Effects of personification and anthropomorphic tendency on destination attitude and travel intentions

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Travel intentions can be shaped by a personified advertisement combined with individual levels of anthropomorphic tendency.
- Destination attitude is influenced by text-personification combined with an individual's level of anthropomorphic tendency.
- Such effects are mediated by emotions felt by high anthropomorphic tendency individuals viewing a personified advertisement.

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ABSTRACT

This research examined how individual differences in anthropomorphic tendency (the tendency to humanize non-human agents/objects) influence how people respond to destination marketing communications. Specifically, this study examined whether individual-level anthropomorphic tendency and text-personification of destination marketing communications interact to influence destination attitude and travel intentions. Results from a study involving 210 Australian participants revealed that destination attitude and travel intentions were most favorable for people with high levels of anthropomorphic tendency and who were exposed to personified tourism messages. These findings indicate that text-personification represents a new communication tactic for tourism — particularly for target consumers who are high in anthropomorphic tendency — and one that can humanize the destination leading to more favorable attitudes and higher intentions to travel. This effect is mediated by positive emotions. People with high anthropomorphic tendency who are exposed to a personified advertisement feel more positive emotions, which lead to positive tourism outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Speaking about a destination as if it were a person is hardly a new development. Consider for instance a person who says they are visiting "Mother Russia". Referring to destinations as people is a form of anthropomorphism, or seeing human characteristics in something that is not human. Doing so gives a sense of familiarity and understanding of the destination in question. Indeed, researchers note three motivations for why people anthropomorphize: effectance motivation, sociality motivation and elicited agent knowledge (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). In short, people want to understand non-human agents, are seeking social connection (or a simulation of one at least), and desire to project their knowledge of humanity onto non-human agents. For destination marketing, this process offers the opportunity to build perceived similarity or shared norms, allowing travelers to reduce uncertainty through increased understanding, and to feel greater attachment (Epley et al., 2007). Indeed, destinations need to be perceived as warm and welcoming if they are to attract tourists to their shores.

Advertisers commonly attempt to activate anthropomorphism by adding human-like features to a product (e.g., a car grille that looks like a smile; Aggarwal & McGill, 2007) or even by humanizing their brand (e.g., spokes-characters; Callcott & Phillips, 1996). This attempt to activate anthropomorphism is defined here as personification. In tourism marketing communications, personification is seen most commonly in country or event mascots — for instance, the London Olympics which used humanoid mascots, or Godzilla becoming a tourism ambassador for Tokyo.

Applying personification in tourism communications has several key benefits. Once anthropomorphism has been activated in a person, this can lead to an increased sense of predictability and understanding (Waytz, Morewedge, Epley, Monteleone, Gao & Cacioppo, 2010d), increased attachment (Chandler & Schwarz, 2010), the conferral of moral rights (Waytz, Epley, & Cacioppo, 2010b), more pro-social behavior like generosity (Haley & Fessler, 2005), and other behaviors, such as intending to behave in a way consistent with the anthropomorphized agent (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Chartrand, Fitzsimons, & Fitzsimons, 2008). Thus, ensuring anthropomorphism of a destination not only aids the tourist in understanding and feeling comfortable with the destination, but makes them a more amenable person within that destination (i.e., less likely behave anti-socially whilst traveling).

Whilst mascots are commonly used, there is no guarantee that the form marketers choose for the mascot will be a form that consumers themselves will relate to. Destinations have a broad market, so designing relevant campaigns can be difficult. However, there is another tool available for activating anthropomorphism that is often overlooked; text-based personification. For example, using personal pronouns like 'he' or 'she' rather than 'it', and other humanized terms. There is a lack of focus in both research and practice with regards to the personification of text. This represents a more subtle approach where the responsibility for attributing humanity and personality reside in the mind of the *consumer*, rather than being dictated by advertisers placing a pre-designed mascot into marketing communications. As this approach leaves much of the control to consumers, it allows scope for greater imaginative involvement and potentially greater connection with the personified destination.

However, as with all marketing communications strategies, individual differences of the message recipient also have a role to play. Given the important role of anthropomorphism in this area, anthropomorphic tendency is likely to be a key determinant of message success. Anthropomorphic tendency is the individual propensity towards anthropomorphism (Waytz, Cacioppo, & Epley, 2010a), a process that was once thought to be universal (e.g., Hume, 2010; Guthrie, 1995). It is this tendency that explains, for example, why one person names his car and another does not. It would also be expected to influence whether someone reacted positively, indifferently or even negatively to personified tourism communications. This study consequently aims to investigate whether individual-level anthropomorphic tendency and personification interact to influence consumers' attitudes towards a destination, and their intentions to travel there. This paper begins with a review of extant literature in the areas of personification in destination marketing, as well as initial work examining the role of anthropomorphic tendency in personification strategies, and the potential mediating effect of positive emotions. This review informs the development of three hypotheses, which are then tested using an online experimental method. Results and implications are then discussed.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Personification strategies in destination marketing

In destination marketing, personification strategies most often appear as mascots or as an idea about the country and its people. For instance, the Leprechaun as an unofficial mascot for Ireland, or referring to Italy as 'passionate' and France as 'artistic'. Personification of text is less common in official strategies, though references to names like 'Mother Russia' may still be made informally.

Communication theory and symbolic interactionism theory can help to explain the value of personification strategies to tourism marketing. Tourism marketers can encode a message and send it consumers, but appropriate decoding of the message is needed to ensure that the meaning intended by the marketer is the same meaning interpreted by the consumer. Symbolic interactionism indicates that meaning is co-created, and the symbols and cues sent by the marketer are actively processed and interpreted by the consumer (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). This is particularly important in the context of destination marketing, where cross-cultural communication is required and there is a risk that signs and symbols encoded by the marketer may not be appropriately interpreted by the consumer.

Personification, then, takes on a key role. When communicating across cross-cultural boundaries, one thing that people have in common is their humanity; the accessibility of the human schema is one reason it tends to be applied to aid in understanding the world (Guthrie, 1995). While the propensity towards applying anthropomorphism has been shown to vary by individual (Waytz et al., 2010a), making something more human-like still remains one way to encourage the application of anthropomorphism, and to speak in a 'common language' across cultural borders.

The difficulty then lies in what *type* of human traits the destination should be imbued with. The field of destination personality is established in the tourism literature (see Chen & Phou, 2013; Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Zouganeli, Trihas, Antonaki, & Kladou, 2012), yet symbolic interactionism indicates that meaning is co-created with the consumer — it is not enough for the marketer to simply create a personality. Indeed, encouraging imaginative engagement can have positive outcomes for brands, with Huang and Mitchell (2014) finding that imaginative engagement with a brand can lead to stronger brand relationships — though they also note that for more utilitarian brands, imagination may need to be encouraged by having the marketer actively personify the brand. For instance, they suggest that British paint company Ronseal note in their advertising "how good a pal Ronseal is" to encourage personification and imaginative engagement in order to build stronger brand relationships.

While a tourism destination is more hedonic than utilitarian, its intangible nature indicates the need for personification from the marketer in order to encourage imaginative engagement. One approach that can be readily applied by destination marketers is text-based personification. Text-based personification (e.g., referring to a city as "she" rather than "it"), where visual personification is not provided, may be ideal for encouraging imaginative engagement and the benefits of anthropomorphism, without the marketer pre-determining a personality that the consumer may not respond well to. There is great value in the personification of text because it transfers control from the marketer to the consumer, which may result in a more unique engagement with the destination.

While there is a lack of research in marketing literature, text personification has been studied in psychological research by Tam, Lee, and Chao (2013) who conducted an experiment where one condition discussed Nature using personal pronouns, and the other did not. Findings indicated that those in the anthropomorphism condition felt a stronger connection to nature than those in the control condition. This is in line with previous work that showed anthropomorphism leads to increased attachment (Chandler & Schwarz, 2010). Tam et al's., (2013) experiment not only indicates that text personification is a successful strategy, but also that it can apply to abstract, intangible concepts beyond products or brands, making this strategy especially relevant for tourism marketing.

However, these same authors note that individual differences in the propensity to anthropomorphize emerged during their experiments. This is supported by earlier research that finds that anthropomorphism varies by individual (Waytz et al., 2010a). Personification encourages consumers to anthropomorphize by encouraging the application of a human schema to a non-human