

Effects of personification and anthropomorphic tendency on destination attitude and travel intentions



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Travel intentions can be shaped by a personified advertisement combined with individual levels of anthropomorphic tendency.
- Destination attitude is influenced by text-personification combined with an individual's level of anthropomorphic tendency.
- Such effects are mediated by emotions felt by high anthropomorphic tendency individuals viewing a personified advertisement.

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ABSTRACT

This research examined how individual differences in anthropomorphic tendency (the tendency to humanize non-human agents/objects) influence how people respond to destination marketing communications. Specifically, this study examined whether individual-level anthropomorphic tendency and text-personification of destination marketing communications interact to influence destination attitude and travel intentions. Results from a study involving 210 Australian participants revealed that destination attitude and travel intentions were most favorable for people with high levels of anthropomorphic tendency and who were exposed to personified tourism messages. These findings indicate that text-personification represents a new communication tactic for tourism – particularly for target consumers who are high in anthropomorphic tendency – and one that can humanize the destination leading to more favorable attitudes and higher intentions to travel. This effect is mediated by positive emotions. People with high anthropomorphic tendency who are exposed to a personified advertisement feel more positive emotions, which lead to positive tourism outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Speaking about a destination as if it were a person is hardly a new development. Consider for instance a person who says they are visiting “Mother Russia”. Referring to destinations as people is a form of anthropomorphism, or seeing human characteristics in something that is not human. Doing so gives a sense of familiarity and understanding of the destination in question. Indeed, researchers note three motivations for why people anthropomorphize: effectance motivation, sociality motivation and elicited agent knowledge (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). In short, people want to understand non-human agents, are seeking social connection (or a simulation of one at least), and desire to project

their knowledge of humanity onto non-human agents. For destination marketing, this process offers the opportunity to build perceived similarity or shared norms, allowing travelers to reduce uncertainty through increased understanding, and to feel greater attachment (Epley *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, destinations need to be perceived as warm and welcoming if they are to attract tourists to their shores.

Advertisers commonly attempt to activate anthropomorphism by adding human-like features to a product (e.g., a car grille that looks like a smile; Aggarwal & McGill, 2007) or even by humanizing their brand (e.g., spokes-characters; Callcott & Phillips, 1996). This attempt to activate anthropomorphism is defined here as personification. In tourism marketing communications, personification is seen most commonly in country or event mascots – for instance, the London Olympics which used humanoid mascots, or Godzilla becoming a tourism ambassador for Tokyo.

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Applying personification in tourism communications has several key benefits. Once anthropomorphism has been activated in a person, this can lead to an increased sense of predictability and understanding (Waytz, Morewedge, Epley, Monteleone, Gao & Cacioppo, 2010d), increased attachment (Chandler & Schwarz, 2010), the conferral of moral rights (Waytz, Epley, & Cacioppo, 2010b), more pro-social behavior like generosity (Haley & Fessler, 2005), and other behaviors, such as intending to behave in a way consistent with the anthropomorphized agent (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Chartrand, Fitzsimons, & Fitzsimons, 2008). Thus, ensuring anthropomorphism of a destination not only aids the tourist in understanding and feeling comfortable with the destination, but makes them a more amenable person within that destination (i.e., less likely behave anti-socially whilst traveling).

Whilst mascots are commonly used, there is no guarantee that the form marketers choose for the mascot will be a form that consumers themselves will relate to. Destinations have a broad market, so designing relevant campaigns can be difficult. However, there is another tool available for activating anthropomorphism that is often overlooked; text-based personification. For example, using personal pronouns like 'he' or 'she' rather than 'it', and other humanized terms. There is a lack of focus in both research and practice with regards to the personification of text. This represents a more subtle approach where the responsibility for attributing humanity and personality reside in the mind of the consumer, rather than being dictated by advertisers placing a pre-designed mascot into marketing communications. As this approach leaves much of the control to consumers, it allows scope for greater imaginative involvement and potentially greater connection with the personified destination.

However, as with all marketing communications strategies, individual differences of the message recipient also have a role to play. Given the important role of anthropomorphism in this area, anthropomorphic tendency is likely to be a key determinant of message success. Anthropomorphic tendency is the individual propensity towards anthropomorphism (Waytz, Cacioppo, & Epley, 2010a), a process that was once thought to be universal (e.g., Hume, 2010; Guthrie, 1995). It is this tendency that explains, for example, why one person names his car and another does not. It would also be expected to influence whether someone reacted positively, indifferently or even negatively to personified tourism communications. This study consequently aims to investigate whether individual-level anthropomorphic tendency and personification interact to influence consumers' attitudes towards a destination, and their intentions to travel there. This paper begins with a review of extant literature in the areas of personification in destination marketing, as well as initial work examining the role of anthropomorphic tendency in personification strategies, and the potential mediating effect of positive emotions. This review informs the development of three hypotheses, which are then tested using an online experimental method. Results and implications are then discussed.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Personification strategies in destination marketing

In destination marketing, personification strategies most often appear as mascots or as an idea about the country and its people. For instance, the Leprechaun as an unofficial mascot for Ireland, or referring to Italy as 'passionate' and France as 'artistic'. Personification of text is less common in official strategies, though references to names like 'Mother Russia' may still be made informally.

Communication theory and symbolic interactionism theory can help to explain the value of personification strategies to tourism

marketing. Tourism marketers can encode a message and send it to consumers, but appropriate decoding of the message is needed to ensure that the meaning intended by the marketer is the same meaning interpreted by the consumer. Symbolic interactionism indicates that meaning is co-created, and the symbols and cues sent by the marketer are actively processed and interpreted by the consumer (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). This is particularly important in the context of destination marketing, where cross-cultural communication is required and there is a risk that signs and symbols encoded by the marketer may not be appropriately interpreted by the consumer.

Personification, then, takes on a key role. When communicating across cross-cultural boundaries, one thing that people have in common is their humanity; the accessibility of the human schema is one reason it tends to be applied to aid in understanding the world (Guthrie, 1995). While the propensity towards applying anthropomorphism has been shown to vary by individual (Waytz et al., 2010a), making something more human-like still remains one way to encourage the application of anthropomorphism, and to speak in a 'common language' across cultural borders.

The difficulty then lies in what type of human traits the destination should be imbued with. The field of destination personality is established in the tourism literature (see Chen & Phou, 2013; Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Zouganeli, Trihas, Antonaki, & Kladou, 2012), yet symbolic interactionism indicates that meaning is co-created with the consumer – it is not enough for the marketer to simply create a personality. Indeed, encouraging imaginative engagement can have positive outcomes for brands, with Huang and Mitchell (2014) finding that imaginative engagement with a brand can lead to stronger brand relationships – though they also note that for more utilitarian brands, imagination may need to be encouraged by having the marketer actively personify the brand. For instance, they suggest that British paint company Ronseal note in their advertising "how good a pal Ronseal is" to encourage personification and imaginative engagement in order to build stronger brand relationships.

While a tourism destination is more hedonic than utilitarian, its intangible nature indicates the need for personification from the marketer in order to encourage imaginative engagement. One approach that can be readily applied by destination marketers is text-based personification. Text-based personification (e.g., referring to a city as "she" rather than "it"), where visual personification is not provided, may be ideal for encouraging imaginative engagement and the benefits of anthropomorphism, without the marketer pre-determining a personality that the consumer may not respond well to. There is great value in the personification of text because it transfers control from the marketer to the consumer, which may result in a more unique engagement with the destination.

While there is a lack of research in marketing literature, text personification has been studied in psychological research by Tam, Lee, and Chao (2013) who conducted an experiment where one condition discussed Nature using personal pronouns, and the other did not. Findings indicated that those in the anthropomorphism condition felt a stronger connection to nature than those in the control condition. This is in line with previous work that showed anthropomorphism leads to increased attachment (Chandler & Schwarz, 2010). Tam et al's., (2013) experiment not only indicates that text personification is a successful strategy, but also that it can apply to abstract, intangible concepts beyond products or brands, making this strategy especially relevant for tourism marketing.

However, these same authors note that individual differences in the propensity to anthropomorphize emerged during their experiments. This is supported by earlier research that finds that anthropomorphism varies by individual (Waytz et al., 2010a). Personification encourages consumers to anthropomorphize by encouraging the application of a human schema to a non-human

destination. It is proposed that consumers with high anthropomorphic tendency are more likely to see the destination in line with a human schema with text-based prompting.

2.2. Individual level anthropomorphic tendency and personification strategies

Anthropomorphic tendency refers to an individual propensity to utilize the process of anthropomorphism (Epley et al., 2007; Waytz et al., 2010a). In essence, those higher in anthropomorphic tendency are more prone to see human characteristics in non-human agents like animals or objects. The tendency to anthropomorphize is an important consideration for marketers – including destination marketers – as anthropomorphism can lead to a number of favorable outcomes, including positive emotional responses, attribution of brand personality, increased brand liking (Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011), behavioral intentions (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012), lower product replacement intentions, more favorable evaluations of products (Chandler & Schwarz, 2010), and higher perceived personal value of products (Hart, Jones, & Royne, 2013). Indeed, seeing something as human automatically makes it more similar to a human perceiver, and people tend to like those who are similar to themselves (Izard, 1960; Byrne, Griffitt & Stefaniak 1967). Hence, when anthropomorphism occurs, personified stimuli are seen more favorably (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007).

Text-based personification is a stimulus that high anthropomorphic tendency consumers are likely to respond favorably to, given that human cues have increased relevance to this group. Personification functions to encourage the application of human schema (already more salient for this group, see Epley et al., 2007) to the non-human destination, hence encouraging anthropomorphism and the positive outcomes that arise from it, whether consumers are consciously aware of this perceived humanness or not. Importantly, the process of anthropomorphism is said to be mindless (Kim & Sundar, 2012) or a subconscious bias (Kennedy, 1992), indicating that while these individuals are likely to respond better to human cues, they are unlikely to be aware of what has occurred, or why they feel more favorable towards the message they have just seen.

Adding visual human cues to physical products has proved a successful strategy for encouraging anthropomorphism to occur (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). Past research has found that 'smiling' car grilles lead to positive product evaluations (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007), that arranging products in 'human' postures leads to positive emotions, greater brand liking, and more positive attributions of brand personality (Delbaere et al., 2011), and that personified images that are physically similar to humans are perceived more favorably (Connell, 2013). This study proposes the same effect for text-based personification.

It is therefore argued that a destination marketing message featuring text-based personification will lead to positive outcomes, such as increased behavioral intentions and more positive attitudes, particularly when the message is viewed by those with higher levels of anthropomorphic tendency. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a. Consumers with a higher level of anthropomorphic tendency who are exposed to a text-personified advertisement will report more favorable destination attitudes than those exposed to a non-personified advertisement.

H1b. Among consumers who have a higher level of anthropomorphic tendency, those exposed to a text-personified advertisement will report greater intentions to travel to the destination in the advertisement than those exposed to a non-personified advertisement.

Further, it is proposed that those high in anthropomorphic tendency are an appropriate audience for destination marketing messages, and hence such messages provide an ideal context for testing the hypotheses. According to SEEK theory, Sociality motivation, Effectance motivation and Elicited agent Knowledge, make up the underlying motivations and factors that influence individual levels of anthropomorphic tendency (Epley et al., 2007). Hence those who are higher in anthropomorphic tendency may also be seeking social connection and mastery of their environment, and are able to project human knowledge onto a non-human agent to do so. Further research in marketing indicates that anthropomorphic tendency also correlates with being young, single, open to experiences, neurotic and conscientious (Letheren, Kuhn, Lings & Pope, 2016).

Whilst the market for tourism is broad, there does appear to be a relationship between some of these motivations, and some segments of tourists. For instance, a tourist might be motivated by the desire to master their environment (either by doing something like hiking, or purely because they seek greater understanding of the destination they are traveling to). Travelers may also be more open to experience, and many young singles travel as backpackers or on working holidays.

It appears therefore that those with high anthropomorphic tendency are an appropriate audience for destination marketing. The best way to reach this market may be through applying subtle human cues to destination marketing, in order to encourage imaginative engagement and to stimulate anthropomorphism and its consequences.

2.3. Positive emotions as a mediator

Given the subconscious nature of anthropomorphism (e.g., Kennedy, 1992) it is suggested that any impacts on behavioral intention and attitudes will occur through the affective rather than cognitive component of attitude formation. The Tripartite Model of Attitude indicates that affect, cognition, and behavior lead to attitude formation (Bagozzi, Tybout, Craig, & Sternthal, 1979; Breckler, 1984; Ostrom, 1969). Given the context of destination marketing falls within holiday marketing, this context itself is very much emotionally driven for consumers (see Gnoth, 1997 for a review), making emotions a relevant inclusion in this study not only because of the nature of anthropomorphism, but also owing to the nature of destination marketing itself.

Anthropomorphism operates more based on affective intuition than rationality. Indeed, the speed that intuition allows is one of the reasons that anthropomorphism was a valuable evolutionary aid, allowing humans to make snap judgments about whether something was human enough to count as a threat (Guthrie, 1995). Anthropomorphism means that individuals perceive humanity in something that is not human, and this perception leads to that non-human agent being treated with consideration and given moral rights, such as would be afforded to a real human (Epley et al., 2007; Waytz, Gray, Epley, & Wegner, 2010c). This means that human emotions become more important too. For instance, research from Chandler and Schwarz (2010) showing that those considering replacing a product will consider qualities such as emotional warmth once they anthropomorphize the product. By the same token, feelings about a favorite television character can lead individuals to see that character as being more real and as having a greater social presence (Gardner & Knowles, 2008). On the other hand, those who are victims of dehumanization (the opposite of anthropomorphism) are generally granted fewer rights and less empathy than those who have been anthropomorphized (Waytz et al., 2010b). Emotions are a key aspect of the process of anthropomorphism.

There is discussion in the literature as to how reliably a positive

attitude towards the advertisement will transfer towards the advertised product (see MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986) with one study pointing out that through affect transfer, positive affective states brought about by personified spokes-characters can transfer onto the brand (Chiu, Lin, & Liu, 2009). In the case of the current study, personifying the destination should lead to positive impacts for the destination. While no transfer of affect is necessarily needed, emotion still has a role to play in mediating this process.

Tam et al. (2013) investigate connectedness as a mediator between anthropomorphism and behavioral outcomes. However, they also note the positive effect of anthropomorphism on the emotions and subjective wellbeing of the participant. These positive emotions may be linked to a sense of mastery (Waytz et al., 2010d), which can make the participant feel more at ease with the anthropomorphized object.

Further, as a hedonic purchase, holiday travel tends to be more emotionally driven (Gnoth, 1997). Emotions are also an important part of the decision-making process in services industries like tourism, influencing everything from the pre-purchase stage when affect may guide decision-making for the hedonic purchase of travel, to the service experience where pleasure and arousal interact under the Circumplex Model of Affect to create emotional responses (Russell, 1980), and finally through to the post-purchase stage where felt emotions are weighed up against expectations to indicate level of satisfaction along with emotions like delight (Finn, 2005; Loureiro & Kastenholz, 2011).

The Circumplex Model of Affect is a seminal model in the area of emotions research and has been validated across a number of different contexts, including across cultures (Loizou & Karageorghis, 2015). This model deals with the interaction affective responses across two planes: pleasure and arousal, with more distinct emotions falling under one of the four quadrants created. It is these emotions that the current study is interested in – specifically, positive emotions that it is believed will result from exposure to a human-like stimulus, and so influence attitude formation. Emotions are of interest in this study due to their nature as brief, not necessarily controllable, and caused by a particular object or event (Beedie, Terry, & Lane, 2005), hence remaining in line with the proposed ‘mindlessness’ (Kennedy, 1992) of anthropomorphism, as well as the context – a specific stimulus is set to cause the emotion, with the city being the recipient of this emotion.

Given that prior research suggests that a link between anthropomorphism, emotions and subjective wellbeing (Tam et al., 2013) this study will explore the role of positive emotions resulting from exposure to the personified message. In this context, a general test of emotions is sought, hence broad categories of ‘happy, pleased, enthusiastic’ are utilized to provide an initial indication of the role of positive emotions in destination marketing efforts that utilize personification strategies. Emotions such as ‘delight’ are not tested in this study, given the need for ‘surprise consumption’ and ‘disconfirmation’ which are better examined post-service experience (Loureiro & Kastenholz, 2011).

It is hypothesized that positive emotions will mediate the relationship between personification and destination outcomes:

H2. The interactions predicted in H1a and H1b will be mediated by the degree of positive emotions a consumer feels when viewing the advertisement.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants were recruited through a market research company. Data were collected using an online experimental design, and a

convenience sampling method was utilized. Two hundred and ten Australian adults participated in the study. The sample was 53.8% female. Other demographic characteristics relating to the sample are presented in Table 1. A power analysis was conducted in order to examine an appropriate sample size using the G*Power software (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). The analysis indicated that a sample size of 128 participants was required to detect a medium effect with a power of 0.8 and an alpha level of 0.05. Thus, the current sample size (N = 210) is appropriate.

3.2. Procedure

A pre-test was first conducted on the survey instrument to ensure internal consistency and no systematic errors. The study then proceeded. The study instructions informed participants that the focus of the study was to seek their opinions on tourism communications. Upon completion of the consent form, participants were asked about their anthropomorphic tendency. Then, two filler questions were included to avoid context effects, asking participants to list four words containing the letter “D” and letter “E” before viewing the stimulus.

The experiment involved a 2 (personified vs. non-personified) × 2 (Paris vs. Rome) between-group design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions, with random assignment being managed within the survey software. In the personified ad, the city was portrayed as “she” whereas the city was depicted as “it” in a non-personified ad (see Appendix 1). To increase generalizability, two cities were tested. Immediately after the ad exposure, dependent and other measures were collected.

3.3. Measures

Anthropomorphic tendency (ANTHRO, hereafter) as an independent measure was measured by a subset of the Individual Differences in Anthropomorphism Questionnaire (IDAQ) (Waytz et al.,

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of the sample (N = 210).

| | n | % |
|-----------------------------|-----|------|
| <i>Gender</i> | | |
| Male | 97 | 46.2 |
| Female | 113 | 53.8 |
| <i>Age</i> | | |
| 18–24 | 23 | 11.0 |
| 25–34 | 56 | 26.7 |
| 35–44 | 38 | 18.1 |
| 45–54 | 36 | 17.1 |
| 55–65 | 39 | 18.6 |
| 65+ | 18 | 8.6 |
| <i>Work status</i> | | |
| Employed | 137 | 65.2 |
| Student | 9 | 4.3 |
| Stay at home parent | 21 | 10.0 |
| Retired | 19 | 9.0 |
| Unemployed/Looking for work | 19 | 7.1 |
| <i>Education</i> | | |
| Less than high school | 3 | 1.4 |
| High school | 45 | 21.4 |
| Apprenticeship/trade | 54 | 25.7 |
| Some university | 16 | 7.6 |
| Undergraduate degree | 62 | 29.5 |
| Postgraduate degree | 27 | 12.9 |
| Other | 3 | 1.4 |
| <i>Household Income</i> | | |
| Less than \$39,000 | 43 | 20.5 |
| \$40,000–\$59,000 | 37 | 17.7 |
| \$60,000–\$79,000 | 32 | 15.2 |
| \$80,000–\$99,000 | 37 | 17.6 |
| \$100,000 or more | 61 | 29.0 |

2010a). Respondents rated the extent to which they believed a non-human object (e.g., animals, natural entities, and technical products) had human characteristics such as emotions and free will (e.g., to what extent does the average fish have free will?). Five items were measured by using a seven-point scale, with 1 being “not at all” and 7 being “very much.”

The two dependent measures utilized were attitude toward the destination and travel intentions to the destination. For the attitude measure, we asked, “thinking specifically about the advertisement you have just viewed, how do you feel about the destination?” Three items were used (bad/good, unfavorable/favorable, and negative/positive), adapted from [Deng and Li \(2013\)](#). The travel intention measure was adapted from [Van der Veen and Song \(2014\)](#), and respondents were asked, “thinking specifically about the advertisement you just viewed, if you were planning a trip overseas, how likely would you be to visit this destination in the future (unlikely/likely, impossible/possible, improbable/probable)?” All of the items were measured using a seven-point semantic differential scale.

The proposed mediating variable of positive emotions was adapted from [Tamir and Robinson \(2007\)](#) and was measured with three items (happy, pleased, and enthusiastic) by asking “when reading the ad, how did you feel?” Control variables collected included gender, age, education, and income. In addition, we measured participants’ prior visit to the destination in the ad. To ensure participants perceived the exposed ad as realistic, we asked, “how realistic do you think the advertisement was? (unrealistic/realistic).”

4. Analyses and results

4.1. Preliminary analyses

Before testing hypotheses, we examined whether the two cities showed differential responses on the dependent variables. Thus, we ran a 2 (personification: yes vs. no) \times 2 (city: Paris vs. Rome) ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) in order to examine the main effects and a two-way interaction effect on attitude toward the destination. Neither the main effect of city ($F(1, 201) = 0.19$, $MSE = 0.29$, $p = 0.66$) nor the interaction effect ($F(1, 201) = 0.05$, $MSE = 0.08$, $p = 0.82$) was significant. Consistent findings were observed for travel intentions to the destination: the main effect of city ($F(1, 201) = 0.17$, $MSE = 0.38$, $p = 0.68$) and the interaction effect ($F(1, 201) = 1.37$, $MSE = 3.14$, $p = 0.24$). In sum, none of the main effects and interaction effects on the dependent measures were significant. The results suggest that the two cities did not produce any differences. Hence we pulled the data from the two cities together.

The items of anthropomorphic tendency (ANTHRO) demonstrated good internal consistency (reliability $\alpha = 0.85$). Thus, we generated a composite score, averaging the items. Using a median split, we created a category variable: low ANTHRO (coded “0”) vs. high ANTHRO (coded “1”). The scale mid-point of anthropomorphic tendency is 4.0 since we used a 7 point scale. The mean value is 4.49. Although the distribution of anthropomorphic tendency is slightly skewed, it is close to a normal distribution. Thus the median split of low vs. high in the analysis is a good reflection of *real* low vs. high anthropomorphic tendency. The mean values of the low vs. high anthropomorphic tendency groups were 3.23 (st.d = 0.94) and 5.48 (st.d = 0.80) respectively ($t = 18.6$, $p < 0.001$).

Other constructs were also averaged since reliability alphas were all in the acceptable range: attitude toward the destination ($\alpha = 0.97$), travel intentions to the destination ($\alpha = 0.95$), and positive emotions ($\alpha = 0.95$). As a confound check, we wanted to ensure that the perceived realism of the ad was not different across the two personified ad conditions and the two cities. Results from

Table 2

Relations of demographic characteristics to anthropomorphic tendency.

| Variable | <i>B</i> | <i>S.E</i> | <i>t</i> |
|-----------|----------|------------|----------|
| Age | −0.27 | 0.06 | −4.33*** |
| Gender | 0.01 | 0.19 | 0.07 |
| Education | 0.01 | 0.07 | 0.07 |
| Income | 0.07 | 0.03 | 2.15* |

Note: *B* (unstandardized coefficient); * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

an ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) show that there were no mean differences amongst the four groups ($F(3, 206) = 0.81$, $MSE = 1.58$, $p = 0.5$). Thus, any experimental effects cannot be attributed to a differential degree of perceived realism of the ad.

We ran ANOVA to examine whether sample characteristics are homogenous across four conditions: (1) Personification/Rome, (2) Personification/Paris, (3) No personification/Rome, and (4) No personification/Paris. Four demographic variables—age, gender, education, and income—were treated as dependent measures. A chi-square test was run for gender. ANOVA was used for age, education, and income. No significant group differences of the demographic variables across the four conditions were found: Age ($F(3, 209) = 0.07$, $p > 0.90$), gender ($\chi^2(3, 209) = 1.0$, $p > 0.70$), education ($F(3, 209) = 1.12$, $p > 0.34$), and income ($F(3, 209) = 0.42$, $p > 0.07$).

We also conducted additional analysis to look at how demographic variables were associated with anthropomorphic tendency. For the analysis, we ran a multiple regression in which predictors were demographics and the dependent variable was anthropomorphic tendency. As the results indicate (see [Table 2](#)), age was negatively related to anthropomorphic tendency ($B = -0.270$, $t = -4.33$, $p < 0.001$), meaning that young people are more likely to have a higher anthropomorphic tendency. Income was positively associated with anthropomorphic tendency ($B = 0.07$, $t = 2.2$, $p < 0.05$). Gender ($B = 0.01$, $t = 0.07$, $p > 0.9$) and education ($B = 0.01$, $t = 0.07$, $p > 0.9$) did not predict anthropomorphic tendency. This is in line with results reported by [Letheren et al. \(2016\)](#) who found that younger people were more likely to have higher levels of anthropomorphic tendency, and were equally likely to be male or female (this previous study did not examine income or education).

4.2. Hypotheses testing

Attitude toward the destination. To test hypothesis 1a, an ANCOVA with personification and ANTHRO as the independent variables and attitude toward the destination as the dependent variable was run. All analyses included the following covariates: gender (dummy coded, “1” female), age, education, income, prior visit to the destination (dummy coded, “1” if yes), and city (dummy coded, “1” if Rome). Levene’s test shows that the homogeneity of variances assumption across the conditions was met ($F(3, 206) = 1.86$, $p > 0.13$). Regarding covariates, people who were female ($F = 10.7$, $p = 0.001$), older ($F = 4.37$, $p = 0.04$), and had a higher income ($F = 12.2$, $p = 0.001$) tended to show more positive attitudes toward the destination. No other covariates showed a significant relationship with the dependent measure. The results revealed that the main effect of personification on attitude toward the destination was not significant ($F(1, 200) = 0.27$, $MSE = 0.39$, $p = 0.66$) whereas both the main effect of ANTHRO ($F(1, 200) = 4.49$, $MSE = 6.56$, $p = 0.03$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$) and the interaction effect were significant ($F(1, 200) = 5.27$, $MSE = 7.69$, $p = 0.02$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$).

[Table 3](#) presents means and standard deviations in each condition. As indicated, the personified ad/high ANTHRO condition had

Table 3
Means and standard deviations for outcome variables in each condition.

| | Non-personified ad | | Personified ad | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|-----------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| | ANTHRO: Low | ANTHRO: High | ANTHRO: Low | ANTHRO: High |
| | Mean (SD) | Mean (SD) | Mean (SD) | Mean (SD) |
| Destination attitudes | 5.5 (1.1) | 5.5 (1.4) | 5.0 (1.3) ^a | 5.8 (1.1) ^a |
| Intention to travel | 5.0 (1.4) | 5.2 (1.5) | 4.5 (1.5) ^b | 5.6 (1.4) ^b |

Note: ANTHRO refers to anthropomorphic tendency. Mean values with the same letter within a row are significantly different each other, a: $p < 0.05$. b: $p < 0.01$. Otherwise, each pair does not differ statistically.

the highest mean value. Planned contrasts revealed that the only significant group difference was observed between high ANTHRO and low ANTHRO under the personified ad condition. No group differences were found for other pairs of conditions. Fig. 1 presents the pattern of interaction visually. The results suggest that a personified ad was only effective when ANTHRO was high. Thus, hypothesis 1a was supported.

Intention to travel to the destination. The results of ANCOVA showed that none of the covariates were significant at 0.05 except for gender ($F = 5.67$, $p = 0.02$). Income was marginally significant ($F = 3.56$, $p = 0.06$). The same covariates were included for this analysis as were included in previous analyses. Levene's test shows that the homogeneity of variances assumption across the conditions held ($F(3, 206) = 0.18$, $p > 0.91$).

The results revealed that the main effect of personification on intention to travel to the destination was not significant ($F(1, 200) = 0.02$, $MSE = 0.04$, $p = 0.89$) whereas both the main effect of ANTHRO ($F(1, 200) = 8.18$, $MSE = 17.9$, $p = 0.005$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$) and the interaction effect were significant ($F(1, 200) = 3.82$, $MSE = 8.31$, $p = 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$). The results were identical to the attitude measure. As we found in the attitude measure, the highest value was observed in a condition where participants with a high ANTHRO were exposed to a personified ad. Table 3 and Fig. 1 present the results. Hypothesis 1b was also supported.

4.3. Testing mediation

Finally, we tested hypothesis 2 that positive emotions would mediate the effects of the personification \times ANTHRO interaction. Specifically, we expected that the independent variable of personification and the moderating variable of ANTHRO would interactively affect a mediator (positive emotions), which in turn influences a dependent variable, controlling for all covariates we used in previous analyses. To test this mediation, we followed a

bootstrapping procedure using the SPSS PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013). An analysis with 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (CI) based on 10,000 bootstrap samples was performed via PROCESS Model 8.

The analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of the two-way interaction on attitude toward a destination through positive emotion (coefficient = 0.38, 95% CI [0.06, 0.77]). Since CI does not include zero, the indirect effect was statistically significant. Note that when the mediating variable was not included in the model, the direct effect of the interaction (personification \times ANTHRO) on the dependent variable was significant (coefficient = 0.78, CI [0.11, 1.44], $p = 0.02$) which was what was tested for hypothesis 1. However, when the mediating variable was added, the direct effect of the interaction became non-significant (coefficient = 0.39, CI [-0.18, 0.98], $p = 0.18$). Fig. 2 illustrates the mediating model.

For intention to travel, a similar pattern was observed. The indirect effect was significant (effect = 0.43, 95% CI [0.06, 0.94]). The significant direct effect of the interaction term (coefficient = 0.81, CI [0.00, 1.62], $p = 0.05$) turned out to be insignificant when the mediating variable was entered (coefficient = 0.39, CI [-0.35, 1.11], $p = 0.30$). Thus, the mediation was established and as a result, hypothesis 2 was supported.

Additional analyses were conducted, and indicate that the interaction effect of personification and ANTHRO on positive emotion show a similar pattern to what was found in the dependent measures. Fig. 3 presents the results. The results show that personification increased positive emotion only when participants held a high ANTHRO tendency.

5. Discussion

Anthropomorphism strategies can be utilized by tourism practitioners to create more welcoming and authentic destination personalities. What has remained unclear is whether text-personification is a viable anthropomorphism strategy, perhaps even offering the advantage of increased imaginative engagement over pre-determined visual anthropomorphism like spokes-characters or mascots. The current findings are therefore important because they demonstrate that text-personification can influence destination attitudes making them one possible alternative for encouraging anthropomorphism aside from visual personification. Specifically, text-personification strategies are beneficial for destination attitudes and travel intentions when the individual consumers' anthropomorphic tendency is high. As such, anthropomorphic tendency has been found to play a fundamental role in the forming impressions of a textually-personified destination.

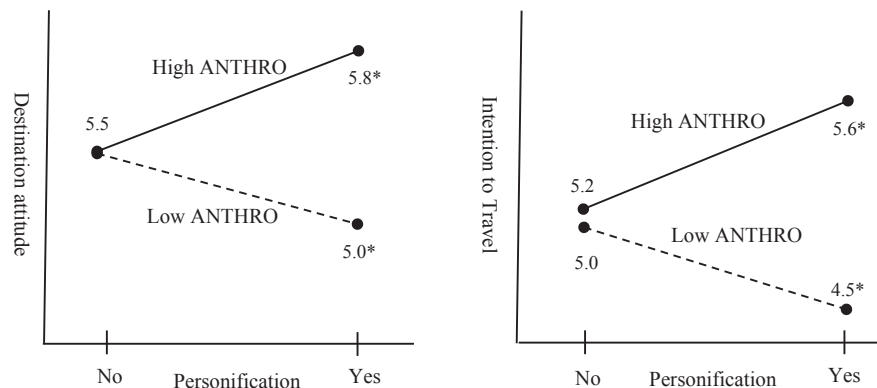


Fig. 1. Pattern of interaction. Note: ANTHRO refers to anthropomorphic tendency and an asterisk indicates a significant mean difference.

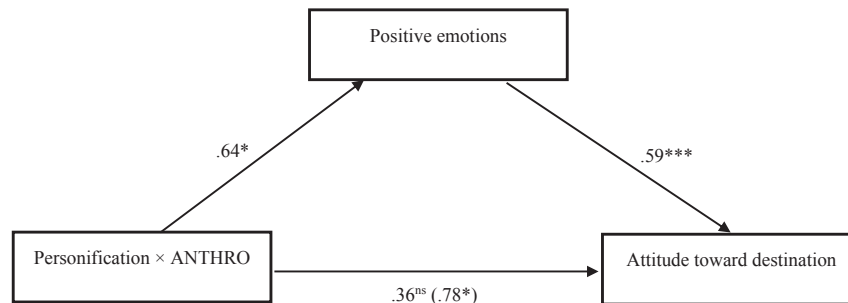
While personification strategies have attracted some attention in the past, this attention has been in a marketing or psychological science context. In addition, these studies have tended to focus on visual anthropomorphism, such as mascots and spokes-characters (e.g., Callcott & Phillips, 1996), product personification (e.g., Aggarwal & McGill, 2007), or brand personality (e.g., Aaker, 1997), with only one study focusing on text-personification, and this in a conservation setting (Tam et al., 2013). The current study focuses on text-personification as a route to improved destination outcomes and hence expands on previous work not just by bringing personification into the tourism literature, but also in demonstrating that text-personification is effective in a marketing setting. In addition, this study has highlighted the role of an important individual difference – anthropomorphic tendency – in the success of tourism messages.

The current findings have important implications for tourism practice. In particular, the current findings suggest that when tourists have high levels of anthropomorphic tendency, personified-text is an appropriate strategy for humanizing the destination and increasing the chances of positive impressions and intentions being formed. Therefore, tourism practitioners wishing to communicate effectively with high anthropomorphic tendency consumers can embed personification into tourism communications. This study did so with a few simple changes, primarily switching destination references from ‘it’ to personal pronouns. When consumers have high anthropomorphic tendency, referring to a destination as if it were a person might be all that is needed to

activate anthropomorphism and thus help ensure more positive perceptions and destination outcomes.

The efficacy of incorporating personification strategies into tourism messages is dependent upon the level of anthropomorphic tendency possessed by the individual receiver of the message. This assumes that tourism marketers are able to determine the individual's level of anthropomorphic tendency. It is already known that sociality motivation, effectance motivation, and elicited agent knowledge influence the propensity to anthropomorphize (Epley et al., 2007), hence anthropomorphic tendency might be identified indirectly through examination of travel motivations. For instance, those who travel to seek connection or mastery might also exhibit higher levels of anthropomorphic tendency. Work is also emerging in the marketing literature that deals with the identification of this tendency through its correlation with other, more easily identifiable traits. In particular, recent research in this area has found that those with higher anthropomorphic tendency are likely to be younger, single, more open to experiences, more conscientious, and less emotionally stable (Letheren et al., 2016). Gender and religion do not have a significant relationship with an individual's level of anthropomorphic tendency, though a cultural effect is pending further investigation (Letheren et al., 2016). Interestingly, additional analyses conducted as part of this research, in addition to supporting earlier results for age and gender, found that those with higher incomes had higher levels of anthropomorphic tendency. Hence, tourism marketers may be able to assume the level of anthropomorphic tendency present in a given

Panel A



Panel B

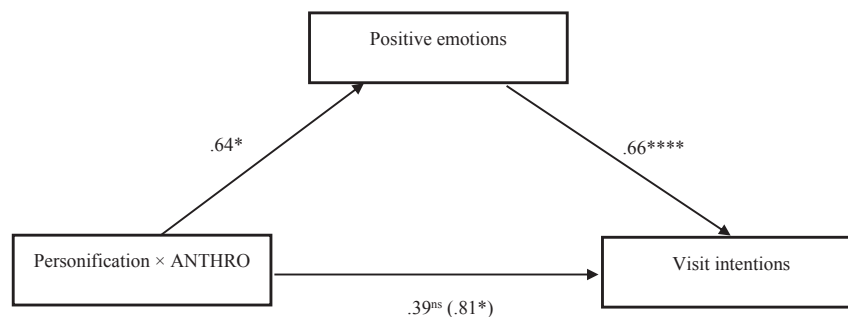


Fig. 2. Mediation analysis. Note: When the mediating variable is added in the model, the significant direct effect of the interaction term became non-significant. The coefficient value in the parenthesis is the one when the model does not include the mediating variable of positive emotions. Please note, the values above are unstandardized coefficients.

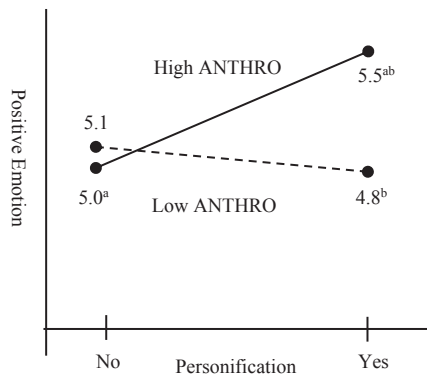


Fig. 3. Pattern of interaction on positive emotion. Note: Mean values with the same letter (i.e., a and b) are significantly different each other. a: $p < 0.05$. b: $p < 0.01$.

target market by comparing these characteristics to those of their target market. For instance, the youth touring market may have higher levels of anthropomorphic tendency than the retiree travel market, and hence be more receptive to personified messages.

This study also found that the relationship between anthropomorphic tendency, personification strategies, and positive destination outcomes, is mediated by positive emotions. That is, when a person with high anthropomorphic tendency sees a personified message, they will feel positive emotions, and these positive emotions will then transfer to the associated destination outcomes. This supports the conceptualization proposed at the start of this paper that anthropomorphism operates through affective routes, and expands previous related research by Tam et al. (2013) who commented on the positive effect of anthropomorphism on the emotions and subjective wellbeing of participants. Given that the personification used in this study led to positive emotions and then positive destination outcomes, an interesting avenue for further research in tourism marketing more generally emerges: whether tourists who have anthropomorphized a destination will show it more 'moral care and concern' (Epley et al., 2007; Waytz et al., 2010c). Indeed, there is scope to investigate the role of a number of different positive emotions in a tourism marketing context, such as joy, delight or amazement, once a traveler has experienced a destination and hence undergone post-purchase evaluation and the possibility of positive disconfirmation.

Hence, the study findings provide a number of actionable strategies that tourism marketers can employ to better communicate with their target market. For example, tourism marketers may use personification strategies to better communicate about tourism destinations with those target markets that have high levels of anthropomorphic tendency; perhaps younger, single and more adventurous tourists. The positive emotions engendered by the personification of the destination have already been found to transfer to a consumers' attitude towards the destination, and the intention to travel. There are a range of circumstances where positive emotions may need to be created towards a destination – for instance, not just when marketing the destination, but also during crises, when seeking foreign aid, when seeking support from other countries, and so on.

This study also opens up new areas of tourism research more generally to further expand theory in this area. For instance, given positive impacts on destination outcomes like attitude and travel intentions, future research could expand into other outcomes like traveler behavior. Tourist behavior and interaction with locals are important concerns in tourism literature (e.g., Cohen, 1984). Given that anthropomorphizing something indicates that it is

worthy of moral care and concern (Epley et al., 2007; Waytz et al., 2010c), research may therefore examine whether travelers exposed to personified tourism communications (including text-personification) show more pro-social behavior when traveling in the destination. Other research could also examine the impact of timing and frequency of personified-text communications on outcomes, or look at the efficacy of a range of anthropomorphic tourism communications when targeting high anthropomorphic tendency consumers. Further, gender effects could be examined. The current study used 'she' in line with naming conventions usually utilized for places (along with transport and nature events), but could be tested with 'he' or gender-neutral pronouns. Finally, future studies examining additional locations would be of interest as a way to replicate and further explore the current findings.

As with all research, a number of limitations were associated with the current study. First, this study would benefit from repetition in other cultural contexts. A general population sample from an Australian panel company was utilized, hence diversity of cultures was not able to be tested. Further, there is scope to take personification strategies further. Our study used a basic text-personification, moving from calling a destination "it" to "she" but maintaining the same welcoming overtones. While this was important to establish a baseline effect, more pronounced personification may prove to have stronger tourism outcomes. Zouganeli et al. (2012) suggest that personification strategies might be designed to include aspects of destination personality – such as attributes of residents and tourists. Hence future research might also examine the effectiveness of basic personification strategies versus personality-based personification. Finally, while intention is an important step in influencing behavior (cf. Theory of Planned Behavior, Ajzen, 1991), this study did not examine effects on behavior. There is, therefore, scope to further examine actual behavior such as purchasing a holiday to the personified destination or even whether a tourist acts pro-socially after arriving at the destination.

Despite these limitations, the current study examines the influence of personification strategies in tourism messages, and how a consumer's level of anthropomorphic tendency influences the efficacy of this strategy. In addition, positive emotions were found to mediate the relationship between personification and positive outcomes for destination attitude and travel intentions. These findings provide important theoretical and practical contributions for those seeking to understand consumer responses to tourism communications, particularly in instances where strategies include humanization. It is hoped that the insights provided here will guide others exploring this area of research.

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Appendix 1

Non-Personification condition text:

Welcome to Paris! Paris is a city with a proud history stretching back through the centuries. It is currently home to over 2 million residents and attracts millions of tourists each year. Paris is perhaps most famous for its food, art, and the Parisian attitude to life, a

certain *Je ne sais quoi*.

Personification condition text:

Paris Welcomes You! Paris has a proud history stretching back through the centuries. She is currently home to over 2 million residents and welcomes millions of tourists each year. Paris is perhaps most famous for her food, art, and attitude to life, a certain *Je ne sais quoi*.

Supplementary files

Questionnaire

Anthropomorphic tendency: Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements on a scale 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much):

To what extent does the average fish have free will?

To what extent do cows have intentions?

To what extent does a cheetah experience emotions?

To what extent does the average insect have a mind of its own?

To what extent does the average reptile have consciousness?

Attitude toward the destination: Thinking specifically about the advertisement you have just viewed, what do you feel about the destination?

Bad (1) ——— Good (7)

Unfavorable (1) ——— Favorable (7)

Negative (1) ——— Positive (7)

Travel intention: Thinking specifically about the advertisement you have just viewed, if you were planning a trip overseas, how likely would you be to visit this destination in the future?

Unlikely (1) ——— Likely (7)

Impossible (1) ——— Possible (7)

Improbable (1) ——— Probable (7)

Emotions: When reading the ad, how did you feel on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)?

Happy

Pleased

Enthusiastic

Gender: Please select your sex.

Male

Female

Age: Which of the following age categories do you belong to?

18–24

25–24

25–34

35–44

45–54

55–64

65+

Education: Please select your highest level of education.

Less than high school

High school

TAFE/trade

Some university

University degree (e.g., Bachelors Degree)

Graduate school/advanced degree (e.g., Masters, PhD)

Income: What is your annual household income before taxes?

Less than \$20,000

\$20,001 - \$29,999

\$30,000 - \$39,999

\$40,000 - \$49,999

\$50,000 - \$59,999

\$60,000 - \$69,999

\$70,000 - \$79,999

\$80,000 - \$89,999

\$90,000 - \$99,999

100,000 or more

Prior visit to the destination: Have you been to the destination in the advertisement?

No

Yes

Ad realism: How realistic do you think the advertisement was?

Very unrealistic (1) ——— Very realistic (7)

Descriptive statistics

1. Anthropomorphic tendency: Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements on a scale 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much):

| | Mean | SD | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1) Fish | 4.11 | 1.80 | -.07 | -.88 |
| 2) Cows | 4.14 | 1.80 | -.07 | -.96 |
| 3) Cheetah | 4.84 | 1.63 | -.43 | -.48 |
| 4) Insect | 4.58 | 1.87 | -.31 | -.97 |
| 5) Reptile | 4.76 | 1.78 | -.41 | -.79 |
| 6) A composite scale | 4.49 | 1.41 | -.35 | -.17 |

Note: The authors used the composite scale. The standard errors for Skewness and Kurtosis are .18 and .30 respectively. The absolute values of skewness (.35) and kurtosis (.17) are less than the value of the standard error $\times 3$ (.18 $\times 3 = .54$). Thus, the distribution of the variable does not show a significant violation of normality.

2. Attitude toward the destination: Thinking specifically about the advertisement you have just viewed, what do you feel about the destination?

| | Mean | SD | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1) Good | 5.49 | 1.28 | -.65 | .03 |
| 2) Favorable | 5.51 | 1.33 | -.76 | .21 |
| 3) Positive | 5.49 | 1.30 | -.73 | .27 |
| 4) A composite scale | 5.50 | 1.27 | -.62 | -.14 |

Note: The authors used the composite scale. The distribution of the variable does not show a significant violation of normality.

3. Travel intention: Thinking specifically about the advertisement you have just viewed, if you were planning a trip overseas, how likely would you be to visit this destination in the future?

| | Mean | SD | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1) Likely | 5.06 | 1.69 | -.77 | .02 |
| 2) Possible | 5.23 | 1.56 | -.76 | .17 |
| 3) Probable | 5.05 | 1.61 | -.70 | .18 |
| 4) A composite scale | 5.11 | 1.53 | -.65 | -.03 |

Note: The authors used the composite scale. The distribution of the variable is a bit skewed. However, the degree of skewness is not substantial.

4. Emotions: When reading the ad, how did you feel on a scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)?

| | Mean | SD | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| 1) Happy | 4.62 | 1.44 | -.38 | .15 |
| 2) Pleased | 4.66 | 1.44 | -.51 | .15 |
| 3) Enthusiastic | 4.51 | 1.49 | -.43 | .10 |
| 4) A composite scale | 4.60 | 1.40 | -.53 | .38 |

Note: The authors used the composite scale. The distribution of the variable does not show a significant violation of normality.

Stimuli image



Non-Personified Stimuli



Personified Stimuli

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