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Exploring the spectrum of human perception in Marketing: Anthropomorphism, animism and pareidolia

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Abstract

This study explores the spectrum of human perception humanisation, animism, anthropomorphism, pareidolia, and infra-humanisation highlighting their psychological underpinnings and applications in marketing. The research investigates how these concepts shape consumer-brand relationships, influence brand perception, and create emotional engagement. By integrating theoretical frameworks and real-world examples, the study identifies critical gaps in understanding the interplay between these phenomena in the context of branding. Propositions are developed to examine how these concepts can enhance emotional resonance, brand loyalty, and consumer trust. A qualitative approach is employed to analyze marketing strategies that utilize these mechanisms. The findings reveal that effective application of these concepts fosters stronger consumer-brand relationships, though excessive reliance or misapplication may lead to unintended consequences. The study concludes with insights for marketers, addressing limitations and proposing future research directions to deepen understanding of these psychological phenomena in branding.

Keywords: Humanisation, animism, anthropomorphism, pareidolia, infra-humanisation, brand love, brand trust, emotional connection

Introduction

Human perception significantly influences consumer behavior, especially in branding and marketing, where it shapes how individuals interact with brands, interpret messages, and form emotional bonds. Psychological phenomena such as humanisation, animism, anthropomorphism, pareidolia, and infra-humanisation are key drivers of this process. These phenomena leverage the brain's innate tendencies to perceive and relate to the world, creating powerful tools for marketers to build connections with consumers.

Humanisation attributes human-like qualities to brands, aligning them with shared values and fostering trust. For instance, campaigns like Dove's "Real Beauty" use authentic storytelling to build emotional resonance. Animism, emphasizing life-like qualities, adds vitality to products, such as describing a car engine as "roaring to life." Anthropomorphism assigns human traits to non-human entities, exemplified by mascots like the Pillsbury Doughboy, creating relatable brand personalities. Pareidolia taps into subconscious pattern recognition, using logos or designs that resemble faces, like Amazon's smile-arrow, to enhance memorability. On the other hand, infra-humanisation, when brands appear indifferent or impersonal, can erode trust.

While these phenomena have been studied individually, their collective influence on branding strategies is underexplored. This study bridges this gap, highlighting their combined potential to foster emotional connections, strengthen loyalty, and address consumer biases for impactful branding.

Research Gap

Despite substantial research on individual phenomena like anthropomorphism (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007) ^[4] and humanisation (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014) ^[5], there is limited understanding of:

1. **Interconnectedness:** How these concepts interact to influence consumer perception and brand strategies.

2. **Application in Branding:** Insights on using pareidolia and animism remain underexplored in marketing contexts.
3. **Negative Implications:** The potential risks of misapplication, such as infra-humanisation leading to cold or indifferent brand perceptions, are not adequately studied.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the theoretical and practical interplay of these phenomena in branding, offering a comprehensive framework for their effective application.

Literature Review

Humanisation

Humanisation involves attributing human-like qualities to entities to foster emotional connections (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014) ^[5]. Examples include campaigns like Dove's "Real Beauty" and TOMS' "One for One," which align brand values with societal concerns to create consumer trust and loyalty.

Animism

Animism emphasizes life-like qualities in inanimate objects or concepts, rooted in cultural traditions. Marketing examples include descriptions like "roaring to life" for a car engine, making products appear relatable and dynamic (Chandler & Schwarz, 2010) ^[2].

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism attributes human traits, emotions, or intentions to non-human entities. Mascots like the Pillsbury Doughboy and anthropomorphic products like Amazon Alexa create emotional engagement and enhance brand recall (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007) ^[4].

Pareidolia

Pareidolia, a subconscious process, involves recognizing patterns like faces in unrelated stimuli (Jakobsen, Hunter, & Simpson, 2023) ^[6]. Marketing applications include logos like Amazon's smile-arrow, which enhance visual appeal and brand memorability.

Infra-Humanisation

Infra-humanisation, a subtle form of dehumanisation, involves perceiving out-groups as less capable of complex emotions (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014) ^[5]. In branding, faceless corporations or automated systems can create perceptions of indifference, reducing consumer trust (Waytz *et al.*, 2010) ^[9].

Propositions

1. **P1:** Humanisation enhances emotional resonance by aligning brand values with consumer identities, fostering trust and loyalty.
2. **P2:** Animism creates dynamic and relatable brand narratives by attributing life-like qualities to non-human entities.
3. **P3:** Anthropomorphism strengthens brand recall and engagement through the deliberate attribution of human traits to non-human entities.
4. **P4:** Pareidolia leverages subconscious pattern recognition to create memorable and visually engaging branding elements.

5. **P5:** Infra-humanisation, if not addressed, negatively impacts consumer trust and weakens brand perception.

Research Method

A qualitative research design was adopted, incorporating:

1. **Content Analysis:** Examination of marketing campaigns, advertisements, and product designs employing these phenomena.
2. **Case Studies:** Analysis of brands like Dove, TOMS, Amazon, Coca-Cola, and others to understand the practical application of these concepts.
3. **Thematic Analysis:** Identification of recurring themes and strategies through literature review and empirical evidence.

Qualitative Analysis

Humanisation

Humanisation involves the process of attributing human-like qualities, behaviors, or traits to entities, which can include both human and non-human targets. This concept extends to categorizing these entities within human social groups, emphasizing shared values, emotional connections, and a sense of community or belonging (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014) ^[5]. It is broader than anthropomorphism, as it applies to both human entities (e.g., individuals within social groups) and non-human entities (e.g., brands, products). Humanisation is broader in scope compared to anthropomorphism, which focuses on attributing human traits specifically to non-human agents (Waytz *et al.*, 2010) ^[9]. It operates on a continuum ranging from full humanisation, where entities are seen as entirely relatable and part of one's social group, to dehumanisation or infra-humanisation, where entities are seen as lacking essential human qualities. The process often involves the projection of shared experiences, cultural values, or ethical principles onto the humanised entity, creating a platform for emotional resonance and connection.

Examples

1. Brand Campaigns: Humanisation in brand campaigns is often executed through storytelling and the alignment of brand values with societal needs and consumer identities.

- **Dove's "Real Beauty" Campaign:** Dove emphasizes inclusivity by celebrating diverse beauty standards, resonating with individuals who feel excluded by traditional norms. By portraying authentic human stories and emphasizing self-acceptance, Dove has fostered a deeper emotional bond with its audience (Portal, Abratt, & Bendixen, 2018) ^[7].
- **Toms Shoes' "One for One" Mission:** TOMS integrates humanisation by aligning its brand with a social cause. Every purchase is tied to a charitable act, creating a connection where consumers feel their purchase has a meaningful impact on the world.

2. Social Media Engagement: Social media platforms provide an excellent medium for brands to humanize themselves by adopting conversational and relatable personas.

- **Wendy's Twitter Persona:** Wendy's uses wit and humor to engage with its audience, responding to queries and comments in a tone that feels human, personal, and approachable. This relatable online

persona helps create a sense of emotional intimacy and brand loyalty.

3. Product Design: Product design is another avenue where brands humanize their offerings. By embedding ethical practices or personal narratives, brands connect with the values of their consumers.

- **The Body Shop's Sustainability Values:** The Body Shop's emphasis on ethical sourcing and environmental responsibility humanizes the brand by aligning it with the broader social values of its audience. Consumers perceive the brand as empathetic and purposeful, fostering a sense of trust and alignment with their own beliefs.

Relevance in Marketing

Humanisation is an essential strategy for brands to establish strong emotional connections with consumers. By making brands appear relatable, authentic, and socially conscious, humanisation fosters brand loyalty and creates long-term consumer relationships. A humanized brand transcends the transactional nature of purchases, becoming a companion or ally in the consumer's life.

In a crowded marketplace, humanisation allows brands to stand out by fostering emotional attachment. For example, humanizing a brand by aligning it with societal values (such as sustainability or diversity) not only strengthens the brand's identity but also encourages advocacy and word-of-mouth marketing. Consumers are more likely to recommend a brand they perceive as humanized because it reflects their own ideals and values.

Furthermore, humanisation helps mitigate negative perceptions and builds resilience against criticism. A brand perceived as "human" and authentic is often forgiven for minor missteps, as consumers see the brand as relatable and fallible, much like themselves. For instance, TOMS' humanized mission-driven marketing enables the brand to maintain consumer trust even during challenges, as it resonates with a shared purpose.

In conclusion, humanisation is a powerful marketing tool that deepens consumer-brand relationships by fostering trust, emotional attachment, and shared values. By adopting strategies that humanize their campaigns, products, and communications, brands can achieve greater relevance, loyalty, and advocacy in today's competitive marketplace.

Animism

Animism is the attribution of life, spirit, or agency to inanimate objects, natural phenomena, or abstract concepts. It stems from the belief that these entities are alive and capable of independent action or intent. This concept has deep roots in cultural, spiritual, and mythological traditions.

Key Characteristics

1. **Focus on Life-Like Qualities:** Unlike anthropomorphism, which specifically attributes human-like qualities to non-human entities, animism emphasizes life-like attributes such as motion, vitality, or agency (Waytz *et al.*, 2010) [9]. For example, a storm may be described as "angry" or a car engine as "purring," reflecting vitality rather than explicit human traits.
2. **Cultural and Spiritual Roots:** Animism is often grounded in cultural or spiritual beliefs. It represents the

worldview that objects, plants, animals, and even geographical features possess a spirit or essence. Indigenous cultures worldwide commonly express this belief, seeing natural elements as alive and interconnected.

3. **Foundation for Anthropomorphic Perceptions:** Animism often serves as a precursor to anthropomorphism. Recognizing life-like qualities in non-human entities can lead to attributing more complex human-like traits, such as emotions or personalities.

Examples

1. Cultural Animism

- Many indigenous cultures regard natural objects, such as trees, rivers, and mountains, as alive and imbued with spirit. For instance, the Maori of New Zealand attribute spiritual significance to certain landmarks like Mount Taranaki, considering them sacred entities.
- The concept of animism is deeply embedded in Hinduism, where rivers like the Ganges are revered as living goddesses.

2. Marketing Animism

- Animism in marketing occurs when products or brands are described as alive or capable of independent action. For instance, a car advertisement might describe an engine as "roaring to life" or headlights as "winking."
- Another example is when malfunctioning technology is described in animistic terms, such as referring to a stubborn laptop that "doesn't want to cooperate" (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007) [1]. These attributions make the products more relatable by giving them a sense of vitality.

3. Media

- Animism is widely utilized in entertainment media, where inanimate objects are brought to life. A prime example is Disney's *Fantasia*, where objects like brooms and plates are depicted as alive and performing tasks on their own.
- Similarly, Pixar's *Toy Story* portrays toys as sentient beings capable of independent thought and action.

Relevance in Marketing

Animism has become a significant tool in marketing because it makes products and brands appear dynamic, relatable, and emotionally engaging. By imbuing non-human entities with life-like qualities, marketers can foster deeper emotional connections with consumers (Chandler & Schwarz, 2010) [2].

1. **Creating Emotional Appeal:** Products described as "alive" can evoke stronger emotional responses. For instance, describing a car as "eager to hit the road" conveys vitality and excitement, which resonate with the consumer's emotional state, making the product more appealing.
2. **Building Reliability:** Animism allows brands to create a sense of familiarity and comfort. For example, when a malfunctioning device is described as "stubborn," it mimics human behavior, making the device's flaws seem relatable and less frustrating.
3. **Enhancing Memorability:** Products or campaigns that leverage animism are often more memorable. For example, Duracell's battery commercials often depict

the batteries as having life-like energy, making them more distinctive in consumers' minds.

4. **Creating Dynamic Narratives:** Animism is often used in storytelling to create engaging narratives. For instance, commercials that show animated food items like M&M's engaging in humorous dialogue not only entertain but also make the product seem fun and approachable.
5. **Targeting Children and Families:** Animism is especially effective in marketing to children. Animated characters that seem alive, such as Tony the Tiger for Frosted Flakes or the Pillsbury Doughboy, attract children by making the brand feel playful and friendly.

Animism allows marketers to leverage the human tendency to attribute life to inanimate objects, creating a sense of vitality and engagement around products. By employing animistic strategies, brands can foster emotional connections, enhance consumer reliability, and make their offerings more memorable. Moreover, the use of animism taps into deep-seated cultural and psychological patterns, making it a powerful tool to engage audiences on both conscious and subconscious levels (Chandler & Schwarz, 2010) [2]. Whether through advertising campaigns, product descriptions, or storytelling, animism brings otherwise static products to life, enriching the consumer-brand experience.

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism refers to the attribution of human traits, emotions, and intentions to non-human entities. This cognitive process involves applying familiar human characteristics to inanimate objects, animals, or abstract concepts to make them more relatable and easier to understand (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007) [4].

Key Characteristics

1. **Cognitive and Cultural Processes:** Anthropomorphism stems from cognitive and cultural tendencies to use human schemas to interpret the world. Humans naturally apply familiar frameworks to unfamiliar entities to make sense of them, which is why anthropomorphism is so pervasive across cultures and industries (DiSalvo *et al.*, 2004) [3].

2. Multiple Forms of Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism manifests in various forms

- **Structural Anthropomorphism:** Focuses on physical similarities to humans, such as faces or body shapes.
- **Gestural Anthropomorphism:** Emulates human-like movements or expressions, such as winking or nodding.
- **Character Anthropomorphism:** Assigns personality traits or social roles to non-human entities.
- **Linguistic Anthropomorphism:** Uses human-like language or narratives to describe or represent non-human entities.

3. **Intentional Application:** Anthropomorphism is often a deliberate strategy in fields such as storytelling, branding, and product design. By creating human-like attributes, marketers and creators aim to build emotional connections with audiences.

Examples

1. Mascots

1. **Pillsbury Doughboy:** The Pillsbury Doughboy's

laughter and playful demeanor make the brand approachable and memorable, fostering emotional connections with consumers (Puzakova *et al.*, 2013) [8].

2. **Vodafone Zoozoos:** These characters, with their human-like gestures and humor, appeal to diverse audiences by adding personality and relatability to the brand.

2. Products

1. **Amazon Alexa:** Alexa uses conversational language, mimicking human interaction, to create a more intuitive and engaging user experience.
2. **VW Beetle:** The Beetle's design, often described as "cute" or "quirky," gives it a personality that makes it more relatable and likable to its audience.

3. Advertising

1. **Coca-Cola Polar Bears:** These animated bears exhibit human emotions like joy and camaraderie, creating heartwarming narratives that enhance brand appeal (DiSalvo *et al.*, 2004) [3].

Relevance in Marketing

Anthropomorphism has become a cornerstone of modern marketing because of its ability to humanize brands, making them more relatable, engaging, and trustworthy.

1. **Emotional Engagement:** Anthropomorphic elements evoke human emotions, enabling consumers to connect with brands on a deeper level. For example, Coca-Cola's polar bears represent joy, togetherness, and warmth, fostering a strong emotional bond with the audience.
2. **Building Trust and Loyalty:** When brands are perceived as human-like, consumers are more likely to trust them. Amazon Alexa's conversational tone not only enhances usability but also builds trust by simulating empathetic and responsive behavior.
3. **Memorability:** Anthropomorphic characters and narratives make brands more memorable by creating distinctive and relatable identities. For instance, the Pillsbury Doughboy's playful personality ensures that consumers remember the brand fondly.
4. **Enhanced Brand Personality:** Anthropomorphism gives brands distinct personalities, which helps them stand out in competitive markets. The VW Beetle's "quirky" personality, for instance, attracts consumers who identify with its uniqueness.
5. **Audience Appeal:** Anthropomorphism is particularly effective in engaging younger audiences and families. Mascots like Tony the Tiger or the M&M characters make brands feel playful and approachable, appealing to children while fostering nostalgia in adults.

Anthropomorphism is a powerful tool for brands to humanize their offerings, enhance emotional engagement, and build trust. By leveraging cognitive tendencies to relate to human-like traits, marketers can create memorable and distinctive brand experiences that resonate with diverse audiences. From mascots and product design to advertising narratives, anthropomorphism transforms abstract entities into relatable and approachable personalities, fostering stronger consumer-brand relationships. As such, it remains a critical strategy for modern marketing and storytelling.

Pareidolia

Pareidolia is a psychological phenomenon where people perceive familiar patterns, such as faces or recognizable shapes, in unrelated or random stimuli. This phenomenon is rooted in the human brain's natural pattern recognition ability, enabling us to identify meaningful shapes or forms even in abstract or ambiguous images (Jakobsen, Hunter, & Simpson, 2023) [6].

Key Characteristics

1. **Driven by the Brain's Pattern Recognition System:** The human brain is hardwired to recognize patterns, particularly those associated with human faces or forms. This mechanism is a product of evolutionary survival, as it enabled early humans to quickly identify potential threats, allies, or resources in their environment.
2. **Subconscious Process:** Pareidolia often occurs without conscious thought. For example, noticing a face in a car's grille or seeing animal shapes in clouds is an automatic response driven by our neural processes.
3. **Subset of Structural Anthropomorphism:** Pareidolia is considered a subset of structural anthropomorphism, where the recognition of patterns (such as human-like forms) is a precursor to attributing additional human traits or emotions to the perceived object. For example, recognizing a "smiling" face in a toaster can lead to perceiving it as "friendly".

Examples

1. Everyday Observations

1. **Car Grilles:** Many people see "faces" in the arrangement of headlights, grilles, and bumpers on cars. This perception is so common that automobile manufacturers often design vehicles with this phenomenon in mind, using "friendly" or "assertive" facial patterns to evoke specific emotions in potential buyers.
2. **Cloud Formations:** Observers often interpret clouds as resembling animals, faces, or other recognizable shapes. This spontaneous recognition reflects pareidolia's influence on everyday experiences.
3. **The Moon's Surface:** The "Man in the Moon" is a classic example where the lunar surface is interpreted as a human face due to shadow patterns.

2. Marketing Applications

1. **Logos:** Logos like Amazon's arrow-shaped "smile" tap into pareidolia by creating an engaging and friendly association with the brand. This subtle use of recognizable patterns reinforces positive brand identity.
2. **Advertisements:** Creative ads often use hidden patterns to captivate viewers. For instance, ads that integrate faces or familiar shapes into abstract designs encourage audiences to engage longer as they decipher the image, enhancing recall and emotional connection.

Relevance in Marketing

Pareidolia is a powerful tool in branding and marketing, offering several benefits

1. **Visual Engagement:** Pareidolia captures attention by leveraging the brain's instinctive pattern recognition. Advertisements and products designed with subtle, recognizable shapes-like faces or familiar forms are more likely to stand out and hold viewers' interest. This

effect is particularly beneficial in cluttered advertising spaces, where a memorable visual cue can create a competitive edge.

2. **Emotional Connection:** Recognizing a human-like pattern or familiar shape in a product or design can evoke positive emotions. For example, a car grille that appears to "smile" can make the vehicle seem approachable and friendly, fostering an emotional connection between the consumer and the product.
3. **Memorability:** Incorporating pareidolia into branding makes products or advertisements more memorable. Patterns that resemble faces or other relatable forms tap into deep-seated neural pathways, making the viewer more likely to recall the brand or message later.
4. **Brand Personality:** Pareidolia contributes to shaping brand personality by giving products and logos human-like or life-like associations. This can enhance relatability and foster a sense of familiarity, making consumers more likely to trust the brand.
5. **Subtle Storytelling:** Pareidolia allows marketers to tell visual stories without overt explanations. A logo with a hidden smile or an ad that plays with abstract patterns encourages consumers to engage actively with the brand, decoding the imagery and forming their own interpretations, which deepens their connection to the brand.

Examples in Practice

1. **Automobile Design:** Car manufacturers like Volkswagen and Tesla design vehicles with headlights and grilles that mimic expressive human "faces." For instance, Tesla's sleek and minimalistic design often resembles a "calm and confident" face, aligning with the brand's innovative and premium image.
2. **Food Packaging:** Packages with elements resembling faces, such as the placement of fruits as "eyes," create a playful and engaging experience, particularly for children. This strategy is widely used in cereals and snacks targeting younger demographics.
3. **Creative Campaigns:** Coca-Cola's "Share a Coke" campaign subtly incorporated pareidolia by aligning the shape of the bottle with smiling faces in its visual storytelling. This approach reinforced the brand's association with joy and togetherness.

Pareidolia is an intuitive and subconscious phenomenon that marketers can leverage to make their products, logos, and advertisements more engaging, memorable, and relatable. By tapping into the human brain's natural tendency to recognize patterns, brands can create emotional connections, enhance recall, and differentiate themselves in competitive markets. Whether through logo design, product aesthetics, or creative storytelling, pareidolia offers a subtle yet effective way to enrich the consumer experience and strengthen brand identity.

Infra-Humanisation

Infra-humanisation is the subtle and often unconscious process of attributing fewer complex human qualities, such as higher cognitive emotions and moral reasoning, to out-group members compared to in-group members. While individuals in out-groups may still be recognized as humans, they are often viewed as lacking the full spectrum of human attributes, particularly those associated with empathy, depth, and complexity (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014) [5]. This concept, a less extreme form of dehumanisation, highlights

the biases that influence interpersonal, intergroup, and consumer-brand relationships.

Key Characteristics

1. **Operates on a Continuum:** Infra-humanisation exists on a spectrum, ranging from full humanisation where entities are perceived as possessing complex emotions and human traits to dehumanisation, where entities are stripped of their humanity entirely. It represents a midpoint, where certain groups or brands are viewed as less "fully human."
2. **Subconscious and Stereotype-Driven:** Infra-humanisation is often unconscious, stemming from ingrained stereotypes and biases. For example, out-groups may be perceived as capable of experiencing basic emotions like anger or happiness but not complex ones such as pride or guilt. This bias is rooted in an in-group's perception of superiority.
3. **Impact on Relationships:** Infra-humanisation negatively affects intergroup dynamics by fostering prejudice and alienation. It also influences how individuals perceive brands, particularly when they fail to demonstrate empathy or engage authentically with their audiences.

Examples

1. Intergroup Dynamics

- In social contexts, infra-humanisation manifests in the tendency to assign basic emotions (e.g., anger, joy) to out-group members while reserving complex emotions (e.g., empathy, guilt, pride) for the in-group. For instance, members of a majority group might perceive immigrants as less capable of complex moral reasoning or emotional depth, perpetuating stereotypes and marginalisation.
- Another example is found in workplace hierarchies, where employees in lower ranks may be viewed as lacking creativity or critical thinking, reinforcing systemic inequality.

2. Branding and Consumer Perception

1. **Faceless Corporations:** Large corporations often suffer from infra-humanisation when they fail to connect with their audiences. A brand perceived as cold, impersonal, or profit-driven risks being viewed as indifferent or exploitative (Waytz *et al.*, 2010) ^[9]. For instance, banks or utility companies often struggle with this perception due to their lack of personal touch in customer interactions.
2. **Automated Customer Service:** Brands relying heavily on automated customer service systems can be perceived as indifferent and disconnected from their customers' needs. Consumers may feel ignored or undervalued when interacting with impersonal, scripted responses, exacerbating the infra-humanisation effect.

Relevance in Marketing

In marketing, infra-humanisation can severely damage a brand's reputation and erode consumer trust. Consumers expect brands to engage authentically and demonstrate empathy, especially in today's socially conscious market. Brands that fail to meet these expectations may inadvertently create emotional distance and alienation, leading to customer dissatisfaction and reduced loyalty (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014) ^[5].

1. **Impact on Consumer Trust:** Infra-humanised brands are often viewed as untrustworthy or indifferent. For instance, a brand that ignores customer feedback or fails to acknowledge social issues may be perceived as lacking empathy, diminishing its appeal.
2. **The Role of Empathy:** To avoid infra-humanisation, brands must actively demonstrate empathy and understanding. Personalized communication, authentic engagement on social media, and addressing customer concerns with care and attention are critical strategies for maintaining a humanized image.
3. **Creating Emotional Engagement:** Emotional connection is a key factor in consumer-brand relationships. Brands that humanize their interactions through relatable campaigns, empathetic messaging, or customer-centric policies are more likely to build lasting trust and loyalty.

4. Examples of Effective Humanisation

- **Zappos:** Known for its customer service, Zappos humanizes its brand by offering personalized interactions and prioritizing customer satisfaction.
- **Ben & Jerry's:** The brand consistently addresses social and environmental issues, demonstrating empathy and aligning with the values of its audience.
- 5. **Avoiding the Infra-Humanisation Trap:** Brands must balance efficiency with empathy. While automation and AI are valuable tools, over-reliance on impersonal systems can alienate customers. Combining technology with human touch points ensures a more authentic and engaging customer experience.

Infra-humanisation highlights the subtle biases that influence perceptions in both interpersonal and consumer-brand relationships. In marketing, it underscores the importance of empathy, authenticity, and meaningful engagement. Brands that fail to address these elements risk being perceived as cold and indifferent, leading to diminished trust and loyalty. By actively humanizing their interactions, embracing consumer feedback, and prioritizing emotional connection, brands can counteract infra-humanisation and foster stronger, more enduring relationships with their audiences. This approach is critical for building a positive reputation and thriving in today's competitive and socially conscious market.

Comparative Table

Concept	Focus	Key Attribute	Example
Humanisation	Categorizing into human terms	Relatability and belongingness	Dove's inclusivity campaigns; TOMS Shoes' socially conscious branding (Portal <i>et al.</i> , 2018) ^[7] .
Animism	Life-like qualities	Perceived vitality	A car described as "alive"; objects in Disney's <i>Fantasia</i>
Anthropomorphism	Human-like traits	Emotional engagement	Pillsbury Doughboy; Amul's mascot (Puzakova <i>et al.</i> , 2013) ^[8] .
Pareidolia	Recognition of patterns	Visual similarity	Seeing faces in clouds; car grilles resembling faces (Jakobsen <i>et al.</i> , 2023) ^[6] .
Infra-humanisation	Attribution of fewer human traits	Subtle biases	Faceless corporate branding; cold automated responses (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014) ^[5] .

Findings

1. **Emotional Engagement:** Effective use of humanisation, animism, and anthropomorphism fosters emotional resonance, enhancing brand loyalty.
2. **Memorability:** Pareidolia contributes to visual distinctiveness and brand recall through subconscious recognition of patterns.
3. **Risks of Infra-Humanisation:** Brands perceived as impersonal or indifferent due to excessive automation risk losing consumer trust.
4. **Strategic Balance:** A balanced approach combining humanisation and technological efficiency ensures authenticity and engagement.

The study underscores the importance of integrating psychological phenomena into branding strategies to build stronger consumer-brand relationships. Humanisation, animism, anthropomorphism, and pareidolia offer tools to enhance emotional connections and brand perception, while avoiding the pitfalls of infra-humanisation is crucial for maintaining trust. Marketers must strategically balance these elements to create authentic and relatable brand experiences. The distinction between humanisation and anthropomorphism lies in the perspective and the process through which a brand or intangible entity is perceived or presented in human terms.

Humanisation

- **Definition:** Humanisation occurs when consumers perceive an intangible entity, such as a brand, as possessing human-like qualities or characteristics. It is a

- **Cognitive Process:** Humanisation is a cognitive process driven by the consumer, influenced by how relatable and authentic they find the brand.
- **Consumer-Centric:** The emphasis is on how the audience interprets the brand. For example, consumers may describe a brand as "caring" or "trustworthy" based on its messaging, actions, or alignment with their values.
- **Outcome:** Humanisation results in consumers seeing the brand as part of their social group or as an ally that shares their beliefs and priorities.
- **Example:** A consumer perceives *TOMS Shoes* as empathetic and socially responsible because of its "One for One" initiative.

Anthropomorphism

- **Definition:** Anthropomorphism occurs when marketers actively attribute human-like traits, behaviors, or intentions to an intangible entity, like a brand, to make it more relatable and engaging. It is a deliberate strategy by the brand to create a human-like identity.
- **Marketer-Centric:** The focus is on how marketers craft the brand's persona, using tools like mascots, visual cues, and human-like storytelling.
- **Outcome:** Anthropomorphism enables brands to be presented as human-like entities, fostering familiarity and emotional engagement.
- **Example:** The *Pillsbury Doughboy*, a mascot with human-like gestures and emotions, makes Pillsbury products feel approachable and friendly.

Key Differences

Aspect	Humanisation	Anthropomorphism
Who drives the process?	Consumers interpret the brand in human terms.	Marketers create human-like traits for the brand.
Focus	Consumer perception and emotional connection.	Strategic crafting of human-like brand personas.
Approach	Subconscious and organic (consumer-driven).	Intentional and overt (marketer-driven).
Example	Consumers see <i>TOMS Shoes</i> as empathetic.	Pillsbury Doughboy represents Pillsbury's personality.

By integrating anthropomorphism (marketer-driven efforts) with humanisation (consumer-driven perceptions), brands can create a synergistic effect, fostering deeper emotional connections and enhancing brand loyalty. However, the balance is critical-excessive anthropomorphism may appear inauthentic and hinder genuine humanisation.

Limitations of the study

1. **Contextual Bias:** The study focuses primarily on examples from established global brands, potentially limiting applicability to small or local businesses.
2. **Qualitative Approach:** While in-depth, qualitative methods may not capture broader quantitative trends.
3. **Temporal Scope:** The study does not account for the evolving nature of consumer behavior over time.

Future Scope

1. **Quantitative Validation:** Future studies could employ surveys or experiments to quantitatively measure the impact of these phenomena on consumer behavior.
2. **Cultural Variations:** Exploring how cultural differences influence the effectiveness of humanisation, animism, and anthropomorphism.

3. **Technology Integration:** Examining the role of AI and automation in balancing humanisation and efficiency.
4. **Longitudinal Studies:** Assessing how consumer perceptions evolve with prolonged exposure to these branding strategies.

This study lays the groundwork for further exploration of the psychological mechanisms underpinning consumer-brand relationships, offering practical insights for marketers and researchers alike.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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