

Research Paper for the Mita Festival (2017)

**Three Kinds of Anthropomorphized Brands
and Consumer Preferences:
Mediating Effects of
Instrumental and Terminal Materialism**

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Summary

According to previous research on the relationship between materialists and anropomorphized brands, materialists respond more favorably to a brand-as-servant, than they do to a brand-as-partner. However, there remain two main problems. (1) A brand-as-master had not been considered as an alternative. (2) Only instrumental materialists have been focused on and terminal materialists have been ignored. Thus, in this study, we conduct empirical analysis on preferences of all two types of materialists for each of all three types of anthropomorphized brands.

1. Research Objectives

Consumers often anthropomorphize brands that they purchased, and treat products under the anthropomorphized brands as if they are human (Aaker, 1997; Aggarwal & McGill, 2011). Brand managers, therefore, try to form favorable human-like brand personalities by product design and marketing communication (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007) and build brand relationships with their customers (Fournier and Yao, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Aggarwal, 2004). Recent research regarding brand relationships has focused the dichotomy of “brands-as-servant” and “brands-as-partner” and discussed which is better type of anthropomorphized brands (Aggarwal & McGill, 2011; Kim & Kramer, 2015).

Brands-as-servant refer to brands that take care of their customers and play a role as servant to satisfy their customers’ needs. It is certain that brands should pursue their customers’ satisfaction to be preferred to their competing brands. However, according to Aggarwal and McGill (2011), typical customers perceive that such brands pursue customer satisfaction in order to earn its return and, as a consequence, they do not evaluate them highly. On the other hand, brands-as-partner refer to brands that are seen as co-producers of the benefit, working together with their customers to meet the needs. While brands-as-servant tend to build an exchange relationship, brands-as-partner are characterized by a communal relationship in which the brands take into account the benefit of their customers like as a family or a lover. Therefore, Aggarwal and McGill (2011) concluded that brands-as-partner are preferred to brands-as-servant.

Recent research has identified a condition under which brands-as-servant are preferred. According to Kim and Kramer (2015), materialistic consumers, who regard the consumption of products as more important than human relationships, prefer brands-as-

servant to brands-as-partner. It is because materialists evaluate a brand highly if the brand satisfy their need control or dominate belongings.

However, there is room for improvement in this moderating effect of materialism on the relationship between the brand personality dichotomy (brands-as-servant vs. brands-as-partner) and consumer preferences. First of all, materialism may not be a unidimensional concept. Previous brand research has discussed only “instrumental materialists, which can be defined as consumers who want to satisfy their lust to dominate by means of the possession (cf. Richins & Dawson, 1992). However, it has been pointed out that there are another kind of materialists, “terminal materialists”, which can be defined as consumers who desire possession (cf. Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Brand research has ignored one of two kinds of materialism.

Moreover, the brand personality dichotomy of brands-as-servant vs. brands-as-partner should be modified. there are brands with another kind of personality, “brands-as-master, which are perceived as higher than their customers in social status while brands-as-servant are perceived as lower and brands-as-partner are perceived as equal. Brands-as-master are seen as creators of the benefit, leading their customers to satisfy the needs.

Thus, in this study, (1) dichotomy of non-materialists vs. materialists replace trichotomy of non-materialists, instrumental materialists, and terminal materialists, and (2) dichotomy of brands-as-servant vs. brands-as-partner replace trichotomy of brands-as-servant, brands-as-partner, and brands-as-master. By doing so, this study contributes to progress in brand personality research.

2. Experimental Design

We utilized a 3 (non-materialists/instrumental materialists/terminal materialists) x 3 (brand-as-servant/brand-as-partner/brand-as-partner) between-subject experimental design. Like previous research, we used a wrist watch as an experimental good. Six-hundred thirty-eight students in a school of business participated in the experiment. They were randomly divided into three groups, non-materialists, instrumental materialists, terminal materialists. Participants in the non-materialist group were asked to read a sentence “You are going to buy a watch to know the time because your watch has been broken.” Participants in the instrumental materialist group were asked to read a sentence “You are going to buy a watch as a symbol of success because you are success in your business.” And, participants in the terminal materialist group were asked to read a sentence “You are going to buy a watch as a treasure because you are drawn to its beauty.”

Then, participants in each group were randomly exposed to one of three kinds of advertising messages regarding an anthropomorphized brand, servant-type messages, partner-type messages, and partner-type messages, and asked to answer a series of questions regarding purchase intention.

A scale item for purchase intention was employed from Schoormans and Robben (1997). For a manipulation check, the degree of materialism was also measured with a scale developed by Richins (2004) and modified based on dichotomy of instrumental vs. terminal materialism proposed by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981). The results showed that the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for purchase intention was 0.92, suggesting high reliability, and CR was 0.92, suggesting sufficient validity. The results also showed that the mean value of instrumental materialism was higher in the instrumental materialist group than in other groups and the mean value of terminal materialism was higher in the terminal materialist group than in other groups. Mean values of both kinds of materialism were the lowest in the non-materialist group.

3. Result

3-1. Result 1: Non-materialist Group

The results of this study showed that non-materialists' intentions to purchase the brand when they were exposed to partner-type messages ($M=4.97$) were significantly highest among three kinds of messages, following servant-type messages ($M=3.62$) and master-type messages ($M=4.52$) ($p < 0.01$ for all pairs). These results suggest that non-materialists prefer to build a communal relationship with the brand rather than to dominate their belongings or to be attached to them.

3-2. Result 2: Instrumental Materialist Group

The results of this study showed that instrumental materialists' intentions to purchase the brand when they were exposed to servant-type messages ($M=5.86$) were significantly highest among three kinds of messages, following partner-type messages ($M=5.01$) and master-type messages ($M=4.51$) ($p < 0.01$ for all pairs). These results suggest that instrumental materialists prefer to dominate their belongings rather than to build a communal relationship or to be attached to them.

3-3. Result 3: Terminal Materialist Group

Terminal materialists have been neglected by previous research. The results of this study showed that terminal materialists' intentions to purchase the brand when they were exposed to servant-type messages ($M=5.64$) were significantly highest among three kinds of messages, following partner-type messages ($M=4.64$) and servant-type messages ($M=2.29$) ($p<0.01$ for all pairs). These results suggest that terminal materialists prefer to be attached to superior brands rather than to dominate them or to build a communal relationship.

4. Discussion

4-1. Academic Implications

This research investigated the relationship between typical three kinds of anthropomorphized brands and consumer preference and the mediating effect of instrumental and terminal materialism. Previous brand research has examined only two kinds of anthropomorphized brands, brands-as-servant and brands-as-partner. This research newly examined brands-as-master. Similarly, previous brand research has compared materialists and non-materialists. This research divided materialists into instrumental and terminal materialists. By doing so, unlike previous research, this research found that some materialists prefer to be dominated by products rather than to dominate products.

4-2. Managerial Implications

Sellers should determine the type of their customers. If customers are non-materialists, sellers should play a role of their partners. If customers are instrumental materialists, sellers should play a role of their servants. And, if customers are terminal materialists, sellers should play a role of their master. In some cases, segmentation or personalization must be needed because there are two or more types of customers. Brand managers and contact persons should select precise marketing communication with each type of customers.

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