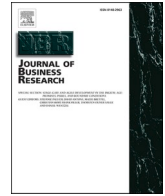




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## Anthropomorphism and its implications for advertising hotel brands

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### ABSTRACT

Given increased branding competition in the hotel industry, it is imperative to explore the importance of marketing communications in generating desirable customer responses. Building on previous anthropomorphism research, two experiments in this research explore the role of anthropomorphism-based communications for hotel brands. Study 1 investigates the moderating role of sociality via accommodation type, and Study 2 examines the moderating effect of effacement on the relationship between anthropomorphism and customers' responses via appeal type. These interaction effects enhance perceived warmth, leading to customers' higher visit intentions. Consistent with the tenets of anthropomorphism, we find anthropomorphism qualifies as an effective hotel communication strategy. Results also provide insights into when anthropomorphism-based communications become more effective in hotel advertising strategies.

David Hume, Scottish philosopher (1757/ 1957, p. xix)

"There is a universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves and to transfer to every object, those qualities."

### 1. Introduction

Intense brand competition is a major threat to sustaining hotel business. An effective marketing communication strategy is becoming important to surviving the surplus of competing brands. Advertising is a key communication strategy when developing favorable evaluations (Burman, Albinsson, Hyatt, & Robles, 2017), higher purchase intentions (Liu & Mattila, 2017), and improved sales performance (Assaf, Josiasen, Matilla, & Cvelbar, 2015). Firms spend heavily on advertising; and the lodging industry is no exception – investing 769.76 million U.S. dollars on brand promotion in 2019 (Statista, 2019). However, not all advertising expenses justify investment. Advertisers must create effective advertisements that gain customer attention (Taylor & Costello, 2017). One innovative way to gain attention is humanizing the brand, which is called anthropomorphism (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). Anthropomorphism refers to the customer's tendency to imbue human characteristics to nonhuman entities (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). Such nonhuman entities can be products or brands.

Anthropomorphism is important as a brand positioning strategy and

has received increased attention from researchers in recent years (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). Drawing on research in anthropomorphism theory (Epley et al., 2007) and mind perception theory (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007), this study explores how anthropomorphism influences customers' visit intentions via perceived warmth in the context of the hotel industry. According to anthropomorphism theory, customers perceive an advertised entity as humanlike when the advertised entity is triggered as humanlike (Epley et al., 2007). The three-factor theory of anthropomorphism supports the idea that elicited agent knowledge works as a cognitive determinant, whereas sociality and effacement are motivational determinants (Shin & Kim, 2018). Following mind perception theory, this study proposes when customers think of a hotel brand as a person, they believe a hotel has the capacity to feel (experience) and act (agency) (Gray et al., 2007). Feel (experience) captures warmth, while act (agency) captures the competence dimension of human perception (Fisk, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Because the warmth dimension is more crucial than the competence dimension in the hedonic consumption context (e.g., a hotel stay), we argue the perceived warmth of a hotel brand is more influential in developing customers' visit intention.

Research suggests additional studies must examine anthropomorphism and its underlying processes because anthropomorphism effects are contextually complicated and depend on situational factors (Ketron

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& Naletelich, 2019). Prior research also suggests increased investigation in hotel advertising is necessary (Burman et al., 2017). This study responds to these calls and explores whether anthropomorphism communication interacts with other conditions to influence customers' perceived warmth and visit intentions. Specifically, this study answers the following research questions: (1) Does anthropomorphism work for hotel brands as the theory posits?; (2) What are the contexts that better effectuate anthropomorphism?; and (3) What is the underlying mechanism explaining the relationship of anthropomorphism with customers' visit intention? This study explores the cognitive mechanism of anthropomorphism derived from anthropomorphism theory, relying on elicited agent knowledge and two moderating effects: (1) sociality via accommodation types and (2) effectance via advertising appeal types.

The current research contributes to positive streams of anthropomorphism. Bridging research between anthropomorphism and mind perception theories, we propose anthropomorphizing a hotel brand prompts customers to judge the hotel brand as warm, which leads to higher visit intention. In the following section, we review the theoretical background and develop hypotheses regarding the process of anthropomorphism. Then, we present two experiments that test the proposed hypotheses, and conclude with a discussion of our findings, theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Anthropomorphism theory

According to anthropomorphism theory, the accessibility of human knowledge, presence of situational cues, and individuals' motivation determines the likelihood of perceiving human-like characteristics in non-human objects (Epley et al., 2007). Attributions in anthropomorphized objects has important implications for how customers perceive anthropomorphized entities (Epley & Waytz, 2009). Anthropomorphism theory includes three determinants- elicited agent knowledge, sociality, and effectance. The elicited agent knowledge determinant explains the cognitive process of anthropomorphism (Wang, 2017). It is a theoretical support in understanding how customers make anthropomorphic judgements toward nonhuman agents (Wang, 2017). People activate the same mental processes when thinking about human beings and anthropomorphized, nonhuman objects (Epley et al., 2007). For instance, we talk about our smartphones, Apple, as if they are a close friend; and we call Alexa, Amazon's virtual assistant, as if it is a person.

The sociality determinant illustrates people's need to develop and sustain a sense of social connection with others, including non-human agents (Wang, 2017). The desire to establish social relationships is achieved through anthropomorphism (Shin & Kim, 2018). A motivation to form a social relationship with nonhuman entities increases customers' likelihood of perceiving humanlike traits in those entities (Epley, 2018). The sociality determinant enables customers to anthropomorphize nonliving entities and view them as sources of social relationships (Chen, Lin, Choi, & Hahm, 2015). For instance, when customers see advertising that emphasizes social bonding in sharing economy hotels, they are more likely to develop anthropomorphized thoughts toward the brand.

The effectance determinant explains people's motivations to develop effective interactions with their situations by improving the nonhuman object's predictability while decreasing its uncertainty (Wang, 2017). People gain a sense of control over nonhuman agents via anthropomorphism since knowledge about human beings is easily understood (Waytz, Morewedge, Epley, Monteleone, Gao, & Cacioppo, 2010b). Lacking certainty encourages customers to apply anthropomorphism to gain competence and reduce ambiguity about their environment (Shin & Kim, 2018). For instance, when customers are unclear about situations, such as local brands, they crave more anthropomorphized thoughts. However, when customers are assured, the need for anthropomorphized

thoughts decreases.

### 2.2. Anthropomorphism applications

Three different anthropomorphism strategies are applied in brand positioning strategies: (1) humanlike features (e.g., a service robot with a human face), (2) a humanlike mind (e.g., a service robot with intentions and motives), and (3) a humanlike personality (e.g., a friendly service robot) (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). Literature suggests the ability to anthropomorphize depends on the degree of humanlike features (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). For instance, Landwehr, McGill, and Hermann (2011) identify favorable customer product evaluations when a car combines an upturned grille with slanted headings. Ketron and Naletelich (2019) observe higher customer sustainability behaviors when messengers characterize human-like features, like sad faces, in its communication.

Anthropomorphism triggers social beliefs and perceptions through humanlike intentions and mental states (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Kim & McGill, 2011). Waytz, Cacioppo, and Epley (2010a) argue when people perceive a nonhuman entity to have a mind, they treat the entity as a moral agent who has empathy. Chandler and Schwarz (2010) investigate people's lowered tendency to replace a product when they perceive it with a humanlike mind. Customers also imbue personalities to products or brands. Using this tactic, a brand may be described as friendly, trustworthy, or efficient. Levy (1985) and Fournier (1998) illustrate customers' tendencies to process brands with human characteristics by transferring personality features to the brands. Guido and Peluso (2015) explore the role of brand personality in identifying brand anthropomorphism.

These anthropomorphism tactics rely on visual representations (Zhou, Kim, & Wang, 2019), linguistic representations (Wan, Chen, & Jin, 2017), or both (Newton, Newton, & Wong, 2017). For visual portrayals, humanlike physical features trigger anthropomorphism, as seen in the M&Ms characters. For linguistic portrayals, anthropomorphism communications use first-person language, promoting the idea of the brand talking directly to customers (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012). For instance, the virtual assistant, Alexa or Siri, becomes alive when using the first-person language of "I." Customer behavior research on anthropomorphism explores various nonhuman entities, such as products (Wan et al., 2017), brands (Guido & Peluso, 2015), food waste (Cooremans & Geuens, 2019), money (Zhou et al., 2019), internal body systems (Newton et al., 2017), and sustainability (Ketron & Naletelich, 2019).

To complement this emerging research line, current research examines the anthropomorphism of hotel brands and its impact on customers' visit intention. Many hotels use anthropomorphism strategies by introducing service robots or tablets as if they were humans to serve customers' needs. For instance, Aloft Cupertino deployed the first service robot, Botlr, in its operations (Walsh, 2018); and Hilton adopted Connie as its new robot concierge (Trejos, 2016). Considering the intangible characteristics of hotel brands, application of anthropomorphism in hotel brands serves as an effective brand communication strategy because the brands need to 'tangibilize' their services to make effective relationships with customers.

### 2.3. A conceptual framework

Based on anthropomorphism theory, this study evaluates the role of anthropomorphism in enhancing the effectiveness of hotel advertising. We propose when customers attribute humanlike capacities to a hotel brand, they apply beliefs and knowledge to the brand. Customers then perceive the anthropomorphized brand differently due to their different belief systems and situational variations. Building on mind perception theory, we further examine perceived warmth as a key mechanism that links the relationship between anthropomorphism and customers' visit intentions in hotel brand advertising, (see Fig. 1).

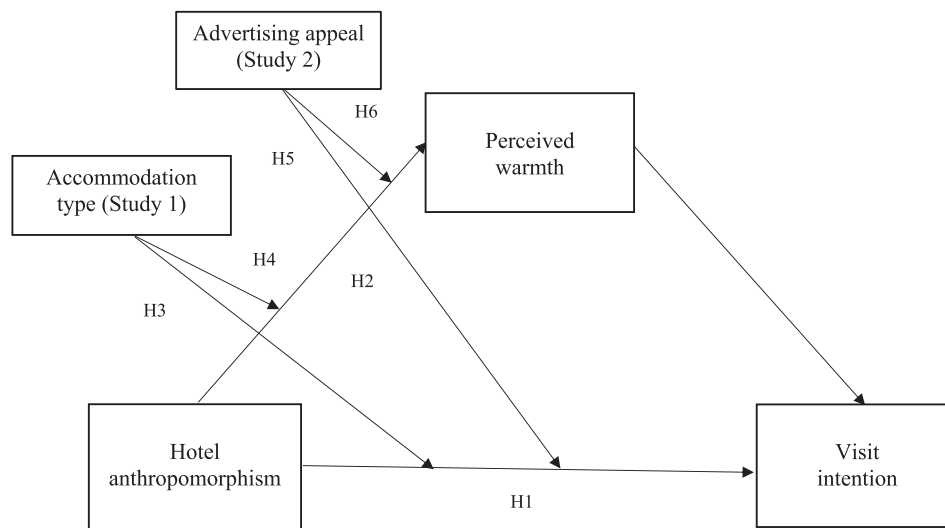


Fig. 1. A conceptual model.

### 3. Hypotheses development

#### 3.1. Anthropomorphism for hotel brands

Customers perceive a hotel brand has the ability to think and feel when it is anthropomorphized, and this process enhances the customer-brand relationship (Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011). Visual and/or verbal tactics are used to enhance anthropomorphism in the advertised entity (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). In this study, we examine verbal portrayals of anthropomorphism by applying a first-person pronoun. Prior research identifies using first-person pronouns such as ‘I’ (Packard, Moore, & McFerran, 2014) and ‘my’ (Kachersky & Palermo, 2013) promotes brand communications. Research shows using personal pronouns and verbs reduces the impersonality of marketing communications and enhances the relationship between the brand and customer (Kwon & Sung, 2011). Pollach (2005) suggests using first-person pronouns fosters social relationships, as people view the information as a personal belief rather than fact. Prior anthropomorphism research also relies on first-person pronouns to trigger anthropomorphic cues (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Kim & McGill, 2011; Puzakova & Aggarwal, 2018). They refer to the object as ‘I’ rather than ‘it’ to imbue human characteristics to the object. Thus, we predict communicating with a first-person pronoun in advertising causes the hotel brand to seem more like a person than when communicating the same information with a third-person pronoun.

Anthropomorphism shows positive effects on customers’ brand preference, product evaluation (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007), attitudes toward advertising (Puzakova, Rocereto, & Kwak, 2013), and purchase intentions (Letheren, Martin, & Jin, 2017). To evaluate an outcome of anthropomorphism in the hotel branding context, this study investigates customers’ visit intention. Visit intention refers to the likelihood of visiting the hotel (Letheren et al., 2017). Customers’ behavioral response plays a key role in evaluating the effectiveness of anthropomorphism marketing (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). Based on prior research that supports using a first-person pronoun to trigger anthropomorphism, we propose the following hypothesis.

**H1.** Anthropomorphism communications in hotel advertising lead to customers’ higher visit intention.

#### 3.2. Perceived warmth

Customers perceive, feel, and relate to brands the same way they develop relationships with others (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). Kervyn,

Fiske, and Malone (2012) brands as intentional agents framework (BIAF) explains the process of customers’ relationships with brands based on the brand’s intention (warmth) and ability (competence) (Kervyn et al., 2012). The BIAF is a practical brand management tool, used to understand how customers respond to brand perceptions and how they perceive brands with human characteristics (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). Warmth and competence dimensions show how people evaluate human and nonhuman entities, such as other people (Kervyn et al., 2012) and brands (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogliner, 2010). Warmth relates to helpfulness, kindness, and friendliness traits. It emphasizes cooperation among people and caring for others (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). In contrast, competence underlies independence, capability, and skillfulness characteristics (Cuddy et al., 2008). A hotel brand with warmth intentions elicits an image of kindness and friendliness, while one with a competence personality signals a resourceful and skillful impression.

Perceived warmth is more important than competence in the service delivery context because such judgements relate to customers’ perceptions of a friendly and caring staff (Mittal & Lassar, 1996). Perceived warmth also plays an important role in an advertising context. Aaker, Stayman, and Hagerty (1986) propose a ‘warmth monitor’ to identify the positive effects of warmth on customers’ purchase likelihood and their enjoyment of warmth-based advertising. Customers’ perceptions of brand intention explain customers’ interactions with anthropomorphized brands (Chen et al., 2015). Warmth perceptions are likely to form when a brand is portrayed with humanlike qualities since these imply the brand has the ability to feel (Zhou et al., 2019). For example, Zhou et al. (2019) find warmth perceptions increase customers’ donation intentions through money anthropomorphism. We argue anthropomorphism is capable of creating warm feelings toward a hotel brand when the brand appears anthropomorphized, which leads to higher visit intention. Based on previous support, we propose a mediating role of perceived warmth:

**H2.** Perceived warmth mediates the relationship between anthropomorphism and customers’ visit intention.

#### 3.3. Moderation by sociality motivation: Accommodation type

The traditional hotel industry faces a challenge with the emergence of the sharing economy. The sharing economy shifts the way customers experience goods and services and changes their understanding of the ownership of goods (Ertz, Durif, & Arcand, 2016). One popular platform in the sharing economy is Air bed and breakfast (Airbnb). Airbnb refers

to an accommodation type that allows people to rent a room or a house (Mody, Suess, & Lehto, 2017). As Airbnb continues to grow rapidly since its inception in 2008, competition for market share between Airbnb and the traditional hotel industry is inevitable (Wang, 2018). For instance, Marriott International, AccorHotels, and Hyatt are now launching home rental ventures. Marriott International is collaborating with Hostmaker to offer Airbnb-styled accommodation services under Marriott's Tribute Portfolio Homes brand in London (Wang, 2018).

Although both traditional hotels and sharing economy hotels serve the same purpose of providing accommodations to customers, each accommodation type appeals differently. Hotels rely on service representatives and amenity offerings, while sharing economy hotels focus on social bonding with hosts and price value. In particular, sharing economy hotels emphasize social connection experiences (Guttentag, 2015). Certain situations foster the effects of anthropomorphism better than others (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). Prior research suggests an interplay between social belonging and consequences of applying anthropomorphism (Mourey, Olson, & Yoon, 2017). Mourey et al. (2017) identify anthropomorphic products are activated when one's need for social assurance is satisfied. Thus, we expect sharing economy hotels trigger better sociality motivations, predicting they work better with anthropomorphic communications. We test this reasoning using the following hypothesis:

**H3.** The type of accommodation moderates the relationship between anthropomorphism communication and customers' responses, such that anthropomorphism communication results in higher customers' visit intention in the sharing economy hotel advertising context than in the traditional hotel advertising context.

We predict inclusion of anthropomorphism communication for sharing economy hotels leads to increased warmth perceptions and higher visit intentions. In contrast, the traditional hotel context attenuates the positive effects of anthropomorphism on warmth perceptions and visit intention because sociality motivation is not the main focus and is therefore triggered less in customer perceptions. In other words, when customers encounter an anthropomorphized sharing economy hotel advertising, they perceive greater warmth and develop a higher visit intention. Our reasoning leads to the following hypothesis:

**H4.** Perceived warmth mediates the effect of anthropomorphism toward visit intention in the sharing economy hotel context. However, such mediation role of perceived warmth is significantly attenuated in the traditional hotel context.

### 3.4. Moderation by effectance: Appeal type

Many hotels communicate their brands as global or local to build the brand's identity. Perceived globalness of a brand refers to customers' perceptions of the brand as a global player (Steenkamp, Batra, & Alden, 2003). Global brands feature extensive availability and familiarity in various geographic regions and rely on standardized marketing strategies across the world (Schuiling & Kapferer, 2004). In contrast, perceived localness of a brand refers to customers' perceptions of the brand being associated with local culture (Steenkamp et al., 2003). Local brands position themselves around unique and authentic experiences (Schuiling & Kapferer, 2004). They gain competitive advantages by connecting with the local culture, national identity, heritage, and local market needs (Dimofte, Johansson, & Ronkainen, 2008).

Customers develop different perceptions between global and local brands. Global hotel brands signal consistent, standardized service perceptions and guaranteed reputation anywhere customers stay (Whitla, Walters, & Davies, 2007). Customers view local hotel brands as unique, authentic, and culturally representative. Based on the distinction between global and local brands, this study predicts differential consequences of global vs. local advertising appeal when customers process anthropomorphized communications. Customers develop

effective relationship management by controlling their interactions with anthropomorphized brands (Epley et al., 2007). Local brands are associated with emotional, belonging, and vague perceptions (Xie, Batra, & Peng, 2015). The pairing of an anthropomorphized communication with a local brand shifts perception of the hotel brand from one of 'uncertainty' to 'certainty,' leading to higher anthropomorphism effects. On the other hand, less anthropomorphism motivation is required to process global hotel brand information, because global brands signal standardization and certainty (Whitla et al., 2007). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H5.** Appeal type moderates the relationship between anthropomorphism communication and customers' responses in hotel brand advertising, such that anthropomorphism communication results in higher customers' visit intention in the localness advertising appeal than in the globalness advertising appeal.

We further expect anthropomorphism for localness advertising appeals to increase warmth perceptions and visit intentions. Kolbl, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, and Diamantopoulos (2018) investigate the relationship between customers' perceptions of a brand's globalness/localness and their stereotypical assessments of the brand through warmth and competence perceptions. They find brand warmth to be a key driver of customer-brand identification that positively affects purchase intention and brand ownership. We argue inclusion of anthropomorphism when promoting localness in hotel advertising leads to increased warmth, which mediates the impact of anthropomorphism on customers' visit intention. Due to its certainty, we expect an attenuated mediating role of perceived warmth between anthropomorphism and customers' visit intention for globalness appeals in hotel advertising.

**H6.** The mediating role of perceived warmth between anthropomorphism and visit intention is higher for localness advertising appeals than for globalness advertising appeals.

## 4. Study 1

In Study 1, we examined the effect of anthropomorphism communication on customers' visit intentions. We also examined whether perceived warmth mediated the effect of anthropomorphism on visit intention. Based on the sociality motivation of anthropomorphism theory, our investigation also included whether anthropomorphism led to higher perceived warmth and visit intention when targeting a sharing economy hotel versus a traditional hotel.

### 4.1. Method

#### 4.1.1. Study design and procedures

Study 1 employed a 2 (brand anthropomorphism: yes vs. no) × 2 (accommodation type: traditional hotel vs. sharing economy hotel) between-subjects experimental design. Scenarios for hotel anthropomorphism were adopted from Aggarwal and McGill (2007), who applied a first-person pronoun in an anthropomorphism condition and a third-person pronoun in a no-anthropomorphism condition (see Appendix A). Accommodation type was manipulated based on the degrees of sociality focus. Participants were asked to answer two anthropomorphism manipulation check questions, adopted from Kim and McGill (2011), and two accommodation type manipulation check questions.

Scenarios were included in an online self-administered survey; and participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. The online questionnaire consisted of five sections. The first section included a screening question, asking whether the subject had stayed at a hotel within the previous 12 months. The second section asked questions about the subject's anthropomorphism tendency as adopted from Waytz et al. (2010a). Anthropomorphic tendency is a key consideration since levels of anthropomorphic traits lead to different anthropomorphism processing levels (Letheren, Kuhn, Lings, & Pope, 2016). The third



section presented the experimental scenario, followed by questions to check manipulation and realism. The fourth section had questions to measure the subject's warmth perceptions and visit intention. We used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Items measuring warmth and visit intention followed Bernritter, Verlegh, and Smit (2016) and Letheren et al. (2017). The final section collected demographic information of the subject.

Common method bias could occur due to the same scales administered in a survey. We assessed potential common method bias by following Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003). We assured the participant's confidentiality and allowed freedom for any opinion in the survey. The research questionnaire included five validity check questions in random locations to check response integrity. Measurement scales appear in Table 1.

#### 4.1.2. Data collection

A web-based, self-administered experiment was the method of data collection. We used Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) for a pretest ( $n = 75$ ) with a small incentive offered to the participants. MTurk was used as an open, online market research portal where people from a diverse population completed requested research participation (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Participants who lived in the U. S. and whose primary language was English were invited to participate in the survey. Pretests evaluated the reliability of each construct and the validity of our experimental manipulations.

Following completion of the pretest, we employed a professional market research company, Qualtrics, to collect data. Established in 1997, Qualtrics had almost four million individuals as panel members within the United States. We randomly assigned participants to one of the experimental conditions with the research questions. Two hundred subjects participated in Study 1, with 38 cases excluded from analyses due to excessive incomplete responses, thus leaving 162 valid cases for hypothesis tests.

#### 4.1.3. Study 1 results

**4.1.3.1. Demographics.** More than half the participants were female (67.9%). The majority of the participants aged between 25 and 34 (34.6%), were Caucasian (71.0%), and had a Bachelor's degree (66%) for their highest level of education.

**4.1.3.2. Manipulation checks.** The participants perceived each brand anthropomorphism condition differently ( $t_{160} = 3.97, p < 0.01$ ;  $M_{no} = 3.70$  versus  $M_{yes} = 4.97$ ). In addition, results revealed the participants perceived each accommodation type differently ( $t_{160} = 7.17, p < 0.01$ ;  $M_{traditional} = 3.74$  versus  $M_{sharing} = 5.95$ ). Moreover, perceptions of realism toward the hypothetical hotel advertising ( $M = 5.86, SD = 1.01$ ) were strong.

**Table 1**

Measurement scales for the main constructs.

Perceived warmth (Bernritter et al., 2016) (Study 1: $M = 4.43, SD = 1.15, \alpha = 0.89$ ; Study 2: $M = 4.28, SD = 1.08, \alpha = 0.89$ )
Based on the scenario, how would you rate the accommodation in the advertisement?
The accommodation in the advertisement is
warm.
generous.
friendly.
sincere.
trustworthy.
Visit intentions (Letheren et al., 2017) (Study 1: $M = 4.48, SD = 1.13, \alpha = 0.89$ ; Study 2: $M = 4.43, SD = 1.42, \alpha = 0.92$ )
I would like to stay at this accommodation in the advertisement.
Staying at this accommodation in the advertisement will be on my list of travel.
I will make an effort to stay at this accommodation in the advertisement.
1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree

**4.1.3.3. Main and interaction effects.** Tests of the proposed hypotheses relied on analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). Customers' anthropomorphism tendency was a control variable in the model. The main effects for anthropomorphism were significant ( $F = 22.84, p < 0.01$ , Pillai's Trace = 0.22, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.23$ ). Use of anthropomorphism resulted in higher visit intention ( $F_{1, 157} = 31.54; p < 0.00$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.16$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1. Visit intentions were higher when a hotel was in an anthropomorphized advertising than when it was not. To test whether warmth perceptions mediated the effects of anthropomorphism on customers' visit intention, we conducted a bootstrapped mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2017). The analysis revealed an indirect effect of anthropomorphism on visit intention through warmth perceptions was significant and positive ( $b = 0.29, SE = 0.11, 95\% CI [0.09, 0.52]$ ). These results supported Hypothesis 2.

The effect of anthropomorphism on visit intention was dependent upon accommodation type ( $F = 4.55, p = 0.01$ , Pillai's Trace = 0.55, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.55$ ). Accommodation type significantly moderated the relationship between anthropomorphism and visit intention ( $F_{1, 157} = 8.01; p < 0.01$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ ), supporting Hypothesis 3 (see Fig. 2). The effect size of these moderating effects was small, ranging from 0.02 to 0.04 (Cohen, 1992).

**4.1.3.4. Moderated mediation analysis.** To examine whether perceived warmth mediated the interaction effect between accommodation type and anthropomorphism on visit intention, we used PROCESS model 8 with 10,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2017). Results showed the index of moderated mediation was significant ( $b = -0.30, SE = 0.13, 95\% CI [-0.58, -0.05]$ ). In the sharing economy hotel condition, there was a significant, indirect effect of anthropomorphism on visit intention ( $b = 0.43, SE = 0.16, 95\% CI [0.07, 0.74]$ ). Because the direct effect of anthropomorphism on visit intention was significant when perceived warmth was included in the model ( $b = 1.25, SE = 0.32, 95\% CI [0.61, 1.90]$ ), perceived warmth partially mediated the effect of anthropomorphism on visit intention. However, the indirect effect was not significant in the traditional hotel condition ( $b = 0.12, SE = 0.10, 95\% CI [-0.02, 0.38]$ ). Therefore, perceived warmth did not mediate the effect of anthropomorphism on visit intention for traditional hotels. These results supported Hypothesis 4. A summary of the hypothesis test results appears in Table 2.

#### 4.1.4. Discussion

Our data illustrated the positive impact of anthropomorphism on perceived warmth and visit intention. Results also revealed the moderating role of accommodation type, supporting the sociality motivation of anthropomorphism theory. Study 1 further showed anthropomorphism increased perceived warmth and visit intention when shown in the sharing economy hotel advertising context, but not in a traditional hotel advertising context.

## 5. Study 2

Study 2 examined effectance motivation via advertising appeal in anthropomorphism communications. Building on anthropomorphism theory, we examined whether anthropomorphism led to higher warmth perceptions and visit intention when a hotel brand advertisement emphasized local, rather than global appeals. Additionally, the mediating role of perceived warmth was investigated.

### 5.1. Method

#### 5.1.1. Study design and procedures

Study 2 was a 2 (brand anthropomorphism: yes vs. no)  $\times$  2 (advertising appeal: local vs. global) between-subjects experimental design. The procedure and questionnaire matched those used in Study 1,

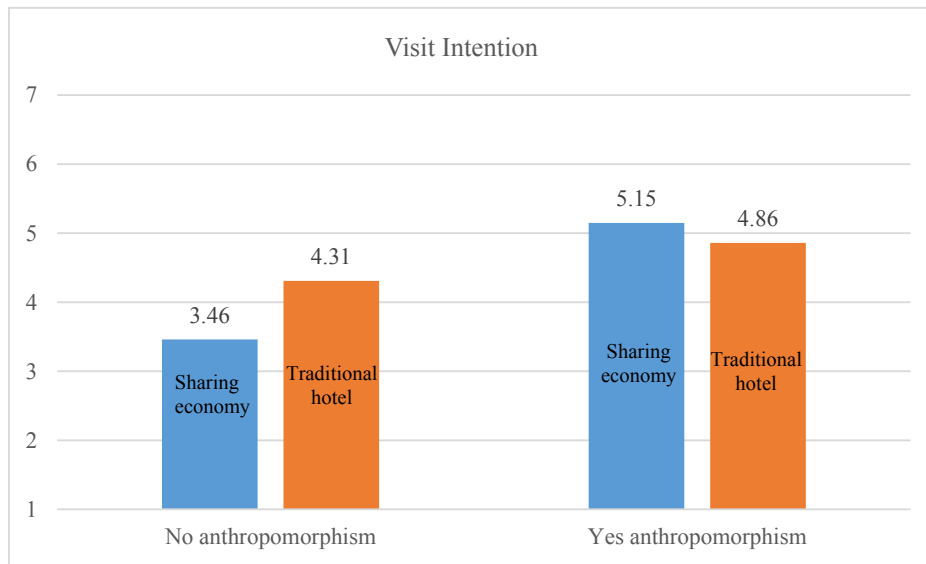


Fig. 2. Effects of anthropomorphism and accommodation type on visit intention (Study 1).

Table 2 Results of hypotheses testing.

Study 1				
ANCOVA analysis			Hypotheses	Result
Visit intention	F	p		
Anthropomorphism (A)	31.54	0.00	H1	Supported
Accommodation type (AT)	1.93	0.16		
A × AT	8.01	0.05	H3	Supported
Index of moderated mediation				
Mediator				
Warmth	Index	95% CI	H2	Supported
	-0.3092	-0.58, -0.05*		
Conditional indirect effect of A on visit intention at levels of AT				
Mediator	Accommodation type	Effect	95% CI	H4
Warmth	Sharing economy	0.4363	0.07, 0.74*	Supported
	Traditional hotel	0.1270	-0.02, 0.38	
Study 2				
ANCOVA analysis			Hypotheses	Result
Visit intention	F	p		
Anthropomorphism (A)	29.44	0.00	H1	Supported
Advertising appeal (AA)	5.78	0.01		
A × AA	11.69	0.00	H5	Supported
Index of moderated mediation				
Mediator				
Warmth	Index	95% CI	H2	Supported
	-0.6257	-1.16, -0.13*		
Conditional indirect effect of A on visit intention at levels of AA				
Mediator	Advertising appeal	Effect	95% CI	H6
Warmth	Local	0.6570	0.14, 1.16*	Supported
	Global	0.0313	-0.09, 0.17	

\* 95% CI excludes zero.

replacing accommodation type with advertising appeal.

5.1.2. Data collection

We conducted a pretest (n = 74) with data collected via MTurk and then employed Qualtrics to collect data from general U.S. consumers by using the same procedures outlined in Study 1. Two hundred and two respondents participated in the study, resulting in 162 usable cases after eliminating 40 incomplete cases.

5.1.3. Study 2 results

5.1.3.1. Demographics. More than half the participants were female (62.3%). The majority were between 25 and 34 (27.8%) years old,

Caucasian (72.8%), and had a Bachelor’s degree (59.3%).

5.1.3.2. Manipulation checks. Independent samples t-tests revealed respondents perceived the anthropomorphized condition differently from the non-anthropomorphized condition ( $t_{160} = -3.16, p < 0.01; M_{no} = 5.09$  versus  $M_{yes} = 4.18$ ). In addition, the respondents perceived the local advertising appeal differently from the global one ( $t_{160} = 7.16, p < 0.01; M_{local} = 4.17$  versus  $M_{global} = 5.86$ ). Participants felt the hypothetical hotel advertising was realistic ( $M = 5.52, SD = 0.97$ ).

5.1.3.3. Main and interaction effects. ANCOVA was used to test the proposed hypotheses, with customers’ anthropomorphism tendency set as a control variable. The main effects for anthropomorphism were

significant ( $F = 28.74$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , Pillai's Trace = 0.26, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.26$ ). Anthropomorphism resulted in higher visit intentions ( $F_{1, 157} = 29.44$ ;  $p < 0.00$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.15$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1. PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2017) revealed the indirect effect of anthropomorphism on visit intention through warmth perceptions was significant ( $b = 0.52$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ , 95% CI [0.28, 0.81]), consistent with Hypothesis 2.

The effects of anthropomorphism on perceived warmth and customer responses were contingent on advertising appeal ( $F = 11.15$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , Pillai's Trace = 0.12, partial  $\eta^2 = 0.11$ ). Advertising appeal moderated the relationship between anthropomorphism and visit intention ( $F_{1, 157} = 11.69$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = 0.06$ ), supporting Hypothesis 5. The effect of anthropomorphism was higher in local advertising appeals than in global advertising appeals (see Fig. 3). The size of the moderating effects was small to moderate (0.06 to 0.11).

**5.1.3.4. Moderated mediation analysis.** To examine whether perceived warmth mediated the moderating effect of advertising appeal by anthropomorphism on visit intention, we used PROCESS Model 8 with 10,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2017). Results showed the index of moderated mediation was significant ( $b = -0.62$ ,  $SE = 0.26$ , 95% CI [-1.16, -0.13]). In the local advertising appeal condition, anthropomorphism exerted a significant, indirect effect on visit intention. Anthropomorphism increased the likelihood of a customer visit through greater perceived warmth ( $b = 0.65$ ,  $SE = 0.26$ , 95% CI [0.14, 1.16]). Because the direct effect of anthropomorphism on visit intention was significant when the model included perceived warmth ( $b = 1.13$ ,  $SE = 0.37$ , 95% CI [0.39, 1.8]), perceived warmth partially mediated the effect of anthropomorphism on visit intention. However, for participants in the global advertising appeal condition, the indirect effect was not significant ( $b = 0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95% CI [-0.09, 0.17]). Therefore, perceived warmth did not mediate the effect of anthropomorphism on visit intention when paired with a global advertising appeal. These results supported Hypothesis 6.

#### 5.1.4. Discussion

We found the main effect of anthropomorphism and the moderating effect of appeal type to be significant. Perceived warmth mediated the effect of anthropomorphism on visit intention in the local appeal condition. Responding to the effectance motivation of anthropomorphism theory, results showed anthropomorphism increased perceived warmth and visit intention only when appearing in local hotel advertising appeal as opposed to a global hotel advertising appeal.

## 6. General discussion

An increasing number of hotels were investing additional resources in advertising and promotion of their brands to gain competitive advantage. Considering the need for research on effective marketing communication strategies for hotel branding, we explored how anthropomorphism communication influenced customers' visit intentions. Anthropomorphism was a simple description of nonhuman entities with human characteristics (Kim & McGill, 2011). Results from two experiments employing a first-person pronoun as an anthropomorphic tactic revealed customers responded more favorably to anthropomorphized hotel advertising over a non-anthropomorphized hotel advertising. Results were consistent with previous studies, showing the use of first-person pronouns had a positive effect on marketing communication outcomes (Puzakova & Aggarwal, 2018).

This study investigated sociality and effectance determinants as moderators. Different from previous research, this study investigated these two determinants based on how brands signaled their characteristics and how customers perceived those brands, rather than investigating customers' innate traits. Past research identified two key customer motivations- sociality and effectance- led to positive outcomes of anthropomorphism (Epley et al., 2007). This study confirmed anthropomorphism was more effective in increasing perceived warmth and visit intention when it encouraged sociality and effectance. Although both accommodation types worked better with anthropomorphism than with non-anthropomorphism communications, the effect of anthropomorphism was higher for sharing economy hotels than traditional hotels. A plausible reason for this difference was sharing economy hotels typically emphasized social connectedness, and fulfilled customers' needs for a sense of interaction (Liu & Mattila, 2017). People who desired a connection with others preferred anthropomorphized products (Chen, Wan, & Levy, 2017). Derived from effectance, this study identified local appeal worked better with anthropomorphism communications. Effectance motivation was a customers' desire to explain and predict an agent's action and enhanced customers' tendency to humanize (Waytz et al., 2010b). Anthropomorphism communications were more effective for local brands because of their pervasive uncertainty and emotionally focused characteristics (Xie et al., 2015).

This study shed light on the underlying psychological mechanism of anthropomorphism. By investigating the concept of perceived warmth based on mind perception theory, we explained the effect of anthropomorphism on customers' visit intention in hotel advertising. Our data

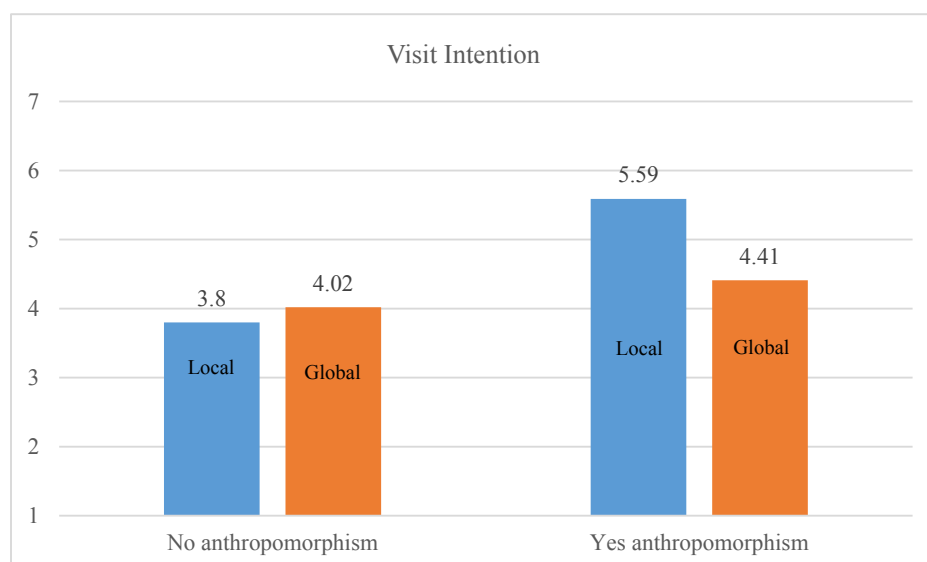


Fig. 3. Effects of anthropomorphism and advertising appeal on visit intention (Study 2).

showed anthropomorphism communication led to increased visit intention through perceived warmth. Results were consistent with previous research that proved anthropomorphizing nonhuman entities encouraged people to treat those entities as if they had feelings (Waytz et al., 2010a).

### 6.1. Theoretical contributions

First, our findings extended the applicability of anthropomorphism by applying the concept to a hotel advertising context. While prior research made significant progress in understanding anthropomorphism, additional investigations were common suggestions (Ketron & Naletelich, 2019). We viewed anthropomorphized brands as intentional agents (Epley & Waytz, 2009). Our data added to the anthropomorphism communication literature by supporting the idea that using first-person pronouns was a simple, yet practical, strategy to enhance the effectiveness of hotel brand communications.

Second, we extended the investigation of anthropomorphism effects to different contextual conditions by investigating sociality and effectance determinants of anthropomorphism theory. Results were consistent with prior research showing positive effects of anthropomorphism on customers' goals of belongingness (Chen et al., 2017) or effectance (Waytz et al., 2010b). Customers' desire to engage with sharing economy hotels reflected humans' fundamental need for a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This study also contributed to the global marketing literature by showing anthropomorphism worked better with a local advertising appeal. Consistent with the reported effects of the effectance determinant, anthropomorphism communications were more effective with local appeals than global appeals in perceiving warmth, perhaps because customers needed to lower ambiguity and uncertainty in local appeals.

Third, this research contributed to the BIAF. Anthropomorphism helped customers perceive brands as humanlike social agents, according to mind perception theory. Our findings added novel insights to the perceived warmth literature by empirically supporting the idea that anthropomorphism activated warmth perceptions in hotel advertising. Applying the idea of perceived warmth borrowed from the BIAF literature, we explicated why anthropomorphism influenced customers' visit intention (Kervyn et al., 2012).

### 6.2. Managerial implications

Our study supports the use of anthropomorphism communications as an effective strategy for hotel branding. First, our findings point to anthropomorphism communications as an effective way to enhance customers' visit intention. Findings suggest managers should carefully create their brand messages. Applications of anthropomorphism communications are plentiful, including brand descriptions, mascots, brand names, and advertising copies. A simple inclusion of first-person pronouns augment customers' warmth and visit intention, implying personified communications foster the customer-brand relationship.

We examine whether customers respond more favorably to anthropomorphism communications that interact with other conditions. Our data shows anthropomorphism is effective for increasing perceived warmth and visit intention when it is paired with sharing economy hotels and local advertising appeal. Marketers should frame the brand type or characteristics through anthropomorphic advertising that promote social gathering while reducing uncertainty. Marketers can use different anthropomorphic cues to maximize the effects of anthropomorphism, depending on the consumption context. For example, hotels may promote an anthropomorphic cue of social exclusiveness for a high-end, private consumption experience. In contrast, an anthropomorphic cue of social bonding is more suitable for a public consumption experience, such as lobbies and bars.

Marketers can use anthropomorphism to create warmth perceptions and trigger a friendly, caring service atmosphere. Marketers may

incorporate anthropomorphism into logos, slogans, or headlines to arouse warmth perceptions to customers. These brand anthropomorphism communications are likely to be effective in various communication platforms, including traditional advertising copies, websites, social media, and mobile advertising.

### 6.3. Limitations and future research

This study had inherent limitations upon which future research should build. This study investigated two moderating effects based on determinants in anthropomorphism theory and current hotel industry trends. Future research should investigate other conditions of moderation, such as customer involvement or brand personality (e.g., warmth vs. competence). How customers responded to anthropomorphized brands might depend on their chronic or transient motivations (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012). This study also investigated perceived warmth as a mediator. Future research should consider other mediators and a potential serial mediation analysis by ordering more than two mediators, when relevant theories support such relationships. Assessing the effect of anthropomorphism through the use of unknown or fictitious sharing economy hotel brands is another consideration for future research. This study used Airbnb as an example of sharing economy hotels; thus, the respondents' knowledge and familiarity with Airbnb could have confounded some of the effects reported in this study.

Future research should also investigate the effect of different anthropomorphism tactics in advertising communications. This study focused on anthropomorphism communications using a first-person pronoun in hotel advertising. Future investigations should consider comparisons of the first-person pronouns to the second and third person pronouns in deriving anthropomorphism effects. Moreover, other visual and/or verbal anthropomorphism cues or strategies, such as anthropomorphic warmth, await systematic inquiries and will significantly add to the growing anthropomorphism literature.

Lastly, current research recruited participants through an online market research company. It is difficult to verify if the sample represented the target population. While online research company panels provide a broader coverage of American consumers, they still pose risks of various unknown sampling biases. Additional research, with larger sample sizes and replications of experiments with different samples, is likely to reduce such biases over time.

## Appendix A

### Study 1

There are two major types of accommodations, a traditional hotel or a sharing accommodation. Examples of a commercial hotel include Marriott, Hilton, or Hyatt. An example of a sharing accommodation is Air Bed and Breakfast (Airbnb). For your upcoming trip, you plan to stay at a commercial hotel (Airbnb). Imagine you plan to stay at the Hotel XXX (Airbnb), a four-star level accommodation, for your trip and you are exposed to the following commercial hotel (Airbnb) advertisement.

#### Hotel XXX (Airbnb) Welcomes You!

I can offer you convenient and high-quality service whenever you stay with me. Whether you are staying with me for the purpose of business trip or vacation trip, I will make your trip comfortable and enjoyable. You should stay with me!

#### Welcome to the Hotel XXX (Airbnb)!

The Hotel XXX (Airbnb) can offer customers convenient and high-quality service whenever customers stay at the Hotel XXX (Airbnb). Whether customers are staying at the Hotel XXX (Airbnb) for the purpose of business trip or vacation trip, the Hotel XXX (Airbnb) will make customers' trip comfortable and enjoyable. Customers should stay at the



## Hotel XXX (Airbnb)!

## Study 2

When you stay at a hotel, you can stay at a global hotel brand or a local hotel brand. Global hotel brands are operated in many countries globally, such as Hilton, Hyatt, Marriott, etc., while local hotel brands are owned locally and only operated in a specific country. For your upcoming trip, you plan to stay at a global hotel brand. Imagine you plan to stay at the Hotel XXX, a four-star level global (local) hotel, for your trip and you are exposed to the following global hotel advertisement.

Hotel XXX Welcomes You!

I can offer you global standard (locally flavored) services whenever you stay with me. Whether you are staying with me for the purpose of business trip or vacation trip, you can experience consistent service quality with me (the authentic local service culture). You should stay with me!

Welcome to the Hotel XXX!

The Hotel XXX can offer customers global standard (locally flavored) services whenever customers stay at the Hotel XXX. Whether customers are staying at the Hotel XXX for the purpose of business trip or vacation trip, customers can experience the consistent service quality (the authentic local service culture). Customers should stay at the Hotel XXX!

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