase worked pretty well. But touch points have changed in both number and nature, requiring a major adjustment to realign marketers' strategy and budgets with where consumers are actually spending their time.

Literature Survey:

According to Guthrie's (1995) classic study, faces in the clouds, anthropomorphic instinct is attributable to humankind's innate need to personify. It's a survival mechanism of sorts. It surges during times of social, economic and technological turmoil.

"Anthromorphism is present in children's books where animals dress in human clothes and feel human emotions. Also, its not uncommon to find children express Anthromorphism, example – feeling guilty when a favorite toy is lost or damaged. Movie producers use it in every movie,

example – Toy Story, Finding Nemo etc. The marketing of orphan dolls is a perfect example where anthromorphic customers rescue a doll from an orphanage". (Anthromorphism in marketing by Burleson Consulting)

The work by Aggarwal and McGill (2007), examines anthropomorphism of the product itself.This research finds that people increase liking of the target product when a congruency exists between a marketer-activated human schema and characteristics of the product because people are more likely to see the metaphor.

The definition of anthropomorphism—as attributing humanlike attributes to nonhuman objects—allows for two distinct forms of anthropomorphism (Guthrie [1995). One form of anthropomorphism relies on analogical reasoning and uses the human schema to structure, think about, and communicate characteristics of the nonhuman entities. In this case, anthropomorphism is a process of inductive reasoning or a simple description of an observable appearance or behavior of nonhuman entities. Attributing humanlike mental states is a second form of anthropomorphism, one that is a step closer to seeing nonhuman objects as being "really" human. This type of anthropomorphism can trigger social beliefs and perceptions afforded other human beings.

This paper, explores situations anthropomorphism can color judgments differently, depending on the social beliefs and expectations of the consumer. When consumers attribute humanlike mental capacities to nonhuman objects, they will apply beliefs and knowledge about their social world to the object world, and consumers with different social concepts will perceive the same anthropomorphized object differently. The central hypothesis of this research is that anthropomorphizing a product causes consumers to apply social expectations and beliefs they would not normally apply to an inanimate entity. This research focuses on how feelings of power lead to perceived control. If the influence of social powercan be properly understood, marketers might be able to sway customers' power perceptions in accordance with their strategies.

Marketers often believe consumers will feel more positively toward their products if they see these products in human terms. For instance, toy makers try to create social bonds between children and their anthropomorphized toys (Turkle 2000). Car makers shape the headlights and grilles of cars to suggest a human face in order to appeal to buyers (Welsh 2006). This study's findings reveal that when entities bear risk, the effect of anthropomorphism is moderated by feelings of social power. Anthropomorphism increases risk perceptions for those with low

power, whereas it decreases risk perception for those with high power. We trace these findings to people's application of social beliefs and expectations to anthropomorphized risk-bearing entities. Hence, high social power makes people think they can control outcomes from anthropomorphized, risk-bearing entities, which in turn decreases risk perception.

The challenge for advertising isn't to create complex relationships between brands and people; it's to combat latent apathy via being relevant and interesting. It's not forgetting how and why people interact with different touch points and most importantly it's aboutcreating tangible business results (Stewart Gurney, The anthropomorphism of brand interaction, 20 June, 2013, bandt.com)

The Effects of Anthropomorphic Agents on Advertising Effectiveness (Yung Kyun Choi, Gordon E. Miracle, Frank Biocca)

Modern day anthropomorphic agents are computer-generated, graphically displayed entities that represent either imaginary characters or real humans controlled by artificial intelligence. An agent that is incarnated with human form is referred to as an "anthropomorphic agent." Anthropomorphic properties are important for the design of social virtual environments because they facilitate the real time transmission of some of the body's communication cues (Biocca, 1997).

When an individual participates in technologically mediated communication, he/she simultaneously experiences two separate environments: the physical environment in which one is actually present, and the environment presented via the medium (Steuer, 1992).

Tele-presence occurs when the individual feels transported to the mediated environment through technology rather than in one's physical environment.(Biocca, 1997; Steuer, 1992).Biocca (1997) it is defined as perception of social presence as the degree to which a user feels access to the intelligence, intentions, and sensory impressions of another.

Present day consumer decision journey goes beyond the traditional information seeking and narrowing the choices. As per (David Court et al., McKinsey Quarterly, June 2009) the new research which shows that rather than systematically narrowing their choices, consumers add and subtract brands from a group under consideration during an extended evaluation phase. After purchase, they often enter into an open-ended relationship with the brand, sharing their experience with it online. They follow the steps described below in making a buying decision.

Consider &Buy :Marketers often overemphasize the "consider" and "buy" stages of the journey, allocating more resources than they should to building awareness through advertising and encouraging purchase with retail promotions.

Evaluate & Advocate: New media make the "evaluate" and "advocate" stages increasingly relevant. Marketing investments that help consumers navigate the evaluation process and then spread positive word of mouth about the brands they choose can be as important as building awareness and driving purchase.

Bond: If consumers' bond with a brand is strong enough, they repurchase it without cycling through the earlier decision-journey stages.The journey begins with the consumer's top-of-mind consideration set: products or brands assembled from exposure to ads or store displays, an encounter at a friend's house, or other stimuli. In the funnel model, the consider stage contains the largest number of brands; but today's consumers, assaulted by media and awash in choices, often reduce the number of products they consider at the outset.

Evaluate: The initial consideration set frequently expands as consumers seek input from peers, reviewers, retailers, and the brand and its competitors. Typically, they'll add new brands to the set and discard some of the originals as they learn more and their selection criteria shift. Their outreach to marketers and other sources of information is much more likely to shape their ensuing choices than marketers' push to persuade them.

Do we create love marks brands through anthropomorphic strategy? Love marks, according to Kevin Roberts should have mystery, sensuousness and intimacy.Can companies design digital objects which would fit the above description? If so, what would be the response from the potential customers?

This article is an attempt to quantify such responses to understand parameters required for creating a strong and sustainable brand presence.

Research problem: Can one sustain the brand power by creating a strong love mark anthropomorphic agent in digital marketing and what parameters or attributes that makes digital brands tick?

Objectives of the study:

To find out the "attributes" that best describes a strong anthromorphic character which would be acceptable to different segments.

To evaluate the brand attitude with such agents

To construct a probable model to establish, improve and sustain brand power.

Research Method:

Survey method with the aid of a questionnaire as a tool was used to analyze potential customer reactions to digital anthromorphic agents and possible top of the mind brands using such strategies. The survey was undertaken to understand the demographic influences on 15 different aspects of perception towards Anthropomorphic Agents.

Responses were sought on the following attributes/parameters.

Communication through a) mythological agents b) Cartoon characters c) real life personalities d) imaginary/fiction characters .

Choice of agents resembling film star, politician, sports persons or famous industrialist

Whether agents communicate trust

Agent's communicative approach a) humour b) rational c) emotional d) problem solving

Whether the agent should remain the same over long period or should evolve over time

Apart from these questions, respondents were also asked about instructiveness of agents, word of mouth due to influence of agents and to what extent agents influenced their buying behaviour.

189 usable responses were received and were complete without any missing data. The responses were skewed towards the age group of 20-40 years representing 65% of the respondents. Few responses(7 %) were received from retired personals, hence this group was treated separately. Descriptive statistics of the respondents is summarized in Table 1. From the data, we can observe that, working professionals and students make up for the bulk of the respondents while home makers are also in sizable numbers who would like to be online most times and can be targeted for promotions through use of agents.

Analysis

Ordinal regression (nominal regression where applicable) was applied to understand and interpret the results.

While working professionals showed significant preference for agents as brand promoters, home makers were less inclined to recommend products due to agents, at the same time they would love to watch the agents talk about the brands.

Very few of the respondents preferred mythological agents as they believe that brands get the colour of religion rather than effectively addressing the benefits. While some believed that certain agents represented the power and trust that brands create, the majority opinion was that it

creates bias. In fact many retired people showed positive inclination towards mythological agents.

Cartoon and Fantasy characters though did not show any significant bias by any demographic group, students definitely showed interest in these agents as they felt such agents always bring freshness and creativity to the brands.

There was a general belief among the respondents that famous real life personalities could add sense of trust in the brands but the sustenance of brand power would definitely depend on the reputation that personalities enjoy over time.

Multinomial regression was used to determine factors associated with agent's personality and demographic. Young working male professionals preferred film star or sportsman, while young working female prefer film star or politician. Students in general preferred sports person compared to film personality. Majority of the retired, preferred powerful industrialists as agents while male respondents' preference was towards the real life agents.

No significant bias was observed towards brand communications by agents, brand/product recall due to agents.

Working professionals preferred the agents to talk and communicate the brand message, while student preferred all aspects of agents like being present in advertisement, talk and communicate, demonstrate product benefit and usage. Female respondents wanted the agents to be interactive, demonstrative and generally pleasant. Students preferred aggressive and adventuristic agents while promoting the products which interest them.

When respondents were asked whether they trusted the agents or felt that agents could mislead them while looking at the alternatives, majority felt that they were not mislead by the agents. The trust factor, they emphasized, depends on the brand and the appropriate agent chosen.

Can the agents persuade you to watch them again and again when they communicate with the intended audience?

Male were less inclined to watch promotion by agents many times unless the messages were very interesting and different. However interactive agents found support from the majority to watch the promotions many times. The younger (20-40) group were more inclined to purchase products having their favourite agents and agreed that the agents did play a part in their purchase decisions.

Should the agent represent single Brand or multiple brands or brand extensions?

Most of the respondents felt that in order to be effective and to have a definite brand personality, agents should communicate and represent single product/brand. Brand extensions could have the same agent provided that the agent communicate the benefits effectively of the extensions but definitely not contradicting the basic benefit that was projected originally.

Agents preferably should represent only one brand in order not to dilute the brand power. In the case of brand extensions, same agents can appear with different messages , even though the effect will not be the same.

Should the agent evolve over time or should continue to be the same?

Working professionals and students preferred the agents to evolve over time to reflect the changes in tastes and the behaviour of young consumers. However majority felt that there should not be too much tinkering with the agent's personality or profile, homemakers preferred the agent not to change at all, as the original perception of the brand may be altered by such evolution.

For the younger generation (professionals and students), agents should evolve over time , grow over time (like Barbie the small child to a mature woman). For homemakers and older generation the agents could remain the same (Nostalgia effect).

The overall analysis is interpreted thus:

- Agents can definitely promote brands in digital marketing
- Age and profession has influence on type of agents (Mythological/real life/ fantasy)
- Agents can resemble sportsperson or film personalities or politicians depending on the product.
- Agents will have to communicate, interact and pleasing/aggressive and demonstrative.
- Agents can promote the brand with different messages depending on the benefits the brand offers.

Therefore if one has to develop a lovemark agent who will deliver the brand message more accurately to the intended buyers, the following parameters & attributes can be considered.
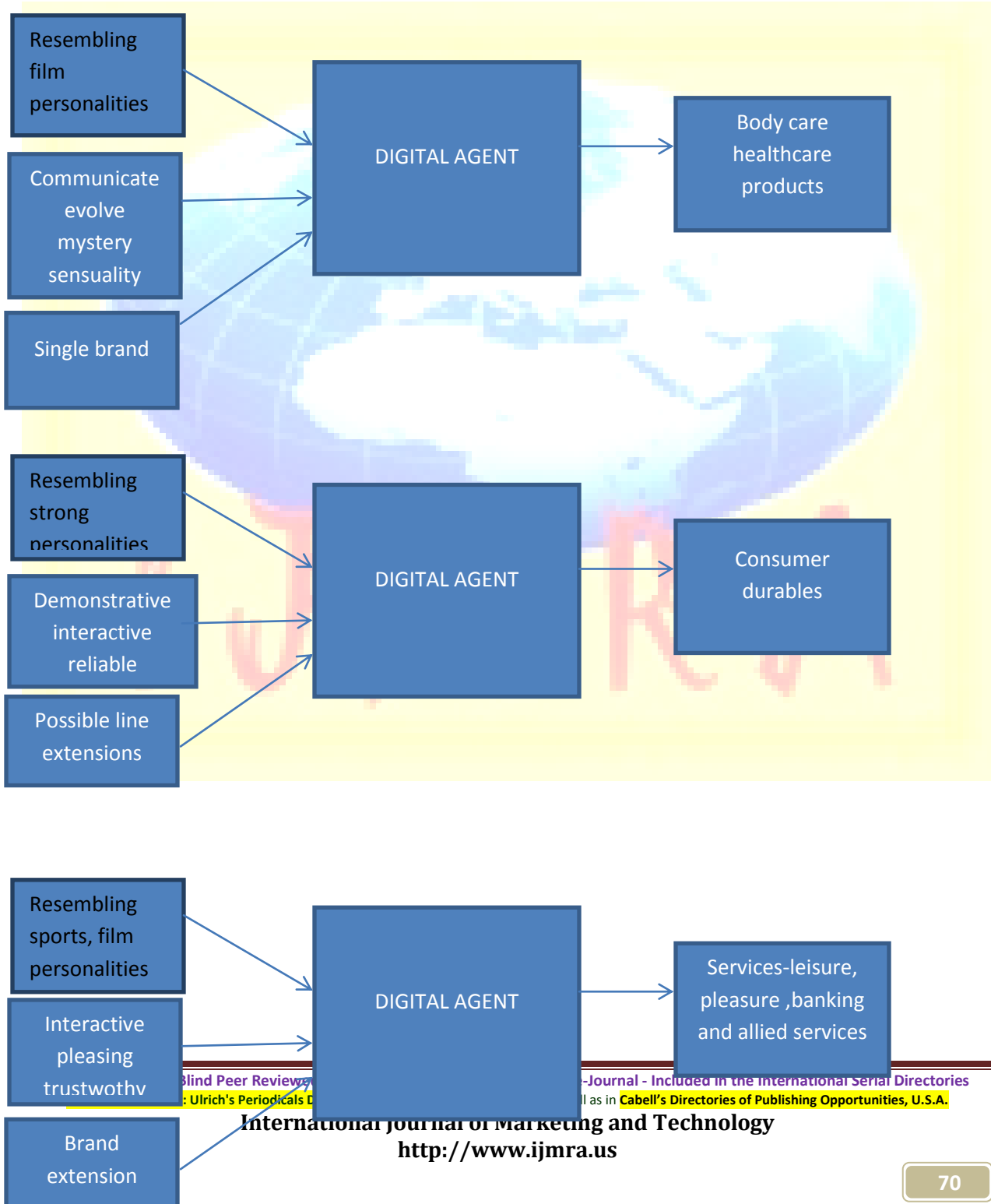
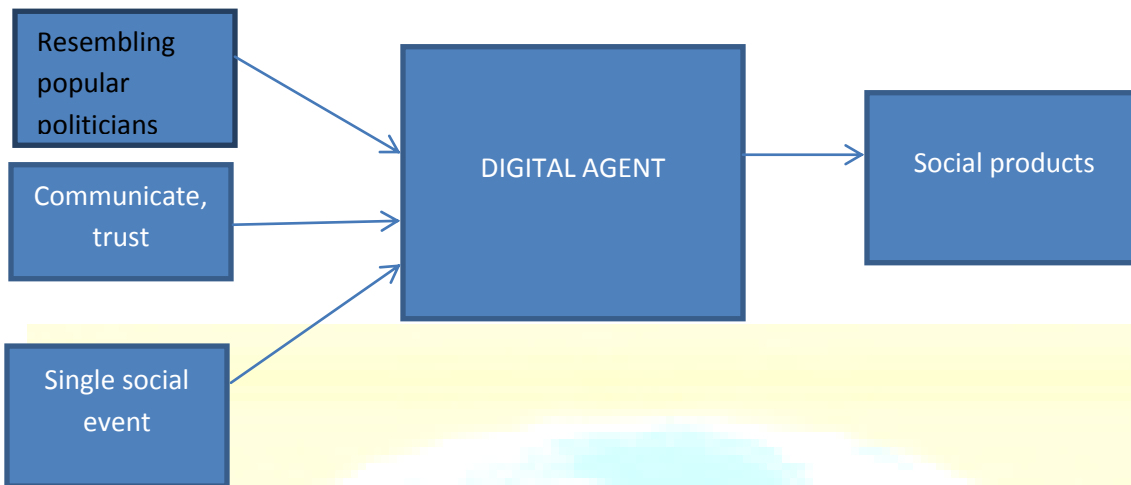Probable models for different occasions/products/ age

Convenience products : digital agents (resembling film personalities, real life), communicative, single brand, evolve based on added benefits mix of mystery and sensuality.

Durables : digital agents (resembling strong personalities), demonstrative, interactive, communicate reliability.

Services : digital agents (resembling sports persons , film personalities) , interactive, pleasing/aggressive, trustworthy)

Social products: digital agents (resembling popular politician, communicate, create trust)

Blind Peer Reviewed ... -Journal - Included in the International Serial Directories
: Ulrich's Periodicals D... ll as in **Cabell's Directories of Publishing Opportunities, U.S.A.**

International Journal of Marketing and Technology
http://www.ijmra.us

70

Resembling popular politicians

Communicate, trust

Single social event

DIGITAL AGENT

Social products

Conclusion:

The online buying is on the increase everywhere and especially in India, where the younger generation has taken to buy many products online because of convenience of shopping and the price. Digital marketing strategies will soon determine the popularity of products and brands and digital agents are going to play a very important role in promoting and sustaining brands. Innovation is the key to create interesting, mysterious and trustworthy agents so that potential buyers in different categories can be attracted to specific brands. One can create individual or family agents who look real time actors and who slowly become darlings of masses. The day is not far off when agents start selling products successfully and during the course they themselves become famous brands.

Appendix

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	20-40	124	65%
	40-60	53	28%
	60 & above	12	7%
Sex	Male	85	45%
	Female	104	55%
Occupation	Working professionals	113	60%
	Home Maker/retired	42	22%
	Student	34	18%

References:

1. Carl DiSalvo, Francine Gemperle," From seduction to fulfillment: the use of anthropomorphic form in design", DPPI '03: Proceedings of the 2003 international conference on Designing pleasurable products and interfaces (2003), pp. 67-72, doi:10.1145/782896.782913

2. T. Koda, and P. Maes, "Agents With Faces: the Effect of Personi-fication," Proc. of the 5th IEEE International Workshop on Robot andHuman Communication, 189-194, 1996

3. "Comprehensive internet usage statistics 2012", http://digitalmarketingat.blogspot.in, browsed on 18th Jan 2014

4. GuthrieS, Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion, Oxford University Press, 1995.

5. "Anthromorphism in marketing by Burleson Consulting", www.dba-oracle.com, browsed on 20th Jan 2014

6. Aggarwal and McGill, "Is That Car Smiling at Me? Schema Congruity as a Basis for Evaluating Anthropomorphized Products", JOURNAL OF CONSUMER RESEARCH, Inc., Vol. 34, December 2007

7. Steuer, J, "Defining Virtual Reality: Dimensions Determining Telepresence", Journal of Communication, Volume 42, Issue 4, pages 73–93, December 1992.

8. Turkle, "What Do You Mean, `It's Just Like a Real Dog'?", The New York times, May 25, 2000.

9. Welsh Jonathan, "Why Cars Got Angry", Wall street Journal, March 10,2006.

10. Stewart Gurney, The anthropomorphism of brand interaction, 20 June, 2013, bandt.com.

11. Yung Kyun Choi, Gordon E. Miracle, Frank Biocca, "The Effects of Anthropomorphic Agents on Advertising Effectiveness and the Mediating Role of Presence", Journal of Interactive Advertising, Vol2 No 1 , fall 2001.

12. David Court et al., " The Consumer Decision journey", McKinsey Quarterly, June 2009

13. Kevin Roberts, Love marks the future beyond brands, powerhouse books, 2005.