

The Effectiveness of Anthropomorphized Mascots in Sport Team Branding

Yong Jae Ko, University of Florida

Wonseok (Eric) Jang, Texas Tech University

Yonghwan Chang, University of Minnesota

Akira Asada, University of Florida

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(including questions)

Anthropomorphism refers to “the tendency to attribute humanlike characteristics, intentions, and behavior to nonhuman objects” (Kim & McGill, 2011, p.95). Marketers often anthropomorphize their products by instilling human personality traits into nonhuman entities (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). One example are sports teams’ mascots. Sports teams frequently utilize anthropomorphic mascots to promote their teams to fans by humanizing nonhuman entities such as animals (e.g., Florida Gator and Jacksonville Jaguar), symbolic image of a city (e.g., Pittsburgh Steelers and San Francisco 49ers), and even natural phenomenon (e.g., Miami Hurricane and TampaBay Lightning). While usage of anthropomorphic mascots has been significantly increased in the sport industry, there is a limited understanding of how sport consumers respond toward teams’ branding efforts of using anthropomorphic mascots. Accordingly, to assist in filling the gap, the purpose of the current study is to examine the effect of anthropomorphic promotion using team mascots on the consumer response.

Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses

Theory of anthropomorphism suggests that people are attracted by anthropomorphized objects because their need for social connection can be satisfied by establishing a psychological connection with such objects (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). In the fields of social psychology and consumer behavior, scholars found that anthropomorphism benefits brands in several ways; consumers more favorably evaluate (e.g., product quality; Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Connell, 2013), trust brands (Waytz, Heafner, & Epley, 2014), and form stronger relationship with brands (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). By incorporating the previous findings, the current study proposes that anthropomorphized messages using mascots would help sports teams attract new fans. Specifically, the authors hypothesized the following:

H1: When sports teams promote their team, anthropomorphized messages using mascots elicit more positive responses from consumers compared to a situation when an objective approach message is used.

H2: Perceived self-brand connection would mediate relationships between anthropomorphized promotional message and consumers’ responses.

Prior literature has also suggested that when a nonhuman entity (e.g., robot) is anthropomorphized, people are more likely to forgive unexpected accidents that were caused by that nonhuman entity (Salem, Lakatos, Amirabdollahian, & Dautenhahn, 2015). This is because anthropomorphism enables people to create beliefs and social expectations toward a nonhuman entity (Kim & McGill, 2011). As a result, people create a stronger emotional connection with an anthropomorphized product (Kim & McGill, 2011). In this regard, as people often forgive significant others’ (e.g., friends and family) faults, they also forgive accidents that were caused by an anthropomorphized product (Salem et al., 2015). Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H3: When sports teams lose a game, anthropomorphized messages using mascot elicit less negative responses and stronger supportive patronage behaviors from fans compared to a situation when an objective approach message is used.

Importantly, such effect would be magnified when teams use anthropomorphized mascots with different facial expression and dynamic movement imagery (Cian, Krishna, & Elder, 2015). Thus, the authors hypothesized:

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H4a: When the teams win a game, anthropomorphized message from happy (joyful) faced mascot elicits more positive responses from their fans than sad/angry faced mascot.

H4b: When the teams lose a game, anthropomorphized message from sad faced mascot would elicit less negative responses and stronger supportive patronage behaviors from their fans than happy faced mascot condition.

H4c/d: In the losing game condition, forgiveness/empathy would mediate relationships between anthropomorphized promotional message and consumers' responses.

H5: In the winning condition, anthropomorphized message from a mascot with dynamic movement imagery would elicit more positive responses from their fans than mascot with less dynamic movement (calm) imagery.

Methods

Experiment 1 (for H1 and H2) will employ a 3 (Anthropomorphism: Anthropomorphized Animal Mascot x Animal Mascot x No mascot) between-subject design. A total of 100 participants will be recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Different types of promotional approaches will be manipulated by using either anthropomorphized or non-anthropomorphized promotion perspective. Specifically, participants read "Imagine that you have recently moved to a city called "Newville" to start your new job...In Newville, there is a professional football team, the Newville Bronco.... The team mascot suggests...*Hi, I am Albert, the official friend of Newville Broncos... The Broncos promise to offer you a great game experiences. Please join our fan group*" Perceived anthropomorphism will be measured for manipulation check (2-items: Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). Emotion/Appealing (Hur et al., 2015) and supportive patronage behaviors (Kim, Trail, & Ko, 2011) will be measured as dependent variables (DVs). In addition, Self-brand connection scale (Escalas & Bettmen, 2003, 2009) will be measured as a mediating variable, while team identification (Kwon, Trail, & Lee, 2009), trait competitiveness (Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1998) and football involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1985) will be measured as covariates.

Experiment 2 (for H3 and H4) will use a 2 (Team performance: Win x Lose) x 2 (Facial Expression: Happy x Sad) between-subject design. A total of 150 participants will be recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Both variables will be a manipulated by researchers. For example, for losing game condition participants read the following message. "Imagine that your favorite team lost a rivalry game tonight.... The team mascot apologizes...*Dear fans, I am Albert, the official friend of Newville Cowboys... We lost very important game tonight. The Broncos will offer you better game experiences next week.*" In addition to the DVs in experiment 1, Blaming (Louie & Obermiller, 2002) and CORFing behaviors (Trail et al., 2012) will be measured as dependent variables. Consistent with Experiment 1, team identification, trait competitiveness, and football involvement will be measured as covariates.

Experiment 3 (for H5) will use a 2 (Team performance: Win x Lose) x 2 (Perceived Movement: High x Low) between-subject design. A total of 150 participants will be recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk. In addition to the DVs in experiment 1, BIRGing behaviors (Trail et al., 2012) will be measured as dependent variables. Consistent with Experiment 1, team identification, trait competitiveness, and football involvement will be measured as covariates.

Results and Implications

We are currently collecting the data and will ensure that we present the results and implications at the conference. The current study further develops our theoretical understanding of sport spectator behavior by applying and extending existing research paradigm of anthropomorphism. It is anticipated that the results would demonstrate how anthropomorphized promotion could help develop new fan base and provide managerial implications for team branding.

**Note: Key references will be provided in the presentation*