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FROM MASCOTS TO AVATARS: EXPLORING CHARACTER DESIGN AS A STRATEGIC TOOL FOR CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT


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Abstract:

Character design has been a branding staple for decades, with mascots embodying brand values, generating familiarity, and establishing consumer trust. In the contemporary, contemporary digital environment, the rise of avatars and AI-driven characters is a significant evolution in strategic brand communication. These digital entities provide interactive, adaptive, and even personalised experiences that go beyond the symbolic role of traditional mascots, creating new opportunities for brands to build engagement. The article examines how character design is used as a strategic method of building consumer engagement, emphasizing the development from mascots to avatars as a continuum rather than substitution. Grounded in anthropomorphism theory, parasocial interaction theory, and narrative transportation theory, the study develops a conceptual model that connects character design with consumer engagement on the basis of psychological and entertainment processes. The paper also highlights a significant research gap, the lack of understanding regarding how digital avatars

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uniquely affect consumer relationships compared to mascots. By completing this gap, the study contributes theoretically to branding literature and practically to managers who are seeking to leverage character-based methods in the contemporary markets.

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Anthropomorphism, Brand Mascots, Consumer Engagement, Digital Avatars, Parasocial Interaction.



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Introduction

Brands have consistently relied upon visual and symbolic elements to communicate character and values. Amongst them, character design is in the form of mascots and subsequently digital avatars has emerged as a successful strategic tool for drawing in consumer attention and building strong connections (Gomes, Lopes, & Nogueira, 2025). Traditional brand mascots such as the Michelin Man or Tony the Tiger have traditionally created familiarity, trust, and emotional identification among consumers, while new avatars and characters created through AI deliver interactive, adaptive, and personal brand experiences. This evolution is a result of more profound evolutions in branding in which consumers are engaged more through digital means of storytelling and immersion into narratives.

As the incorporation of avatars or virtual influencers as a strategy in branding becomes more prevalent, many questions arise about how these virtual beings may compare to the mascots as facilitators in the development of relationships between consumers and brands. Though there is nostalgia associated with the use of mascots, the avatars have the potential of involving consumers in real-life interaction and participation, making it possible for consumer engagement via anthropomorphism, parasocial interaction, and entertainability (Lourenço, Ferreira, & dos Santos, 2024; Srivastava et al., 2025).

However, despite the prominence of avatars as strategies in current marketing practices, research on the same lack's comprehensiveness. This paper contributes towards the completion of this gap by proposing a conceptual model on character design as a brand strategic tool for interfacing with consumers. The article employs psychological mechanisms such as

anthropomorphism, parasocial interaction, and narrative transportation in the development of the theoretical explanations of brand communication and offers practical suggestions for brand marketers in managing digital realms.

Literature Review

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism, on the other hand, is the phenomenon of attributing anthropocentric features like emotions, intentions, and personality to non-human entities like objects, mascots, and avatars, and it has emerged as a key psychological construct in the study of branding and consumer behavior (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). In the context of marketing, anthropomorphism helps the consumer to perceive the character of the brand, including the mascot, AI, and avatar, as having the ability to engage in social interactions and have intentions and emotions. Recent studies on the phenomenon of anthropomorphism with respect to the character of the virtual influencer have revealed the positive role of anthropomorphism on the credibility and parasocial relationships with the consumer, which are key precursors to consumer behavior and attitudes (Author, 2024). Similarly, other studies conducted on anthropomorphism in the context of digital marketing have revealed the positive role of anthropomorphic AI and chatbots on consumer engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty (Gomes, Lopes, & Nogueira, 2025). Thus, anthropomorphism not only remains a key concept from a theoretical perspective but also assumes the role of a tool to enhance the psychological association with the consumer in the physical and digital world.

In the context of consumer marketing, studies have demonstrated that anthropomorphism plays a key role in influencing consumers' attitude, emotions, and behavior through increased emotional attachment, warmth, and social connectedness (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). Furthermore, when a brand character presents anthropomorphic features, it is more likely to evoke increased emotional engagement and identification in consumers, which are closely related to cognitive and affective engagement in the brand (Li, 2025). Such psychological factors are likely to account for the positive predictive relationship found in various studies between anthropomorphism and consumers' engagement outcomes, including increased purchase intentions, positive emotions, and sustained engagement with the brand's content (Chen, Sengupta, & Zheng, 2023). While some studies have identified some potential boundary conditions in this relationship (e.g., distinctiveness motivation), overall, it seems to affirm the proposition that human-like brand characters, both in their physical and virtual forms, are likely to play a key role in engaging consumers through their anthropomorphic features in ways that are more in line with their emotional and psychological needs and expectations.

Brand Personality

Brand personality is a set of human characteristics linked to a brand, allowing consumers to relate to a brand in a similar way to how they relate to people (Aaker, 1997). Marketers are using this concept to create a unique personality for their brands by ascribing human personality traits such as sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness to their brands, thus differentiating their brands from those of their competitors. For instance, when a brand possesses personality traits such as sincerity, consumers are more likely to develop symbolic and relational connections with a brand, thus enhancing brand associations and relationships (Freling, Crosno, & Henard, 2011; Keller, 2003). In this case, it is clear that

brand personality is a key concept in marketing strategies that transforms a brand from a mere product into a meaningful entity with the potential to create emotional connections with consumers.

Character design has already been recognized as an important tool in communicating brand personality in branding strategies. Brand mascots and other characters help brands project human-like qualities that can easily be identified and associated with by consumers. In today's digital setting, the rise of avatars and AI-powered characters can also be seen as an extension of communicating brand personality by creating interactive communication with consumers. This can be seen as a tool in creating a social representation of the brand, creating a more intimate consumer connection with the brand itself (Lourenço, Ferreira, & dos Santos, 2024; Srivastava et al., 2025). As the concept of branding continues to evolve in the digital setting, the ability to recognize character design as a tool in communicating brand personality is seen as an important concept in creating a more intimate consumer-brand connection.

Brand Trust

Brand trust is the willingness of consumers to depend upon the brand based on the assumption that the brand is dependable, honest, and has the potential to deliver what it promises (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester, 2004). Trust is considered an essential element for the development of long-term consumer-brand relationships, as it helps to mitigate the level of risk or uncertainty felt by the consumer during the purchase decision. A trustworthy brand is more likely to generate positive attitudes among the consumers, which would lead to long-term relationships with the brand (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Trust has been widely acknowledged as a critical factor for the development of consumer-brand relationships, especially in competitive markets where the consumer is free to choose among different brands. Thus, the development of brand trust is considered a critical objective for organizations seeking to develop long-term relationships with the consumers.

Brand personality and character-based branding may prove to be an essential factor in the development of brand trust, as it helps brands seem more relatable and human-like. By the use of mascots, spokes characters, and other digital avatars, brands may seek to communicate warmth, sincerity, and competence, which are essential components of brand personality that may contribute to the development of brand trust. Anthropomorphized characters may act as social representatives of the brand, enabling the consumer to develop an emotional connection with the brand, thereby perceiving the brand as more trustworthy. Digital avatars may prove to be more effective in the development of brand trust, as interactive characters may offer more personalised brand experiences, thereby strengthening the brand-consumer relationship (Lourenço, Ferreira, & dos Santos, 2024; Srivastava, Gupta, Kumar, & Tuli, 2025). As brands are becoming more inclined towards character-based brand communication, it is essential to understand the contribution of character-based branding to the development of brand trust, as it may explain the development of consumer engagement.

Customer Engagement

Customer engagement entails the extent to which consumers invest themselves cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally in interactions with the brand (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011; Hollebeek, 2011). Unlike classical transactions, customer engagement emphasizes interaction and experience between the consumer and the brand. Engaged customers are often

emotionally attached to the brand and are involved in interactions with the brand through activities like creating and consuming content, providing feedback, and interacting with the brand in branded communities. In relation to relationship marketing, customer engagement is one of the important outcomes as it leads to the development of brand loyalty, advocacy, and continuous relationships between the consumer and the brand (Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012).

The use of character-based branding approaches such as the employment of mascot characters, avatars, and virtual influencers can lead to increased consumer engagement by offering engaging and fun experiences with the brand. Character-based approaches that include anthropomorphic characters can help draw consumer attention to the brands through emotional engagement and association of brands with relatable social creatures. The use of storytelling and interactive experiences with digital characters allows customers to get involved in the experience, thus fostering increased engagement with the brands (Lourenço, Ferreira, & dos Santos, 2024; Srivastava, Gupta, Kumar, & Tuli, 2025). Specifically, digital avatars and characters driven by artificial intelligence technologies can facilitate real-time and customised communication with the brands. Given the increasing use of character designs in branding as an effective communication approach, it is important to explore how characters affect consumer engagement.

Theoretical Development

Anthropomorphism Theory

Anthropomorphism refers to the phenomenon where human traits are assigned to non-human beings, which acts as a strong and ancient motivator for engaging with brands. In classical marketing strategies, anthropomorphizing products through the use of characters such as the Michelin Man and Tony the Tiger was used to create emotional connections between the products and the consumer base. Virtual influencers and avatars in modern digital environments can also be anthropomorphized through the design of human-like behavior and interactions, which improves consumers' perceptions of trust, engagement, and interaction. According to self-congruence theory, Mehta et al. (2024) prove that the congruent human-like behavior of an avatar increases consumer trust.

However, the effectiveness of anthropomorphic design follows a non-linear pattern and is subject to the phenomenon known as the "uncanny valley." As noted in recent academic studies on virtual influencers (Fostering Parasocial Relationships with Virtual Influencers, 2025), such aspects as humanness, attractiveness, and eeriness are interconnected in a very complicated way. On the one hand, anthropomorphism makes people more engaged in interaction due to increased trust and identification. On the other hand, overdone realism can cause negative emotions, such as uncanny unease.

The best balance between anthropomorphism is very important as it becomes the main requirement for Parasocial Interaction (PSI). It will be hard for consumers to develop a psychological connection with a cold machine. Anthropomorphism needs to occur in order to activate social behaviors. If the virtual influencer creates the sensation of human-like qualities while avoiding the uncanny valley, the consumer will no longer see the virtual object as mere codes but rather move from an interaction to a social relationship. Thus, anthropomorphism becomes the framework through which the parasocial bond is formed.

Parasocial Interaction Theory

The Parasocial Interaction (PSI) theory describes the psychological process through which individuals form one-sided, emotionally significant relationships with mediated personas (Horton & Wohl, 1956). While initially applied to traditional broadcasting, contemporary marketing literature has successfully extended PSI to branding, demonstrating that consumers develop emotional connections and symbolic friendships with brand representatives and anthropomorphic characters (Labrecque, 2014; Garg & Bakshi, 2024). Traditional branding used to rely on static mascots like Tony the Tiger. Through constant TV and print exposure, these characters slowly built-up familiarity, brand trust, and emotional ties over time.

Today virtual influencers and AI-driven avatars (think Lil Miquela) possess a unique edge that they seem responsive, autonomous, and capable of adapting on the fly. This mimics genuine human reciprocity, making the "illusion" of a two-way relationship feel remarkably real (Jin & Ryu, 2020; Kim, 2023; Lou, Kim, & Xie, 2024). Traditional mascots were rigid and bound to specific ads like modern AI avatars, by contrast, drive ever-evolving narratives across social media, weaving themselves directly into the consumer's daily digital routine.

Consequently, evaluating AI avatars requires a complementary theoretical lens which is Narrative Transportation (NT) Theory. Narrative Transportation theory explains the phenomenon wherein individuals become cognitively and emotionally absorbed into a story world, leading to character identification, emotional arousal, and a temporary dissociation from reality (Green & Brock, 2000; van Laer et al., 2014; Thomas & Grigsby, 2024).

Narrative Transportation Theory

Narrative transportation theory suggests that people immerse themselves into a world of a story on the levels of cognition, emotion, and imagination, leading to the establishment of a specific psychological state, which features affective involvement, mental visualization, and dissociation from the real world (Green & Brock, 2000; Thomas & Grigsby, 2024). An important implication of narrative transportation theory in marketing communications is its ability to lower consumers' cognitive resistance and make them less prone to counterarguments when exposed to brand stories. As such, the process of message processing changes from analytical and rational to more experiential and affective (Green & Brock, 2000). As a result, the transported consumers project themselves mentally into the world of the story and create profound psychological connections with the story agents.

In past years, classic brands mascots such as the Michelin Man and Tony the Tiger were considered as basic narrative characters for a brand. Nevertheless, the structure of traditional brand mascots is inherently narrow which is the story is episodic, fixed, and unidirectional, hence confining the customer to a mere spectator role. Conversely, digital avatars and virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela present themselves as natural parts of the developing narrative ecology. The current research which extends narrative transportation theory into digital and virtual influencer marketing points out that the intricacy and form of the narrative of an avatar greatly influence the degree of engagement of consumers with a message.

Therefore, the structure of the brand character design automatically determines the level of narrative transportation. As the conventional characters act as mediators for developing familiarity due to constant exposure to unchanging stories, the AI characters allow continuous

participation in the narrative process through co-creation. Consumers can actually interact with the avatars in ways that influence how the stories evolve while receiving feedback, transforming them from mere spectators to participants in the narrative. Building on the recently established evidence that narrative immersion leads to emotional connection and trust with digital entities (Jain et al., 2024), Narrative Transportation is posited to be a major psychological mechanism explaining the relationship between character design and consumer participation. Due to the interactive, multiplatform approach to storytelling associated with AI avatars, their narrative immersion is expected to exceed that seen in traditional brand mascots.

Development of Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the present study demonstrates the direct relationship between Anthropomorphism, Brand Personality, and Brand Trust in the development of Customer Engagement in the context of Character-driven Branding. The conceptual framework of the study is underpinned by Anthropomorphism Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and Narrative Transportation Theory. Anthropomorphism enables consumers to perceive the characters of the brand. Brand Personality is characterized by specific traits of the brand, including being warm, sincere, or competent. Brand Trust enables consumers to engage in the brand.

Through the representation of such immediate relationships, the framework encompasses the conventional as well as the digital branding strategies, emphasizing the potential of human-like, interactive brand characters to generate engagement and foster consumer-brand relationships independently. This is a reflection of the dynamic nature of the branding environment, where the mascot, the AI avatar, is a social and narrative representation of the brand, creating engaging, personalised, and entertaining experiences for the consumer.

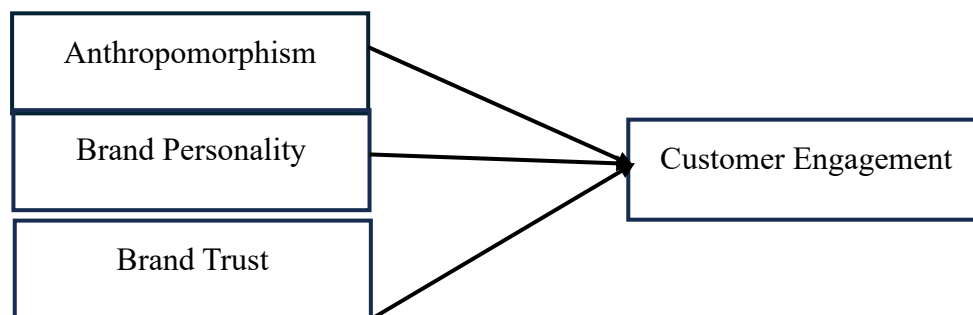


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The above figure describes the direct link between Anthropomorphism, Brand Personality, and Brand Trust as they influence Customer Engagement in character-driven branding. Each concept is a different dimension or avenue by which character-driven branding affects consumer cognition, emotion, and behavior. Anthropomorphism is the concept by which character-driven branding is perceived as human-like and relatable. Brand Personality is the concept by which character-driven branding is perceived as having distinct qualities or characteristics that are emotionally appealing to the consumer. Brand Trust is the concept by which character-driven branding is perceived as having the power to elicit consumer behavior. Collectively, these concepts, as supported by Anthropomorphism Theory, Parasocial Interaction Theory, and Narrative Transportation Theory, offer a complete understanding of

how character-driven branding influences consumer behavior in both physical and virtual brand environments.

Methodology

The current study adopts a Quantitative Cross-Sectional Survey Design that would be helpful to explore the direct relationships between Anthropomorphism, Brand Personality, and Brand Trust, respectively on Customer Engagement in character-based brand marketing environments. The Quantitative research design is the best method for such research, considering the capability of the approach to test the hypothesized relationship between constructs under investigation in a quantitative manner, thus making it possible to obtain empirical evidence to substantiate the research theoretical framework. The cross-sectional nature of the research design will help gather a considerable number of observations from one population at one point in time, thus contributing to valuable information on customer perceptions and attitudes toward regular brand mascots as well as artificial intelligence generated avatars (Hair et al., 2022).

The research population consisted of customers aged 18-45 years old who had experience working with brand mascots or avatars. To identify suitable participants, the purposive sampling technique was used. Following the rules for Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), the minimum number of responses to consider for a reliable analysis equals to ten times the number of measurement items. Thus, a sample size of 300 people was sufficient for data analysis via SEM.

Respondents' perceptions towards and interaction with characters was measured using a structured online questionnaire. Five sections were used in the study which included demographics, Anthropomorphism, Brand Personality, Brand Trust and Customer Engagement. All the items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale. Values ranged from 1 being strongly disagree to 5 as strongly agree. Items used in the questionnaire had been adopted from previous research studies such as Epley et al. (2007) and Lourenço et al. (2024) for the measurement of Anthropomorphism, Aaker (1997), and Srivastava et al. (2025) for the measurement of Brand Personality, Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), and Delgado-Ballester (2004) for Brand Trust, and Brodie et al. (2011) for Customer Engagement. In order to check the relevancy and validity of the survey questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted involving thirty respondents. Cronbach's alpha value for all the constructs was above 0.70.

Constructs were measured as per their definitions. The concept of anthropomorphism describes the level at which consumers associate the human nature, similarity, and social presence of the brand characters. The construct brand personality is based on the personality traits associated with the characters, for example, sincerity and competence. Consumers' trust in the dependability, integrity, and credibility of the brand describes brand trust. Finally, customer engagement measures the involvement of customers in the brand interactions.

The collected data were tested by using PLS-SEM (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling) by the help of the Smart Partial Least Square tool, which is ideal for analysing complicated models having multiple direct relationships regardless of their sample size, even though the latter is not too big (Hair et al., 2022). Data analysis involved two steps. Initially, a measurement model was used for testing reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Reliability was measured on the basis of such criteria as Cronbach's alpha and

composite reliability, whereas convergent validity was tested using Average Variance Extracted (>0.50). Discriminant validity was estimated with the Fornell-Larcker criterion. The structural model was estimated by testing the significance of the paths between Anthropomorphism, Brand Personality, Brand Trust, and Customer Engagement with the help of bootstrapping.

Ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the research process. This is because the research was purely voluntary, and the participants gave their consent before they were given the questionnaire to fill. In addition, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained as the data collected was only used for research purposes.

Discussion

Findings show that indeed, Anthropomorphism, Brand Personality, and Brand Trust have a considerable effect on how people interact with character brands. Through the creation of personable AI avatars, people establish human-like connections, thus proving the validity of Anthropomorphism Theory (Epley et al., 2007; Lourenço et al., 2024). This research shows that the Brand Personality theory is crucial to creating a connection with people since when a brand establishes trust, and personality attributes such as warmth or trustworthiness are conveyed, emotional attachment takes place, leading to brand recognition (Aaker, 1997; Srivastava et al., 2025). In addition, brand trust also proves that creating certainty among people is important when building a consumer's relationship with a brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Contrary to classic mascots, the benefits of AI avatars include immersive experience creation through narrative transportation (Srivastava et al., 2025).

Conclusion

The contribution of this paper to the literature on digital branding is related to the exploration of the anthropomorphism phenomenon and its effect on the creation of brand character design. It has been revealed that anthropomorphic attributes applied in the design of brand characters may represent a significant element of brands' strategies to increase consumer engagement. Thus, the transformation of anthropomorphic characteristics into appealing brand character designs could positively affect consumer engagement in digital marketing. This study extends the existing literature on anthropomorphism and its influence on brand characters by focusing on the mediating role of brand character design in converting anthropomorphic factors into tangible branding factors. The incorporation of anthropomorphic brand character design can be an important aspect of brand strategy in an ever-evolving digital marketing communication scenario enabled by AI technology. The findings of this study have shown that anthropomorphic factors can be an important aspect of brand strategy to enhance consumer engagement. This study has important implications for both researchers and marketers because it has shown how brand characters can be used to enhance consumer engagement in an increasingly digital marketing communication scenario.

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