

The Role of Brand Spokes-Characters' Gender in an Emerging Context – A Worthy Consideration for Brand Anthropomorphism?

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ABSTRACT

According to the cognitive consistency theory, non-human brand stimuli with gender cues can trigger perceptions of their human-likeness and associated gender stereotypes. Gender's role in (de) humanization of human beings has been well studied, whereas its role in brand anthropomorphism remains underexplored, despite its impact on consumer behavior. Therefore, the influence of the acknowledged gender of brand spokes-characters on their anthropomorphism within the NPO sector of South Africa was the primary objective of this study. Additionally, the secondary objective was its influence on their perceived masculine and feminine brand personality and credibility. Data from an online panel of 600 respondents, analyzed using ANOVAs, showed that the characters' acknowledged gender did not influence their anthropomorphism, yet it influenced perceptions of their gendered brand personalities and credibility. These findings highlight the importance of non-human brand stimuli's gender perceptions and the match-up hypothesis in this regard, offering several implications for marketing scholars and practitioners.

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Introduction

“Gender may be not simply a cue for grouping humans into categories, but one that informs who is seen as ‘human’ in the first place.”
(Martin & Mason, 2022)

Gender is central to perceived humanness of human beings, and overlooking it could lead to perceptions of being perceived as less than fully human (Martin & Mason, 2022). The centrality of gender in perceived humanness is reiterated in dehumanization literature, which shows evidence of females being more frequently subjected to dehumanization than males (Haslam, 2006). Based on this premise, it is likely that gender would be central in the perceived humanness of non-human agents too. This is a psychological process referred to as *anthropomorphism* (Epley, 2018, p. 591) – or *brand anthropomorphism* when applied to brands or brand entities (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). Yet, given the

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psychological nature of anthropomorphism, it is likely to occur along a continuum (Epley et al., 2007) – from strongly held to weakly held perceptions – and owing to the importance of cognitive consistency in anthropomorphism, the perceived gender of non-human agents is likely to play a role in the degree to which such agents are anthropomorphized.

According to Jin and Qian (2021), brand anthropomorphism is becoming increasingly significant in consumer behavior research. This highlights the growing need for more comprehensive research in this field across various industries and using various methods, such as experiments (Jin & Qian, 2021). To date, anthropomorphism and brand anthropomorphism have often been evoked in research studies by comparing personified versus non-personified stimuli (e.g. Kim & McGill, 2011). However, these personified stimuli are often gender-neutral (e.g. Awad & Youn, 2018), nullifying the potential role their intentional gender design, let alone their interpreted or acknowledged gender, may play herein. Similarly, existing literature about gender in branding (e.g. Azar, 2015; Grohmann, 2009) tends to focus more on the role of intentional gender design (i.e. a brand's strategy), rather than on consumers' interpretation, acknowledgment, or unconscious attribution of gender in this context. Therefore, on the basis that gender is fundamental to perceived humanness (Martin & Mason, 2022) of human beings, it raises the question: "What role (if any) does gender play in the anthropomorphism of non-human agents, such as brand stimuli?"

While research about anthropomorphism in marketing and branding has received considerably more attention in developed markets (e.g. Kim & McGill, 2011; Puzakova & Kwak, 2023), it is starting to gain more traction within developing markets too (Manchanda & Deb, 2021). This is especially true as more research into investigating differences in people's tendencies to anthropomorphize across cultures is encouraged (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2020; Ghuman et al., 2015). Given the historical landscape of South Africa, which was driven by unequal power relations, a race and gender hierarchy was notably created (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010). As such, it makes for a compelling cultural backdrop against which to explore anthropomorphism through a gendered lens, especially within the under-researched sub-Saharan context – an area of growing importance due to increasing global interdependence (Blankson et al., 2024).

According to Darley (2002), effective brand management and maintaining a positive brand image are especially important in the sub-Saharan context, owing to their significant impact on organizations' financial performance (Berthon et al., 2007). The use of marketing activities traditionally reserved for the profit sector is becoming even more pertinent for nonprofit organizations (NPOs), due to the rising competition within the sector (Casey, 2016; Durgba Devi & Arumugam, 2024; Lee, 2021). The South African NPO sector, in particular, is becoming more reliant on such brand management strategies as they generally have scarcer financial resources than NPOs in more developed markets (Walton-Good, 2021). Some of these strategies include creating relevant and likable characters to represent a brand (Ogilvy, 1983) and brand anthropomorphism, which has shown to yield benefits such as brand loyalty and positive word-of-mouth (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). Brand anthropomorphism has been widely adopted and explored in the profitable sector due to these benefits; therefore, its application in NPOs may also be highly promising, as it could attract more attention and prosocial behavior from donors (Dalman & Ray, 2022) and has not been as widely explored to date (Ha et al.,

2022). Additionally, according to Roozen and Raedts (2017), the gender of endorsers and/or representatives for NPOs can also play a role in the extent of charitable giving toward NPOs, which further confirms the suitability of the NPO context for purposes of this study. Therefore, in response to the call for more brand anthropomorphism research across various industries and methods, this study aims to use a gendered lens as we expand our understanding of this as a brand management tool within the South African NPO sector. The primary objective of this study is therefore to explore the role (if any) that the acknowledged gender of non-human brand stimuli, particularly brand spokes-characters, may play on their anthropomorphism, in an industry that has not been as extensively researched – the nonprofit sector – by combining elements of an experiment (i.e. three distinctly gendered stimuli) with a traditional survey. In so doing, we can enhance our understanding of marketing and advertising practices in emergent African contexts (Burgess & Malhotra, 2020), particularly in not-for-profit sectors that rely on such tools to drive financial performance.

Furthermore, based on cognitive consistency, the acknowledged gender of brand stimuli such as brand spokes-characters is likely to trigger associated gender stereotypes (Martin & Mason, 2022) and be perceived similarly to respective human brand spokespersons (Garretson & Niedrich, 2004). It is, therefore, likely that their acknowledged gender may influence perceptions of their masculine and feminine brand personality traits (Grohmann, 2009; Pearson, 1982) and their credibility (Hovland et al., 1953). While previous studies have explored the gender dimensions of brand personality (i.e. masculine and feminine brand personality) (e.g. Grohmann, 2009) and the influence of a spokesperson's gender on source credibility (i.e. trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness) (e.g. Pearson, 1982), lesser attention has been paid to the role of gender when it comes to the use of non-human brand stimuli. To fill this gap, the study aims to extend the existing knowledge on the gender dimensions of brand personality and source credibility by examining the influence of the acknowledged gender of non-human brand stimuli, specifically brand spokes-characters. Unlike human spokespersons, the gender of brand spokes-characters may result from an intentional design choice rather than biology, which may evoke different consumer perceptions of the gender dimensions of brand personality and source credibility. Consequently, the secondary objectives of this study are to explore the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender on their perceived masculine and feminine brand personality, as well as their perceived credibility as brand representatives.

The remainder of this research paper is structured as follows: the literature review which provides an overview of the conceptualization and hypotheses formulation, followed by the methodology and data analysis, and concludes with a discussion of the results, the study's limitations and directions for future research.

Literature review

Cognitive consistency theory

The psychological principle of cognitive consistency suggests that if humans experience inconsistencies within and between cognitions, they become motivated to reduce or eliminate such inconsistencies by changing their behavior, environment,

or adding new cognitive elements (Festinger, 1957). Therefore, when exposed to non-human stimuli that appear human-like, one would rely on knowledge about human beings to make sense of such stimuli. This may result in attributing such stimuli with human-like emotions or mental states/capacities (R. Huang et al., 2020), driving the perception of their human-likeness. Furthermore, suppose such stimuli were to have gender cues. In that case, it may facilitate the likelihood of them being ascribed humanness and be interpreted through the lens of society's gender associations and stereotypes, similarly to their human counterparts (Martin & Mason, 2022, 2023).

Gendered personality traits and credibility are among the key gender associations that influence the perceived effectiveness of brand spokespersons (Garretson & Niedrich, 2004). Therefore, the physical humanlike appearance of brand spokes-characters is not only likely to be interpreted based on our expectations of their human counterparts but their effectiveness is also likely to be evaluated based on their gendered personality and credibility. This makes the cognitive consistency theory an apt framework to understand how consumers process and perceive such brand stimuli.

Brand anthropomorphism: designed vs. perceived

Anthropomorphism is a psychological and intuitive individual cognitive process in which unobservable human-like qualities (e.g. personality, cognition or emotion) are attributed to non-human agents. It often entails more than mere descriptive reports of such non-human agents' observable or imagined behaviors (Epley et al., 2007).

To date, scholars have made significant contributions to the anthropomorphism literature, and likewise, contributions to brand anthropomorphism literature are gaining prevalence (Epley, 2018; MacInnis & Folkes, 2017; Sharma & Rahman, 2022). According to Sharma and Rahman (2022) and Zhang et al. (2020), further research is needed to explore all the forms of brand stimuli (e.g. logos and spokes-characters) that may be useful in driving brand anthropomorphism, and to ascertain whether there are any clear distinctions between the anthropomorphism of brands and such stimuli.

Sharma and Rahman (2022) identify two prominent approaches in which brand anthropomorphism is explored in literature. Firstly, *designed brand anthropomorphism*, more commonly known as brand personification, which refers to the degree to which brands are created to appear human-like. This is often in the form of a character used for marketing-related purposes (R. J. Cohen, 2014, p. 3), such as the Michelin Man and the Pillsbury Doughboy. According to Epley et al. (2007), brand personification is an effective strategy for encouraging perceptions of a brand's human-likeness. These perceptions of brands as human-like refer to the second tradition through which brand anthropomorphism is explored, *perceived brand anthropomorphism* (Sharma & Rahman, 2022, p. 465).

Responding to the call for further research on the forms of brand stimuli driving brand anthropomorphism, this study explores whether and how *perceived brand anthropomorphism* varies based on *designed brand anthropomorphism*, in the form of brand spokes-characters, some of which are gendered. Since possessing human cognition or mental capacities are central to what makes individuals human, perceptions of non-human agents having *a mind, intentions, desires, consciousness,*

and *an ability to experience emotions* are key for anthropomorphism (Epley, 2018; Epley et al., 2008; Waytz et al., 2010). Therefore, perceived *brand anthropomorphism*, which will be broadly referred to as “brand anthropomorphism” in this study, will entail the perceptions of the brand spokes-characters having these mental capacities.

Role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in brand anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism, including brand anthropomorphism, is a psychological and perceptual concept (Golossenko et al., 2020), existing on a continuum (Epley et al., 2007) rather than an invariant human trait (Guthrie, 1995). Given the significant role that gender plays in humanization (Martin & Mason, 2022) and dehumanization (Haslam, 2006) of human beings, and based on the cognitive consistency theory, the acknowledged gender of non-human agents are also likely to influence their perceived human-likeness. Therefore, not considering the role of gender in brand anthropomorphism would be amiss, and to date, research still remains limited in this area. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap, which is its primary objective.

Within the metaphor of understanding brands-as-people, sexual attributions to brands include *brand sex* (Azar, 2015). *Brand sex* is characterized as a demographic characteristic defined “as the human sex associated with a brand” (Azar, 2015, p. 49). Through designed brand anthropomorphism, not only is perceived brand anthropomorphism a likely outcome but so are perceptions of a *brand's sex* (brand as male, female, neither/both), especially when they are imbued with gender cues. The term “sex” carries biological implications, while “gender” is more socio-culturally constructed (Hyde et al., 2019). Since brand spokes-characters cannot possess biological sex, the term “gender” (Yang & Aggarwal, 2025), and more specifically, “acknowledged gender” will be more fitting in this study to refer to the acknowledgment of the brand spokes-characters as either female, male, or neither/both (i.e. gender-neutral).

According to dehumanization, females are often perceived as less dominant and are usually more objectified (i.e. denied full agency) than males (Haslam, 2006). Grau and Zotos (2016) state that such gender stereotypes are often “mirrored” in mass media and advertising environments, too. For example, in advertisements featuring both males and females, females often appear more in the background and are portrayed as more subordinate, while males are portrayed as more dominant and autonomous (Zotos & Eirini, 2014). Given the principles of cognitive consistency, brand spokes-characters acknowledged as female may be perceived in line with these gender stereotypes and therefore differ in how they are anthropomorphized compared to those acknowledged as male. It can therefore be hypothesized that:

- H₁: There are significant differences in the brand anthropomorphism across the acknowledged gender groups of brand spokes-characters.

Within the metaphor of understanding brands-as-people, and the role of gender therein, respective gender associations are also likely to emerge. Brand spokes-characters with gender cues may therefore be perceived as embodying “human personality traits

associated with masculinity and/or femininity” (Grohmann, 2009, p. 106). While literature about gendered brand personality is comprehensive regarding human beings, less is known regarding inanimate brand spokes-characters. This notable gap is to be explored as one of the secondary objectives of this study.

Gender associations: role of brand spokes-characters’ acknowledged gender in perceived masculine and feminine brand personality

According to Lieven et al. (2015) and César Machado et al. (2021), brand design and visual identity features can shape perceptions of a brand’s corresponding masculine and/or feminine personality traits, which is especially evident when drawing on evolutionary psychology (Lieven et al., 2015). Therefore, when gendered brands adopt behavior or personality traits that are incongruent or counter-stereotypical to their perceived gender, it is likely to be perceived as a poor fit (Yang & Aggarwal, 2025). As a result, brands acknowledged as male are more likely to be associated with masculine personality traits, and those acknowledged as female with feminine personality traits. Consequently, brands acknowledged as male versus female will likely differ regarding their perceived masculinity versus femininity. It can therefore be hypothesized that:

- H₂: There are significant differences in perceived masculine brand personality across the acknowledged gender groups of brand spokes-characters.
- H₃: There are significant differences in perceived feminine brand personality across the acknowledged gender groups of brand spokes-characters.

Further to understanding brands-as-people and the role of gender therein, literature about brand spokespeople highlights gender associations as critical factors in determining their perceived credibility (Pearson, 1982). According to Garretson and Niedrich (2004), perceived credibility is key to understanding the effectiveness of these brand representatives. While the role of gender in the credibility of human spokespeople is evident in literature, it is less evident when it comes to inanimate brand spokes-characters. This highlights another notable gap that this study aims to explore as one of the secondary objectives.

Gender associations: role of brand spokes-characters’ acknowledged gender in perceived source credibility

Based on literature about human spokespersons, their brand effectiveness can be examined through their perceived credibility (Garretson & Niedrich, 2004). This is referred to as source credibility and is defined as the “communicator’s positive characteristics that affect the receiver’s acceptance of a message” (Ohanian, 1990, p. 41) and comprises’ *trustworthiness*, *expertise*, and *attractiveness* (Ohanian, 1990). *Trustworthiness* is defined as the confidence in a communicator to communicate a message honestly and objectively. *Expertise* entails the extent to which a communicator is perceived as making valid assertions and possessing the knowledge to support these assertions (Hovland et al., 1953, p. 21). *Attractiveness* refers to the facial and physical appearance of a communicator that is pleasing to observe and that attracts an audience’s attention (Patzner, 1983, p. 229).

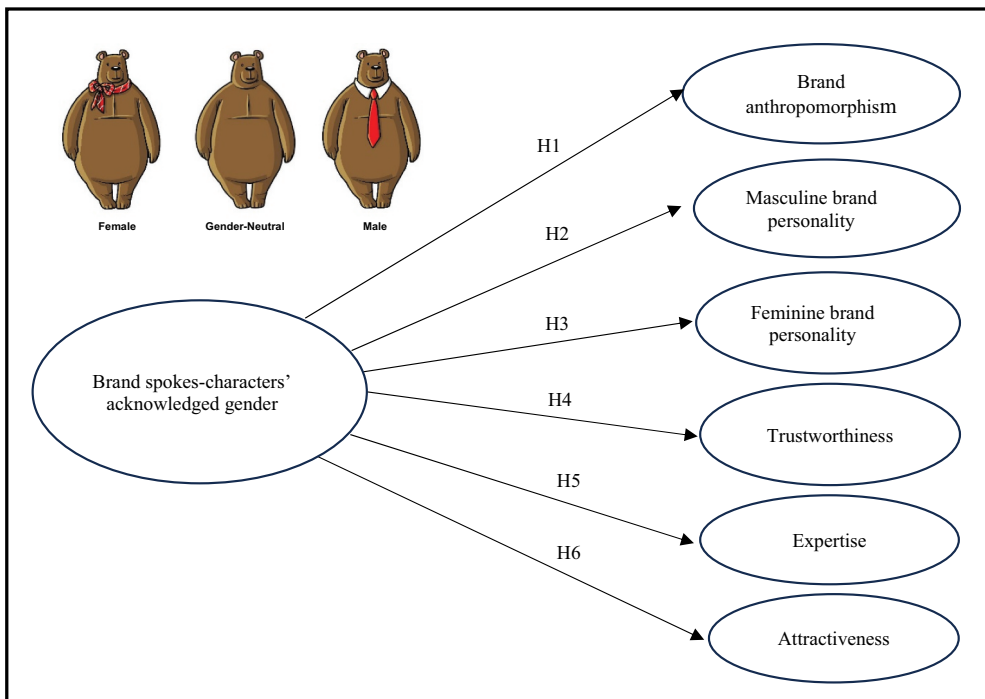


Figure 1. Graphical Representation of the Hypotheses.

According to Pearson (1982), the perceived credibility of communicators is likely to differ based on their gender. According to Brownlow and Zebrowitz (1990), female communicators are often perceived as more *trustworthy* and *attractive* than males, while males have more *expertise* than females, in commercial communications (Principe & Langlois, 2012). However, a study by J. C. Huang (2021) found female and transgender endorsers to be perceived as less credible across all three dimensions than male endorsers. Therefore, in line with the principles of cognitive consistency, it is evident that the perceived credibility of brand spokes-characters across all three dimensions (i.e. trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness) is also likely to differ based on their acknowledged gender. It can therefore be hypothesized that:

- H₄: There are significant differences in perceived trustworthiness across the acknowledged gender groups of brand spokes-characters.
- H₅: There are significant differences in perceived expertise across the acknowledged gender groups of brand spokes-characters.
- H₆: There are significant differences in perceived attractiveness across the acknowledged gender groups of brand spokes-characters.

Refer to [Figure 1](#) for a graphical representation of all the hypotheses within this study.

Methodology

To evoke brand anthropomorphism and perceptions of gender in this study, *designed brand anthropomorphism* (i.e. brand personification) in the form of brand spokes-characters was deemed fitting. To minimize biased responses, it was essential to ensure that an unfamiliar brand spokes-character was created. Manipulating an animal, such as a *bear*, to appear human-like was deemed appropriate due to their observably human-like features, such as hand-like claws and the ability to walk bipedally (Connell, 2013). To elicit perceptions of these characters' gender, a seemingly male and female version of the bear brand spokes-character was created, based on male and female being the two prominent gender categories in a culture (Wood & Eagly, 2015, p. 461). The characters were, respectively, adorned with stereotypical gender cues such as facial features (e.g. long eyelashes) and clothing accessories (Golomb et al., 1990). The clothing accessories were red, which is considered a unisex color (Olvera, 2012). Since there is currently an observable shift away from societal gender norms, with *gender-neutrality* becoming a notable marketing and consumer trend (Bula, 2022; Claveria, 2016), it was necessary also to include a gender-neutral version of the character (devoid of any gender cues) in this study. Various versions of bear brand spokes-characters were created, and after a pretest, three versions of the bears depicted in Figure 1 emerged as the most effective. The three versions of the bear characters were intentionally designed to be emotionless in both facial and bodily expressions to minimize any confounding consequences as a result, because according to Fischer et al. (2004), preconceived emotions can often be associated with specific genders. Figure 2 below provides the scenario and visual aid used to introduce each version of the bear brand spokes-character as a representative of a South African NPO within the questionnaire.

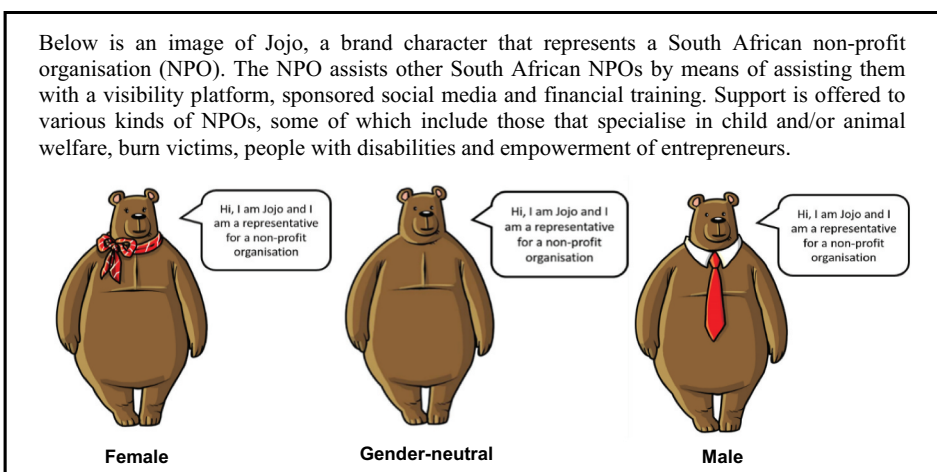


Figure 2. Introduction to the Brand Spokes-Character Stimuli Through a Scenario and Visual Aid. *Note:* Respondents were randomly assigned to a questionnaire using one of these three bear spokes-character stimuli.

Sample

A convenience sample of 600 respondents was recruited through an online panel, administered by a reputable research company with experience in the South African market. Respondents were 18 years and older, mostly from urban areas, and needed access to a device to complete the online questionnaire. South Africa was the developing country of choice for this study, primarily because of convenience. All the respondents were incentivized to participate. A convenience sampling method was deemed suitable, due to the lack of a sampling frame (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). However, since such samples are not representative of the population, and therefore not generalizable, caution should be exercised when interpreting the results hereof (Malhotra, 2010).

To avoid gender bias, a gender quota comprising 100 respondents identifying as male and 100 identifying as female were exposed to either the male, female, or gender-neutral version of the bear character, as depicted in Figure 1. Upon acknowledging the gender of the bear brand spokes-character to which they were exposed, respondents were then asked about the brand anthropomorphism of these characters, the perceived masculine and feminine brand personality, and trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (i.e. source credibility). The measurement hereof was based on work by Grohmann (2009), Ohanian (1990), as well as Epley et al. (2008, p. 115) and Waytz et al. (2010, p. 422), respectively. The items were all measured with a seven-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree” and 7 = “strongly agree”). The demographic data collected included respondents’ gender and age. Before the final questionnaire was distributed among the online panel, a pretest was conducted among 60 respondents.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics.

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender with which respondents identify		
Female	300	50
Male	300	50
TOTAL	600	100
Population group		
Black African	367	61,2
Coloured	79	13,2
Indian/Asian	35	5,8
White	108	18,0
Other	2	0,3
Prefer not to say	9	1,5
TOTAL	600	100
Age (yrs)		
20–29	144	24
30–39	296	49,33
40–49	103	17,17
50–59	31	5,17
60–69	20	3,33
70+	3	0,50
Incomplete	3	0,50

Data analysis and results

Demographic profile of respondents and descriptive statistics

Owing to the gender quota that was set for this study, 300 respondents self-identified as male and 300 as female. As evident from Table 1, 73.33% of the respondents were between 20 and 39 years old, and “Black African” was the most represented population group (61.2%). The characteristics of the sample for this study align with those of the South African population, according to the most recent census study conducted in 2022 (Stats, 2022).

Perceptions of marketing stimuli have been noted as important, as consumers often base their purchase decisions thereon (Du Toit, 2014, p. 76), as opposed to what is intended by marketers. Thus, in this study, understanding the influence of the brand spokes-characters’ acknowledged gender was more important than their intended gender (based on the observable gender cues with which the characters were adorned). Therefore, in terms of *acknowledged* gender, 96 of the 600 (16%) respondents acknowledged the characters as female, 205 (34.17%) acknowledged them as gender-neutral, and 299 (49.83%) acknowledged them as male, irrespective of their intended gender. Thus, the most *acknowledged* gender was male, confirming the male dominance in society, because when in doubt, respondents acknowledged more characters as male than female or gender-neutral.

Validity and reliability

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the convergent and discriminant validity of the scales (Hair et al., 2014, pp. 618–619). Three items with factor loadings below 0.5 were removed from further analyses. The measurement model indicated a good fit ($\chi^2 = 1150,518$, $df = 360$, p -value = 0.000; $\chi^2/df = 3.196$; goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = 0.880; adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) = 0.855; comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.953; Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = 0.948; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.061). Cronbach’s alpha was then calculated to assess the internal consistency of the various constructs, while the composite reliability (CR) was calculated to make the reliability analysis more robust. As evident from Table 2, all the scales indicated good reliability, while convergent validity of the final measurement model assessed using AVE, was also provided (Hair et al., 2014, p. 619).

From Table 3, discriminant validity was also evident as the square root of the final AVEs for each construct was above the inter-construct correlation coefficients (Malhotra, 2010, p. 749). Thus, the instruments used were deemed reliable and valid for the purposes of this study.

Hypotheses testing

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) is used to test for statistically significant differences between three or more independent sample means (Allen et al., 2018). To determine whether there were statistically significant differences throughout this study (H_1 to H_6), based on the brand spokes-characters’ acknowledged gender (i.e. female, male, and gender-neutral), it was deemed suitable to analyze the data by means of ANOVAs.

Table 2. Reliability and Convergent Validity Assessment.

	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Brand anthropomorphism		0,903	0,900	0,062
BA1	0,747			
BA2	0,765			
BA3	0,838			
BA4	0,855			
BA5	0,797			
Masculine BP		0,836	0,842	0,576
MBP1	0,782			
MBP3	0,832			
MBP4	0,818			
MBP6	0,576			
Feminine BP		0,931	0,934	0,741
FBP2	0,771			
FBP3	0,771			
FBP4	0,918			
FBP5	0,932			
FBP6	0,896			
Trustworthiness		0,944	0,947	0,781
Trust1	0,785			
Trust2	0,896			
Trust3	0,925			
Trust4	0,901			
Trust5	0,904			
Expertise		0,952	0,950	0,792
Expertise1	0,867			
Expertise2	0,931			
Expertise3	0,914			
Expertise4	0,863			
Expertise5	0,873			
Attractiveness		0,926	0,928	0,723
Attract1	0,880			
Attract2	0,888			
Attract3	0,872			
Attract4	0,874			
Attract5	0,726			

Notes: BP = Brand personality.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity Analysis.

	BA	Masculine BP	Feminine BP	Trustworth-iness	Expertise	Attractiveness
BA	0,801					
Masculine BP	0,682	0,759				
Feminine BP	0,648	0,603	0,861			
Trustworthiness	0,750	0,674	0,782	0,884		
Expertise	0,760	0,731	0,690	0,796	0,890	
Attractiveness	0,701	0,746	0,634	0,738	0,800	0,850

Notes: BA = Brand anthropomorphism; BP = Brand personality.

Before the interpretation hereof, the underlying assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance first needed to be confirmed (Allen et al., 2018, p. 82). Most of the assumptions were not violated and therefore ANOVA statistics were mostly interpreted, except for “expertise” whereby the Welch statistics had to be interpreted, as the assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated (Allen et al., 2018, p. 86).

The ANOVA results indicate that at $\alpha = 0.05$, no statistically significant differences between the brand spokes-characters’ acknowledged gender in brand anthropomorphism, $F(2, 597) = 1.88, p = 0.153, \eta^2 = 0.01$, and in trustworthiness, $F(2, 597) = 0.53, p =$

Table 4. Results from the Post Hoc Tests and Cohen's *D* for Acknowledged Gender.

	Female	Gender-neutral	Male	<i>p</i> -value	Cohen's <i>d</i>
BA	5.16	4.87	4.85	N/A	N/A
Masculine BP	5.04 ^a	4.91 ^b	4.67 ^a	0.054 ^{**a}	0.2 ^a
Feminine BP	5.59 ^a	5.41 ^b	5.22 ^a	0.056 ^{**a}	0.2 ^a
Trustworthiness	5.35	5.32	5.21	N/A	N/A
Expertise	5.27 ^a	4.96 ^b	4.81 ^a	0.013 ^{*a}	0.3 ^d
Attractiveness	4.83 ^a	4.57 ^b	4.20 ^{a b}	0.002 ^{*a}	0.3 ^a
				0.027 ^{*ab}	0.2 ^b

1. The results from the Tukey's HSD test are indicated by ^a and/or ^b. All mean values containing the same letters (e.g. ^a or ^b) indicate that these groups differ significantly from one another. All means values containing different letters (e.g. ^a or ^b) indicate that these groups do not differ significantly from one another.

2. The italicized *p*-value is based on the interpretation of the Games-Howell post hoc procedure, and the italicized Cohen's *d* is calculated based on the Welch statistics and the Games-Howell post hoc procedure.

3. ** *p*-values are significant at $\alpha = 0.1$.

4. * *p*-values are significant at $\alpha = 0.05$.

0.588, $\eta^2 = 0.00$ were found. There were, however, statistically significant differences for masculine brand personality, $F(2, 597) = 3.58$, $p = 0.029$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$; feminine brand personality, $F(2, 597) = 3.03$, $p = 0.049$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$; and attractiveness, $F(2, 597) = 7.14$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$. For "expertise," the Welch statistics were interpreted at $\alpha = 0.05$, indicating that there were statistically significant differences in expertise, Welch's $F(2, 272.83) = 4.05$, $p = 0.018$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$. In summary, hypotheses H_2 , H_3 , H_5 , and H_6 were supported, while hypotheses H_1 and H_4 were not.

The results from the post hoc analyses with Tukey's HSD approached significance at 0.05; thus, they were interpreted at $\alpha = 0.1$. As seen in Table 4, the brand spokes-characters acknowledged as female attained statistically significantly higher scores for masculine brand personality ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.40$ vs. $M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.39$), feminine brand personality ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.32$ vs. $M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.48$), and attractiveness ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.49$ vs. $M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.62$) than those acknowledged as male. In terms of attractiveness, the brand spokes-characters acknowledged as gender-neutral ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.46$) also attained statistically significant higher scores than those acknowledged as male ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.62$). Due to unequal variances and unequal sample sizes between the characters acknowledged as female, gender-neutral, and male, respectively, in terms of "expertise," a Games-Howell post hoc procedure was performed (Field, 2013, p. 459) and was interpreted at $\alpha = 0.05$. These results indicated that the brand spokes-characters acknowledged as female attained statistically significantly higher scores ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.32$) than those acknowledged as male ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 1.61$) for "expertise." According to the measure of effect size by J. Cohen (1988, pp. 25–26), all the differences noted above would be considered small (*d* between 0.2 and 0.3).

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in brand anthropomorphism, its role in perceived masculine and feminine brand personality and perceived credibility within an NPO context, in an emerging market.

Firstly, the findings demonstrate no evidence of differences in the acknowledged gender of brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters. This may have resulted from the design of the gender cues not being as overt or the prevailing

“male gaze,” where there appears to be twice as many male brand mascots as females in the market (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2018), as such when in doubt, the characters may have been perceived as male more so than female or even gender-neutral. Thus, despite the argument that acknowledged gender of non-human agents is likely to influence their perceived human-likeness, this was not the case in this study. However, regardless of the acknowledged gender, the brand spokes-characters were still perceived as human-like to some extent, given the anthropomorphism mean values for female, gender-neutral, and male spokes-characters ($M = 5.16$; $M = 4.87$; $M = 4.85$). This finding holds two key advantages. First, it shows that NPOs and brand managers can successfully humanize their brands using spokes-characters, without relying heavily on overt gender cues, and second, the anthropomorphism of all spokes-characters, regardless of acknowledged gender, indicates that consumers are receptive to diverse and inclusive character representations.

Secondly, the findings show evidence that the brand spokes-characters’ acknowledged gender differed in both perceived masculine and feminine brand personality, which aligns with the principles of cognitive consistency and supports previous findings (Grohmann, 2009). Yet, contrary to existing research, the brand spokes-characters acknowledged as female were perceived as having more of a masculine brand personality than those acknowledged as male. This may be attributed to masculinity being more broadly defined than femininity, making it easier for consumers to identify markers of masculinity than femininity (Yang & Aggarwal, 2025). Additionally, this may be attributed to evolving gender perceptions, as prescriptive gender norms continue to be challenged, as role-reversal becomes more common in family households (Pinho & Gaunt, 2021), and as people choose to lead less gendered lives. This fluidity likely influences how consumers interpret brand gender cues, particularly in diverse and transitional cultural contexts like emerging markets. This finding raises an important consideration for brand managers and NPOs alike, in that one could not assume that consumers will perceive brand spokes-characters in a specific way given their assigned gender, but that research and testing are necessary to ensure alignment with the intended brand personality and the perceptions thereof of consumers.

Thirdly, the findings confirm that perceptions of two dimensions of source credibility – *expertise* and *attractiveness* – differ based on brand spokes-characters’ acknowledged gender. Even though gender differences were evident in *expertise*, contrary to research by Brownlow and Zebrowitz (1990), the characters acknowledged as female were perceived as being more knowledgeable about NPOs than those acknowledged as male. This may be due to their intrinsically communal nature (Eagly et al., 2020), a key driver for NPO work, and as evidenced by the fact that the majority of professionals, informal community carers and volunteers in the South African NPO landscape appear to be female (L. Patel, 2009). On the other hand, all three gendered characters may have been perceived similarly regarding *trustworthiness*, as trust is a foundational characteristic of NPOs (Kelly et al., 2014), which may supersede the role of the perceived gender of its endorsers. Thus, suggesting that consumers may lean on their expectations of the organization, with the NPO’s credibility acting as a “trust shield” that neutralizes potential gender biases in

endorsement. Another compounding factor could be that as society is becoming increasingly aware of and resistant to gender stereotyping, consumers may be more inclined to evaluate communications on their message and perceived authenticity rather than defaulting to traditional gender norms.

Even though there was no evidence of differences in brand anthropomorphism pertaining to brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender, it was evident that gender was perceived despite what may have been intended by their designed gender cues. This reiterates gender as a central premise to the conception of humanness, but particularly the perceived humanness of inanimate brand stimuli.

Theoretical and managerial implications

This study makes several theoretical contributions that also have managerial implications. First, the cognitive consistency theory (Festinger, 1957), as used in this study, provides a novel lens to argue not only for brand anthropomorphism but also for assigning gender to personified stimuli. We contribute to brand anthropomorphism literature directly by exploring the role of gender herein. For brands to remain relevant by mirroring what society purports as topical, we conclude that brand spokes-characters' gender should be a prominent research stream within brand anthropomorphism conversations. Part of our findings suggest that brands should be aware that, in most instances, brand spokes-characters have an acknowledged gender that consumers perceive, albeit not what brands may have intended. Future research can use qualitative methods to explore additional reasons other than cognitive consistency for how and why gender is attributed to brand spokes-characters, beyond a presumably intended gender-neutral brand stimulus. Additionally, as gender conversations evolve and transcend the binary divide (Bula, 2022; Claveria, 2016), it may also become important to explore the attribution thereof, beyond the traditional gender norms.

Second, innovatively operationalizing “brand sex” (Azar, 2015) for inanimate brand spokes-characters regarding *acknowledged gender* creates an opportunity to explore the intricate issue consumers perceive. Globally, gender is surfacing as a frontier driver for consumer decisions (Bula, 2022). We provide evidence that 1) brand spokes-characters are imbued with gender perceptions, and 2) consumers from South Africa, a sub-Saharan country and emerging market, are equally influenced by such drivers. Although cultural connotations associated with gender may differ from country to country, brands can benefit by making sure that the appropriate gender-cultural milieu is taken into consideration when using brand spokes-characters.

Third, *acknowledged gender*, as evident in this study, supports the notion that brand stimuli and the context within which such stimuli are used (i.e. NPOs in this study) may be difficult to separate as each element influences the other. Brands must not underestimate the match-up hypothesis, as it applies to gender and the specific context in which brands and/or brand elements are used (e.g. Lien et al., 2012). We purport that gender as related to “brand sex” remains a complicated element to explore using survey-based methods, and that future experimental research could provide additional insight about the interacting effects of different elements related to the acknowledged gender of brand spokes-characters.

Fourth, the findings of this study shed light on the complicated nature of gender associations. Masculine and feminine brand personality characteristics appear to not only be impacted by *acknowledged gender* but also possibly by the context of the study and/or the details of the brand spokes-character (such as the type of animal, the visual cues and the written scenario). We, therefore, contribute to brand personality literature (Grohmann, 2009) by offering insight related to one element (*acknowledged gender*) that impacts perceived brand personality dimensions. Based on the cognitive consistency theory that assumes consumers simplify brand stimuli based on what is familiar, future research could explore whether the dominant gender of human spokespersons in specific contexts has spillover effects onto the acknowledged gender of brand spokes-characters in similar contexts. Brands should be sure that the data insights used for strategic decision-making related to their brand spokes-characters include information about the gender that consumers may acknowledge these characters to have.

Fifth, by considering source credibility, we merge the literature stream considering human spokespersons, with that of brand spokes-characters. Specifically, findings point to the importance of *acknowledged gender* when considering the source credibility of brand spokes-characters. Our pioneering initiative proved fruitful and can again be used in future research to explore further the three dimensions of source credibility (Ohanian, 1990) in the realm of brand spokes-characters, perhaps related to perceived lifestyle as established in the human spokesperson literature. Brands should be mindful that the acknowledged gender of their brand spokes-characters will impact the perceived source credibility. Thus, brands should conduct thorough research about consumers' perceived source credibility of all gender dimensions for the brand spokes-character being used.

Limitations and directions for future research

Despite the contributions made by the findings of this study, social science research has limitations that could be addressed by future research. First, the study focused primarily on gender as binary (male/female), with the exception of gender neutralism. However, gender exists beyond the culturally accepted male and female divide (Adams, 2017) and has become more fluid with several new gender identities that have come to the fore. As such, the generalizability of these findings is limited. Therefore, the recommendation for future research would be to consider measuring gender perceptions (including masculine and feminine brand personalities) beyond gender as a binary construct to ensure more inclusive research going forward.

Second, the design of the brand spokes-characters may have been ambiguous to some or interpreted differently (e.g. some traits may be perceived as feminine to some, and neutral to others), which may limit the generalizability of these results. Future research could benefit from the use of an experimental design in which the degree of such characters' human-likeness can be manipulated, ranging from low on the brand personification reality continuum (i.e. non-human characters with minimal human-like features, e.g. Mr Pritt) to high (i.e. characters with highly human-like features, e.g. Mr Clean) (R. J. Cohen, 2014). Alternatively, qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, could also offer richer insights into how consumers interpret and react to the gendered traits when it comes to *designed brand anthropomorphism*.

Third, this study focused on the acknowledgment of brand spokes-characters' gender and not on the accuracy based on what was intended nor on the interaction between its acknowledged gender and perceived masculine/feminine brand personality. Therefore, future research could explore these effects as they may offer valuable insights into the study of gendered marketing stimuli in brand anthropomorphism and the broader study of gender.

Fourth, this study focused on the South African context, which may further limit the generalizability of these findings to markets in the global North and other developing markets within Africa. There are vast disparities among Sub-Saharan countries alone, based on factors such as linguistics, culture, demographics, and socio-economics (Darley, 2002). Future research should therefore consider comparative studies within the Sub-Saharan context before extending it to other African or even global markets. Gender perspectives in some African cultures, especially in rural settings, may still very much be rooted in religious, traditional or socio-economic structures, while those in more urbanized settings may have more progressive views (J. Patel, 2020). As such, myriad interpretations of brand anthropomorphism through a gendered lens may emerge when employing a cross-cultural approach.

Conclusion

As gender becomes more topical and advances, this study makes it evident that the operationalization of “brand sex” within brand anthropomorphism – both *designed and perceived* is key consideration warranting further research. Although the findings contribute to moving marketing science and practice forward in the under-researched sub-Saharan African context Africa (Blankson et al., 2024; Burgess & Malhotra, 2020), by highlighting the significance of exploring brand anthropomorphism through a gendered lens, it is also evident that gender in its entirety is still a complicated issue. It is one that deserves far more attention in future research, not only in humanization and dehumanization literature but evidently in brand anthropomorphism literature too.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics approval statement

Ethics approval was obtained from Economic and Management Sciences faculty of the University of Pretoria Ethics committee, protocol number EM146/18.

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