

THE ROLE OF GENDER IN BRAND ANTHROPOMORPHISM OF BRAND SPOKES-CHARACTERS

by

Jade Verbeek

Student Number: 27219250

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Promoters:

Dr Liezl-Marie van der Westhuizen & Prof. Melanie Wiese
University of Pretoria
Department of Marketing Management
Pretoria

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own original work under the supervision of my promotor. Where the words, ideas or material from other sources (whether from published or unpublished articles, printed sources, Internet sources, or any other sources) have been used, due acknowledgement was given and reference was made accordingly.

This thesis was done by compiling three research articles. A different version of these articles may be published in accredited academic journals with co-authors, following the examination, adaptations and the journal review process.



Jade Lauren Verbeek

ABSTRACT

Brand anthropomorphism, which refers to brands being perceived as having human-like qualities, has been found to yield several brand benefits, two of which are brand loyalty and commitment and a willingness to spread positive word-of-mouth. These benefits make it a valuable consideration in the marketing domain. However, like other sets of beliefs, not all anthropomorphic beliefs have the same strength: they can range along a continuum from strongly held to weakly held anthropomorphic beliefs, thus affecting the degree to which they yield brand benefits. Yet the literature to date often appears to have explored this variance by comparing the anthropomorphic beliefs of personified non-human stimuli (which are mostly gender-neutral) with those of non-personified stimuli, or by exploring individuals' general propensity to anthropomorphise. However, based on the dehumanisation literature, the gender of human beings has been found to play a role in the degree to which human beings are denied humanness. It can be anticipated, therefore, that the perceived gender of non-human stimuli is also likely to play a role in the degree to which they are attributed humanness. Although research on brand anthropomorphism has increased in recent years, little is known about the variance in the actual occurrence of the brand anthropomorphism of specific non-human brand stimuli, such as brand spokes-characters, using a gendered lens.

The primary purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore the role of gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters in an NPO context. Since brand anthropomorphism has been found to yield several brand benefits, especially in the profit sector, it may also be a viable strategy for NPOs to consider as they strive to increase patronage in a competitive landscape. So this warrants further exploration of brand anthropomorphism in this context.

Data was collected from participants and respondents residing in South Africa who were over the age of 18 years. Since gender played a pivotal role in this study, equal gender quotas were set for these participants and respondents. The data was collected using a multi-method approach to address the primary purpose of this study, in three phases. First, unstructured interviews were conducted to explore the design

of personified and gendered brand spokes-character stimuli. Second, based on the feedback from the unstructured interviews, the brand spokes-character stimuli were revised and were subsequently used as the stimuli in a focus group, in order to probe discussions and to unearth deeper meanings associated with these personified and gendered stimuli. Third, a survey questionnaire administered via an online panel was conducted to explore the role of gender in brand anthropomorphism in an NPO context. Three scenarios were created, in which only the gender (female, gender-neutral, or male) of the brand spokes-character stimulus used in each changed. A total of 600 respondents were recruited from a convenience sample, in which 200 respondents were respectively exposed to one of the three scenarios.

This study's main findings arising from multiple analysis of variance (ANOVAs), multi-group moderation structural equation modelling (SEM), and mediation, were four-fold. First, this study uncovered the complexities involved in designing gendered and personified non-human brand stimuli. The brand spokes-characters' gender was acknowledged more often than not, and the gendered brand spokes-characters appeared to play a role in their brand anthropomorphism and in their perceived suitability for NPOs. A suggestion to marketers, therefore, is to elicit brand anthropomorphism by endowing brand stimuli not only with observable biological cues, but also with more social cues, such as gender cues (e.g., clothing) in order to yield possible greater brand benefits. Second, on the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in brand anthropomorphism, it was found that there were no statistically significant differences in brand anthropomorphism based on the brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender. Marketers are therefore encouraged to elicit brand anthropomorphism to a greater degree by considering the use of more realistic (e.g., 3D design) brand stimuli that are not static in design, but that are able rather to move. Third, even though there were no statistically significant differences in the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters, based on the delimitation of the human-like qualities constituting brand anthropomorphism in this study, there were significant differences in these characters' other perceived unobservable human-like qualities, based on their acknowledged gender. These included the gender dimensions of brand personality (i.e., masculine and feminine brand personalities), and two of the three dimensions of source credibility (i.e.,

expertise and attractiveness). These results indicated that brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender does appear to play a role in the perceptions that they have unobservable human-like qualities, such as a feminine brand personality and/or expertise. According to the definition, such perceived unobservable human-like qualities could essentially also constitute anthropomorphism. Marketers are encouraged, therefore, to endow brand stimuli with either observable (e.g., a face) or unobservable (e.g., a voice) human-like attributes, as these are likely to elicit perceptions that such stimuli have unobservable human-like qualities (e.g., expertise). Fourth, the findings of this study indicated that the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters has an influence on brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour, with brand affect and intention to donate playing a mediating role, and potential donors' gender playing a moderating role in most of these direct relationships. Males were found to be more strongly persuaded to engage in prosocial behaviour by the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters, while females were persuaded more by the brand affect toward these characters. One of the recommendations to marketers or managers of NPOs, therefore, is to consider carefully the gender of potential donors when communicating with them to elicit support.

Theoretically, this study extends the existing literature about brand anthropomorphism by using a gendered lens. Specifically, additional insight into the variance of the actual occurrence of brand anthropomorphism, using a gendered lens, is offered. In addition, one of the main overall managerial contributions of this study is that it highlights the importance of marketers endowing brand stimuli with observable (e.g., human-like female facial features) or unobservable gender cues (e.g., an audible human-like female voice). This is likely to enhance brand perceptions and ultimately lead to favourable intentions and behaviour toward the brand as a result. However, like all social science research, this study is not without its limitations. Among the several limitations highlighted in the study, one of them is that it focuses on the role of only one demographic variable in brand anthropomorphism – namely, gender. A recommendation for future research, therefore, is to consider exploring the role of other demographic variables such as cultural groups, which has been found to play an important role in the effectiveness of brand personification strategies; or education

level, which has been found to influence how gender roles are perceived. The consideration of other demographic variables may provide deeper insight into brand anthropomorphism and its effectiveness that may not have been uncovered in this study.

LIST OF KEY TERMS

In order to explore the role of gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters in an NPO context, a number of key terms have been used. They are defined below.

- **Brand personification**

‘To personify’ has been defined as transforming something into a character imbued with human-like characteristics (Cohen, 2014:1). In the brand domain, ‘brand personification’ is defined as brands making use of a “character with human-like characteristics in packaging, promotion, public relations, or for any other marketing-related purposes” (Cohen, 2014:3). More frequently, brand personification refers to when a brand is personified as a character with human-like attributes rather than as a real-life person (Cohen (2014:3). For the purposes of this study, therefore, brand personification is similarly defined, and refers specifically to when brands make use of *a character with observable human-like attributes for marketing-related purposes, as opposed to a real-life person.*

- **Brand spokes-character**

A character used by brands, especially an animated character, used to be referred to as a ‘trade character’, which Phillips (1996:146) defined as “a fictional, animate being or animated object that has been created for the promotion of a product, service or idea”. However, based on several frameworks and typologies of these animated characters, by authors such as Callcott and Lee (1995) and Hosany, Prayag, Martin and Lee (2013), the term ‘brand spokes-characters’ was used in this study instead to refer to such characters. Similarly to the previous definitions and frameworks used to describe these characters, brand spokes-characters for the purposes of this study, are defined as *fictional animated characters that are non-celebrities with observable human-like attributes, that represent brands for promotional purposes, and that are not necessarily registered trademarks for these brands.*

- **Anthropomorphism**

Anthropomorphism is considered an innate human tendency, and it means “imbuing the imagined or real behaviour of non-human agents with human-like characteristics,

motivations, intentions, and emotions” (Epley, Waytz and Cacioppo, 2007:864). However, Epley (2018:591) defines it more simply as “perceiving human-like traits in non-human agents”; which is the definition used in this study.

- **Brand anthropomorphism**

The anthropomorphism of brands has been referred to as ‘brand anthropomorphism’, and is defined as the examination of “consumers’ perceptions of brands as having human-like qualities” (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:356). However, since mental capacities or states are what make human beings uniquely human (Gray, Gray and Wegner, 2007; Haslam, Kashima, Loughnan, Shi and Suitner, 2008:254), perceiving non-human agents as having *unobservable* human-like qualities – especially mental states (e.g., intentions) – is essential to anthropomorphism (Epley, 2018:592). ‘Brand anthropomorphism’ in this study therefore specifically refers to *consumers’ perceptions of brand spokes-characters as having unobservable human-like qualities* (e.g., intentions), and not necessarily to the perceptions of the brand as a whole as having these qualities.

- **Gender**

Gender in this study is defined in accordance with the definition of the World Health Organization (Not dated) as the “socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men, which vary from society to society and that can be changed”. In this study, gender is considered from the perspective of both the perceived gender of the brand spokes-characters (female, gender-neutral or male) and the gender with which consumers (i.e. potential donors) identify (female or male).

- **Gender dimensions of brand personality**

Masculinity and femininity have been deemed important aspects of human personality (Constantinople, 1973). However, since such human characteristics are often easily associated with brands (Aaker, 1997), consumers are likely to associate masculine and feminine traits with brands too. This is referred to as the ‘gender dimensions of brand personality’, defined in this study as “the set of human personality traits associated with masculinity and femininity applicable and relevant to brands”

(Grohmann, 2009:106), but more specifically to the brand spokes-characters used in this study.

- **Source credibility**

The perceived credibility of spokespersons or endorsers of products or brands provides a good understanding of its effectiveness (Stafford, Stafford and Day, 2002:18). Based on the definition by Ohanian (1990:41), the credibility of a source, such as the brand spokes-characters in this study, is referred to as ‘source credibility’, and is defined as a “communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message”.

- **Brand affect**

‘Affect’ encompasses specific mental processes that include emotions, moods, and attitudes (Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer, 1999:184). It has been defined as “valenced feeling states and emotions” (Matzler, Bidmon and Grabner-Kräuter, 2006:428). Affect in a brand domain has been referred to as ‘brand affect’, which is defined as “a brand’s potential to elicit a positive emotional response in the average consumer as a result of its use” (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001:82). In this study, brand affect refers specifically to that shown toward the brand spokes-characters, and not necessarily to the brand as a whole.

- **Non-profit organisations**

In accordance with the definition of ‘non-profit organisations’ (NPOs) by Wheeler (2009:86), in this study the term refers to an entity that has been established for a specific public purpose or social cause, that is built on the principles of human decency, caring and giving, and that is supported by donors of (for example) time and/or money.

- **Prosocial behaviour**

Prosocial behaviour refers to acts as defined by society that are considered generally beneficial to others (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin and Schroeder, 2005:366). Donations to an NPO are an example of prosocial behaviour and, according to Michaelidou, Micevski and Siamagka (2015:135), donations to NPOs can take various forms, such

as giving time, money, or in-kind goods or services. In this study, prosocial behaviour refers specifically to the donation of money, and includes both potential donors' intention to donate as well as their actual donation behaviour toward an NPO.

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- CHAPTER 1 -
CONTEXTUALISATION OF THE STUDY

1. INTRODUCTION

In order to make sense of the world, human beings have an inherent tendency to attribute human-like qualities to non-human or inanimate objects, and to perceive them as human. This phenomenon has been referred to as *anthropomorphism* (Waytz, Epley and Cacioppo, 2010b:59). The pervasive nature of anthropomorphism in human perceptions allows it to reside in various domains such as religion, science, philosophy, art, and aesthetics (Puzakova, 2012:1), and even in marketing, particularly in products and branding (Aggarwal and McGill, 2007; Puzakova, Kwak and Rocereto, 2009). It has been suggested that, in marketing, brand anthropomorphism has the potential to yield long-term business success, such as brand loyalty and commitment, a willingness to pay a premium price and to spread positive word-of-mouth (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:371). In order to yield such benefits, marketers often rely on brand personification in their efforts to elicit brand anthropomorphism because, according to Epley, Waytz and Cacioppo (2007:869) and MacInnis and Folkes (2017:358), non-human agents that have been personified through observable human-like attributes are more likely to easily elicit the anthropomorphism of these agents.

Anthropomorphism and the anthropomorphic beliefs about non-human agents can vary along a continuum: some individuals may hold stronger anthropomorphic beliefs, while others may hold weaker anthropomorphic beliefs about the same non-human agent (Epley *et al.*, 2007:865). To date, the literature has mainly focused on exploring anthropomorphism of personified gender-neutral stimuli versus that of non-personified stimuli. Undeniably the results often indicate that the personified stimuli, even though gender-neutral, elicit anthropomorphism to a greater degree than the non-personified stimuli (e.g., Kim and McGill, 2011; Kwak, Puzakova and Rocereto, 2015, 2017; Reavey, Puzakova, Larsen Andras and Kwak, 2018). This does not necessarily provide a true reflection of how anthropomorphic beliefs may vary from person to person when they are exposed to the same personified or non-personified stimulus. In addition, the literature to date, has often placed focus on exploring anthropomorphism as a trait – by understanding individuals' propensity to

anthropomorphise (e.g. Chin, Sims, Clark and Lopez, 2004; Letheren, Kuhn, Lings and Pope, 2016; Timpano and Shaw, 2013). Thus in such studies, the variance is explored from the perspective of how individuals may differ in their inherent tendency to engage in the anthropomorphism of non-human agents in general, and not necessarily in terms of the actual occurrence of the anthropomorphism of specific non-human agents. Evidently, insight into the possible variance in brand anthropomorphism as a result of exposure to a specific personified non-human brand stimulus, especially using a gendered lens appears to be scant. This study therefore aimed to address this scarcity in the literature.

According to MacInnis and Folkes (2017:358), personified non-human brand stimuli with observable human-like attributes are likely to easily elicit brand anthropomorphism, and so an attempt was made in this study to elicit brand anthropomorphism using brand personification. Brand personification can take various forms (Cohen, 2014:3–8), one of which includes the use of spokespersons such as brand spokes-characters. Examples of such characters include the Energizer Bunny, the Nesquik Bunny, and Snap, Crackle and Pop from Kellogg's Rice Krispies.

However, based on the dehumanisation literature, in which human beings are denied their full humanness, the gender of human beings appears to play a role in the degree of humanness attributed to them (Haslam, 2006:252). Females especially are likely to be attributed with less humanness and to be more objectified than males (Haslam, 2006:253). Therefore, just as the gender of human beings can play a role in the degree to which they are attributed or denied their full humanness, it can be anticipated that the acknowledged gender of personified non-human brand stimuli, such as brand spokes-characters, is likely also to play a role in the degree to which these stimuli are anthropomorphised. To gain deeper insight into brand anthropomorphism, the use of personified non-human brand stimuli with gender cues to elicit brand anthropomorphism may be key, and may yield different outcomes from stimuli that are gender-neutral. For the purposes of this study, it was therefore deemed necessary to make use of brand spokes-characters, some of which were endowed with a sex (female or male) using gender cues while others were gender-neutral. Not only did the gender-neutral brand spokes-characters in this study serve as a point of reference against which the gendered characters could be compared, but due to a rising trend

of gender-neutrality (Claveria, 2016) in the market with more brands 'getting on board' in their marketing communication, it was deemed necessary to include gender-neutral brand spokes-characters as well. Therefore *gendered brand spokes-characters* throughout this study will refer to both the characters endowed with gender cues (female or male) and those devoid of such cues (gender-neutral).

According to studies by Meyers-Levy and Loken (2015) and Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran (1991), males and females differ in the way that they interpret information, and so their interpretation and perception of non-human stimuli as having unobservable human-like qualities (i.e., the anthropomorphism of these stimuli) may differ too. Therefore, not only may the acknowledged gender of personified non-human brand stimuli, such as brand spokes-characters, play a role in their brand anthropomorphism, but so too may consumers' gender. The primary objective of this study, therefore, was to explore the role of gender from both perspectives in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters. The value herein lies in gaining insight into whether and how brand benefits derived from brand anthropomorphism, such as brand loyalty and commitment are influenced by the gender perceptions held by consumers, which are then often projected onto a brand or its brand spokes-character.

However, according to Bem (1974:160–161) and Grohmann (2009:111–112), the acknowledged gender of brands or their spokespersons is likely to result in the perceptions of them having a specific unobservable gendered brand personality (i.e., a masculine or feminine brand personality). For example, a brand or their spokesperson with male gender cues is likely to be acknowledged as male and to be perceived as having a masculine brand personality. In addition, owing to the observable human-like similarities of brand spokes-characters, consumers are likely to interpret and make sense of these characters in the same way as they would real-life human brand spokespersons (Garretson and Niedrich, 2004:26). According to Stafford, Stafford and Day (2002:18), spokespersons and their effectiveness is best interpreted through source credibility, first introduced by Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953:19), which comprises three dimensions: trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness as validated by Ohanian (1990). However, source credibility has also been found to be influenced by the gender of real-life human brand spokespersons (Pearson, 1982:5). Thus the acknowledged gender of spokespersons appear to play

a role in their perceived gender dimension of brand personality and in their perceived source credibility. Since exploring the role of brand spokes-characters' gender in brand anthropomorphism is key to the primary objective of this study, it is evident that brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender may play a role in the perceived gender dimensions of brand personality and in the perceived source credibility of these characters too. This was therefore also further explored in this study.

Yet, more importantly for marketers, it is deemed necessary to explore not only the role of brand spokes-characters' gender, particularly their acknowledged gender in the brand anthropomorphism of these characters, but also the subsequent outcomes for brands and the role, if any, of consumers' gender. According to Connell (2013) and Nan, Anghelcev, Myers, Sar and Faber (2006), when brand spokes-characters appear more human-like, a positive affect toward these characters is likely to be yielded which, in the branding domain, can be referred to as 'brand affect' (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001:82). Based on findings by Bechara and Damasio (2005) and Naqvi, Shiv and Bechara (2006), positive affect is likely to determine consumers' behavioural intentions and guide their behaviour toward a brand. Thus, in this study, brand affect, behavioural intentions, and actual behaviour were explored as outcomes of the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters. This was done, while simultaneously also exploring the role of consumers' gender on these relationships, since males and females have been found to differ in the way in which they make sense of and interpret information and stimuli (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991).

While marketing strategies are considered important in the for-profit sector, it has become a fundamental tool for non-profit organisations (NPOs) (Venable, Rose, Bush and Gilbert, 2005:296) too. The development of marketing strategies has increased in importance for NPOs as the need to differentiate continues to grow in order to gain a bigger share of donors' pockets, especially amid intensely competitive rivalry in the sector (Michaelidou, Micevski and Siamagka, 2015:134; Ranganathan and Henley, 2008:2; Venable *et al.*, 2005:295). With brand anthropomorphism proving to yield several brand benefits (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:371), especially in the profit sector, the elicitation of brand anthropomorphism in the NPO sector may therefore also be an effective strategy for NPOs to elicit more patronage in a highly competitive

landscape. Understanding brand anthropomorphism in the NPO context has therefore been considered important, thus providing the context in which this study took place. Behavioural intentions and actual behaviour as a result of positive affect in this context, is therefore likely to take on the form of *intention to donate* and *donation behaviour*.

Based on this prior literature, the overall purpose of this study was therefore to explore the role of gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters in an NPO context.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The variation in anthropomorphism between strongly and weakly held anthropomorphic beliefs (Epley *et al.*, 2007:865) often appears to have been considered; first, in studies in which the anthropomorphism of stimuli is compared between those that have been personified with no gender cues and those that have not been personified at all. The results from such studies often find that the personified stimuli yield more positive behaviours from consumers (such as brand love, purchase intention, and likelihood to donate; e.g., Kwak *et al.*, 2015, 2017; Rauschnabel and Ahuvia, 2014; Reavey *et al.*, 2018) as a result of it being anthropomorphised, than do the non-personified stimuli. Second, this variation has also occasionally been considered in studies of individuals' anthropomorphic tendencies (e.g., Chin *et al.*, 2004; Letheren *et al.*, 2016; Timpano and Shaw, 2013) and not necessarily of the actual occurrence of the anthropomorphism of a specific stimulus. Yet studies that have explored or been mindful of this variation in the actual occurrence of the brand anthropomorphism of only personified non-human brand stimuli through a gendered lens remain relatively scarce. The world as we know it is often perceived through a gendered lens, based on our predisposition of being human beings. Therefore if marketers are unsure about if and how the gender of their brands or their brand spokes-characters are being acknowledged, the marketing efforts to yield brand benefits such as brand loyalty and commitment, through strategies such eliciting brand anthropomorphism, may not only become futile but may also be to a brand's detriment. The value for marketers in understanding this variation in brand anthropomorphism

through a gendered lens therefore lies in enabling them to make more informed brand decisions.

Based on this gap in the existing literature, three areas were identified and explored in this study. First, androcentrism, which is defined as being dominated by or centred on masculine interests or points of view (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020), is still very prevalent in society. This is despite rising support for ideologies that question traditional androcentric practices and that rather endorse feminism and gender-neutralism (Wendell, 1987:86; Brunskell-Evans, 2015; Claveria, 2016; Kasriel-Alexander, 2016:18), which are subsequently blurring gender lines and making gender more 'fluid' than ever before. This is already evident: some consumer brands, such as Zara and H&M, are taking a stance on offering more gender-neutral fashion lines to the market (Cherrington, 2016; Paparella, 2018) to encourage gender fluidity and blended gender. The ease with which gender was once acknowledged, especially based on social gender cues such as clothing, may now be compromised. Therefore, the use of especially gendered non-human stimuli, such as marketing or brand stimuli, need more attention in a time where gender – and the basis on which it was once perceived – is rapidly changing. Yet, as far as could be determined, few studies have reported on this, which could have important implications, as gender perceptions today appear more complex and intricate, and no longer appear to be as simple and easily understandable as they once may have been. This study therefore aimed first to unearth the deeper meanings currently associated with gender, particularly those associated with gendered personified brand stimuli such as brand spokes-characters.

Second, previous studies that have explored anthropomorphism have often made use of personified non-human stimuli that appear gender-neutral (e.g., Awad and Youn, 2018; Reavey *et al.*, 2018; Touré-Tillery and McGill, 2015). There has been very little consideration of endowing these stimuli with a sex by means of gender cues in order to explore their potential and subsequent effects in anthropomorphism. Since females have often been found to be objectified and treated as less human than males, especially as noted in the dehumanisation literature (Haslam, 2006:253), it can be anticipated that the acknowledged gender of personified non-human stimuli is likely to play a role in their anthropomorphism too. However, with gender-neutralism

becoming a notable marketing and consumer trend in recent years (Claveria, 2016; Kasriel-Alexander, 2016:18), the role of gender-neutral brand spokes-characters in brand anthropomorphism could not be overlooked either, and so it was also explored in this study. However, the acknowledged gender of such stimuli is also likely to play a role in the perceived gender dimensions of brand personality (Bem, 1974:160–161; Grohmann, 2009:111–112), and in the perceived source credibility (Pearson, 1982:5) of these characters. This study thus aimed also to explore the role of the brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender not only in the brand anthropomorphism of these characters, but also its role in the gender dimensions of brand personality, and in the source credibility of the brand spokes-characters.

Third, males and females differ not only in terms of how they are perceived in society, but also in terms of how they process and respond to information (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991). Since females have been found to process information more comprehensively, they have also been found to more precisely interpret nonverbal cues and consequently assume the thoughts and feelings of others more accurately than do males (Klein and Hodges, 2001; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991; Rosip and Hall, 2004). Thus it can be anticipated that females are more likely also to interpret the nonverbal cues of non-human stimuli (such as their observable and unobservable human-like qualities), and may consequently assume and infer that such stimuli have thoughts and feelings. However, although gendered consumption has become more important (Avery, 2012:333), little literature exists about the role of consumers' gender in the anthropomorphism of non-human stimuli (Letheren *et al.*, 2016:979), which could provide deeper insight into the study of anthropomorphism, and could also have important implications for marketers. This study thus aimed also to explore the role of consumers' gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters in addition to the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender. However, since anthropomorphism has been shown to yield several brand benefits in the existing literature (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:371), this study consequently also aimed to explore the subsequent brand outcomes of the role of gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters.

Due to increased competition among NPOs (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2015:134; Ranganathan and Henley, 2008:134), the elicitation of anthropomorphism in this landscape may be a notable marketing strategy for NPOs to increase their share of donors' pockets. According to Epley *et al.* (2007:880), the anthropomorphism of non-human stimuli in social settings is likely to increase the perceptions of these stimuli being moral and worthy of care or concern. So the NPO context was used for the purposes of this study and, since the exploration of consumers' gender was one of the key components under investigation in this study, *consumers* were more aptly referred to as *potential donors*, especially when outcomes for the NPO, such as *intention to donate* and *donation behaviour* were considered throughout the study.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of this study were as follows:

3.1. Primary objective

The primary objective of this study was to explore the role of gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters in an NPO context.

3.2. Secondary objectives

In support of the primary objective of this study, the secondary objectives of this study were as follows:

- To unearth deeper meanings associated with personified stimuli – specifically, gendered brand spokes-characters – and their role in brand anthropomorphism in the NPO context.
- To explore the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters.
- To determine the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in other perceptions of brand spokes-characters – specifically, the gender dimensions of brand personality and source credibility.

- To explore the role of potential donors' gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour by considering brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour.

4. BACKGROUND ON BRAND SPOKES-CHARACTERS AND BRAND ANTHROPOMORPHISM

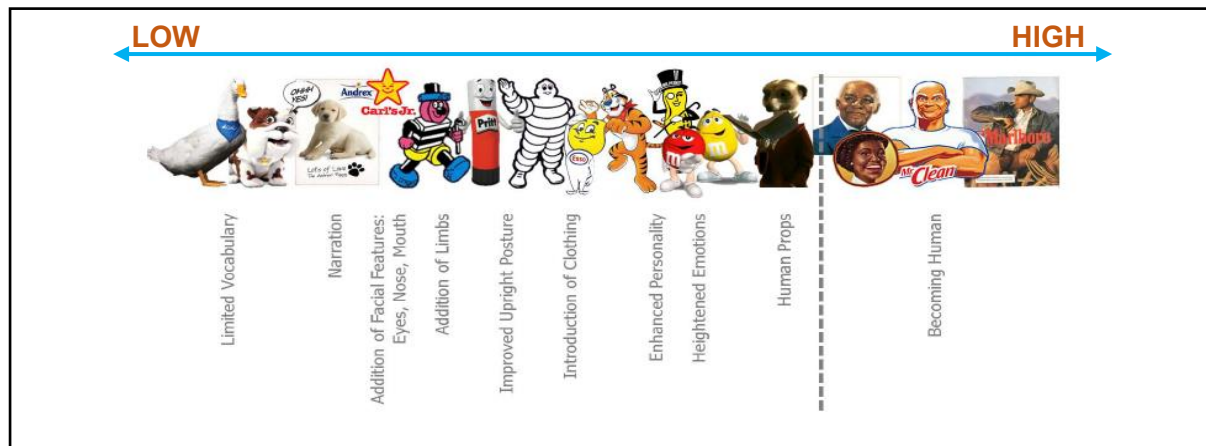
4.1. Branding and brand personification

Branding is often an important tool used by marketers to distinguish their products from the competition (Lamb, Hair, McDaniel, Boshoff, Terblanché, Elliott and Klopper, 2015:281). The origins of branding date back to the 1500s when the term 'brandr', which meant 'to burn', was used by farmers to burn a unique mark on their cattle in order to differentiate them from the livestock of other farmers (Shadel, 2014). The concept of branding therefore originated with the purpose of differentiating or distinguishing, and the modern definitions of branding appear to be no different. According to the American Marketing Association (2017), *brand* refers to a name, symbol, design, or other feature that distinguishes one seller's products and services from another.

Brands differentiate themselves in several ways (Fleck, Michel and Zeitoun, 2014:84). One way in particular is through the creation of a unique brand personality which, according to Aaker (1997:347), refers to a "set of human-like traits and characteristics associated with a brand". Various mechanisms can be used to imbue brands with personalities; one of these refers to 'brand personification' (Fleck *et al.*, 2014:84), which is often primed by marketers to facilitate recognition, recall, loyalty, and a sense of identification and/or perceptions by consumers of a relationship with a brand (Cohen, 2014:3; Fournier, 1998:344). Brand personification refers to when brands make use of a "character with human-like characteristics in packaging, promotion, public relations, or for any other marketing-related purposes" (Cohen, 2014:3). These characters used by brands can be plotted on a reality continuum, as seen in Figure 1, from animated characters who have observable or audible human-like attributes (e.g.,

a human-like voice) to real-life people, such as celebrity endorsers (Cohen, 2014:8–10; Khogeer, 2013:59).

Figure 1: Continuum of brand personification



Source: Khogeer (2013:59)

Cohen (2014:3–8) outlines five overlapping categories of brand personification strategies that can be considered by marketers in order to personify their brands using characters. In the first category, the character personifies the brand itself and, as a result, the personality of the character is usually congruent with that of the brand. Often the characters in this category have the same name as the brand (e.g., Captain Crunch from the Captain Crunch cereal from the Quaker Oats Company). In the second category, the character is a spokesperson for the brand through verbally advocating for, explaining, and providing credibility to, the brand, and/or conveys the brand message in a way that will persuade consumers (e.g., Snap, Crackle and Pop are the characters that advocate for the Rice Krispies cereal from Kellogg's). In the third category, the character serves as an ambassador for the brand, and is an official and authorised representative of the brand who is unique in form, appearance, or costume (e.g., Mini is the character that appears similar to the wheat cereal it represents, called Mini-Wheats, from Kellogg's). In the fourth category, the character serves as a mascot for the brand it represents, and generally supports the brand's messaging and generates goodwill for the brand through nonverbal communication (e.g., Cornelius Rooster is the character that appears on the packaging for the Corn Flakes cereal from Kellogg's). The fifth and last category represents all the characters that do not

explicitly fit into any of the four above-mentioned categories. These characters neither ‘speak for’ nor represent the brand (e.g., in an advertisement for chocolate Weetabix cereal, teddy bears (which have no affiliation to Weetabix) come to life after a little girl eats the cereal. This advert can be viewed here for ease of reference: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIU3sv-fFdQ>.

According to Cohen (2014:3), brand personification more frequently refers to when a brand is personified as a character with human-like attributes rather than as a real-life person. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, brand personification was defined similarly, as brands making use of *a character with observable human-like attributes for marketing-related purposes*, as opposed to a real-life person. Although brand personification in this study spans all the categories proposed by Cohen (2014:3–8), it is more aligned with the second category of brand personification, in which the character is the spokesperson for a brand through verbally advocating and providing credibility for the brand in order to persuade consumers.

4.2. Defining brand spokes-characters

Based on the terms used in studies by Callcott and Lee (1995) and Hosany, Prayag, Martin and Lee (2013) to refer to the characters used by brands, the term *brand spokes-character* was used in this study as a result of combining the respective terms *spokes-character* and *brand character*. Based on the various frameworks and typologies that have previously been used to define spokes-characters, as outlined in Appendix A, it is important to delimit the definition of brand spokes-characters for the purposes of this study. According to Phillips (1996:145) and Hosany *et al.* (2013:50), the dimension of non-advertising spokes-characters (e.g., celebrity characters) has been recommended to be excluded from the definition of spokes-characters because celebrity spokes-characters fulfil a different role in advertising than that of advertising or promotional spokes-characters who are not celebrities. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, celebrity spokes-characters were also excluded from the definition of brand spokes-characters. Based on prior explanations of these characters by Callcott and Lee (1995), Hosany *et al.* (2013), and Phillips (1996), brand spokes-characters in this study were defined as *fictional animated characters that are non-celebrities with*

observable human-like attributes, that represent brands for promotional purposes, and that are not necessarily registered trademarks for these brands. Some familiar brand spokes-characters that fit this definition are illustrated in Figure 2 below. Interestingly, a quick survey of the current landscape of animated brand spokes-characters in the market suggests that most of them appear to be male.

Figure 2: Examples of animated brand spokes-characters



Source: Credle, 2019; Taste of General Mills. 2015; The Telegraph, 2017; Tire Business, 2011

4.3. Anthropomorphism

The personification of inanimate agents or stimuli (such as brands) activates a human schema (i.e. appears human-like) and, as a result, is often perceived as being physically similar to human beings; which is likely to easily elicit the unconscious innate human tendency referred to as ‘anthropomorphism’ (Epley *et al.* 2007:869; Letheren, Martin and Jin, 2017:67). Anthropomorphism was first uncovered in the 6th century BC by Xenophanes, a Greek philosopher, to describe how non-human gods and supernatural beings resembled human believers (Waytz *et al.*, 2010b:59). Epley *et al.* (2007:864) define this innate human tendency as “imbuing the imagined or real behaviour of non-human agents with human-like characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions”; or, more simply for purposes of this study, it is referred to as “perceiving human-like traits in non-human agents” (Epley, 2018:591). Anthropomorphism is therefore considered an individual cognitive psychological and inferential process for non-human agents’ unobservable human-like attributes, which involves more than mere descriptive reports of these agents’ observable or imagined behaviour (Epley *et al.*, 2007:865). According to Epley (2018:592), Gray, Gray and

Wegner (2007) and Haslam, Kashima, Loughnan, Shi and Suitner (2008:254), the most human-like qualities that human beings possess are their inner mental states such as intentions, desires, beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. Thus the perception of non-human agents as having these *unobservable* inner mental states is regarded as central to anthropomorphism.

An article by Epley *et al.* (2007) appears to be the first to explain when and why anthropomorphism is likely to take place (Epley *et al.*, 2007:865) by providing a psychological account of the phenomenon. According to Epley *et al.* (2007), anthropomorphism is likely to be determined by one cognitive and two motivational determinants: elicited agent knowledge, and sociality and effectance motivation. First, *elicited agent knowledge* refers to the extent to which knowledge about human beings is activated. This kind of knowledge is usually activated to make inferences about unknown or unfamiliar non-human agents (Waytz *et al.*, 2010b:59). Second, *sociality motivation* refers to the need and/or desire to establish social connections with others. When people lack social connection with other human beings, they are likely to be motivated to seek social connections with non-human agents (Waytz *et al.*, 2010b:59). Third, *effectance motivation* refers to the motivation to be a competent social agent in one's environment. When people lack understanding, predictability, and control over their environments, especially in the presence of non-human agents, they are likely to attribute human-like qualities to these non-human agents in order to establish predictability and control over their environments (Epley *et al.*, 2007:866; Waytz *et al.*, 2010b:60). Since anthropomorphism is likely to be activated by any one of these three determinants, it can be considered a varying psychological process, embedded in daily life, that provides critical insights into how people perceive and make sense of non-human agents or inanimate objects (Waytz *et al.*, 2010b:58; Waytz, Morewedge, Epley, Monteleone, Gao and Cacioppo, 2010c:411). The anthropomorphism of non-human agents is therefore considered to vary along a continuum ranging from strongly held to weakly held anthropomorphic beliefs (Epley *et al.*, 2007:865).

Waytz, Cacioppo and Epley (2010a:227) and MacInnis and Folkes (2017:371) suggest that this natural tendency to perceive non-human agents or inanimate objects as having human-like qualities provides an effective way for marketers to yield benefits such as brand loyalty and commitment for their products or brands.

4.4. Brand anthropomorphism

As far as could be determined, one of the earliest and most popular references to anthropomorphism in the marketing domain dates back to a 2007 study by Aggarwal and McGill, in which the anthropomorphism of products (e.g., a car and bottles) was explored. Several studies have since emerged in which the anthropomorphism of products and brands have been explored (e.g., Kim and McGill, 2011; Puzakova *et al.*, 2009; Reavey, 2013).

A review of the literature pertaining specifically to the humanisation of brands was conducted by MacInnis and Folkes (2017), who identified three sub-domains of the literature: 1) the human-focused perspective (i.e., anthropomorphism); 2) the self-focused perspective; and 3) the relationship-focused perspective. First, the *human-focused perspective* (i.e., anthropomorphism) “examines consumers’ perceptions of brands as having human-like qualities”. Second, the *self-focused perspective* examines how a brand “is specifically like oneself”. Third, the *relationship-focused perspective* examines “how consumers’ relationships with brands resemble relationships between people” (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:356). The *human-focused perspective* (i.e., anthropomorphism) was of particular interest for the purposes of this study, and was therefore the primary perspective explored in this study. According to MacInnis and Folkes (2017:356), this perspective focuses on brands as having: 1) human-like features or physiognomy (e.g., observably human-like face); 2) a human-like mind (e.g., intentions); and/or 3) a human-like personality (e.g., being friendly). However, even though ‘human-like features or physiognomy’ may have been alluded to in previous definitions of brand anthropomorphism (e.g., Khogeer, 2013; Kwak *et al.*, 2017; Portal, Abratt and Bendixen, 2018; Puzakova *et al.*, 2009), according to Epley *et al.* (2007:865) anthropomorphism primarily entails the perceptions of non-human agents as having human-like qualities that are essentially *unobservable* (e.g., a mind/intentions), than as having *observable* human-like attributes.

According to Epley (2018:592), Gray *et al.* (2007) and Haslam *et al.* (2008:254), having a mind with mental capacities or states – such as intentions, desires and emotions– is

often what makes human beings uniquely human compared with non-human agents. Thus the attribution of unobservable human-like qualities to non-human agents, and the perception of such qualities – specifically, mental capacities or states – is essential to anthropomorphism (Epley, 2018:592). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, perceptions of brands as having observable human-like features or physiognomy will not constitute brand anthropomorphism, as this has already been accounted for in the definitions of brand personification and brand spokes-characters. Instead, brand personification through the use of brand spokes-characters with observable human-like features and physiognomy was used in this study in an attempt to elicit brand anthropomorphism. Thus, in this study, the distinction between brand personification through brand spokes-characters and brand anthropomorphism was key, where the former has been defined as brands using characters with *observable human-like attributes*, while the latter has been delimited as the subsequent perceptions of these characters having *unobservable* human-like qualities such as those associated with mental capacities. Since the explanation of the human-focused perspective of humanising brands by MacInnis and Folkes (2017) was considered all-encompassing, it was deemed a suitable basis upon which to define brand anthropomorphism for the purposes of this study. ‘Brand anthropomorphism’ in this study therefore refers to *consumers’ perceptions of brand spokes-characters as having unobservable human-like qualities*. It is important to note here that in this study ‘brand anthropomorphism’ refers solely to the anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-character, not of the brand in its entirety.

However, the definitions of ‘anthropomorphism’ and of ‘brand anthropomorphism’ have become complicated, with many authors differing in their delimitation of the human-like qualities that constitute the phenomenon (e.g., Aggarwal and McGill, 2007; Epley *et al.*, 2007; Epley, Akalis, Waytz and Cacioppo, 2008; Puzakova *et al.*, 2009; Waytz *et al.*, 2010a, 2010c). It was deemed important, therefore, to delimit the human-like qualities that constitutes brand anthropomorphism in this study. Since mental capacities or states make human beings uniquely human (Gray *et al.*, 2007; Haslam *et al.*, 2008:254), and have been noted as essential to anthropomorphism (Epley, 2018:592), the human-like qualities used in this study were more aligned with such mental states and capacities. At the same time, the human-like qualities as delimited by the main authors who provided a psychological account of anthropomorphism (e.g.

Epley *et al.*, 2008:115; Waytz *et al.*, 2010c:422) were also considered. Therefore the human-like qualities delimited in this study to include: *a mind, intentions, desires, consciousness, and an ability to experience emotions*. It is important to note here that brand anthropomorphism should not be limited only to these qualities, as it can entail an extensive list of many other perceived unobservable human-like qualities; but, in order to measure it in this study, these were the specific human-like qualities that were be considered.

As the anthropomorphism of non-human agents can range along a continuum from strongly held to weakly held anthropomorphic beliefs (Epley *et al.*, 2007:865), so too can the anthropomorphic beliefs about personified brand spokes-characters, such as those used as stimuli in this study, vary along the same continuum. Since gender plays a role in the degree to which human beings are dehumanised (Haslam, 2006:252), with females being subjected to dehumanisation more often than males (Haslam, 2006:253), brand spokes-characters endowed with gender cues are also likely to cause variation in the degree to which these characters are anthropomorphised. However, not only can the acknowledged gender of the brand spokes-characters play a role in the brand anthropomorphism of these characters, but – according to Klein and Hodges, (2001) and Rosip and Hall (2004) – females are able to detect and interpret nonverbal cues more accurately, allowing them also to infer the thoughts and feelings of others more accurately than males. Therefore, the gender of consumers might also play a role in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters in this study. Evidently, both the acknowledged gender of personified stimuli, as well as consumers' gender, may play a pivotal role in the brand anthropomorphism of such stimuli.

4.5. Gendered brand spokes-characters in a changing marketplace

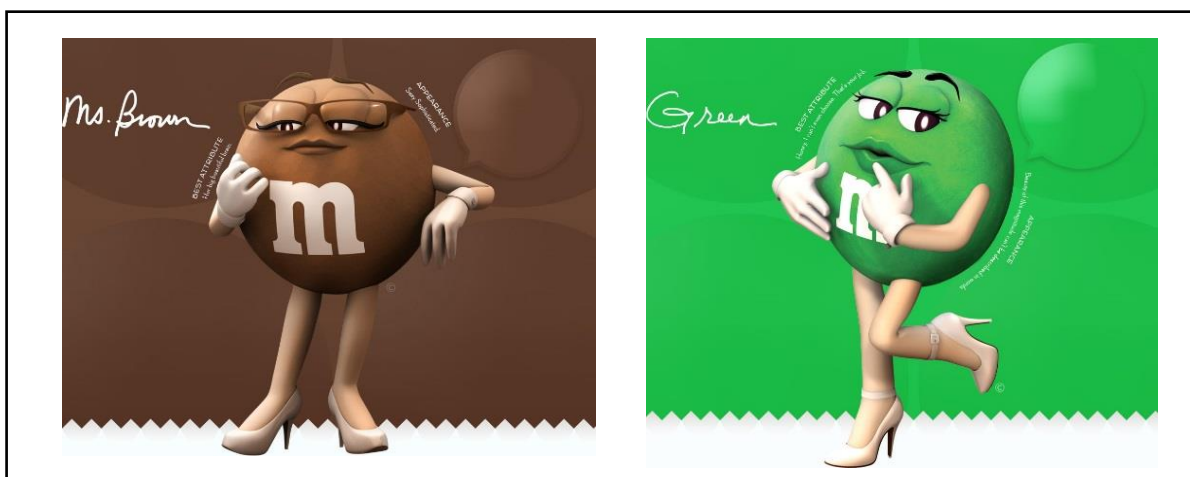
One of several ways in which brands have attempted to differentiate themselves is by creating and portraying a brand personality (Aaker, 1997:347; Fleck *et al.*, 2014:84), which has become more tangible through brand personification, in which brands make use of characters for marketing-related purposes (Cohen, 2014:3; Fleck *et al.*, 2014:84). Some of the familiar characters to date, as portrayed earlier in Figure 2,

include Tony Tiger, Bibendum or Michelin Man, and Pillsbury Doughboy. Yet it is interesting that, upon closer observation of the many characters currently in the market, most appear to be male. This is supported in a 2018 report by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (2018), in which it was found that there are twice as many male brand spokes-characters as there are female brand spokes-characters. Therefore, in studies consumers generally recall male brand spokes-characters more frequently than female brand spokes-characters, owing to the sheer number of male brand spokes-characters in the market (Peirce and McBride, 1999:965). According to Putrevu (2001:9), the gender stereotypes that are evident in society (i.e., males being the more dominant figureheads) are often also prevalent in mass media and advertising environments – which may explain why most brand spokes-characters in the market still appear to be predominantly male.

However, even though androcentrism may still remain prevalent, society is changing to the extent that traditional androcentric practices are being questioned (Wendell, 1987:86); ideologies such as feminism are on the rise (Brunskell-Evans, 2015), and gender neutralism is gaining prevalence in the market (Claveria, 2016; Kasriel-Alexander, 2016:18). Due to these societal shifts, consumers are beginning to expect brands to embrace and adapt to these changes accordingly. Therefore the dominance of male brand spokes-characters that is still evident today may no longer be as prominent in the future, especially as more consumers begin to identify with the views of feminism and/or gender neutralism. Some consumers have already begun to protest against brands that indulge in older gender ideologies (IMC Conference, 2018). Mars, the company behind the creation of M&Ms, the chocolate candies, bore the brunt of this when it received threats of boycott from feminist groups, not only because of its under-representation of females, but also because of its misrepresentation of females in its candy spokes-character range (Superbowl Commercials, 2012). Subsequently, in 2012 Mars unveiled the second female addition to the M&M ‘spokes-candy’ team. Ms Brown is referred to as the “chief chocolate officer”, and is often portrayed as intelligent and witty (Newcomb, 2012), which is in stark contrast to the brand’s first female spokes-character, Ms Green, who is often portrayed as sexy (O’Reilly, 2016). Figure 3 below depicts the two different female ‘spokes-candies’ for M&Ms. This is but one of several examples in recent years of consumers protesting against brands promoting gender stereotypes, and brands then consequently making a concerted

effort to try and be more inclusive. Evidently more and more consumers are becoming activist and are calling on brands to be more representative and more inclusive, especially of gender. Therefore the study of gender in the context of the rise of gender inclusivity in society should become an important consideration in the academic literature going forward, as it may have important implications not only for theory but also for practice as the consumer marketplace continues to change.

Figure 3: M&M's female 'spokes-candies'



Source: M&M's, 2016

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND UNDERPINNINGS

Perception, according Lamb *et al.* (2015:95), refers to the process by which individuals select, organise, and interpret stimuli in a meaningful and coherent way in order to make sense of it. Perception is based on the sensory attributes of stimuli, but also on the learning from and experiences of prior engagements with the stimuli. In a marketing context, therefore, 'consumers' perceptions' refers to how consumers interpret and make sense of marketing stimuli. When the perceptions of marketing stimuli are positive, they are likely to influence positive behaviours such as purchase decisions (Du Toit, 2014:75–76) and have the ability ultimately to strengthen consumer-brand relationships (Chang and Chieng, 2006). Thus, in order to explore how the brand spokes-character stimuli in this study were interpreted and made sense of, *consumers' perceptions* were key, and was thus the primary lens through which the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters were explored in this study.

Using that lens, suitable theoretical underpinnings were subsequently identified for the purposes of this study, and are discussed hereunder.

5.1. Theoretical framework: Stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework

Exposure to stimuli in an environment stimulates an emotional and cognitive frame of mind in individuals (Jacoby, 2002; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974), which in turn constitutes their perceptions and drives their behavioural responses to the stimuli (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982:37; Islam and Rahman, 2017:98). This sequence of events can be explained by the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), and later adjusted by Jacoby (2002).

The S-O-R framework is an extension of the classical stimulus-response (S-R) framework proposed by Ivan Pavlov (Chan, Cheung and Lee, 2017:207; Pavlov and Gantt, 1941), and comprises three elements: stimulus, organism, and response. First, *stimulus* refers to external factors or environmental inputs such as brands, products, logos, and advertisements (Jacoby, 2002:54). According to Eroglu, Machleit and Davis (2001:179), these factors usually arouse an individual and affect their internal and organismic state. Second, *organism* refers to the subconscious processing of stimuli, represented by the affective / emotional and cognitive state of an individual (Eroglu *et al.*, 2001:180; Jacoby, 2002:54), which mediates the relationship between external stimulus and an individual's behavioural response (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). The term 'emotional states' represents an individual's emotions such as pleasure and/or arousal, while 'cognitive states' represents their internal mental processes (Islam and Rahman, 2017:98), which refer to the processing, retention, and retrieval of all information that goes into their minds (Eroglu *et al.*, 2001:181). Third, *response* refers to the final behavioural reactions or responses by consumers (Chan *et al.*, 2017:207; Eroglu *et al.*, 2001:182), which can be classified as either approach or avoidance behaviours (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982:41). Approach behaviours are positive behavioural responses that might be directed toward a particular setting, while avoidance behaviours are negative behavioural responses that may be directed toward a particular setting (Bitner, 1992:60; Donovan and Rossiter, 1982:41; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974).

As this study set out to explore and understand the role of gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and its subsequent outcomes in an NPO context, the use of the S-O-R framework as the theoretical underpinning was merited. For the purposes of this study, brand spokes-characters were used as *stimuli*, which – in line with the S-O-R framework – should yield an emotional or cognitive state in an individual, categorised as the *organism* component of the framework. In this study, the *organism* component referred to the gender dimensions of the brand personality, source credibility, and the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-character stimuli. Consequently, based on the S-O-R framework, *stimuli* and *organism* are likely to result in a behavioural reaction or *response*, which for the purposes of this study referred to brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour.

5.2. Theory underpinning brand anthropomorphism and gender perceptions: Cognitive consistency

‘Cognition’ refers to the conscious mental process of acquiring knowledge, understanding, opinions, and/or beliefs about stimuli through thought, experience, and the senses (Awa and Nwuche, 2010:44; Lexico, 2018). Festinger (1957:3) simply defines ‘cognition’ as the “knowledge, opinion and/or beliefs about an environment, about oneself or about one’s behaviour”. Cognition depends on perceptual processes; yet it can also influence perception (Goldstone and Barsalou, 1998). Thus some would consider cognition and perception to be highly interrelated (Tacca, 2011:1). According to Awa and Nwuche (2010:44), Festinger (1957:1), and Gawronski and Strack (2004:535), one of the most basic human motivations is to achieve consistency in and between cognitions, which is what constitutes the psychological principle of cognitive consistency.

Cognitive consistency is based on several theories pertaining to the notion of consistency. Three of the more prominent theories are: 1) Heider’s balance theory, 2) Osgood and Tannenbaum’s congruity theory, and 3) Festinger’s cognitive dissonance theory (Abelson, 1983:37; Awa and Nwuche, 2010:44; Greenwald, Banaji, Rudman, Farnham, Nosek and Mellott, 2002:3; Simonson and Maushak, 2001). First, the balance theory attempts to explain how to balance cognitions that are imbalanced in a triad of interpersonal relations (Awa and Nwuche, 2010:45; Heider, 1946; Khanafiah

and Situngkir, 2004:2). Second, the congruity theory attempts to explain how to make consistent any inconsistencies between the attitudes of role-players in interpersonal relations (Awa and Nwuche, 2010:45; Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955). Last, the cognitive dissonance theory attempts to explain how to reduce any inconsistencies that individuals may experience in and between cognitions, in order to return to cognitive consistency (Awa and Nwuche, 2010:45; Simonson and Maushak, 2001). Collectively, these theories suggest that individuals generally prefer situations in which their beliefs and opinions (i.e., cognitions) about stimuli fit together coherently (Rauschnabel and Ahuvia, 2014:378). According to Festinger (1957:4–5), two of the most common causes of cognitive inconsistency or dissonance between cognitions are, first, new events or information that may be contrary to existing knowledge, opinions, and/or cognitive behaviour; and second, when the cognition of an action taken is at odds with the cognition of a different action. Once these inconsistencies exist, people become motivated to reduce or eliminate them; and this may result in them changing their behaviour or environment, or adding new cognitive elements (Festinger, 1957:18–21). Thus, in accordance with the principles of cognitive consistency, when people are exposed to personified stimuli such as the brand spokes-characters used in this study, their cognitions about real-life human beings and about these stimuli may be at odds with one another. According to Epley *et al.* (2007:869), people are thus likely to reduce this inconsistency by relying on their existing knowledge about real-life human beings in order to make sense of these stimuli, which may explain why these stimuli are likely to be perceived as having human-like qualities (i.e., being anthropomorphised). Therefore, in order to understand the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-character stimuli used in this study, the principles of cognitive consistency provided an appropriate theoretical underpinning upon which to do so.

In addition, according to the principles of cognitive consistency, when consumers encounter personified non-human stimuli with gender cues, they are likely to rely on, and transfer, society's gender associations and stereotypes (e.g., males being perceived as strong and females being perceived as weak) onto these stimuli in order to make sense of them and understand them. Cognitive consistency therefore provides an appropriate theoretical underpinning to explain not only the brand

anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters in this study, but also the perceptions that are associated with these characters' acknowledged gender.

5.3. Theory underpinning gender differences: Theory of selectivity hypothesis

As a result of the different roles that males and females fulfil in society (Putrevu, 2001:5), they are likely to differ in their cognitive processing styles, their affective responses, and their reactions to any kind of information (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991). Thus their perceptions – how they interpret or make sense – of stimuli and information may differ across the gender boundaries. This is the premise of the theory of selectivity hypothesis. According to Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran (1991), females tend to process information more comprehensively than do males; therefore they are able more accurately to detect and interpret nonverbal cues, which allows them more accurately to infer the thoughts and feelings of others (Klein and Hodges, 2001; Rosip and Hall, 2004). Males are regarded as primarily more self-focused, and are therefore most likely only to process information received through advertising campaigns that directly affects them. Females, on the other hand, are regarded as primarily more relationship-oriented and, as a result, they are more likely to process all aspects of information received through advertising campaigns, as they are concerned about the total impact. Males have thus been labelled more *item-specific* processors, while females have been labelled more *relational* processors (Putrevu, 2001:7–8). It therefore appears that how consumers perceive and engage in the brand anthropomorphism of personified non-human brand stimuli, and their responses to such stimuli and to the brand it represents, may differ between males and females. Thus, in an attempt to explore the role of the consumers' gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and its subsequent outcomes, the theory of selectivity hypothesis was deemed to be a suitable theoretical underpinning in this study to explain the gender differences that may be at play.

6. DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THIS STUDY

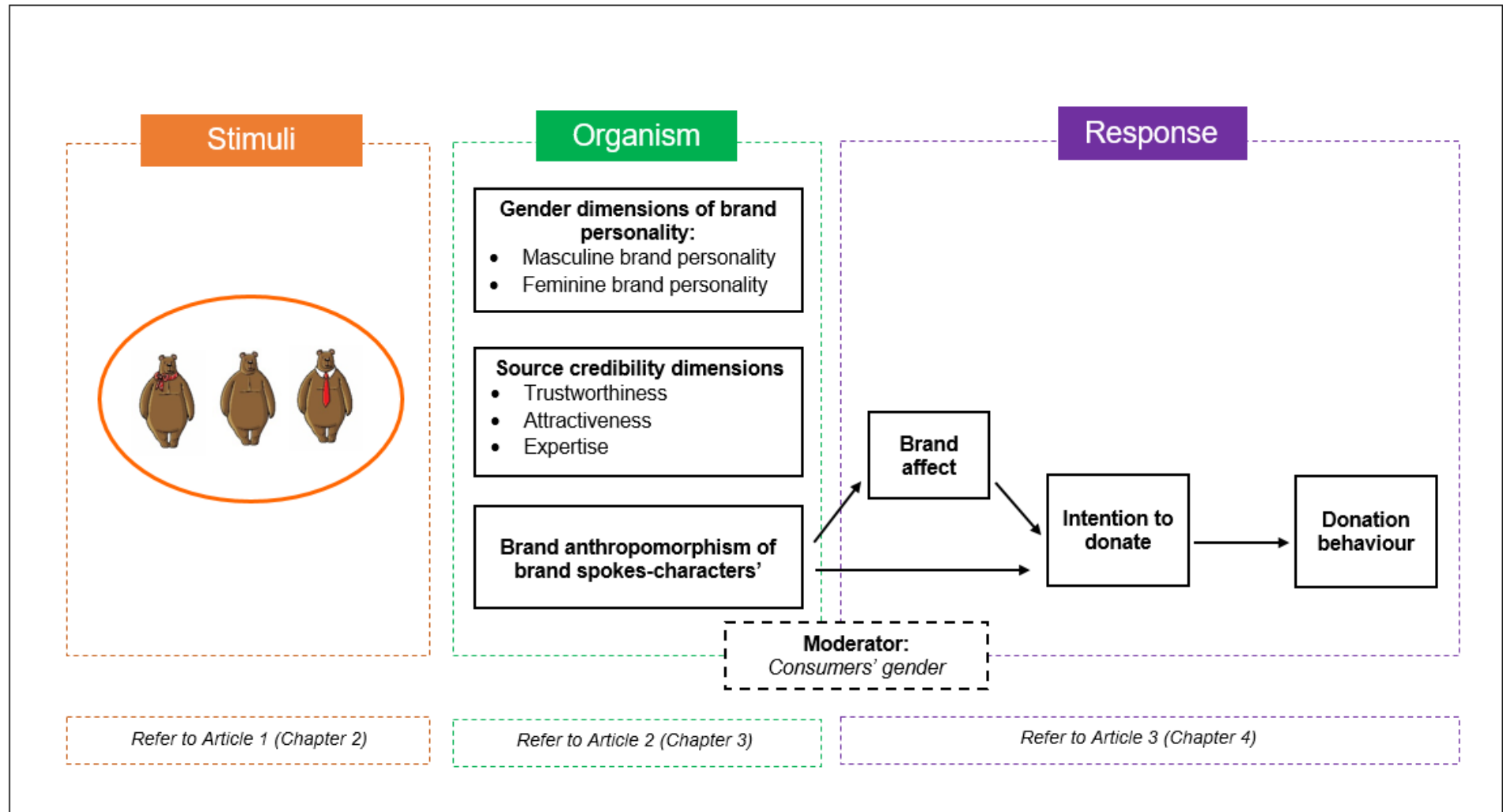
As previously mentioned, the S-O-R framework was used as the theoretical framework upon which to develop the conceptual framework for this study, in order to improve the understanding of the reactions and responses that may come as a result of the role that gender plays in the brand anthropomorphism of the personified brand spokes-character stimuli in an NPO context. The S-O-R framework only guided the development of the conceptual framework for this study; thus it was not tested in its entirety. A visual representation of the conceptual framework for this study is given in Figure 4, and a brief explanation of how the S-O-R framework underpins the conceptual framework follows.

First, the *stimulus* component of the framework refers to external factors or environmental inputs such as brands, products, logos, and advertisements (Jacoby, 2002:54). Therefore, in an attempt to elicit brand anthropomorphism in this study, brand spokes-characters with observable human-like attributes portrayed as female, gender-neutral, or male were used. Consequently, the use of these characters as the stimuli to elicit brand anthropomorphism was underpinned by the *stimuli* component of the S-O-R framework, which is further explored in Chapter 2 of this study.

Second, the *organism* component of the framework refers to the subconscious processing of stimuli, and is represented by the emotional and cognitive state of an individual (Eroglu *et al.*, 2001:180; Jacoby, 2002:54), which in this study encapsulated perceptions of the brand spokes-character stimuli (i.e., the gender dimensions of brand personality, source credibility, and brand anthropomorphism). This is further explored in Chapter 3 of this study.

Third, the *response* component of the framework refers to the final behavioural reactions or responses by consumers (Chan *et al.*, 2017:207; Eroglu *et al.*, 2001:182), which in this study encapsulated brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour. As previously mentioned, the consumers' (i.e. potential donors') gender may play a role in the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters, but also in their response toward these characters; so it was treated as a moderating

Figure 4: Conceptual framework for study



variable across both the *organism* and *response* component of the conceptual framework of this study. This is further assessed in Chapter 4 of this study.

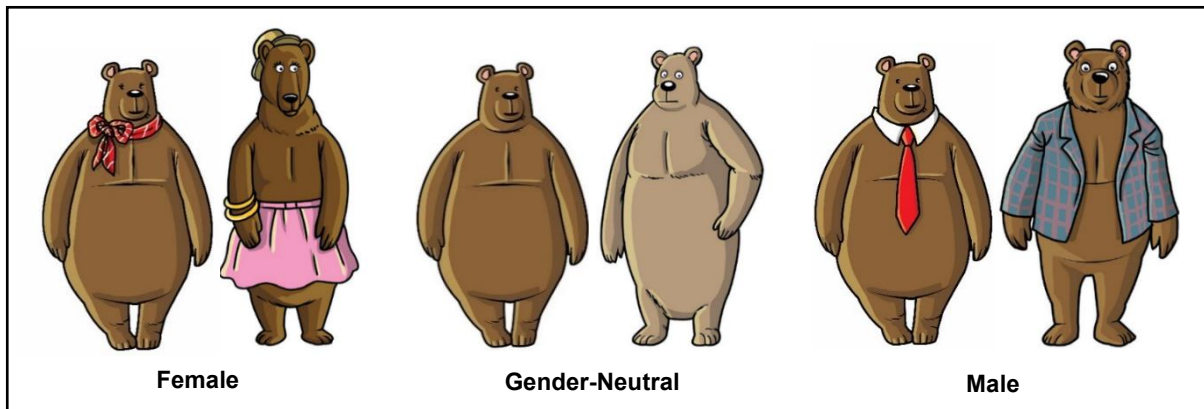
A more detailed explanation of each component of the conceptual framework as underpinned by the S-O-R framework follows.

6.1. Stimuli: Designed gendered bear brand spokes-characters

In an attempt to elicit brand anthropomorphism in this study, it was deemed necessary to use personified brand spokes-characters as stimuli, some of which were endowed with a female or male sex, while others were gender-neutral. Stereotypical gender cues were therefore used to portray some of the characters as either female or male (e.g., a pink skirt for the bears intended to be portrayed as female, and a blue jacket for those intended to be portrayed as male), while other characters were devoid of any gender cues so that they could be portrayed as gender-neutral.

Brand spokes-characters were specifically designed for the purposes of this study to avoid any biased responses that might have occurred if a well-known character had been used. Since 'brand anthropomorphism' refers to the perceptions of *non-human* agents having unobservable human-like qualities, the characters used in this study had to be non-human; so an animal was used. Due to bears' human-like appearance as a result of their forward facing ears, their hand-like claws, and their ability to walk bipedally for short distances (Connell, 2013:463), bears were used as the personified non-human stimuli in this study. Bears also seemed apt, given the NPO context of this study, because of their altruistic nature (Get Bear Smart Society, Not dated), which is considered a key characteristic of NPOs too (Arkansas State University, 2017). In addition, according to Bucklin (2017), when non-human agents are ascribed a name, it implicitly means that they are also likely to be perceived as human-like. Thus naming the personified bear brand spokes-character stimuli used in this study was warranted, and so the name 'Jojo' was ascribed to the stimuli. Figure 5 below provides examples of some of the female, gender-neutral and male brand spokes-characters that were designed for this study.

Figure 5: Examples of designed gendered bear brand spokes-characters



These gendered brand spokes-characters were therefore used as stimuli in this study for three reasons. First, to unearth the deeper meanings associated with gendered brand spokes-characters (refer to Chapter 2). Second, to explore the role of gender in the perceptions of brand spokes-characters (refer to Chapter 3). Third, using only a gender-neutral brand spokes-character as the stimulus, to explore the role of potential donors' gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour (refer to Chapter 4).

6.2. Organism: Gender dimensions of brand personality, source credibility, and brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters

As mentioned earlier, the brand spokes-character stimuli in this study were endowed with observable human-like attributes and gender cues. In accordance with the principles of cognitive consistency, brand spokes-characters are likely to be perceived as having human-like qualities (i.e., to be anthropomorphised) because of their observable human-like attributes (Epley *et al.*, 2007:869; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:358). As a result of their human-like similarities, they are also likely to be perceived in terms of their source credibility (trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness) (Garretson and Niedrich, 2004:26; Hovland *et al.*, 1953:19). Based specifically on these characters' observable gender cues, their acknowledged gender, is likely to play a role in their perceived gender dimension of brand personality (Bem, 1974:160–161; Grohmann, 2009:111–112), their source credibility (Pearson, 1982:5), and their brand anthropomorphism (Haslam, 2006:252). Therefore the use of personified brand spokes-character stimuli is not only likely to elicit brand

anthropomorphism, but their acknowledged gender (based on their gender cues) is also likely to play a role in the perceptions of these brand spokes-characters (i.e. their perceived gender dimension of brand personality, their source credibility, and the extent of their brand anthropomorphism).

6.2.1. *Gender dimensions of brand personality*

Masculinity and femininity have been deemed important aspects of human personality (Constantinople, 1973), and because human characteristics are often associated with brands – referred to as ‘brand personality’ (Aaker, 1997) – Grohmann (2009:106) argued that consumers are likely also to associate masculine and feminine traits with brands. Consequently, the notion of the *gender dimensions of brand personality* was introduced and defined as “the set of human personality traits associated with masculinity and femininity applicable and relevant to brands” (Grohmann, 2009:106). These masculine and feminine associations were found to coincide with the gender of the brand or its spokesperson (Grohmann, 2009:111–112), as can be explained by the principles of cognitive consistency. As an example, a male spokesperson is likely to lead to increased perceptions of a masculine brand personality. Thus the acknowledged gender of the brand spokes-characters used in this study are also likely to lead to increased perceptions of either a masculine or a feminine brand personality, and therefore this was also explored in this study.

6.2.2. *Source credibility*

According to Stafford *et al.* (2002:18), several studies investigating product or brand spokespersons or endorsers have focused on their credibility, as this provides a good understanding of the effectiveness of such spokespersons or endorsers, based on the relationships and similarities between their positive characteristics, the endorsed product or brand, and the intended audience. It also has the effect of significantly persuading a targeted audience, which is key for marketers (Sternthal, Dholakia and Leavitt, 1978). Following several prior studies measuring a source’s credibility, the term *source credibility* was coined and defined as a “communicator’s positive characteristics that affect the receiver’s acceptance of a message” (Ohanian, 1990:41). Ohanian (1990) then developed and validated a scale to measure source

credibility, comprising three sub-dimensions: trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. *Trustworthiness* entails the level of acceptance and the extent to which a listener believes and has confidence in a spokesperson and the message(s) they convey (Huang, Hsieh and Chen, 2011:9972; Ohanian, 1990:41). *Expertise* refers to the competence, knowledge, and experience that a spokesperson is perceived to possess in relation to the product or service that they promote (Huang *et al.*, 2011:9972; Mashwama, 2016:69; McGinnies and Ward, 1980:467; Ohanian, 1990:46). *Attractiveness* is defined as the physical attributes of the spokesperson that attract the audience's attention (Mashwama, 2016:69; Raluca, 2012:76).

According to Sliburyte (2009:935), the more credibility a brand spokesperson or endorser is perceived to have, the more they are perceived as being a credible representation of the brand, which may result in brand benefits such as a more positive brand image (Shelton and Chiliya, 2014:264; Sliburyte, 2009:2011). However, according to Pearson (1982:5), the acknowledged gender of spokespersons or endorsers is likely to influence their perceived credibility, with females being perceived as having less credibility than males. Several studies have in fact found the gender of these communicators to influence either their perceived credibility or the perceived credibility of their message (Armstrong and McAdams, 2009; Armstrong and Nelson, 2005; Mishra, Dhar and Raotiwala, 2001; Pearson, 1982). As can be explained by the principles of cognitive consistency, the brand spokes-characters used in this study are therefore not only likely to be perceived in terms of their source credibility, but their acknowledged gender is also likely to influence their perceived credibility, this was therefore also explored in this study.

6.2.3. *Variation in brand anthropomorphism based on brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender*

Personified non-human agents are likely to be easily anthropomorphised (Epley *et al.*, 2007:869; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:358) because of the overlap between the features of a personified non-human stimulus and stored knowledge, which Higgins (1996:154) argued would lead to a greater applicability of stored knowledge. Thus personified non-human agents are likely to be anthropomorphised because people tend to rely on and elicit their existing and stored agent knowledge (i.e., knowledge

about human beings) in order to make sense of these agents. For the purposes of this study, therefore, brand anthropomorphism was explored primarily based on its cognitive determinant, referred to as ‘elicited agent knowledge’. Even though the anthropomorphism of personified non-human agents is likely to occur, it is important to note that, like any other set of beliefs, their anthropomorphism is still likely to vary along a continuum from strongly held to weakly held beliefs, suggesting that not all anthropomorphic beliefs reflect the same degree of strength (Epley *et al.*, 2007:865). This variation could also be explained by the principles of cognitive consistency, in which the magnitude of the inconsistencies between cognitive elements may vary, and so too may the pressure to reduce these inconsistencies (Festinger (1957:18). The greater the perceived inconsistencies between the cognition of personified non-human agents and real-life human beings, the greater the pressure to reduce them, which is likely to result in stronger anthropomorphic beliefs, and vice versa.

Thus, in order to explore the brand anthropomorphism of personified non-human agents in this study while considering its variance, an attempt was made, first, to elicit brand anthropomorphism using brand personification by means of brand spokes-characters with observable human-like attributes. Second, these characters were also endowed with gender cues, because gender has been found to play a role in the dehumanisation of human beings (Haslam, 2006:252). Thus, in accordance with the principles of cognitive consistency, the gender cues with which the brand spokes-characters are endowed are also likely to cause variation in the degree to which these characters are perceived as having human-like qualities. Based on the dehumanisation literature and the principles of cognitive consistency, there may therefore be less pressure, as an example, to reduce the inconsistencies between female human beings and brand spokes-characters endowed with female gender cues; in which case female brand spokes-characters may yield weaker anthropomorphic beliefs. This may be because brand spokes-characters are essentially inanimate objects or agents, and female human beings are often subjected to objectification, possibly producing less pressure for consumers to reduce the inconsistencies between the two – or consumers may just be more oblivious to these inconsistencies. According to the Lexico (2018), ‘being oblivious’ or ‘oblivion’ refers to “the state of being unaware or unconscious of what is happening around one”. Thus in this study, weaker anthropomorphic beliefs about brands or brand spokes-

characters are referred to as *brand anthroblivion*, while stronger anthropomorphic beliefs are referred to as *stronger brand anthropomorphism*. This exploration of the varying degrees to which brand spokes-characters can be anthropomorphised as a result of their gender is important because of the implications it may have for brand anthropomorphism in both theory and practice; and to date this has received little attention.

Consequently, the exploration of the perceptions of the gendered brand spokes-character stimuli can be summed up as an investigation of how consumers process and make sense of these stimuli. According to the S-O-R framework, after exposure to a stimulus, the subconscious processing of a stimulus is likely to take place, which is referred to as the *organism* component. Therefore the gender dimensions of brand personality, source credibility, and the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters in this study was underpinned by the *organism* component of the S-O-R framework. The details of the exploration of these perceptions of the brand spokes-character stimuli are provided in Chapter 3 of this study.

6.3. Response: Outcomes of the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters

6.3.1. Brand affect

According to Mourey, Olson and Yoon (2017:3), it has been suggested that anthropomorphic products that have human-like qualities and characteristics attributed to them have the ability to increase positive affect. This was also evident in a study by Nan *et al.* (2006), which found that the perceptions of a personified character on a website increased positive affect toward the web site. *Affect* encompasses specific mental processes that include emotions, moods, and attitudes (Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer, 1999:184), and is generally referred to as “valenced feeling states and emotions” (Matzler, Bidmon and Grabner-Kräuter, 2006:428). In the domain of branding, the term *brand affect* has been used and defined as “a brand’s potential to elicit a positive emotional response in the average consumer as a result of its use” (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001:82). Thus the brand spokes-characters used as stimuli in this study is also likely to evoke such positive responses from consumers

(i.e., brand affect), which is why this too was explored in this study. However, not only can affect be influenced by anthropomorphism, but – according to Morris, Woo, Geason and Kim (2002:7) – affect can also be considered a component of attitude and a driver of persuasion, which can guide behavioural intentions (Morris *et al.*, 2002:14) as well as actual behaviour (Bechara and Damasio, 2005; Naqvi *et al.*, 2006). Thus the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters is likely to lead to emotional responses such as brand affect, which in turn can yield brand benefits such as prosocial behaviour. Brand affect is therefore likely also to play a mediating role between the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour, and this was explored in this study, as it might yield valuable implications for NPOs.

6.3.2. *Prosocial behaviour: Intention to donate and donation behaviour*

With the global expansion of the NPO sector as noted by Casey (2016:190,217), there has also been a significant increase in competitive rivalry between non-profit organisations (NPOs) in a bid to gain a bigger share of donors' pockets (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2015:134; Ranganathan and Henley, 2008:2; Venable *et al.*, 2005:295). Thus NPOs have started developing effective marketing strategies, a tool primarily used in the profit sector, in the effort to differentiate themselves from their competitors and to gain more support and donations for the social causes they represent (Small and Verrochi, 2009; Venable *et al.*, 2005:296–297). It is through effective marketing strategies that effective brand images are built, which, according to Venable *et al.* (2005:298), can influence prosocial behaviour such as intention to donate and donation behaviour in an NPO context. An effective strategy in the profit sector that has been found to enhance brand image has been the creation and introduction of relevant and likable spokes-characters to represent brands (Ogilvy, 1983:108). Thus, amid rising competitive rivalry in the NPO sector, not only could brand spokes-characters, but also the brand anthropomorphism of these characters, be an effective strategy for NPOs to enhance their image and to differentiate themselves as they encourage more donors to support the social causes they represent. Yet, according to Roozen and Raedt (2017), gendered endorsers representing NPOs are generally perceived differently, based on the congruence of their acknowledged gender with the NPO they represent. Male endorsers are generally perceived as having a warmer and

more inviting persona, and so they are generally perceived as being more effective endorsers for NPOs than are females (Roozen, 2012), thus further emphasising the importance of exploring the role brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in an NPO context.

Consequently, the exploration of brand affect toward brand spokes-characters, as well as the intention to donate and donation behaviour toward an NPO, can be summed up as the response of consumers to both the brand spokes-characters and the brand (i.e., the NPO). According to the S-O-R framework, the final behavioural reactions or responses of consumers to stimuli is referred to as the *response* component. Thus in this study, brand affect, the intention to donate, and donation behaviour were underpinned by the *response* component of the S-O-R framework. The details of the exploration of these outcomes of the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters in an NPO context is provided in Chapter 4 of this study.

6.4. Moderating role of consumers' gender

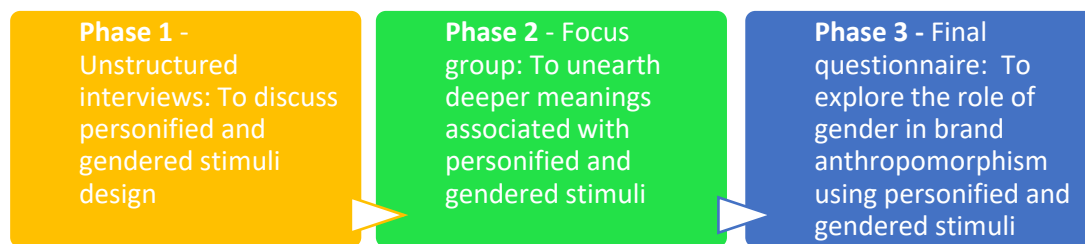
The variation in anthropomorphism may not be caused by the gender of brand spokes-characters alone: it may also be caused by the gender of the consumer. According to Klein and Hodges (2001), Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran (1991) and Rosip and Hall, (2004), females are able more comprehensively to detect and interpret nonverbal cues. Thus they may be able more comprehensively to perceive the nonverbal and unobservable human-like qualities of non-human agents than are males, who are often perceived as being more self-focused (Putrevu, 2001:7–8). Females and males may therefore differ in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters: females may be more likely to engage in stronger brand anthropomorphism, while males may be more likely to engage in brand anthroblivion. Yet, as mentioned previously, consumers' gender may play a role not only in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters, but also in their response to the brand spokes-characters and/or the brand. This may be because of their differing cognitive processing styles; therefore, the gender of the consumer was treated as a moderating variable across both the *organism* and *response* components of the conceptual framework for this study, and was particularly explored in Chapter 4. Since brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender was a major focus in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of this study,

Chapter 4 placed more focus on the consumers' gender – or rather, the potential donors' gender, as it is referred to in that chapter. Therefore it was important to make use of only a gender-neutral brand spokes-character stimulus in Chapter 4, in order to avoid biased responses and skewed results if the character were to be endowed with a female or male sex.

7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a multi-method approach consisting of three phases (as can be seen in Figure 6 below) to address the main research question about the role of gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters in an NPO context.

Figure 6: Three phases of this study



7.1. Research design

A research design is the framework used for the collection and analysis of data (Bryman and Bell, 2014:382). According to Bryman and Bell (2014:30), there are two research approaches or orientations that can be used to conduct business research: qualitative or quantitative. Quantitative research usually emphasises *quantification* (i.e., numerical data), while qualitative research usually emphasises *words* (i.e., non-numerical data) in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman and Bell, 2014:382). Based on prior studies that have explored brand spokes-characters and anthropomorphism (including brand anthropomorphism) (Aggarwal and McGill, 2007, 2012; Callcott and Phillips, 1996; Chen, Wan and Levy, 2017; Guido and Peluso, 2015; Merchant, LaTour, Ford and LaTour, 2018; Peirce, 2001), this study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches. However, more specifically a qualitative descriptive approach was employed in the use of unstructured interviews and a focus group, that included a quantitative individual task, to unearth deeper meanings

associated with the gender of brand spokes-characters. On the other hand, a quantitative approach was employed in conducting survey research through an ex post facto study design, in which a self-administered questionnaire was distributed among an online panel to explore the role of gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour. A cross-sectional research design was applied in this study: data was collected from participants and respondents once, at a single point in time, as the purpose of this study was not to ascertain a change in participants' and respondents' behaviour over time.

This study followed both a post-positivist and a positivist research paradigm in order to explore the role of gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters, in accordance with the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 4. First, the epistemological approach of 'post-positivism' places emphasis on meaning and new knowledge creation, in which the nature of this knowledge "consists of non-falsified hypotheses that can be regarded as probable facts or laws" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:113). Second, 'positivism' is defined as an epistemological approach in which knowledge is acquired using natural science methods in order to study and understand social reality (Bryman and Bell, 2014:12). A post-positivist and a positivist paradigm is usually applied in order to understand phenomena to enable prediction and control (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:113). Thus a post-positivist and a positivist paradigm was applied in this study, to explore, understand and gain deeper insight into the phenomenon of brand anthropomorphism by determining the role of gender therein and its outcomes in an NPO context. As this study made use of both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, knowledge was acquired through both a deductive and inductive process respectively.

7.2. Sampling plan

Usually it is practically impossible to study an entire population. As a result, research is conducted on a subset of the population, referred to as a *sample* (Leedy and Ormrod, 2013:206). For the purposes of this study, the sample comprised participants and respondents residing in South Africa over the age of 18 years old. Since not all individuals of the population had an equal chance of being selected (i.e., there was no sampling frame), data was collected by means of a non-probability sampling method

(Cooper and Schindler, 2011:384). For both the unstructured interviews and the focus group, purposive sampling was used – that is, participants were sampled strategically, based on their relevance to the research questions (Bryman and Bell, 2014:381). More specifically, the maximum variation sampling technique of purposive sampling was used, to obtain diverse enough perspectives from the samples in order to provide as much variation in the data to explain the key themes that have been identified (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012:287). The participants for the unstructured interviews were therefore selected from a variety of age groups, incomes, educational backgrounds and occupations, while for the focus group participants were selected from a variety of age groups and educational backgrounds. However, for the self-administered questionnaire distributed via an online panel, convenience sampling was used as a sample was drawn from a population that was readily available and from which the researcher could easily collect data (Leedy and Ormrod, 2013:214).

Since the data in this study was collected by means of unstructured interviews, a focus group, and an online panel, different sample sizes were determined for each method of data collection. First, for the unstructured interviews, saturation was reached after the tenth interview as no new insights emerged from these interviews; thus only 10 participants participated in the unstructured interviews. Second, focus groups generally involve between four and twelve participants (Saunders *et al.*, 2012:400); therefore a sample size of 10 was deemed suitable for the focus group. Third, previous studies investigating anthropomorphism, brand anthropomorphism, and brand spokes-characters used sample sizes ranging between 100 and 400 participants (Delgado-Ballester, Palazón and Peláez, 2019; Garretson and Niedrich, 2004; Hart, Jones and Royne, 2013; LeBel and Cooke, 2008; Pairoa and Arunrangsiwed, 2016; Williams, Masser and Sun, 2015). However, according to Bryman and Bell (2014:177), the bigger the sample, the more representative it is likely to be. Therefore a sample of 600 respondents was deemed suitable to complete the questionnaire administered via the online panel. Due the pivotal role of gender in this study, equal gender quotas were set for those who participated in the unstructured interviews, the focus group, and the online panel, in order to avoid skewed results. Consequently, a quota of five females and five males were targeted for both the unstructured interviews and the focus group, while 300 females and 300 males were targeted for the online panel.

7.3. Measuring instruments

For both the unstructured interviews and the focus group, no formal measurement instruments were used. In the unstructured interviews, participants were exposed to stimuli and were asked to provide oral input; in the focus group, discussions were guided using a semi-structured discussion guide.

However, the self-administered online questionnaire made use of established measurement instruments that were drawn and adapted from the existing literature for the specific purposes of this study. These measurement instruments are outlined below. The perceived masculine and feminine brand personality traits of the brand spokes-characters were measured through six items respectively (e.g., “Jojo appears to be brave”, “Jojo appears to be sensitive”) adapted from Grohmann (2009). Grohmann (2009) conducted six studies in one research paper, and the Cronbach’s alpha values attained for masculine and feminine brand personality across the six sub-studies ranged between 0.89 and 0.91 and between 0.91 and 0.93 respectively. Based on a study by Ohanian (1990), the brand spokes-characters’ source credibility was measured through three sub-dimensions: *trustworthiness*, *expertise*, and *attractiveness*, comprising five items each (e.g., “Jojo appears to be honest”, “Jojo appears to be knowledgeable”, “Jojo appears to be attractive”). Ohanian (1990) attained Cronbach’s alpha values of 0.8 and higher for each sub-dimension of source credibility. Brand anthropomorphism was measured through five items (e.g., “Jojo appears to have desires”, “Jojo appears to have intentions”) adapted from one of five studies by Waytz *et al.* (2010c:422), in which a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.82 was attained for the scale. Brand affect was measured through three items (e.g., “Jojo makes me feel good”) adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2002), in which a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.8 was attained for the scale. Intention to donate was measured through four items (e.g., “I am likely to donate to the non-profit organisation”) adapted from Coyle and Thorson (2001), in which a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.83 was attained. The Cronbach’s alpha values attained in all of the aforementioned studies were clearly well above the norm of 0.7, indicating good internal consistency (Bland and Altman, 1997:572). All of these scales were subsequently adapted to be measured on a seven-point scale (1 = ‘strongly disagree’ and 7 = ‘strongly agree’).

Respondents were also asked questions relating to their prior patronage of NPOs. These were not measured through established measurement scale items; rather, respondents were just asked questions such as whether they had donated to NPOs before, and how often. Actual donation behaviour was also not measured through scale items; instead it was measured similarly to a study by Wen Wan, Peng Chen and Jin (2017), who measured actual purchases of a personified product. Therefore, in this study, respondents were provided with an additional monetary incentive for taking part in this study. They were then given a choice between being paid the full additional incentive and donating some or all of it to the NPO. Those respondents who wanted to donate to the NPO were allowed to choose how much of their incentive they wanted to donate. The proceeds collected from this study were then donated to the NPO, as administered by the researcher.

7.4. Self-administered questionnaire design

Before completing the questionnaire, respondents were provided with the details of the purpose of the study, as well as the estimated duration of the questionnaire. Participants were also assured of the confidentiality of their responses and of their anonymity in completing the questionnaire. Upon providing their consent, respondents were redirected to the start of the questionnaire. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three scenarios: the questionnaire remained the same across all three scenarios, in which the only difference was the gender of the brand spokes-character stimulus used in each. Thus respondents were tasked with completing a questionnaire depicting a female, a gender-neutral, or a male brand spokes-character. The questionnaire had eight sections:

1. Section A asked respondents which gender they identify with. This section came first in order to pool respondents according to gender, to ensure that equal gender quotas were always maintained.
2. Section B asked questions relating to whether respondents had ever donated to NPOs before, how often, how much they usually donated to NPOs, and their reasons for donating to NPOs. The purpose of these questions was to obtain a broad understanding of their previous patronage of NPOs in general.
3. Section C included a short written scenario introducing and depicting the female, gender-neutral, or male brand spokes-character by its name (Jojo) as a

representative of an NPO. This scenario included a brief overview of the type of NPO being represented by the brand spokes-character. A South African-based NPO that provides support to other South African NPOs that span multiple categories (e.g., animal welfare, child welfare, burn victims, welfare of people with disabilities) was selected. This type of NPO was purposefully selected for this study in order to avoid any biased responses that might have resulted if an NPO representing only one specific social cause (e.g., burn victims) had been selected instead. Statements measuring the intention to donate to the NPO, using a seven-point Likert scale, followed the scenario.

4. Section D briefly explained that respondents were to be given an additional monetary incentive for their participation in the study, and that they could decide whether to be paid the full additional incentive or to donate some or all of it to the South African NPO. This scenario also provided the name of the South African NPO, Loving Thy Neighbour, and depicted the respective brand spokes-character, asking respondents to donate to the NPO. This section assessed respondents' donation behaviour by asking statements such as whether they wanted to donate all or part of their additional monetary incentive to Loving Thy Neighbour; if so, how much; and if not, why not.
5. Sections E to G assessed respondents' reactions to and perceptions of the brand spokes-character depicted in the questionnaire by measuring the brand affect toward the character; whether the brand spokes-character was perceived as female, gender-neutral, or male; the gender dimensions of brand personality; source credibility; and the brand anthropomorphism of the character.
6. Section H concluded the questionnaire by obtaining the demographic profile of the respondents according to the year in which they were born and the racial group with which they identified.

7.5. Pre-testing

Based on the outcomes and the suggestions proposed in the focus group, the refined brand spokes-characters were vetted through a pre-test of the final self-administered questionnaire distributed to an online panel. Ethical clearance was first obtained before any data was collected, including data from the pre-test. Based on a total sample size of 600 respondents for the final questionnaire, a pre-test was conducted

with 10% of this total sample (i.e., 60 respondents) in order to determine any weaknesses in the instrumentation of the questionnaire (Cooper and Schindler, 2011:89). The questionnaire was pre-tested via an online panel of respondents with similar backgrounds and characteristics as that of the sample used to complete the final self-administered questionnaire (Cooper and Schindler, 2011:358). An equal gender quota was also employed in the pre-test with 30 females and 30 males making up the online panel. Since this study used three scenarios (i.e., a female, a gender-neutral, or a male brand spokes-character stimulus in each), the female and male respondents were split equally between the three scenarios. The meaning, question sequence, continuity and flow, and length and timing of the questionnaire as a whole were among the criteria that were pre-tested (Cooper and Schindler, 2011:359). After the pre-test, no major changes were made to the questionnaire.

7.6. Data collection

For the purposes of this study data, after receiving ethical clearance, data was collected using unstructured interviews, a focus group, and a self-administered questionnaire distributed via an online panel.

7.6.1. Ethical considerations

In accordance with the ethical standards and regulations of the University of Pretoria, ethical clearance was obtained before any data collection took place (refer to Appendix B for a copy of the ethical clearance letter). Upon receipt of ethical clearance, all participants and respondents were required to complete an informed consent form before participating in the focus group or completing the online questionnaire. This form outlined the research purpose, the anonymity and confidentiality of responses, the voluntary nature of participation, the estimated time to complete the focus group or online questionnaire, the availability of a research summary on request, and the contact details of the supervisor and co-supervisor of the researcher. Refer to Appendix C for the informed consent form for participation in the study, specifically for the online questionnaire. The informed consent form for the focus group looked very similar, differing only in the specific details pertaining to the focus group, such as the estimated time to complete the focus group.

7.6.2. *Unstructured interviews*

Since the design of personified marketing stimuli is considered a creative process, creative input was needed from the short unstructured interviews. The ten participants in the unstructured interviews were provided with printed versions of differently designed brand spokes-characters, some of which were endowed with gender cues while others were gender-neutral (refer to Appendix D for the stimuli that were used). The participants were asked to provide oral input specifically on the design of these characters' observable human-likeness and on their perceptions or acknowledgment of these characters' gender, in order to unearth the perceptions of the brand spokes-characters' human-likeness and its gender. The feedback was then used to refine the design of the brand spokes-characters where necessary, before using them as stimuli in the focus group.

7.6.3. *Focus group*

Prior to participating in the focus group, participants provided informed consent, and were verbally assured of the confidentiality of their responses and that their identities would be protected by being given pseudonyms (Sanghvi and Hodges, 2015:1681). Participants were also informed that the session would be audio-recorded. A 1.5-hour focus group session then ensued in order to unearth deeper meanings associated with the gender of brand spokes-characters that were designed for the purposes of this study, and its role in brand anthropomorphism in an NPO context. During the focus group session, the researcher took on the role of the moderator and facilitated the discussions with the assistance of a semi-structured discussion guide created prior to the focus group. According to Belk, Fischer and Kozinets (2013:41), a common cause of the downfall of focus groups is that dominant or persuasive participants can influence others in the group; thus, during collaborative discussions, participants also completed a quantitative individual task to obtain responses so that they were unable to influence one another. An example of a question asked during the focus group discussion was "Have you been able to identify whether the bears have a gender (male, female or gender-neutral)?" Refer to Appendix E for a copy of the discussion guide used in the focus group and a copy of the individual tasks completed during the

focus group. The brand spokes-characters depicted in the individual task were also the stimuli around which the focus group discussion revolved. Following the focus group, field notes were compiled, and an external transcriber transcribed the audio recordings of the discussion for ease of analysis. The length of the full transcription was 23 typed pages.

7.6.4. Self-administered questionnaire via an online panel

The self-administered questionnaire was pre-tested before the final questionnaire was distributed among an online panel comprising 600 respondents over the age of 18 years old and residing in South Africa. Each respondent had to provide informed consent before they could begin the questionnaire seen in Appendix F. Participants in the online panel were randomly assigned to one of the three scenarios, and even though the questionnaire remained the same, the brand spokes-character stimulus depicted in each scenario differed in its gender (i.e., female, gender-neutral, or male). A reputable South African market research company was responsible for the recruitment of the online panel, and distributed the link to the questionnaire hosted on the Qualtrics platform. In accordance with the market research company's common practice, those who participated in the study were incentivised. However, for the purposes of this study, an additional incentive was provided to participants, which served as a probe to elicit their donation behaviour. Since an equal gender quota was set, 300 females and 300 males completed the questionnaire; the female and male respondents were split equally (e.g. 100 females and 100 males) between the three scenarios in which a female, a gender-neutral, or a male brand spokes-character was used as the stimulus.

7.7. Data analysis

First, the unstructured interviews mostly pertained to the design of the brand spokes-character stimuli; so the oral input received was used to amend the design of these characters to be used in the focus group.

Second, the data from the focus group was transcribed, after which it was coded through a deductive thematic analysis, whereby thematic groupings were made based

on the purpose of this study. Themes were identified in order to provide an indication of the patterns in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006:82,84).

Third, the data from the self-administered questionnaires was analysed in several ways, using version 25 of IBM AMOS and SPSS and version 8.4 of Mplus software packages. Reliability was first assessed through Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) in order to make the reliability analysis more robust, while validity was assessed through convergent and discriminant validity tests conducted by means of a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson, 2014:618–619). According to Bryman and Bell (2014:379, 382), 'reliability' refers to the "degree to which a measure of a concept is stable", where Cronbach's alpha coefficients and CR values above 0.7 indicate good reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2014:619). 'Validity', on the other hand, refers to the "degree to which the measure of a concept reflects that concept" (Bryman and Bell, 2014:379,382). Convergent validity is assessed through the average variance explained (AVE), which should be above the expected cut-off of 0.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2014:619), while discriminant validity is assessed through the square root of the final AVEs for each construct, which should be above the inter-construct correlation coefficients (Malhotra, 2010:749). Descriptive analyses followed in order to determine the frequencies of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender, as well as the mean scores and standard deviations for the scales used in the study, based either on the brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender or on the consumers' (i.e., potential donors') gender. Finally, various multivariate statistical analyses were conducted after checking the applicable assumptions; these included multiple analysis of variance (ANOVAs), multi-group moderation structural equation modelling (SEM), and mediation analyses.

8. CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

This study attempted to make the following theoretical and practical contributions to the field of brand anthropomorphism, specifically using gendered brand spokes-characters in an NPO context.

8.1. Theoretical contributions

First, this study has provided a novel perspective from which gender – specifically, gender perceptions – can be further explored. In society, gender has traditionally been segmented according to the binary categories of male and female (Blair, 2018), and so academic studies have also often explored gender and its influence, especially in the marketing domain, from the perspective of these binary gender categories too (e.g. Azar, 2013, 2015; Grohmann, 2009). Yet conversations about gender and gender perceptions are changing, with gender ideologies such as gender-neutrality gaining prevalence (Claveria, 2016), even though androcentrism is still very evident in society. This study has therefore unearthed the deeper meanings associated with gendered personified non-human brand stimuli; and while not all possible gender categories may have been included in this study, it made provision for the consideration of gender-neutral brand spokes-character stimuli too. In addition, this study has unearthed the role of such stimuli in the subsequent perceptions of these stimuli in a more progressive gender landscape that is currently permeating society, which prior studies would not have been able to explore. The findings thus warrant and provide a novel perspective of understanding gender perceptions that transcend the binary categories in order to broaden the scope of the existing literature on gender, which emerged mostly during times where gender roles conformed to the binary categories and when the gender divide was less blurred.

Second, this study has built on the existing but growing body of literature on anthropomorphism, and specifically on brand anthropomorphism. To date, studies in the fields of both anthropomorphism and brand anthropomorphism have often focused on or elicited anthropomorphism of stimuli that are mostly personified but that are gender-neutral, with little focus on those that are gendered (e.g., Awad and Youn, 2018; Kwak *et al.*, 2017; Reavey *et al.*, 2018; Touré-Tillery and McGill, 2015). Yet, since the gender of human beings influences the degree to which they are dehumanised (Haslam, 2006:252), gender was anticipated also to play a role in the degree to which gendered personified non-human brand stimuli would be anthropomorphised. In addition, based on the theory of selectivity hypothesis, females and males differ in their cognitive and inferential processing styles (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991). Thus they are likely to differ in

the extent to which they anthropomorphise non-human agents too. Yet, according to Letheren *et al.* (2016:979), little literature exists on the role that consumers' gender would play in the anthropomorphism of non-human agents. As far as could be determined, this study is therefore one of the first to demonstrate that gender – both that of the stimuli used to elicit brand anthropomorphism and that of the consumer – plays a role not only in brand anthropomorphism but also in the outcomes thereof for brands. This may therefore further extend the list of the determinants of anthropomorphism proposed by Epley *et al.* (2007), and provides further confirmation that anthropomorphism should not be considered and explored as a universal trait, as initially proposed by Guthrie and Guthrie (1993).

Third, this study has added to the existing literature on NPOs by exploring the role of brand anthropomorphism in this context. The findings of this study highlight the usefulness of brand anthropomorphism for NPOs, as it is likely to evoke feelings of care, concern, and empathy, thus influencing prosocial behaviour, as shown in a study by Huang, Zhou, Ye and Guo (2020). While some studies have explored the influence of anthropomorphism on prosocial behaviour, they have often made the mistake of considering only the *observable* human-like attributes of personified stimuli, which essentially constitutes *personification* (e.g. Ahn, Kim and Aggarwal, 2014; Reavey *et al.*, 2018). Thus studies that have explored this by considering only the perceived *unobservable* human-like qualities of such stimuli, which essentially constitutes *anthropomorphism*, remain limited. This study is therefore one of only a few – such as the study by Huang *et al.* (2020) – that confirm the effectiveness and role of brand anthropomorphism, based purely on the perceptions of personified non-human brand stimuli as having *unobservable* human-like qualities, and it does so specifically in an NPO context. Consequently, the results reveal that the brand anthropomorphism of personified non-human brand stimuli yields prosocial behaviour toward an NPO.

Fourth, this study has enhanced the existing body of knowledge on brand stimuli – specifically, stimuli with human-like and gender attributes – such as brand spokes-characters, by providing insight not only into the creative process driving the design of stimuli, but also into the perceptions that stem from it. Often the influence of stimuli used in marketing / brand communications, or even in academic research projects, such as those exploring brand anthropomorphism, can be underestimated, especially

with regard to how the stimuli would be perceived. This study sheds lights on the intricacies and complexities involved in the perceptions of such stimuli, and the often ripple effect they can have on the response to stimuli and/or even the brand they represent.

Fifth, this study has contributed to the existing literature on consumer perceptions by demonstrating the applicability of the S-O-R framework as a theoretical underpinning to explore the perceptions and subsequent responses that arise from personified non-human brand stimuli in an NPO context.

8.2. Managerial contributions

First, brand anthropomorphism has been found to yield several brand benefits, including brand loyalty and commitment and a willingness to pay a premium price (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:371). The results of this study may therefore help marketers to elicit brand anthropomorphism by reinforcing the importance of the personification of non-human brand stimuli. The findings propose that personified non-human stimuli with observable gender cues appear to be perceived as more human-like than those devoid of such cues. Marketers are therefore able to gain several benefits for their brands through the recognition and understanding of the importance of the personification of marketing and/or brand stimuli, and particularly of the inclusion of gender cues, in order to elicit brand anthropomorphism.

Second, we now find ourselves in a society where perceptions of gender are rapidly changing and where brands are starting to come under fire for portraying gender stereotypes in their communications. As recently as 2019, the Advertising Standards Association in the United Kingdom published new rules banning advertisements that portray “harmful” gender stereotypes; and Volkswagen (manufacturers of vehicles) and Philadelphia (manufacturers of cream cheese) were the first two brands to come under fire for contravening these rules (BBC News, 2019). The results of this study may therefore assist marketers by highlighting the importance of conducting perception studies, particularly on the use of gendered stimuli in their marketing and brand communication, or even on the gender of their targeted audience. As the conversations about and perceptions of gender continue to change beyond traditional

societal gender norms, the perceptions of gender in marketing and/or brand communication and the gender roles of a targeted audience are inevitably being influenced too, as shown in this study. Marketers therefore need to be aware of these trends, and recognise that what they initially intend to communicate may no longer be easily perceived in that way. This highlights the importance of conducting perception studies, especially in sectors where perceptions of gender cues or gendered consumption are key, as the gender landscape looks a lot different today from how it looked in the past; and it is still changing, more now than ever before.

Third, amid intensive competitive rivalry between NPOs (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2015:134; Ranganathan and Henley, 2008:134), the results of this study may offer practitioners in this field valuable insight into the use of brand personification to elicit brand anthropomorphism, which was found to yield prosocial behaviours toward an NPO. Thus attempts to elicit brand anthropomorphism through brand personification – or even through communications written from a humanised perspective (e.g., written in the first person) – may in fact be a useful and effective tool in the non-profit sector. This could be especially valuable at a time when the marketers or managers of NPOs face immense pressure as they compete with one another for a share of potential donors' resources, which are becoming thinly spread as the number of NPOs established continue to increase.

9. OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

The entire study is presented in five chapters, which are briefly outlined below.

9.1. Chapter 1: Contextualisation of the study

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the entire study. This chapter highlights the research problem and outlines the research objectives. The contextualisation of the conceptual framework for this study is explained, along with a visual illustration of the framework and a brief explanation of the theoretical frameworks and underpinnings supporting it. Lastly, this chapter explains the research methodology, along with the theoretical and managerial contributions of the entire study.

9.2. Chapter 2: Pictures speak a thousand words – Exploring gendered brand spokes-characters

The first article of this study is presented in Chapter 2. It is qualitative and quantitative in nature, as it makes use of unstructured interviews and a focus group, the findings from which were then vetted through a questionnaire distributed via an online panel. Its **purpose** is to expand the existing theoretical knowledge of brand personification and brand anthropomorphism using personified non-human brand stimuli by unearthing meanings associated with the gender of such stimuli in an NPO context. The **objectives** of Chapter 2 are therefore to unearth deeper meanings associated with personified stimuli – specifically, gendered brand spokes-characters – and their role in brand anthropomorphism in the NPO context. This is done by exploring: 1) the acknowledgement of brand spokes-characters' gender, 2) the role of gendered brand spokes-characters in the brand anthropomorphism of such characters, and 3) the role of gendered brand spokes-characters in their suitability for NPOs. The **method of analysis** employed is a deductive thematic analysis to identify thematic groupings, based on participants' quotations, in accordance with the primary objective of the article.

9.3. Chapter 3: Gender is more than skin deep – Exploring the role of brand spokes-characters' gender in brand anthropomorphism

The second article of this study is presented in Chapter 3. It is quantitative in nature, as it makes use of self-administered questionnaires distributed via an online panel of 600 respondents. Its **purpose** is to expand the existing body of knowledge about brand anthropomorphism by exploring the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender. The **objectives** of this article, therefore, are to explore: 1) the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters; and 2) the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in other perceptions of brand spokes-characters – specifically, the gender dimensions of brand personality and source credibility. The **method of analysis** deemed suitable was the analysis of variance (ANOVA). First, in order to determine reliability, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) were assessed, while validity was assessed by means of a confirmatory factor analysis

(CFA). Thereafter multiple ANOVAs were conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in the brand anthropomorphism, the gender dimensions of brand personality, and the dimensions of source credibility of the brand spokes-characters, based on their acknowledged gender.

9.4. Chapter 4: To donate or not to donate? The role of potential donors' gender in brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour

The third article of this study is presented in Chapter 4. Like Chapter 3, it is quantitative in nature, as it makes use of self-administered questionnaires distributed via an online panel of 200 respondents. Its **purpose** is to build on the existing literature on brand anthropomorphism by highlighting the role of potential donors' gender, and to build on the existing literature on NPOs by considering the importance of brand anthropomorphism in that context. The **primary objective** of this study is to explore the role of potential donors' gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour by considering brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour. The **methods of analysis** deemed suitable are multi-group moderation structural equation modelling (SEM) and mediation analyses. First, in order to determine reliability, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) were assessed, while validity was assessed by means of a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Thereafter the direct relationships were analysed using structural model estimation, followed by an analysis of the indirect relationships by considering the mediation effects of brand affect and intention to donate. Lastly, the moderation effects of potential donors' gender on the direct relationships were analysed.

9.5. Chapter 5: Conclusion and recommendations

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the study's main findings from the three articles. It also provides the theoretical and managerial contributions of this study, as well as the recommendations, limitations, and directions for future research.

For a visual summary of the three articles in this study, refer to Table 1. The sample sizes for each article differed according to the respect research objectives.

Table 1: Visual summary of the three articles in this study

PRIMARY RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: TO EXPLORE THE ROLE OF GENDER IN THE BRAND ANTHROPOMORPHISM OF BRAND SPOKES-CHARACTERS IN AN NPO CONTEXT.		
Chapter 2: Pictures speak a thousand words – Exploring gendered brand spokes-characters		
Secondary research objective addressed	To unearth deeper meanings associated with personified stimuli – specifically, gendered brand spokes-characters – and their role in brand anthropomorphism in the NPO context.	
Aims	To explore: 1) the acknowledgement of brand spokes-characters' gender, 2) the role of gendered brand spokes-characters in the brand anthropomorphism of such characters, and 3) the role of gendered brand spokes-characters in their suitability for NPOs.	
Data collection method and sample size	Unstructured interviews	10
	Focus group	10
	Online panel	60
Chapter 3: Gender is more than skin deep – Exploring the role of brand spokes-characters' gender in brand anthropomorphism		
Secondary research objectives addressed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To explore the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters. To determine the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in other perceptions of brand spokes-characters – specifically, the gender dimensions of brand personality and source credibility. 	
Aims	To explore the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in: 1) the brand anthropomorphism of these characters, 2) the gender dimensions of the brand personality of these characters (i.e., masculine or feminine brand personality), and 3) the dimensions of these characters' source credibility (i.e., trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness).	
Data collection method and sample size	Online panel	600
Chapter 4: To donate or not to donate? The role of potential donors' gender in brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour		
Secondary research objective addressed	To explore the role of potential donors' gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour by considering brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour	
Aims	To explore: 1) the direct relationships between brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters, brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour, 2) the indirect relationships between brand anthropomorphism and intention to donate through brand affect, and between brand anthropomorphism and donation behaviour through intention to donate, and 3) the moderating effects of potential donors' gender on the direct relationships.	
Data collection method and sample size	Online panel	200

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- CHAPTER 2 -

ARTICLE 1: PICTURES SPEAK A THOUSAND WORDS – EXPLORING GENDERED BRAND SPOKES-CHARACTERS

ABSTRACT

Purpose – To unearth deeper meanings associated with personified stimuli – specifically, gendered brand spokes-characters – and their role in brand anthropomorphism in the non-profit organisation (NPO) context. This is done by exploring: 1) the acknowledgement of brand spokes-characters’ gender, 2) the role of gendered brand spokes-characters in the brand anthropomorphism of such characters, and 3) the role of gendered brand spokes-characters in their suitability for NPOs.

Design/methodology/approach – Given the scarcity of research into gendered marketing stimuli, such as brand spokes-characters, in the domain of brand anthropomorphism, an exploratory study was deemed appropriate. This study analyses qualitative data from short unstructured interviews and a focus group comprising 10 participants respectively, and quantitatively vets these findings through paid participants obtained from an online panel.

Findings – The study uncovers the complexities in designing gendered marketing stimuli, such as brand spokes-characters. Mainly, it identifies that, while gender is easily acknowledged, it is not always in accordance with the intended gender, and that gendered brand spokes-characters play a role in the brand anthropomorphism of these characters, as well as in the suitability of these characters for NPOs.

Research implications – This study adds to the existing theoretical knowledge of brand personification and brand anthropomorphism by unearthing meanings associated with the acknowledged gender of personified non-human brand stimuli, its role in brand anthropomorphism and in its suitability for the brand it represents.

Practical implications – The findings offer suggestions for marketers when designing and making use of personified marketing or brand stimuli with gender cues.

Originality/value – In contrast to previous work, which has examined brand anthropomorphism primarily through personified and gender-neutral stimuli, this study explores the role of personified and gendered brand stimuli in brand anthropomorphism by primarily unearthing the meanings associated with such stimuli.

Keywords Brand stimuli, Brand personification, Brand spokes-characters, Brand anthropomorphism, Gender, Non-profit organisations

Paper Type Research Paper

1. INTRODUCTION

“We see the world, not as it is, but as we are – or, as we are conditioned to see it.”
– Steven R. Covey

A more recent approach to branding has been through the brand-as-a-person paradigm, in which brands are being studied as “living entities” with personalities and with whom relationships can be built (Hanby, 1999:4–5). The perceptions of brands as complete and literal living entities is the psychological process referred to as *brand anthropomorphism*, which has been defined as the perceptions of brands as having human-like qualities (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:356). Brand anthropomorphism provides an effective way for marketers to yield brand benefits, such as brand loyalty and commitment, and a willingness to pay a premium price and to spread positive word-of-mouth (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:371). One of the most common ways in which marketers have attempted to elicit brand anthropomorphism has been through brand personification (Fleck *et al.*, 2014:84), such as the use of personified brand stimuli (e.g., brand spokes-characters) with observable human-like attributes (Cohen, 2014:4). According to Aggarwal and McGill (2007) and Delbaere, McQuarrie and Phillips (2011) personified brands or brand stimuli are likely to easily elicit the perceptions of these brands as complete and literal living entities, and essentially the anthropomorphism of such brands. Thus marketers consider brand personification a useful tool in an attempt to elicit brand anthropomorphism and to reap the subsequent brand benefits thereof.

To date, the exploration of brand anthropomorphism in academic studies has often been examined using gender-neutral personified stimuli (e.g., Awad and Youn, 2018; Kwak *et al.*, 2017; Reavey *et al.*, 2018; Touré-Tillery and McGill, 2015), as opposed to stimuli that has been endowed with a sex by means of gender cues. However, due to *gender socialisation*, human beings develop an internal gender identity from infancy, wherein being a male or female becomes an internalised part of how human beings think of themselves (Ryle, 2018:120) and the world. Gender can therefore be considered an important part of what makes human beings *human*. Thus, in order further to explore and understand brands as living entities or as human, their perceived or acknowledged gender appears to be a necessary consideration, which to date

appears to have received very little consideration in academic studies. However, if brand gender is to be considered, it should not be done without being mindful that gender-neutrality has become a notable trend in society (Claveria, 2016; Kasriel-Alexander, 2016:18) in recent years. As a result, gender lines are starting to blur; and so the acknowledgment and perceptions of gender may become more challenging than they once were. Thus, when exploring the role of gendered and personified non-human brand stimuli in its brand anthropomorphism, it should not be done without considering the potential effects of the gender-neutrality movement that is currently at play in society.

According to Goodstein (1993:88), when individuals encounter any stimulus they automatically attempt to match it with the category description. In an attempt to elicit brand anthropomorphism in this study, use will be made of personified non-human brand stimuli that are gendered, thus individuals will be likely to match such brand stimuli to the brand it represents too. Roozen (2012) and Roozen and Raedts (2017) propound that the gender of endorsers specifically for non-profit organisations (NPOs), plays an influential role in their perceived effectiveness and suitability for NPOs. Therefore, in making use of gendered brand spokes-character stimuli in this study, it was necessary to do so within a category description or context in which the brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender may play an influential role too. It was with this in mind, that NPOs were deemed a suitable context for the purposes of this study.

Given the scarcity of research about the role of gendered and personified non-human brand stimuli in brand anthropomorphism, this study was exploratory in nature. It therefore aimed to unearth deeper meanings associated with the gender of personified stimuli – specifically gendered brand spokes-characters – and their role in brand anthropomorphism in the NPO context. This was done by exploring the following three research aims: 1) the acknowledgement of brand spokes-characters' gender, 2) the role of gendered brand spokes-characters in the brand anthropomorphism of such characters, and 3) the role of gendered brand spokes-characters in their suitability for NPOs. This was done through multiple design and vetting phases. Since this study was exploratory in nature, qualitative research methods were deemed suitable; therefore unstructured interviews and a focus group were conducted. However, in order to achieve triangulation of the data, some of the findings from the focus group

were further vetted quantitatively through paid participants via an online panel. Several rounds of refinements were made to the brand spokes-character stimuli, which is testament to the complexities involved in the meanings associated with personified non-human brand stimuli, such as brand spokes-characters, especially when they are endowed with a sex by means of gender cues. The findings suggest that, even though the brand spokes-characters' gender was easily acknowledged, it was not always as intended; gendered brand spokes-characters appears to play a role in the brand anthropomorphism of such characters and in the suitability of these characters for NPOs.

The next section of this article provides a literature review for this study, followed by the methodology, findings, discussion, and a conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Brand personification

Hanby (1999:4–5) proposes that the perspectives from which brands are viewed appears to have evolved from brands as “lifeless, manipulable artefacts” to brands as “living entities” with personalities, and with whom relationships can be built. These personalities, often referred to as *brand personalities*, have been defined as a “set of human-like traits and characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997:347). According to Fleck *et al.* (2014:84), a brand personality can be conferred on brands through several mechanisms one such way is referred to as *brand personification*. This is defined as the “use by a brand of a character with human-like characteristics in packaging, promotion, public relations, or for other marketing-related purposes” (Cohen, 2014:3). The personification of brands can be plotted on a reality continuum, ranging from animated characters with observable and/or audible human-like features or attributes at the lower end, to real-life people at the higher end of the continuum (Cohen, 2014:8). Yet, more often than not, brand personification refers to a brand being personified as a character as opposed to a real-life person (Cohen, 2014:3). There has been an exponential growth in the use of animation, especially the use of animated characters used in advertisements to personify products or brands (Callcott and Lee, 1994, 1995; Huang *et al.*, 2011). For the purposes of this study, brand

personification will be delimited to the personification of brands at the lower end of the reality continuum – specifically, *animated characters with observable human-like attributes*.

2.2. Brand spokes-characters

Brand personification by means of an animated character used to be referred to as a “trade character” (Phillips, 1996), which has been defined as “a fictional, animate being or animated object that has been created for the promotion of a product, service or idea” and that are not necessarily legal trademarks (Phillips, 1996:146). However, these characters have also been referred to as *spokes-characters* and *brand characters* (Callcott and Lee, 1995:145; Hosany *et al.*, 2013:49–52). According to Callcott and Lee (1995:145), the term *spokes-character* appears apt because it implies that these characters mimic the characteristics and roles of conventional real-life human brand spokespersons or endorsers. Thus, by combining the terms *spokes-characters* and *brand characters*, the term *brand spokes-characters* will be used in this study to refer to these animated characters. Based on the various frameworks and typologies used to define these characters, such as the AMOP framework by Callcott and Lee (1995), the dimensions by Phillips (1996), and the typologies by Hosany *et al.* (2013), it is important to delimit the definition of brand spokes-characters for the purposes of this study. Since brand personification in this study refers to the use of animated characters with *observable human-like attributes*, it was deemed important to emphasise this in the definition of brand spokes-characters in this study, too. Brand spokes-characters is therefore defined as “*fictional animated characters that are non-celebrities and who have observable human-like attributes, that represent brands for promotional purposes, and that are not necessarily registered trademarks for these brands*”. Examples of popular animated characters with observable human-like attributes include the Michelin Man, Tony the Tiger, and the M&M spokes-candies.

2.3. Brand anthropomorphism

According to Azar (2015:52) and Louis and Lombart (2010:115) the physical signs and symbols of brands that are presented to consumers are important cues that can be used to draw inferences about the intangible qualities of these brands. As such, the

human-like cues used by brands may aid the visualisation and interpretation of these brands as living entities, because of their physical resemblance to human beings (Connell, 2013:462), as found in studies by authors such as Aggarwal and McGill (2007:477) and Connell (2013:465). According to Epley *et al.* (2007:869), the physical resemblance to human beings elicits individuals' existing knowledge about human beings in order for them to make sense of the non-human agents with physical human-like attributes. Consequently, the perceptions of non-human agents as living entities with unobservable human-like qualities, such as having intentions (Epley *et al.*, 2007:864; Epley, 2018:591), refer to the psychological and cognitive process termed *anthropomorphism* (Epley *et al.*, 2007:865). According to Epley (2018:592), Gray *et al.* (2007) and Haslam *et al.* (2008:254), the most human-like qualities that human beings possess are their inner mental capacities or states, such as intentions, desires and emotions. Thus the perception of non-human agents as having these *unobservable* human-like qualities such as inner mental states is regarded as central to anthropomorphism (Epley, 2018:592). The perceptions of specifically brands as having such human-like qualities has been referred to as *brand anthropomorphism* (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:356).

According to Epley *et al.* (2007:869) and MacInnis and Folkes (2017:358), brands with observable human-like attributes, such as brand spokes-characters, are likely to easily elicit the brand anthropomorphism of these characters. Therefore brand spokes-characters were used as the brand stimuli in this study, in an attempt to elicit brand anthropomorphism. 'Brand anthropomorphism' in this study therefore specifically refers to the anthropomorphism of these characters, and not necessarily of the brand itself. It is however important to note here that in the literature the unobservable human-like qualities which brands can be perceived as having are endless, thus it is important to highlight examples of such human-like qualities that would be considered in this study. Based on the importance of the inner mental states and the prior work by two of the main authors of anthropomorphism, Epley *et al.* (2008:115) and Waytz *et al.* (2010:422), the human-like qualities to be considered in this study include but are not limited to *a mind, intentions, desires, consciousness, and an ability to experience emotions.*

According to MacInnis and Folkes (2017:371), brand anthropomorphism has been found to yield several brand benefits, and may therefore be useful for marketers to try to elicit. Some of these brand benefits include brand loyalty and commitment, a willingness to pay a premium price, and to spread positive word-of-mouth.

2.4. Brand anthropomorphism using the brand-as-a-person paradigm

With an increased presence of brands in consumers' lives (Centeno, Cambra-Fierro, Vazquez-Carrasco, Hart and Dinnie, 2019:556), and because emotional bonds and attachment develop as a result of continued interactions between an object and an individual (Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Enns and Koh-Rangarajoo, 1996), emotional bonds and attachment are likely to develop between consumers and brands as well. Since attachment is likely to be preserved through a relationship, consumers are often easily able to enter into relationships with brands (Fournier, 1998). However, Fournier (1998:344) and Puzakova *et al.* (2009:413) suggests that, in order for a brand to be legitimised as a partner in these relationships, it needs to be anthropomorphised by being perceived as "a complete, literal human". Fournier (1998:344) proposes that consumers appear to show no difficulty in doing so, because – according to Aaker (1997) – they are often consistently able to assign personality traits (i.e. an unobservable human-like quality) to brands. This perception of brands as being human-like, forms the premise upon which the *brand-as-a-person* paradigm is built, and is one of several principles on which brands can be studied. Evidently anthropomorphism is a key theoretical building block of this (Azar, 2015:44; Centeno *et al.*, 2019:556). Since the personification of brands by means of brand spokes-characters is a key focus area in this study in an attempt to elicit brand anthropomorphism, the brand-as-a-person paradigm has been deemed a suitable principle upon which to conduct this study.

There are three lenses through which the brand-as-a-person paradigm can be analysed, as highlighted by Azar (2015:45): *demographic, personality, and behavioural*. Even though some demographic and behavioural aspects of the brand-as-a-person paradigm have previously been examined, there still appear to be few studies that conceptualise how consumers perceive the sex or the sexual orientation of brands (Azar, 2015:45). Consequently, it may explain why there appears to be very

little attention paid to the role of the perceptions of a brand's gender in its brand anthropomorphism, in the literature to date. While previous studies have, for example, examined the influence of consumers' gender on anthropomorphic tendencies (Letheren *et al.*, 2016), there appears to be little research on the role of a brand's gender in its brand anthropomorphism. Most of the research exploring anthropomorphism to date appears to have typically done so through the use of personified non-human stimuli that appears gender-neutral (e.g., Awad and Youn, 2018; Kwak *et al.*, 2017), shedding little light on the role of gendered stimuli on anthropomorphism. However, because human beings are mostly born with a biological sex, and because of gender socialisation through which human beings often learn the gender norms of society and develop their own internal gender identity, biological sex and perceived gender / gender identity can be considered important parts of what makes human beings human. This was confirmed in a study by Nowak and Rauh (2005:174), who found that avatars endowed with gender cues were regarded as more human-like than those that were devoid of such cues. Thus endowing brands with gender cues warrants consideration when studying brands as complete and literal living entities.

Azar (2015:48) found that sexual associations can often be inferred from brands; these associations have been categorised as *brand sex*, *brand gender*, and *brand sexual orientation*. First, *brand sex* is proposed as a demographic characteristic of the brand-as-a-person paradigm, and is defined as the "human sex associated with a brand" (i.e., inferences that consumers make when referring to brands as male or female). Four *brand sexes* have been identified: brand as a male, brand as a female, brand as neither male nor female, and brand as male and female (Azar, 2015:49). Second, *brand gender* is proposed as a personality characteristic of the brand-as-a-person paradigm, which refers to the human masculine and feminine personality traits associated with a brand (Azar, 2015:48; Grohmann, 2009:106). Grohmann (2009) has proposed four classifications of *brand gender*, based on the masculine and feminine brand personality scale: masculine, feminine, undifferentiated, and androgynous. Lastly, *brand sexual orientation* is proposed as the behavioural characteristic of the brand-as-a-person paradigm, and is defined as the "human sexual orientation associated with a brand", and thus refers to the masculine and feminine behavioural traits applied to a brand (Azar, 2015:48, 50). Based on the semiotic square by Floch

(1988), Azar (2015:50) highlighted six brand sexual orientations: 1) masculine male (i.e., heterosexual male); 2) not masculine male (i.e., gay); 3) feminine female (i.e., heterosexual female); 4) not feminine female (i.e., lesbian); 5) masculine and feminine male or female (i.e., bisexual male or female); and 6) not masculine nor feminine male or female (i.e., asexual male or female). According to Azar (2015:52), it is necessary to make a distinction between the three aforementioned categories of brand sexual associations (i.e., *brand sex*, *brand gender*, and *brand sexual orientation*), as it highlights the multifaceted ways in which consumers may perceive the sexual associations of brands.

According to Terman and Miles (1936:451), masculinity and femininity are important aspects of the human personality, and are considered central to how the structure of personality gradually takes shape. Masculine and feminine traits are easily accessible personality traits (Grohmann, 2009:106), and are often referred to by individuals when describing others (Lippa, 2005). Since brands in some instances can also be regarded as human-like, especially based on the brand-as-person paradigm, it is likely that brands too can be described and associated with masculine and/or feminine personality traits (Aaker, 1997). The perceptions of brands as having either a masculine or feminine brand personality, is referred to as the *gender dimensions of brand personality* and it is ultimately what shapes *brand gender*, which has been found to positively influence attitudinal, affective, and behavioural responses to brands (Grohmann, 2009). Thus, in order to explore the role of gendered brand spokes-characters in this study, it was deemed important to endow these characters with a sex by means of observable gender cues in an attempt to elicit perceptions of these characters having a gender. The focus in this study was therefore placed primarily on exploring and unearthing the meanings associated with brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender as a result of the sex with which they were endowed, by means of observable gender cues, with less focus placed on the brand spokes-characters' sexual orientations.

However, while the importance of exploring the brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender has been duly noted above, consideration simultaneously needs to be given to the advent of *gender-neutrality* as a notable marketing and consumer trend in recent years (Claveria, 2016; Kasriel-Alexander, 2016:18). The

Oxford Dictionaries define *gender-neutral* as “suitable for, applicable to, or common to both male and female genders” (Lexico, 2017). Thus, according to the four classifications of brand gender by Grohmann (2009:108), gender-neutrality can be likened to *androgyny*. This trend is evident in the market, with consumer brands such as Zara and H&M introducing gender-neutral fashion lines (Cherrington, 2016; Paparella, 2018) in the last few years. As advocacy for *gender-neutrality* in the consumer market appears to be increasing and stereotypical gender behaviours appears to be decreasing (Gupta and Gentry, 2016:251), traditional gender lines are becoming more blurred. Thus the ease with which gender, especially brand gender, once was acknowledged and perceived may be compromised. Therefore, exploring brand gender cannot be done without considering the possible effects of gender-neutrality too, that is currently at play in society. To date, there appears to be little research in this regard. Therefore, in order to explore the role of gendered brand spokes-characters in brand anthropomorphism in this study, it was important to not only endow the brand spokes-character stimuli with a male or female sex, using gender cues, but it was necessary also to include brand spokes-character stimuli that are gender-neutral or androgynous. As a result, some of the brand spokes-characters in this study were devoid of a sex, and were therefore endowed with no gender cues.

2.5. Non-profit organisations

According to Goodstein (1993:88), individuals automatically attempt to match a stimulus with the category description, thus so too individuals may attempt to automatically match gendered brand spokes-characters with the brand it represents or endorses. In a study by Roozen and Raedt (2017), it was found that gendered stimuli – specifically, endorsers for NPOs – would be perceived differently based on the congruence between their respective gender and the NPO. Therefore, attitude toward an NPO and its advertising, as well as consumers’ intention to donate to an NPO, were all influenced by its endorser’s gender. Similarly, Roozen (2012) also found that male endorsers perceived as ‘warm’ (i.e., persona perceived as warm and inviting) appear to be perceived as more effective for NPOs than those who are female. Thus, the acknowledged gender of the brand spokes-characters in this study is also likely to play a role in its perceived congruence / incongruence with NPOs. The NPO sector was therefore deemed a suitable context in which to conduct this study. In addition,

the non-profit sector is continuing to expand globally (Casey, 2016:190, 217), with competitive rivalry between NPOs also increasing (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2015:134; Ranganathan and Henley, 2008:2) as they bid to encourage more prosocial behaviour from potential donors (Venable *et al.*, 2005:295). Therefore, exploring the role of gendered brand spokes-characters in an NPO context may provide the marketers or managers of NPOs with valuable insights into how to encourage more prosocial behaviour amid the intensely competitive landscape.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to elicit brand anthropomorphism in this study, it was necessary to do so through personified non-human brand stimuli, for which brand spokes-characters with observable human-like cues were deemed suitable. The human-like cues included human-like eyes, mouth, arms, and legs. To elicit perceptions of the brand spokes-characters' as having a gender, it was also necessary to endow these characters with a male or female sex using observable gender cues (e.g., clothing, clothing accessories, and gender-specific facial features). Thus, in order to design these characters accordingly, a five-phase multiple-design and vetting process ensued, as discussed hereunder, in an attempt to achieve the purposes set out in this study. This process included: 1) self-designed stimuli, 2) cartoonist-designed stimuli, 3) refinements to the stimuli based on unstructured interviews, 4) vetting the refined stimuli through a focus group and making refinements thereafter, and 5) vetting the refined stimuli based on the focus group, through an online panel. Each of these phases subsequently provided more insight into the deeper meanings associated with gendered personified marketing stimuli, specifically brand spokes-characters, and their role in brand anthropomorphism and in their suitability for NPOs.

A qualitative descriptive approach was employed in the use of unstructured interviews and a focus group, that included a quantitative individual task, while a quantitative approach was employed in the use of an online panel. Unstructured interviews and a focus group discussion were deemed suitable because of the exploratory nature of this study (Belk *et al.*, 2013:42–43). To help establish credibility, data triangulation was employed in order to vet refinements made to characters based on the results obtained from the interviews and focus group. Paid participants via an online panel were

therefore consulted to vet these refinements. Purposive sampling was used throughout this study, except for the recruitment of the paid participants that participated in the online panel, where convenience sampling was used.

3.1. Design of personified non-human brand stimuli endowed with gender cues

3.1.1. Design requirements for brand spokes-character stimuli

When designing the brand spokes-characters for the purposes of this study, a few things were taken into consideration. First, to avoid biased responses based on pre-existing knowledge, it was deemed necessary to use characters that were unknown. Thus it seemed apt to design characters for the specific purposes of this study. Second, brand spokes-characters in this study were delimited to include only animated characters. Thus based on the definition of “animated”, the characters used in this study had to be created and designed using a computer (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2019). Third, because ‘brand anthropomorphism’ refers to the perception of non-human agents having human-like qualities, it was important not to use human characters. Thus the use of an animal that could easily be manipulated to appear human-like was deemed suitable. Connell (2013:463) proposes that *bears* appear physically more human than many other animals because of their forward-facing ears, hand-like claws, and their ability to walk bipedally for short distances. Altruism has also been recognised as one of many bear personality traits (Get Bear Smart Society, Not dated), which coincidentally is also a characteristic of many NPOs (Arkansas State University, 2017) – thus further confirming the suitability of using a *bear* as the brand spokes-character in this study. Fourth, in order to endow the bear brand spokes-characters with a sex, consideration was given to society’s gender binary of male and female categories (Blair, 2018). Thus, some of the characters were endowed with either a male or a female sex using gender cues. However, due to the growth in the gender-neutralism movement (Claveria, 2016), it was deemed necessary to also portray some of the characters as gender-neutral or androgynous. To endow the characters with one of the two binary sexes, stereotypical gender cues were used (e.g., a blue jacket for males and a pink shirt for females), whereas those portrayed as gender-neutral were devoid of any gender cues. Fifth, it was important not to make the bear brand spokes-characters appear too ‘teddy bear-like’. Perceptions of teddy

bears generally include traits such as being dependable, soft, trustworthy, calm, and supportive (hfi, 2014), which are often recognised as feminine personality traits (Grohmann, 2009). Thus, to avoid skewed responses whereby the characters may mostly be acknowledged as female, it was important to try to minimise their ‘teddy bear-likeness’ as much as possible. Last, preconceived emotions are generally attributed to males and females, such as males generally expressing anger and hostile emotions, while females express sadness, fear, and/or guilt (Fischer, Rodriguez Mosquera, Van Vianen and Manstead, 2004:87). Therefore, to minimise the confounding consequences of emotion on the acknowledgment of the bear brand spokes-characters’ gender, it was deemed necessary to portray the characters as emotionless as possible, in both their facial expressions and their body language.

3.1.2. *Self-design of brand spokes-character stimuli*

In line with the design requirements for the bear brand spokes-characters outlined in section 3.1.1, several self-design attempts were made (refer to Figure 1 for an example). This proved challenging because of the limited access to graphic design tools and skills. Therefore, only existing images of animated bears found in free online image banks, such as Freepik.com, could be manipulated. However, these self-design attempts closely resembled a teddy bear, as can be seen in Figure 1. Thus it was deemed necessary rather to commission a professional cartoonist to design the bear brand spokes-character stimuli for this study.

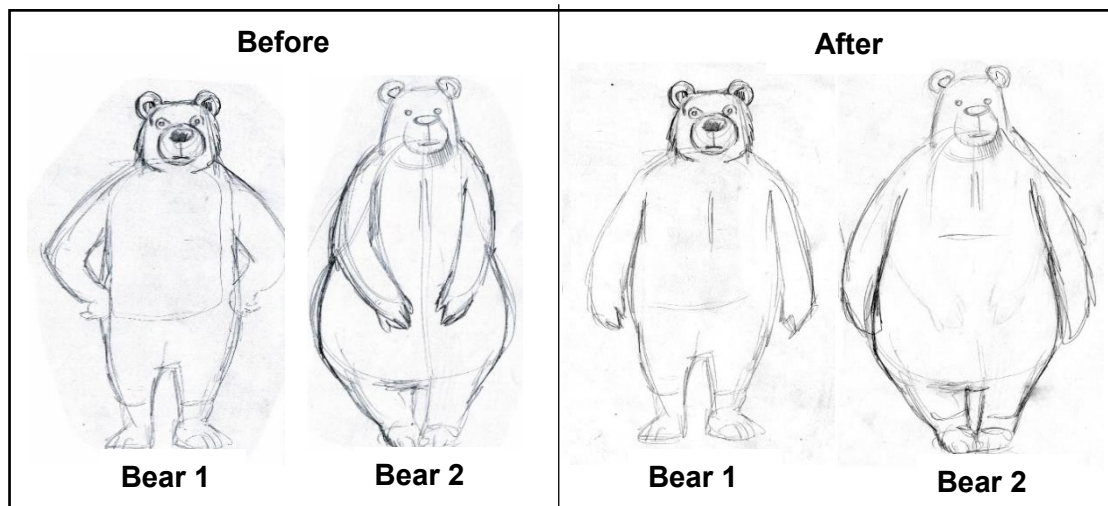
Figure 1: Self-design attempt



3.1.3. Design of brand spokes-character stimuli by cartoonist

A professional cartoonist was commissioned, and designed five different types of bear brand spokes-characters. The rationale for designing five different types of bears was to explore differently designed brand spokes-characters as personified marketing stimuli for NPOs. The specific requirements in the brief for the cartoonist were in accordance with those outlined in section 3.1.1. These included portraying the bear brand spokes-characters as human-like (e.g., human-like eyes, human-like physique), emotionless, and endowing some of them with a sex using gender cues, while maintaining the appearance of the bear as animal so that it would not be perceived as being too much like a teddy bear. Each of the five different types of bear designs underwent several reiterations. In the *before* images in Figure 2, Bear 1 appears assertive, whereas Bear 2 appears shy, simply owing to the position of its ‘arms’. In the *after* images, the ‘arms’ of both characters were revised; making the characters appear more neutral in their body language and their perceived emotions. This is an example of the kind of reiterations that were made to the bear designs by the cartoonist. After the reiterations were made, a male and female version of each of the five types of designed bears were created. The male and female versions were endowed with stereotypical gender cues (e.g., clothing such as a blue jacket for males, and facial features such as voluminous eyelashes for the females, and/or accessories such as a necklace for females), while the gender-neutral versions remained neutral with no stereotypical gender cues.

Figure 2: Examples of the reiterations made to two types of bear brand spokes-characters



3.2. Refining and vetting refined personified non-human brand stimuli endowed with gender cues

3.2.1. Refining brand spokes-character stimuli based on short unstructured interviews

Purposive sampling was then used to pre-test all fifteen designed bear brand spokes-characters, comprising five female bears, five gender-neutral bears, and five male bears, through short unstructured interviews. The sample for these interviews consisted of ten participants – five males and five females – between 18 and 54 years old, whose employment ranged across sectors such as telecommunications, tertiary education, and electric power. An equal gender quota was set to avoid biased results, as gender, particularly brand spokes-characters' gender was key to this study. Since the design of personified marketing stimuli can be considered a creative process, creative input was needed from the short unstructured interviews. For this reason, the participants were provided with printed versions of all fifteen designed bear characters, to unearth their perceptions of the brand spokes-characters' human-likeness and its gender. They were therefore asked to provide oral input specifically on the design of these characters' observable human-likeness and on their acknowledgment of these characters' gender. After the tenth unstructured interview, saturation was achieved as no new insights were gleaned from these interviews, and only three recommendations emerged. These included: 1) changing the colour of some of the types of bear characters to avoid preconceived meanings attached to certain colours; 2) making some of the characters' facial expressions more neutral, especially those that appeared surprised or anxious; and 3) changing the clothing or clothing accessories worn by some of the characters that appeared unsuitable or ill-fitting. These recommendations were taken into account, and refinements were made to the respective bear brand spokes-characters. Thereafter the fifteen refined bear characters were vetted in a focus group discussion.

3.2.2. Vetting refined brand spokes-character stimuli through a focus group

In order to unearth deeper meanings associated with the gender of the bear brand spokes-characters and its role in brand anthropomorphism in an NPO context, a 1.5-

hour focus group session was conducted with ten participants – five males and five females, based on the equal gender quota that was set. Using a purposive sampling technique, participants were between the ages of 23 and 41 years. A safe and comfortable environment was provided to enable participants to express their own opinions freely (Belk *et al.*, 2013:42). Pseudonyms were given to the participants to protect their identity (Sanghvi and Hodges, 2015:1681), as the discussion was audio-recorded with the participants' permission. The researcher facilitated the discussions with the assistance of a discussion guide created prior to the focus group. Since dominant or persuasive participants can influence others in a group (Belk *et al.*, 2013:41), it was deemed necessary for participants to also complete an individual task pertaining to the three research aims of this study. Participants' acknowledgement of the brand spokes-characters' human-likeness was further confirmed by asking them to provide a name that would be suitable for all the characters, irrespective of its acknowledged gender. According to Bucklin (2017), ascribing a name to an object or animal implicitly infers that the object or animal is perceived as being human-like. To confirm that the characters were acknowledged as emotionless, participants were explicitly asked whether the bear brand spokes-characters appeared emotionless. Following the focus group discussion, the researcher compiled field notes and, based on the audio recordings, an external transcriber transcribed the discussion into written format for ease of analysis. The length of the full transcription was 23 typed pages.

Through a deductive thematic analysis of the full transcription the data was coded, by identifying phrases and sentences from participants' quotations and developing labels to describe them. These codes were then subsequently used to identify thematic groupings to provide an indication of the patterns in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006:82,84) based on the purpose of this study. Based on the findings and the suggestions put forth for the refinements of the brand spokes-character stimuli, data and method triangulation was employed to help establish credibility, by then consulting paid participants via an online panel. Additional measures employed to ensure data trustworthiness in this study was also the safeguarding of participants identity using pseudonyms, and the emphasis on the participants' voluntary participation in order to help achieve integrity credibility, as well as the use of purposive sampling as a measure to help achieve transferability.

3.2.3. *Refining brand spokes-character stimuli based on the focus group*

In the focus group discussion, only one type of bear brand spokes-character emerged as the most suitable for NPOs, and suggestions for refinements, particularly to the male and female versions of this character, were put forth. Refinements were then made only to the male and female versions of the particular character.

3.2.4. *Vetting refined brand spokes-character stimuli through paid participants*

The three versions (i.e., female, gender-neutral and male) of the one type of bear brand spokes-character deemed suitable for NPOs in the focus group were then further vetted by means of 60 paid participants obtained via a South African online panel. Because participants in focus groups often influence one another's responses in a group situation (Gibbs, 1997), it was deemed necessary to vet this character further via an online panel in order to minimise the confounding influence of group dynamics. In addition, owing to the refinements made to the male and female versions of the character, and because the characters' gender were often acknowledged differently than what was intended by its observable gender cues in the focus group, it was deemed necessary to vet only the characters' acknowledged gender further via the online panel.

Twenty participants, based on the equal gender quotas that were set, were therefore exposed to either the female, gender-neutral or male version of the bear brand spokes-character (refer to Table 1). A small online panel was deemed suitable, as the aim was merely to explore the acknowledgement of the character's gender (Denscombe, 2014:32,34). A reputable South African market research company managed the administration of this panel. The sample had a mean age of about 32 years of age, with the oldest respondent being 62 and the youngest being 20.

Table 1: Gender quota amongst paid participants

Stimuli	Quota
Female spokes-character	10 males and 10 females
Gender-neutral spokes-character	10 males and 10 females
Male neutral spokes-character	10 males and 10 females

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Focus group: Individual task

The focus group included a quantitative individual task for participants to complete before the discussion began. Participants were asked the following three questions: 1) Does the character appear to be human to you? [Yes or No]; 2) Do you perceive the character to have a gender? [Female, Gender-neutral, or Male]; and 3) Would you consider this character to be a suitable representative for an NPO? [Yes or No]. Participants were first exposed to the five gender-neutral bear brand spokes-characters, and thereafter to the five male and five female versions of these characters respectively (refer to Table 2 for the illustrations of the 15 characters). In an attempt to avoid common method bias, the designs of the five male and five female bear characters were randomly arranged in the individual task. This was done to minimise the likelihood that participants would uncover a pattern in the sequence of their arrangement, and thus provide biased responses. The responses to the three questions asked about each bear brand spokes-character are reflected in Table 2. Responses about the gender of Bear A(M), Bear C(F), Bear D(M), and Bear E(F) were erroneously omitted, and a participant acknowledged the gender of Bear A(F) as “confused”; therefore the responses for those characters were disregarded.

Table 2: Summary of the quantitative individual task




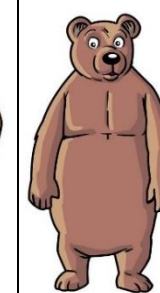











						
	Bear A (GN)	Bear A (F)	Bear A (M)	Bear B (GN)	Bear B (F)	Bear B (M)
Human						
Yes	5	6	6	7	7	6
No	5	4	4	3	3	4
Gender						
Female	0	9	1	3	10	0
GN	2	0	0	3	0	0
Male	8	0	8	4	0	10

Table 2: Summary of the quantitative individual task (continued)

Suitability for NPO						
Yes	5	2	3	8	7	1
No	5	8	7	2	3	9
						
	Bear C (GN)	Bear C (F)	Bear C (M)	Bear D (GN)	Bear D (F)	Bear D (M)
Human						
Yes	5	7	7	6	6	7
No	5	3	3	4	4	3
Gender						
Female	0	6	0	3	2	2
GN	2	3	0	4	3	0
Male	8	0	10	3	5	7
Suitability for NPO						
Yes	2	2	4	10	5	7
No	8	8	6	0	5	3
						
		Bear E (GN)	Bear E (F)	Bear E (M)		
Human						
Yes		7	7	6		
No		3	3	4		
Gender						
Female		1	6	0		
GN		2	0	0		
Male		7	3	10		
Suitability for NPO						
Yes		5	4	3		
No		5	6	7		

[Note: F = Female; GN = Gender-Neutral; M = Male]

From Table 2, it is evident, first, that most of the bear brand spokes-characters were perceived as human-like; yet those endowed a sex by means of gender cues were

perceived as more human-like than those portrayed as gender-neutral. Second, more bear brand spokes-characters were acknowledged as male and female than gender-neutral; however, the characters' acknowledged gender was not always in accordance with its intended gender (i.e., based on their observable gender cues). Third, more bear brand spokes-characters were perceived as being unsuitable for NPOs than suitable; those portrayed as gender-neutral were perceived as more suitable than those endowed with gender cues.

These findings therefore suggest that bear brand spokes-characters endowed with a sex by means of gender cues, appears to play a role in both the attribution of human-likeness and their suitability for NPOs; yet it does not always necessarily inform the characters' acknowledged gender. The reasons for this are investigated further in the findings from the discussion.

4.2. Focus group: Discussion

The focus group discussion aimed to unearth the deeper meanings associated with the gendered brand spokes-characters, and their role in brand anthropomorphism in the NPO context. Based on the thematic groupings, the clothing and clothing accessories with which the brand spokes-characters were adorned, emerged as an overarching theme which also emerged in discussions around the central topics of the brand spokes-characters' gender, human-likeness, and their suitability for NPOs. A visual summary of the themes and sub-themes identified are presented in Table 3 followed by a detailed explanation of each.

Table 3: Visual summary of themes and sub-themes

Clothing and clothing accessories	
Themes	Sub- themes
Cultural and societal gender norms	Androcentrism
	Gender neutrality
	Gender socialisation
Inference of personality traits on the brand spokes-characters	Influence of physical human-like attributes (e.g. clothing)
	Influence product / brand category's perceived personality traits

Congruency between brand category and brand spokes-characters	Influence of physical human-like cues (e.g. clothing)
	Influence of the personality traits inferred on the brand spokes-characters

In this study, clothing and clothing accessories were among the prominent observable gender cues that were manipulated to endow the bear brand spokes-characters with either a male or a female sex. However, during the focus group discussion, its prominence was confirmed not only in the discussions of the bear brand spokes-characters' gender, but also in discussions about the characters' human-likeness and their suitability for NPOs. First, it appears that the participants were more easily able to acknowledge the bear brand spokes-characters' gender when they were adorned with clothing or clothing accessories than when they were not. As an example: when the clothing or clothing accessories were perceived as more feminine, more masculine, or gender-neutral, the participants appeared to rely on that perception to acknowledge the characters' gender accordingly:

Participant 10: ... you look at [character] E[M] it's like an old man wearing a jacket.

Similarly, a study by Shakin, Shakin and Sternglanz (1985) also found clothing to be a very common and effective gender cue.

Second, most of the participants acknowledged that the bear brand spokes-characters wearing clothing or clothing accessories were more human-like than those that were not. This is evident from one participant's response when asked what makes the characters appear human-like.

Participant 5: It's the dressing, the accessories.

These findings align with Greenberg, Solomon and Arndt (2008:117–118), who propose that, in an attempt to negate their similarity to non-human animals, human beings often engage in activities such as adorning their bodies with clothing and/or jewellery. Similarly, Fowles (1974:343) advocates that clothing be considered a phenomenon unique to the human species. Historically, no other living beings have worn clothing (Hurn, 2011:110).

Third, the suitability of the bear brand spokes-characters for NPOs also appears to have been based on the clothing or clothing accessories worn by some the bear brand spokes-characters:

Participant 8: I think when you put clothes on, it's more like quirky, silly and funny. When I think of non-profit organisations, it's more serious they want to help people in whatever. When you put clothes on the mascots, it kind of loses the seriousness.

According to Venable *et al.* (2005), the brand personality traits that usually characterise NPOs include integrity, nurturance, sophistication, and ruggedness. Thus the perceived quirkiness, silliness, and funniness of the characters adorned with clothing or clothing accessories may have been perceived as incongruent with the brand personality traits of NPOs. This may therefore explain why the characters endowed with a male or female sex by means of their clothing or clothing accessories may have been perceived as being less suitable for NPOs than those that were gender-neutral and were devoid of these gender cues.

From the focus group, the prominence of the clothing and clothing accessories not only appeared in discussions of the characters' gender, human-likeness, and suitability for NPOs, but also throughout the focus group discussion. This is highlighted in some of the themes that emerged from this discussion, which are discussed below.

4.2.1. The role of cultural and societal norms regarding gender

From the focus group discussion, it emerged that participants' acknowledgement of gender in general is largely informed by the cultural and societal norms pertaining to gender, of which a) gender socialisation, b) androcentrism in society, and c) the growth of gender-neutrality were highlighted. First, through the gender socialisation that is learnt from infancy, human beings have been socialised into prescriptive gendered roles (e.g., blue is for boys and pink is for girls) (Grønhøj and Ölander, 2007:221); thus their perceptions and the way in which they make sense of the world are often shaped by a gendered lens (Ryle, 2018:133). Participants' perceptions of gender in this study appeared to be informed no differently, as suggested by a participant:

Participant 5: ...a message was sent in a subtle way and we were socialised to perceive them in that way. So for me I don't think it was me actually who decided the gender; I was told or I got subtle messages about its gender.

Thus, when discussions were held about what signifies gender, especially of brands or the spokes-characters that represent brands, participants often relied on the stereotypical gender cues that are reinforced by society. These included clothing, colour, physique, activities performed, and perceived personality traits:

Participant 3: No, 'cause he wears like a cap, he is very male.

Participant 2: First For Women [insurance] doesn't really have a mascot but that's the only real pink logo that I can think of.

Participant 5: ...for me it was female...it looks like curves. So I got that because of the curves.

Participant 3: And if you think of Mr Min [cleaning agent] for example as well, like it is a male character...he is like the hero. He's like saving the day. So although the female will be using the product, the character is a male.

Participant 4: I think if the teddy bear is smiling, we can start to associate that with woman. But if the teddy bear is frowning, or angry or aggressive, it's easy to associate that with a man.

The use of such cues to acknowledge gender aligns with the findings of previous studies. First, as alluded to at the beginning of section 4.2, clothing as an effective gender cue was confirmed in a study by Shakin *et al.* (1985). Second, Pomerleau, Bolduc, Malcuit and Cossette (1990) confirmed colour to be a gender cue, where boys were found to wear more blue, red, and/or white clothes, while girls wore more pink and multi-coloured clothes. Third, physique (i.e., body shape / form) was confirmed as a gender cue by Cao, Dikmen, Fu and Huang (2008), who used an algorithm to recognise gender from still human body images. Fourth, the recognition of gender based on social roles was explored by Eagly and Steffen (1984), who confirmed that, males are more likely to be considered as employed because of their perceived agency; while females are stereotypically perceived as more communal, therefore they are more likely to be considered homemakers. Last, a study by Feingold (1994) confirmed gender differences in personality, such that males were found to be more assertive and to have slightly higher self-esteem, while females were more extroverted, anxious, trustworthy, and tender-minded (e.g., nurturing).

In addition, participants' acknowledgement of gender in general appears to be informed by androcentrism, which refers to societal systems arranged around males, resulting in the subordination of females, with individual biases and institutional policies reinforcing these norms (Bailey, LaFrance and Dovidio, 2018:1–2). This was apparent in the individual task (refer to Table 2) and in the discussion, as participants often defaulted to acknowledging brand spokes-characters as male, even though they were not endowed with male gender cues. This may have been because spokespersons are often regarded as advocates or voices of authority for brands (Cohen, 2014:4), and as a consequence of androcentrism, males too are often perceived as the voices of authority in society (Peirce, 2001:846). Thus it may have been easier for participants to acknowledge the brand spokes-characters as male rather than female or gender-neutral. A participant articulately expresses this sentiment:

Participant 2: ... I think society it is still male dominant. The whole perception if you introduce a female mascot, it is like flimsy... It is just that dominance, it is still in the world, in the work place, in cultural settings. So to bring in a female is actually risky for a brand to do because it actually takes away some of the credibility of what you are trying to present because the males are seen as more credible.

Last, participants' acknowledgment of gender in general also appeared to be slightly tainted by the recent blurring of gender lines attributable to growth in the gender-neutralism movement (Claveria, 2016). As a result, clothing – traditionally an easily recognisable gender cue (e.g. a blue formal suit jacket for males and a pink floral shirt for females), as evident for most of the participants in this study – was not always as easily distinguishable for some of the participants:

Participant 6: For me, it looks more like a gay character... I think in the society we live in now we kind of have to take [this] into consideration...

Based on the first research aim of this study, the findings from the individual task suggest that the brand spokes-characters' gender was acknowledged, mostly as male or female, even though it was not always in accordance with the characters' intended gender (based on its observable gender cues). According to the discussion, it appears that this acknowledgement of the characters' gender may have been informed mostly

by the cultural and societal norms pertaining to gender, particularly a) gender socialisation, b) androcentrism within society, and c) the growth of gender-neutrality.

4.2.2. *The inference of personality traits based on observable cues*

The focus group discussion suggests that the bear brand spokes-characters' observable human-like attributes often unconsciously informed the personality traits that participants would apply to the characters, as evident in this response:

Participant 10: [Bear] A[F] looks friendly.

This is confirmed by the studies of Hassin and Trope (2000) and Naumann, Vazire, Rentfrow and Gosling (2009), in which it was found that dynamic physical human-like attributes, such as facial features and posture, may play an important role in making inferences and judgements about an individual's personality traits (Hassin and Trope, 2000:845). The participants referred to the characters' perceived personality traits throughout the discussions, particularly those pertaining to the characters' gender, human-likeness, and their suitability for NPOs.

First, the bear brand spokes-characters' perceived personality traits appeared to aid participants in their acknowledgment of the characters' gender. When participants perceived the characters as having personality traits such as approachableness or aggressiveness, they mostly acknowledged the characters as female or male respectively. One participant appeared to acknowledge a bear brand spokes-character as female because:

Participant 2: ... a bit more female, and a bit more approachable.

In contrast, a bear brand spokes-character was acknowledged as male because:

Participant 4: ...if the teddy bear is frowning, or angry or aggressive, it's easy to associate that with a man.

Feingold (1994) propounds that obvious gender differences exist when it comes to personality traits. This may therefore explain the ease with which participants were

able to rely on the brand spokes-characters' perceived personality traits when acknowledging the gender of the characters.

Second, the ability of participants to perceive the bear brand spokes-characters as having personality traits may be evidence enough that these characters were perceived as having an unobservable human-like quality, and so were essentially anthropomorphised. According to Epley *et al.* (2007:864), the perception of non-human agents as having human-like qualities, which includes the likes of 'personality traits', is essentially what constitutes anthropomorphism.

Third, the bear brand spokes-characters' perceived personality traits were also referred to during discussions about the suitability of these characters for NPOs. Participants appeared to deem the characters as suitable only when they perceived a congruence between the characters' personality traits and the brand personality traits usually associated with NPOs, as discussed by Venable *et al.* (2005). This is evident in the statements made by the following two participants:

Participant 2: It would also depend on what type of non-profit. If it's for kids then [bear] D[GN] is much friendlier than the others.

Participant 10: [Bear] D[GN] looks gentle, especially for a non-profit organisation.

This reliance on the congruence between the perceived personality traits of the bear brand spokes-characters and the traits usually associated with NPOs to ascertain the suitability of these characters for NPOs aligns with the existing congruence literature. The literature suggests that individuals automatically attempt to match a stimulus, such as the bear brand spokes-characters in this study, with its evoked category description, such as NPOs (Goodstein, 1993:88).

Based on the second research aim of this study, the findings from the individual task suggest that brand spokes-characters endowed with a male or female sex by means of gender cues were perceived as more human-like than those that were gender-neutral. According to the discussion, it appears that, because of characters' human-like attributes (including their gender cues), participants perceived these characters as having personality traits, essentially anthropomorphising them. Since these perceived personality traits emerged during discussions about the characters' gender, it can be

supposed that gendered brand spokes-characters' may play a role in perceptions of them having personality traits, and essentially in their brand anthropomorphism too.

4.2.3. *Congruence between the brand stimuli and the brand*

From the focus group discussion it appears that participants often matched the bear brand spokes-characters' perceived personality traits and clothing or clothing accessories with the brand personality traits usually associated with NPOs according to Venable *et al.* (2005), in order to determine the suitability of these characters for NPOs. This is evident in the comment by a participant:

Participant 2: It would also depend on what type of non-profit. If it's for kids then [bear] D[GN] is much friendlier than the others.

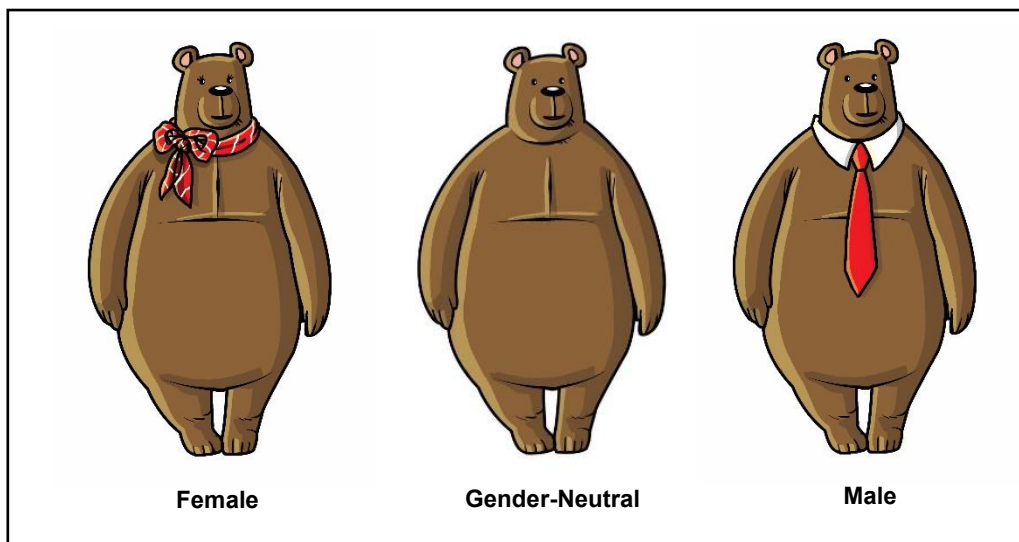
In addition, a previously mentioned quote stated that a participant perceived the clothing or clothing accessories worn by some of the characters endowed with male or female gender cues as quirky, silly, and funny, which was perceived as juxtaposing the traits often associated with NPOs, such as sophistication. This finding – that participants attempted to find congruence between the stimuli and the brand – aligns with the views of Goodstein (1993:88), who found that people automatically attempt to match a stimulus with a category description. According to Chang (2014:507), a perceived match or congruence between spokes-characters and a product or brand is the second most important quality reflecting consumers' perceptions of these characters.

Based on the third research aim of this study, the findings from the individual task suggest that brand spokes-characters endowed with a male or female sex by means of clothing or clothing accessories were perceived as being less suitable for NPOs than those devoid of these gender cues. In addition, the characters' perceived personality traits appeared to play a role in their perceived suitability for NPOs too. According to the discussion, it appears that the gendered brand spokes-characters, as recognised by both their observable gender cues - clothing or clothing accessories – and by means of their perceived personality traits, played a role in their perceived suitability for NPOs.

4.3. Refinements to the gendered brand spokes-character stimuli

Bears D (as labelled in Table 2) were deemed the most suitable brand spokes-characters for NPOs in the focus group. However, recommendations emerged to refine only the male and female versions of the character. Based on the recommendations, these two versions of the character were redesigned to wear more subtle clothing accessories as opposed to excessive clothing items. The colour red was chosen for the accessories of both versions of the character, as it is considered a unisex colour (Olvera, 2012). The refined versions of this character are depicted in Figure 3. It was only these three versions of the character that were further vetted among the paid participants obtained via an online panel.

Figure 3: Refined bear brand spokes-characters vetted via an online panel



4.4. Vetting refined gendered brand spokes-character stimuli through paid participants

As previously mentioned, it was deemed necessary to vet further only the acknowledged gender of the characters depicted in Figure 2 via an online panel. Table 4 reflects a summary of the results from the online panel. Evidently, most of the respondents exposed to the male version of the character acknowledged it to be male. However, many of the respondents exposed to the gender-neutral or female version of the character also acknowledged them as male. This provides further evidence that, while brand spokes-characters' gender were acknowledged, it did not always happen

as intended, especially when the characters were not designed to be explicitly male. These findings thus reflect and confirm the prevalence of androcentrism in the market, and align with the current landscape of brand spokes-characters in the market, which mostly appear to be male as well (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2018:2).

Table 4: Acknowledgement of gender of bear brand spokes-characters

Acknowledged gender	Observable gender cues (i.e. intended gender)		
	Female	Gender-Neutral	Male
Female	7	2	1
Gender-Neutral	7	8	2
Male	6	10	17
Total	20	20	20

4.5. Summary of findings

The number of refinements made to the bear brand spokes-characters used as stimuli within this study is testament to the complexities involved in the meanings associated with personified non-human brand stimuli, especially when they are endowed with a sex using gender cues. Given that clothing or clothing accessories were one of the prominent observable gender cues used in this study to manipulate brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender, the findings confirm the prominence of clothing or clothing accessories not only in discussions pertaining to the characters' gender, but also in discussions pertaining to the characters' human-likeness and their suitability for NPOs. In accordance with the three research aims of this study, it was found, first, that brand spokes-characters' gender is acknowledged, even though it may not always be in accordance with its intended gender. More of the characters were acknowledged as male and female rather than gender-neutral, with most of them being acknowledged as male. The acknowledgement of the characters' gender appears to be informed mostly by the cultural and societal norms pertaining to gender. Second, the brand spokes-characters endowed as having a male or female sex by means of clothing or clothing accessories were acknowledged as more human-like than those that were devoid of these gender cues. It appears that these gender cues, and the characters' human-like attributes, enabled participants to perceive the characters as having personality traits, essentially anthropomorphising these characters. Since references

were often made to the brand spokes-characters' perceived personality traits during discussions about their gender, it can be implied that their acknowledged gender may play a role in perceiving them as having personality traits, and essentially in their brand anthropomorphism too. Third, the brand spokes-characters endowed with a sex using clothing or clothing accessories as gender cues were perceived as being less suitable for NPOs than those devoid of such cues (i.e. those that were intended to be gender-neutral). However, it appears that the characters' perceived personality traits also played a role in their perceived suitability for NPOs. Therefore, gendered brand spokes-characters (by means of their observable gender cues (i.e. clothing) and their perceived personality traits) played a role in their perceived suitability for NPOs.

5. DISCUSSION

With the highlighted importance of considering gendered and personified non-human brand stimuli, such as brand spokes-characters, when examining brand anthropomorphism, the primary purpose of this study was to unearth the deeper meanings associated with gendered brand spokes-characters' and their role in brand anthropomorphism in the NPO context. This was done by exploring: 1) the acknowledgement of brand spokes-characters' gender, 2) the role of gendered brand spokes-characters in the brand anthropomorphism of such characters, and 3) the role of gendered brand spokes-characters in their suitability for NPOs.

The findings from this study suggest, first, that, while brand spokes-characters' gender appears to be acknowledged, it is not always as intended, based on observable gender cues, as more characters were acknowledged to be male than female or gender-neutral. The ease with which brand spokes-characters were acknowledged as gendered in this study may be attributed to gender socialisation, which encourages viewing the world through a gendered lens (Ryle, 2018:133). However, the incorrect acknowledgement of gender at times in this study may have been attributable to gender-neutralism, in which the stereotypical gender cues once used to differentiate males from females may no longer be as explicit. It may also be due to the prevalence of the androcentrism that is still evident in society, in which societal systems are arranged around males (Bailey *et al.*, 2018:1–2). This may explain why most of the

brand spokes-characters in this study were easily acknowledged as male, even though they were endowed with a female sex or portrayed as gender-neutral.

Second, the findings of this study suggest that gendered brand spokes-characters may play a role in the brand anthropomorphism of such characters. In the first place, it was found that brand spokes-characters endowed with a male or female sex using gender cues were acknowledged as slightly more human-like than those that were gender-neutral. This may also be explained by gender socialisation, in which human beings develop an internal gender identity from infancy that shapes how they view themselves and make sense of the world (Ryle, 2018:120). As a result, biological sex and gender appear to be an important part of what makes human beings human; and this may have influenced participants' perceptions of human-likeness, especially for those characters endowed with a male or female sex. In the second place, descriptions of the brand spokes-characters' perceived personality traits (i.e., their unobservable human-like qualities) also emerged during the discussions about their gender, confirming that there are gender differences in personality traits (Feingold, 1994). However, the fact that the brand spokes-characters were even perceived as having personality traits, is essentially what constitutes brand anthropomorphism (Epley *et al.*, 2007:864; Epley, 2018:591), thus providing further evidence that gendered brand spokes-characters may play a role in the brand anthropomorphism of such characters.

Third, it was found that gendered brand spokes-characters may play a role in the suitability of these characters for NPOs. In the first place, it was found that the perceptions of the clothing or clothing accessories worn by the characters endowed with a male or female sex were perceived as less suitable for NPOs than those without these cues. This perception may have arisen because participants saw an incongruence between the clothing or clothing accessories worn by the characters endowed with gender cues and the brand personality traits usually associated with NPOs (Venable *et al.*, 2005) – a point made in the congruence literature (e.g. Goodstein, 1993:88). In the second place, participants also referred to the characters' perceived personality traits during discussions about their suitability for NPOs, as they attempted to find congruence between the two – which again confirms the congruence literature. Since it appears that both the characters' perceived personality traits and their clothing or clothing accessories informed perceptions of their gender, it appears

that gendered brand spokes-characters, may play a role in their suitability for NPOs. This confirms the study by Roozen and Raedt (2017) in which it was found that differently gendered endorsers for NPOs were perceived differently.

5.1. Theoretical implications

The theoretical implications of this study are twofold. First, when exploring gender in studies, especially of non-human stimuli, the manipulation of gender by endowing stimuli with gender cues may not always be as simple. The findings of this study suggest that societal norms regarding gender may have an impact on gender perceptions. Some of the norms that were evident in this study included the ever-present androcentrism (i.e. male bias) and the recent growth of gender-neutrality. Thus, this study extends existing theoretical knowledge of gender perceptions by highlighting the importance of exploring gender perceptions while simultaneously considering the influence of the current gender norms that are continuously changing. This may be particularly useful for marketing scholars in an attempt to explore and understand consumer perceptions of marketing stimuli with explicit or even subtle gender cues. In so doing, more insights are to be gained in order to extend the broader study of gender as well.

Second, even though academic inquiry into brand anthropomorphism has gained traction in the past decade (Wan, 2018:467), there are still many spheres that need further exploration. The findings of this study suggest that gendered brand spokes-characters may play a role in the brand anthropomorphism of these characters. However, the literature to date investigating the influence of gendered stimuli on anthropomorphism appears scant. This study therefore builds on existing theoretical knowledge of anthropomorphism, and more specifically brand anthropomorphism by identifying that the acknowledgement of gender, especially of personified non-human brand stimuli, may play an important role in the brand anthropomorphism of such stimuli. This may yield very different results from many existing studies that have examined brand anthropomorphism using stimuli devoid of gender cues (i.e. gender-neutral).

5.2. Managerial implications

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study offer a few suggestions for marketers in profit and non-profit organisations to consider with regard to gendered brand spokes-characters. First, even though observable gender cues such as clothing and clothing accessories were used to endow some of the bear brand spokes-characters with a sex, the findings suggest that the manipulation of brand spokes-characters' sex may prove to be difficult. This is even more the case in this study because the spokes-characters were designed to be static in a 2D printed format. It would however be of value for marketers, when designing animated gendered brand spokes-characters, to consider portraying these characters in other formats, such as being in motion, in 3D format, or with an audible voice, which may result in more accurate acknowledgement of gender as intended by marketers.

Second, this study affirms that people automatically attempt to match a stimulus with the category description (Goodstein, 1993:88), as was evident in the perceived incongruence between the traits of brand spokes-characters endowed with gender cues and that of NPOs. Congruence between the stimuli and a product or brand can influence the perceptions of those stimuli (Chang, 2014:507), and thus the product or brand that it represents. Marketers should therefore always consider the brand and its context when designing marketing stimuli, as consumers rely on this perceived congruence to decide its suitability for the product or brand it represents.

Third, when the brand spokes-characters were endowed with gender cues, they were acknowledged as slightly more human-like than those that were devoid of these cues. Thus, to elicit the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters, marketers should also consider endowing these characters observable gender cues, such as clothing, clothing accessories, and/or gender-specific facial features (e.g., a moustache for males or long eyelashes for females). Through more effective attempts at eliciting brand anthropomorphism – such as the use of gender cues – greater brand benefits can be yielded.

5.3. Limitations and directions for future research

Despite the contribution of the findings in this study, no social science research is without limitations that should be addressed by future research. First, this study was exploratory in nature, which is why a small sample for the online panel (consisting of 60 respondents) was deemed suitable (Denscombe, 2014:32,34). However, due to the qualitative methodology and sampling methods, the findings of this study are not generalisable. Despite this limitation, the study still provides valuable insight into the deeper meanings associated with gendered brand spokes-character stimuli and their role in brand anthropomorphism and NPOs, which were unearthed during the design and vetting process.

Second, this study was concerned with the acknowledgement of brand spokes-characters' gender and its subsequent role in the brand anthropomorphism of such characters through both observable and unobservable human-like qualities. However, brand anthropomorphism was not explicitly tested by means of an empirically valid and reliable scale. Thus the recommendation for future research would be for it to determine the influence of gender in brand anthropomorphism by testing brand anthropomorphism by means of a valid and reliable scale.

Third, while this study attempted to ascertain whether gendered brand spokes-characters play a role in brand anthropomorphism, it did not further explore which of the two genders (male or female) are likely to be anthropomorphised to a larger degree, or why. Future studies would thus be warranted in exploring whether brand spokes-characters acknowledged as male or female are likely to be anthropomorphised more so than the other is.

Fourth, the role of the consumers' gender was not considered in this study; yet, according to Worth, Smith and Mackie (1992:28), the interaction between consumers' perception of their own gender and that of products or brands is at times more influential in product or brand evaluations than either factor in isolation. Thus future research is recommended to examine the role of both the gender of marketing stimuli and consumers' gender in brand anthropomorphism.

Last, future research could also explore the consequences for brands of the role that gendered brand spokes-characters play in the brand anthropomorphism of these characters. That topic was beyond the scope of this study.

6. CONCLUSION

While academic studies have shown brand anthropomorphism to yield several benefits for products or brands, such as brand loyalty (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:371), few have explored the prevalence of gendered brand stimuli, the simultaneous effects of gender-neutrality that are evident in society, and their impact on brand anthropomorphism. Yet, according to Lieven, Grohmann, Herrmann, Landwehr and Tilburg (2014), a brand's gender plays an important role for brands. The findings of this study, therefore, suggest that, while gender-neutrality plays a role in the acknowledgement of brand spokes-characters' gender, gendered brand spokes-characters play a role in the brand anthropomorphism of these characters, as well as in the perceived suitability of these characters for brands, such as those in the NPO sector. However, through unearthing the deeper meanings associated with personified stimuli endowed with gender cues in this study, it was evident that pictures speak a thousand words, as perceptions of these stimuli's gender appeared to exist and be informed beyond just the stereotypical binary gender divide. Therefore, in order to gain deeper insight into brands as people or brand anthropomorphism going forward, both academics and marketing practitioners alike would need to be more mindful of brand's gender perceptions, especially in a time where traditional gender norms are changing and gender role-reversals are becoming more evident.

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- CHAPTER 3 -

ARTICLE 2: GENDER IS MORE THAN SKIN DEEP – EXPLORING THE ROLE OF BRAND SPOKES-CHARACTERS' GENDER IN BRAND ANTHROPOMORPHISM

ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to explore the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters, and to determine its role in the other perceptions of brand spokes-characters – specifically, the gender dimensions of brand personality and source credibility.

Design/methodology/approach – A gendered spokes-character was used as the stimulus in the survey questionnaire that were distributed via an online panel to 600 respondents currently residing in South Africa. Of the 600 respondents, 200 were respectively exposed to a survey questionnaire using either a female, gender-neutral or male brand spokes-character as the stimulus. The data was analysed using multiple analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Findings – The results reveal that brand spokes-characters' gender influences the perceptions of these characters' unobservable human-like qualities. Statistically significant differences were evident, specifically in the gender dimensions of brand personality and in attractiveness and expertise (two dimensions of source credibility).

Research implications – From a theoretical perspective, this study adds to the existing body of knowledge about brand anthropomorphism by highlighting the role of personified non-human brand stimuli's acknowledged gender in such stimuli's perceived unobservable human-like qualities.

Practical implications – The findings of this study suggest that marketers be mindful when ascribing a gender to, or shaping the gender perceptions of, their brands or any marketing stimuli, as its acknowledged gender may influence perceptions of it having specific human-like qualities.

Originality/value – Contrary to earlier literature about anthropomorphism elicited primarily through gender-neutral personified stimuli, this study explores the role of the acknowledged gender of personified brand stimuli in the brand anthropomorphism of such stimuli.

Keywords – Brand spokes-characters, Brand anthropomorphism, Cognitive consistency, Brand gender, Source credibility

Paper type – Research paper

1. INTRODUCTION

“Because women and girls are not valued equally as human beings, they are treated as less than such.” Waris Dirie

Denying full humanness to human beings has been referred to as ‘dehumanisation’ (Haslam, 2006:252). Within the dehumanisation literature, it is proposed that the gender of human beings play a role in the degree of humanness attributed to them. Females, especially, are likely to be attributed with less humanness and be more objectified than males (Haslam, 2006:253). Therefore, just as human beings can be denied full humanness, so can non-human agents be attributed a degree of humanness. This phenomenon has been referred to as ‘anthropomorphism’, and is defined as the perception of non-human agents as having unobservable human-like qualities (Epley, 2018:591). Anthropomorphism is likely to be easily elicited when non-human agents are personified using observable human-like attributes (Epley *et al.*, 2007:869; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:358). This occurrence of anthropomorphism, elicited by means of personified non-human agents, may occur as a result of the principles of cognitive consistency. Since personified non-human agents appear observably human-like but are essentially not human, individuals’ knowledge of these agents may be inconsistent with their existing knowledge of human beings (Epley *et al.*, 2007:869). The anthropomorphism of these agents is thus likely to occur in order to reduce this inconsistency and to make sense of these personified non-human agents. According to Epley *et al.* (2007:867), once anthropomorphism occurs, anthropomorphic beliefs can vary along a continuum, such that some individuals may hold stronger anthropomorphic beliefs about non-human agents than do others. This is similar to how human beings can be assigned full humanness by some individuals while being dehumanised by others (Haslam, 2006:252). Therefore, just as gender can cause variation in the degree of humanisation of human beings, it can be supposed that, if non-human agents such as brands are personified with gender cues, it is likely that its acknowledged gender may also cause variation in the degree of anthropomorphism of these brands – a point that will be explored in this study.

There appears to be a growing body of research examining anthropomorphism (e.g., Hur, Koo and Hofmann, 2015; Ketron and Naletelich, 2019; Wan, 2018). First,

anthropomorphism appears often to have been examined as a trait, through understanding individuals' propensity or tendency to engage therein (e.g., Chin *et al.*, 2004; Letheren *et al.*, 2016; Timpano and Shaw, 2013). The items that have often been used to measure anthropomorphism as a trait include statements such as “*To what extent does the average fish have free will?*” and “*To what extent do cows have intentions?*” (Waytz *et al.*, 2010a:229). Evidently, these statements are not based on exposure to specific stimuli, but rather are generic in nature in order to ascertain individuals' general tendency to anthropomorphise non-human agents or objects. Second, anthropomorphism appears often to have also been examined by comparing the scores for anthropomorphism of those exposed to personified, versus non-personified stimuli. These studies frequently find that the personified stimuli elicit anthropomorphism to a greater degree than non-personified stimuli (Kim and McGill, 2011; Kwak *et al.*, 2015, 2017; Reavey *et al.*, 2018). Thus, from the existing body of knowledge to date, it appears that the exploration of anthropomorphism, using only personified non-human stimuli to elicit anthropomorphism to gain insight into the variance between strongly and weakly held anthropomorphic beliefs (Epley *et al.*, 2007:867), is scarce.

Studies that have explored anthropomorphism using personified stimuli appear often to have portrayed these stimuli as gender-neutral (e.g., Awad and Youn, 2018; Reavey *et al.*, 2018; Touré-Tillery and McGill, 2015), with very little consideration for endowing such stimuli with gender cues in order to explore its potential and varying subsequent effects. Therefore, the exploration of the role of personified non-human stimuli with gender cues, in anthropomorphism appears to be scant. Based on the dehumanisation literature, the acknowledged gender of personified stimuli may be an important consideration for gaining further insight, not only into anthropomorphism, but also into the variance between weakly and strongly held anthropomorphic beliefs about such stimuli.

Thus, for the purposes of this study, it was deemed important to use personified non-human brand stimuli endowed with gender cues to explore its role in the anthropomorphism of brands (i.e., brand anthropomorphism). Consequently, in an attempt to elicit brand anthropomorphism in this study, brand personification using brand spokes-characters endowed with human-like cues were used; while perceptions

of their gender were elicited by endowing some of the characters with observable gender cues and others with no gender cues. The primary aim of this study, therefore, was to explore the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters. According to MacInnis and Folkes (2017:371), anthropomorphised brands may yield several brand benefits, such as brand loyalty and commitment, and a willingness to pay a premium price and to spread positive word-of-mouth. The implications of this study may therefore provide marketers with insight into the role of the acknowledged gender of a personified brand or brand stimuli in brand anthropomorphism, which may subsequently inform the extent to which brand benefits may be yielded.

According to Grohmann (2009:111–112) and Bem (1974:160–161), a brand or its spokesperson with observable gender cues is likely to be perceived as having a specific unobservable gender dimension of brand personality (i.e., a masculine or feminine brand personality), which can be explained by the principles of cognitive consistency. Similarly, based on the principles of cognitive consistency, brand spokes-characters with gender cues are therefore also likely to be perceived as having a specific unobservable gender dimension of brand personality. However based on the observable human-like similarities of the brand spokes-characters to be used as the stimuli in this study, the principles of cognitive consistency also suggest that consumers are also likely to interpret and make sense of these characters as they would real-life human brand spokespersons (Garretson and Niedrich, 2004:26). According to Hovland *et al.* (1953:19), human spokespersons are generally interpreted and understood by their perceived credibility (trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness), which is likely to be influenced by their gender (Pearson, 1982:5). Therefore, brand spokes-characters are also likely to be interpreted in terms of their perceived source credibility, yet owing to their gender cues, their perceived source credibility is also likely to be influenced by their acknowledged gender. Consequently, in order to explore the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in the brand anthropomorphism of these characters, it was deemed necessary also to explore its role in the other perceptions of brand spokes-characters – specifically, the gender dimensions of brand personality (i.e., masculine or feminine brand personality) and source credibility (i.e., trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness). This therefore became the secondary aims of this study.

The data for this study was collected using a survey questionnaire distributed to the members of an online panel. The findings suggest that the acknowledged gender of personified non-human brand stimuli may be a key consideration when exploring brand anthropomorphism, which has implications for both theory and practice. One of the findings was that brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender did not always align with their intended gender, with more gender differences being evident in terms of their acknowledged rather than intended gender. A practical implication is for more focus to be placed on understanding a brand or its acknowledged gender than its intended gender, in order to yield the maximum brand benefits as a result.

In the next sections of this article, an argument is made for the use of the cognitive consistency theory in exploring the role of brand spokes-characters' gender in brand anthropomorphism, the gender dimensions of brand personality, and source credibility. Thereafter, the methodology, data analysis, and results are explained. The article concludes with a discussion, which includes implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Cognitive consistency theory

The psychological principle of cognitive consistency suggests that one of the most basic human motivations is to achieve consistency within and between cognitions (Awa and Nwuche, 2010:44; Festinger, 1957:1; Gawronski and Strack, 2004:535). Cognition refers to the “knowledge, opinion and/or beliefs about an environment, about oneself or about one’s behaviour” (Festinger, 1957:3). Festinger (1957:4–5) highlights two of the most common causes of cognitive inconsistencies or dissonances between cognitions: 1) new events or information that may be contrary to existing knowledge, opinions, and/or cognitive behaviour; and 2) when the cognition of an action taken is contrary to the cognition of a different action. In the event that these inconsistencies exist, people become motivated to reduce or eliminate them, which could include changing their behaviour or environment, or adding new cognitive elements (Festinger, 1957:18–21).

According to Kurzman (2008:5–6), individuals constantly seek to understand the world by identifying, evaluating, and engaging with perceptual ‘inputs’ or stimuli. Therefore, based on the principles of cognitive consistency, when consumers encounter personified non-human stimuli, their knowledge of these stimuli and those of actual human beings may appear to be inconsistent with one another. Such inconsistency is therefore what is likely to motivate consumers to reduce it, by relying on and eliciting existing knowledge about human beings (Epley *et al.*, 2007:869) in order to make sense of, and understand, these kinds of stimuli. Consequently, personified non-human stimuli are likely to be perceived as having unobservable human-like qualities (e.g. a mind, intentions, or free will), beyond its observable human-like attributes (e.g., human-like face, eyes, mouth, or body), which is essentially what constitutes anthropomorphism. Thus the principles of cognitive consistency provide a suitable foundation on which anthropomorphism can be understood in this study.

However, the principles of cognitive consistency also suggest that, when consumers encounter personified non-human stimuli with a gender, consumers are likely to rely on, and transfer, society’s gender associations and stereotypes (e.g., males being perceived as strong, and females being perceived as weak) on to these stimuli in order to make sense of them and understand them. The principles of cognitive consistency also suggest that personified non-human brand stimuli, such as the brand spokes-characters, are likely to be interpreted and perceived in terms of their perceived credibility, much as how human spokespersons would generally be perceived (Garretson and Niedrich, 2004:26) due to their observable human-like similarities. Cognitive consistency thus provides a suitable theoretical underpinning in this study, which explains not only the brand anthropomorphism of personified non-human brand stimuli, but also the perceptions of these stimuli’s gender and their credibility.

2.2. Brand anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism, which was first described in the 6th century BC by Xenophanes, a Greek philosopher, was used to describe how non-human gods and supernatural beings resembled their human believers (Waytz *et al.*, 2010b:59). Since then it has been described as an intuitive individual cognitive process in which unobservable human-like qualities (e.g., a mind or emotion) are attributed to non-human agents, and

entails more than merely descriptive reports of these non-human agents' observable or imagined behaviours (Epley *et al.*, 2007:865). Even though anthropomorphism has often been recognised as an invariant and universal human trait (Guthrie and Guthrie, 1993), light was shed on the phenomenon in 2007 from a psychological perspective (Epley *et al.*, 2007).

Three determinants of anthropomorphism were consequently, uncovered: elicited agent knowledge, sociality, and effectance motivation. Elicited agent knowledge is considered the primary cognitive determinant of anthropomorphism, whereas sociality and effectance motivation are considered the two motivational determinants. *Elicited agent knowledge* refers to the extent to which knowledge about human beings is activated. This kind of knowledge is usually activated to make inferences about unknown or unfamiliar non-human agents (Waytz *et al.*, 2010b:59). *Sociality motivation* refers to the need and/or desire to establish social connections with others. When people lack social connection with other human beings, they are likely to be motivated to seek social connections with non-human agents (Waytz *et al.*, 2010b:59). *Effectance motivation* refers to the motivation to be a competent social agent within one's environment. When people lack understanding, predictability, and control over their environments, especially in the presence of non-human agents, they are likely to attribute human qualities to these non-human agents in order to establish predictability and control over their environments (Epley *et al.*, 2007:866; Waytz *et al.*, 2010b:60). According to Higgins (1996:154), the greater the overlap between the features of a stimulus and stored knowledge, the greater the applicability of the stored knowledge; therefore the process of anthropomorphism is essentially driven by the elicitation of agent knowledge, and is the only determinant that can also be controlled by marketers. For the purposes of this study, anthropomorphism will therefore be explored exclusively from the perspective of its cognitive determinant, elicited agent knowledge, with less focus on sociality or effectance motivation.

Based on the psychological account of anthropomorphism, it has also come to be understood as varying on a continuum between strongly held and weakly held anthropomorphic beliefs (Epley *et al.*, 2007:865). This variance in anthropomorphism can also be explained by the principles of cognitive consistency. According to Festinger (1957:18), the magnitude of inconsistencies between cognitive elements

may vary, and so too the pressure to reduce it. The greater the perceived inconsistencies between the cognition about non-human agents with observable human-like attributes and real-life human beings, the greater the pressure to reduce them. Consequently, this may result in stronger anthropomorphic beliefs about these non-human agents. On the other hand, the weaker the anthropomorphic beliefs or the more oblivious consumers are to the perceived inconsistencies between non-human agents with observable human-like attributes and real-life human beings, the less pressure there will be to reduce them. Consequently, this may result in weaker anthropomorphic beliefs about these non-human agents. According to the Lexico (2018), being oblivious, or oblivion, refers to “the state of being unaware or unconscious of what is happening around one”. Therefore, in this study, weaker anthropomorphic beliefs have been termed *anthroblivion*, whereas stronger anthropomorphic beliefs have been termed *stronger anthropomorphism*.

To date, scholars have made important contributions to the anthropomorphism literature, especially the brand anthropomorphism literature (Epley, 2018:593; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:356). ‘Brand anthropomorphism’ refers to the anthropomorphism of brands, which are essentially non-human agents or stimuli, and has been defined as “consumers’ perceptions of brands as having human-like qualities” (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:356). The qualities that uniquely distinguish human beings from non-human agents, such as brands, are often associated with human beings’ mental capacities or states (Gray *et al.* 2007; Haslam *et al.*, 2008:254), such as intentions, desires, and emotions (Epley, 2018:592). Thus the perception of non-human agents as having unobservable mental capacities or states is central to the anthropomorphism (Epley, 2018:592) of these agents. On this premise, ‘brand anthropomorphism’ in this study will refer to the perceptions of brands as having *unobservable* ‘human-like qualities’ especially relating to mental states or capacities. These qualities have been delimited within this study to include *a mind, intentions, desires, consciousness, and an ability to experience emotions*, as referred to in prior work by both Epley *et al.* (2008:115) and Waytz *et al.* (2010c:422). Unobservable human-like qualities is extensive, therefore it is important to note that brand anthropomorphism is not only limited to the afore-mentioned unobservable human-like qualities, yet these were the specific qualities that were delimited to measure brand anthropomorphism in this study.

In an attempt to elicit brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters in this study, the use of brand personification, which is likely to activate egocentric and elicited agent knowledge (Epley *et al.*, 2007:869), was deemed suitable. ‘Brand personification’ is defined as a “brand’s use of a character with human-like characteristics in packaging, promotion, public relations, or for other marketing-related purposes” (Cohen, 2014:3). For the purposes of this study, these characters have been referred to as *brand spokes-characters*, and ‘brand anthropomorphism’ in this study will therefore refer specifically to the anthropomorphism of these characters, and not necessarily to the brands they represent. In this study, ‘brand spokes-characters’ have been defined as *fictional animated characters that are non-celebrities with observable human-like attributes, that represent brands for promotional purposes, and that are not necessarily registered trademarks for these brands* (Callcott and Lee, 1995; Hosany *et al.*, 2013; Phillips, 1996). An example of a familiar brand spokes-character that fits this definition is Toucan Sam (Kellogg’s Froot Loops). However, to explore and gain more insight into brand anthropomorphism, these brand spokes-characters were not only endowed with biological human-like attributes, but some were also endowed with socially-constructed gender cues, in order to gain more insight into the variance in brand anthropomorphism, between *stronger brand anthropomorphism* (strongly held anthropomorphic beliefs) and *brand anthroblivion* (weakly held anthropomorphic beliefs). This was based on the premise that since the gender of human beings plays a role in the degree to which human beings are dehumanised and objectified (Haslam, 2006:253), the acknowledged gender of brand spokes-characters is also likely to play a role in the degree to which they are anthropomorphised.

2.3. Brand spokes-characters’ gender and gender dimensions of brand personality

In order to explore the role of brand spokes-characters’ acknowledged gender in the brand anthropomorphism of these characters, it was necessary to understand what constitutes *gender*. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), gender refers to “socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed” (WHO, Not dated). Specifically, within the context of

branding, *brand gender* refers to “the set of gendered brand and product characteristics, attributes and personality traits associated with that brand by consumers” (Ulrich, Tissier-Desbordes and Dubois, 2011:137).

According to Ulrich *et al.* (2011), the *gendered attributes of brand communication* and the *gender dimensions of brand personality* are important dimensions of brand gender that, for the purposes of this study, can be inferred solely from the brand spokes-character itself. This makes these two dimensions of brand gender especially important considerations in this study. First, *gendered attributes of brand communication* refers to the gendered associations made with a brand, essentially based on its gender cues (Ulrich *et al.*, 2011:140). Second, *gender dimensions of brand personality* stems from *brand personality*, which was introduced by Aaker (1997:347) as the “human characteristics associated with brands”. Since masculinity and femininity are important aspects of human personality (Constantinople, 1973), and because consumers are likely to relate to brands as they would to ‘human’ partners (Fournier, 1998), Grohmann (2009:106) argues that consumers are likely to associate masculine and feminine traits with brands too. *Gender dimensions of brand personality* thus refers to a “set of human personality traits associated with masculinity and femininity applicable and relevant to brands” (Grohmann, 2009:106). However, according to Grohmann (2009:111–112) and Bem (1974:160–161), and aligned with cognitive consistency, a brand or its spokesperson with observable gender cues or attributes (i.e. *gendered attributes*) is likely to be associated with them being perceived as having more of a masculine or feminine brand personality (i.e. *gender dimension of brand personality*). And based on the principles of cognitive consistency, brand spokes-characters with gender cues (i.e. *gendered attributes*) are also likely to influence perceptions of them having a masculine or feminine brand personality (i.e. *gender dimension of brand personality*). For example, when exposed to a brand spokes-character with male gender cues, a masculine brand personality is more likely to be perceived as prominent, as this achieves cognitive consistency; however, if a feminine brand personality were to be perceived as more prominent in this instance, it may result in cognitive dissonance or inconsistency. Therefore, in an attempt to explore and understand the role of brand spokes-characters’ acknowledged gender in brand anthropomorphism; as a result of its gender cues, it was also important also to understand its role in brand spokes-characters’ perceived gender dimension of brand

personality, which essentially can also be considered an unobservable human-like quality. Thus, based on the aforementioned literature, it can be hypothesised that:

- H₁: Based on brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender, there are significant differences in masculine brand personality.
- H₂: Based on brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender, there are significant differences in feminine brand personality.

According to Pearson (1982:5), the acknowledged gender of human spokespersons generally influences perceptions of their credibility, a lens traditionally used to interpret and perceive human spokespersons (Hovland *et al.*, 1953:19). Based on the principles of cognitive consistency, brand spokes-characters are therefore likely to be perceived similarly (Garretson and Niedrich, 2004:26), and consequently their acknowledged gender is also likely to influence perceptions of their credibility.

2.4. Brand spokes-characters' gender and credibility

According to Sternthal *et al.* (1978), the perceived credibility of spokespersons exercises great persuasiveness on a targeted audience, which is key for marketers. The effectiveness of spokespersons can be examined through the source credibility model, depending on the relationship and similarities between spokespersons' positive characteristics, the endorsed product or brand, and the intended audience (Stafford *et al.*, 2002:18). *Source credibility* is defined as the "communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message" (Ohanian, 1990:41). According to Hovland *et al.* (1953) and Hovland and Weiss (1951), there are two factors leading to the perceived credibility of communicators: trustworthiness and expertise. Source attractiveness, as a component of the source valence model (McGuire, 1985), has also been highlighted as an important influence in persuasive communication effectiveness (e.g., Patzer, 1983). For the purposes of this study, the refined measure of source credibility, comprising *trustworthiness*, *expertise*, and *attractiveness* as proposed by Ohanian (1990), was therefore used to explore brand spokes-characters' credibility. *Trustworthiness* can be defined as a receiver's confidence in a communicator to communicate a message that is deemed most valid

in an honest and objective manner (Hovland *et al.*, 1953:21; Ohanian, 1991:47). *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.*, 1953:21; Ohanian, 1991:46). *Attractiveness* refers to the facial and physical appearance of a communicator that is pleasing to observe and that attracts an audience's attention (Baker and Churchill, 1977; Patzer, 1983:229).

Traditionally males have been perceived as occupying positions of higher status and authority in society (Eagly and Steffen, 1984:735–736), and in the past some of the studies have shown males to be more effective written communicators than females (Goldberg, 1968; Noel and Allen, 1976). It was thus supposed that males and females are likely to be perceived differently when it comes to their credibility, with females likely to be perceived as having less credibility than males (Pearson, 1982:5). Subsequently, several studies have found the gender of communicators to influence either its perceived credibility or the perceived credibility of the message being conveyed by them (Armstrong and McAdams, 2009; Armstrong and Nelson, 2005; Mishra *et al.*, 2001; Pearson, 1982). Since source credibility comprises trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, it is likely that males and females would also be perceived differently in each of these dimensions. This was also evident in a study by Brownlow and Zebrowitz (1990), who found females to be perceived as more trustworthy than males in commercial communications, whereas males were perceived as having more expertise than females. Similarly, studies by Hume and Montgomerie (2001:99) and Principe and Langlois (2012:116) found female faces to be regarded as more attractive than male faces. In accordance with cognitive consistency, brand spokes-characters are also likely to be interpreted and perceived in terms of their credibility, and therefore their acknowledged gender is also likely to influence perceptions of their credibility, which essentially can also be considered an unobservable human-like quality. Therefore, it was deemed important also to understand the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in the perceptions of these characters' perceived source credibility. Grounded on the abovementioned literature, it can be hypothesised that:

- H₃: Based on brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender, there are significant differences in trustworthiness.

- H4: Based on brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender, there are significant differences in expertise.
- H5: Based on brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender, there are significant differences in attractiveness.

2.5. Brand spokes-characters' gender and brand anthropomorphism

The perceived gender differences, as previously mentioned (e.g., males generally being perceived as having more expertise than females), often stem from the gender inequalities prevalent in society. These inequalities are believed to be instilled among children from a young age at home, where girls are often oriented to take on more domestic roles, while males are oriented to take on more competitive roles, and are given harsher punishments because they are perceived as being tougher (Goffman, 1977:314). According to Grau and Zotos (2016:762) and Putrevu (2001:9), the gender inequalities in society appear often to be 'mirrored' or reflected in mass media and advertising environments too. Despite significant advances in the gender equality movements in society, gender stereotyping still appears to be prevalent in advertising (Eisend, 2010:420). This is evident in a study by Zotos and Eirini (2014), who found that, when males and females are framed together in advertisements, females often still appear on the side-lines and are portrayed as inferior and adopting postures of subordination, as opposed to males who appear more tough and autonomous. Males are often perceived as better suited for dominant roles in society, including in the realm of marketing communications, where there are currently twice as many male brand spokes-characters as there are female brand spokes-characters (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2018). Females are often perceived as less suitable for dominant roles in society because they are more likely to be objectified than males (Haslam, 2006:253; Waytz *et al.*, 2010b:60). Thus, based on the principles of cognitive consistency, brand spokes-characters acknowledged as female are also likely to be objectified more than those acknowledged as male, and may therefore elicit weaker perceptions of these characters as having unobservable human-like qualities. In this study, brand spokes-characters acknowledged as female may therefore be more likely to elicit *brand anthroblivion* (i.e., weaker anthropomorphic beliefs), while those

acknowledged as male may be more likely to elicit *stronger brand anthropomorphism* (i.e., stronger anthropomorphic beliefs). It can therefore be hypothesised that:

- H₆: Based on brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender, there are significant differences in brand anthropomorphism.

3. METHODOLOGY

Personified non-human brand stimuli, such as brand spokes-characters, are more likely to be anthropomorphised (Epley *et al.*, 2007:869; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:358) as a result of their observable human-like similarities. In addition, according to Bucklin (2017), when non-human agents are ascribed a name, it implicitly means that they are likely to be perceived as human-like too. Thus, personified brand spokes-characters named 'Jojo' were used as the stimuli in this study to elicit brand anthropomorphism. Since this study examines anthropomorphism, it was necessary to delimit brands spokes-characters to exclude human characters, and to focus only on non-human characters. Thus, the use of an animal was deemed suitable. A study by Connell (2013:463) argues that, because of the forward-facing ears, hand-like claws, and ability to walk bipedally for short distances, these animals appear observably more human-like than many other animals. A bear was therefore chosen to be the brand spokes-character in this study. A bear brand spokes-character was designed for the specific purposes of this study in order to ensure that it was unfamiliar, and to avoid biased responses that may have resulted from using a well-known bear brand spokes-character.

Since brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender is central for the purposes of this study, it was deemed necessary also to elicit perceptions of the bear brand spokes-character's gender. Therefore, based on *male* and *female* being the two prominent gender categories in a culture (Wood and Eagly, 2015:461), male and female versions of the bear brand spokes-character were created. According to Cao *et al.* (2008), Golomb, Lawrence and Sejnowski (1990), and Shakin *et al.* (1985), stereotypical gender cues such as facial features, clothing (including accessories), and physique or body shape are among several observable cues that often distinguish males from females. Facial features and clothing accessories were therefore added to

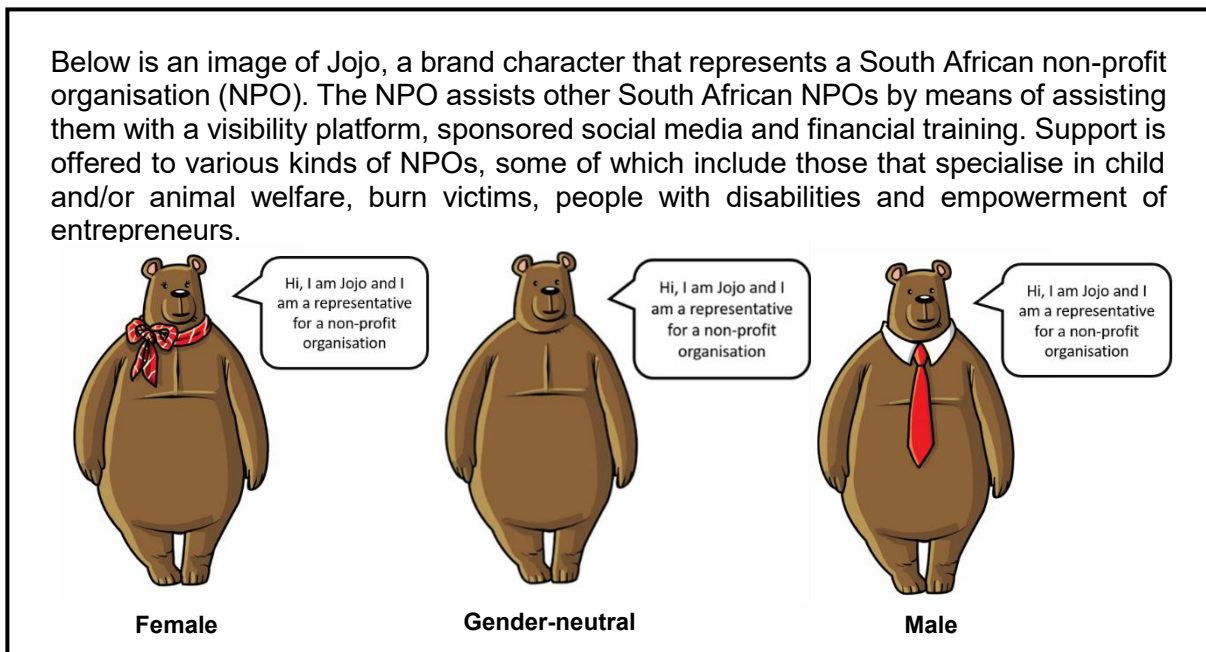
the bear brand spokes-characters in this study, as gender cues in order to portray them as either male or female. In terms of facial features, the female bear brand spokes-character was presented with longer eyelashes than the male character. In terms of clothing accessories, both bear brand spokes-characters were portrayed as wearing neckline accessories in order to avoid biased responses if each wore a different kind of accessory. However, to create the distinction between the two genders, the male bear brand spokes-character wore a red tie while the female character wore a tied red scarf. It was deemed necessary to control for the colour of the accessories – thus the colour red was used – as it is considered to be a unisex colour (Olvera, 2012). In addition to creating a male and female version of the bear brand spokes-character, a gender-neutral version was created due to *gender-neutrality* becoming a notable marketing and consumer trend in recent years (Claveria, 2016; Kasriel-Alexander, 2016:18), and it was used as a point of reference against which to compare the characters endowed with gender cues. This version of the bear brand spokes-character was created without any stereotypical gender cues (i.e., no facial features and no clothing accessories). The purpose of including a gender-neutral version was to ascertain whether these characters would still be perceived as having a gender, despite portraying no observable gender cues, due to gender-neutrality gaining popularity within society. The purpose of using personified brand spokes-characters with gender cues was in an attempt to elicit stronger brand anthropomorphism than the gender-neutral character. If brand anthropomorphism were to be elicited, it was anticipated to be more so for the gender-neutral characters, and if it were to be elicited between the two characters with gender cues, it was anticipated more so for those endowed and/or acknowledged as female than male.

According to Ulrich *et al.* (2011), there are six dimensions that constitute *brand gender*: the gendered attributes of brand communication, the gender dimensions of brand personality, the gender of the typical brand user, the grammatical gender of the brand name, the gendered attributes of the logo, and the gendered attributes and benefits of the products. With a focus on brand spokes-characters' gender in this study, it was important to account for all these brand gender dimensions when exploring brand spokes-characters' gender. First, as previously alluded to, *gendered attributes of brand communication* and *gender dimensions of brand personality* were accounted for, and could be inferred from the characters themselves, based on their endowed

gender cues. The use of gender cues was an attempt to elicit perceptions of the characters' gendered attributes and, inadvertently, their respective gender dimension of brand personality. Second, the *gender of the typical brand user* was addressed in this study by setting gender quotas to have an equal representation of male and female respondents. Alreck, Settle and Belch (1982) argue that males are likely to prefer masculine brands, while females are likely to prefer feminine brands. Thus, to avoid a bias in the responses, it was deemed necessary to set equal quotas for the gender of the respondents who participated in this study. Last, the *grammatical gender of the brand name, gendered attributes of the logo, and the gendered attributes and benefits of the product itself* were addressed using a scenario in the questionnaire. The scenario was used to introduce the brand spokes-character stimulus by name, as a representative of an NPO that operates across multiple industries and categories. Figure 1 below provides the scenario and visual aid used to introduce each bear brand spokes-character as a stimulus within the questionnaire. Detailed brand information about the NPO, beyond what was needed to get to know the brand spokes-character itself, was deemed irrelevant, and was thus omitted. Previous research proposes that there are perceived differences between male and female endorsers for NPOs when it comes to attitudes toward an NPO and its advertising, as well as the intention to donate (Roozen and Raedts, 2017). This is especially so, since females are generally perceived to have a more communal nature (i.e., a concern for the wellbeing of others) than males (Eagly and Steffen, 1984). It appears that the gender of an endorser or spokesperson plays an influential role in its perceived effectiveness and suitability for NPOs, and thus an NPO was deemed a suitable context for this study.

Figure 1: 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 brand spokes-character stimuli



3.1. Sample

A convenience sampling method was used to recruit 600 respondents using an online panel. The respondents were all 18 years and older, currently residing in South Africa, and were incentivised for their participation in this study. Since gender was examined in this study, it was deemed necessary to set gender quotas to avoid unbiased results. The target population thus consisted of 100 male and 100 female respondents who were each exposed to a questionnaire using one of the stimuli depicted in Figure 1.

3.2. Questionnaire design

Respondents were requested first to acknowledge the gender of the bear brand spokes-character to which they were exposed. Thereafter they were asked questions about its perceived masculine and feminine brand personality, its perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (i.e., source credibility), and about the brand anthropomorphism of the characters. The perceived masculine and feminine brand personality traits of the brand spokes-characters were measured through six items respectively (e.g., 'Jojo appears to be brave' and 'Jojo appears to be sensitive') adapted from Grohmann (2009). Based on Ohanian (1990), the brand spokes-characters' source credibility was measured through three dimensions:

trustworthiness, *expertise*, and *attractiveness*, comprising five items each (e.g., ‘Jojo appears to be honest’, ‘Jojo appears to be knowledgeable’, and ‘Jojo appears to be attractive’). Brand anthropomorphism was measured through five items (e.g., ‘Jojo appears to have desires’ and ‘Jojo appears to have intentions’) used by both Epley *et al.* (2008:115) and Waytz *et al.* (2010c:422). The items were measured with a seven-point scale (1 = ‘strongly disagree’ and 7 = ‘strongly agree’). Demographic questions for this study included questions about respondents’ gender and age. Before the final questionnaire was distributed among the online panel, a pre-test was conducted among 60 respondents to determine any weaknesses in the instrumentation of the questionnaire (Cooper and Schindler, 2011:89).

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The data analysis for this study was conducted on Version 25 of the IBM AMOS and SPSS software packages. This section is organised as follows: first, the demographic profile of respondents; second, the results of the acknowledgment of gender of the brand spokes-character stimuli versus its intended gender; third, the validity and reliability of the scales used in this study; fourth, the descriptive statistics; and last, the results from the ANOVAs used to test the hypotheses.

4.1. Demographic profile of respondents

Owing to the gender quota that was set for this study, there were 300 respondents who identified as male and 300 who identified as female. The age of the respondents was from 18 years to 70 years, with 76% of the respondents ranging from the ages of 18 and 35.

4.2. Acknowledgement of the gender of the brand spokes-character stimuli versus its intended gender

According to Du Toit (2014:75), perceptions and/or reactions to stimuli are considered subjective in nature, implying that each individual perceives or reacts to stimuli on their own terms. Consumers may differ in their perceptions of marketing stimuli, and these perceptions may even at times be at odds with what was intended by marketers.

Perceptions and/or reactions to stimuli, specifically marketing stimuli, have been noted as important in the marketing literature because consumers' purchasing decisions are often, to an extent, based on consumers' perceptions (Du Toit, 2014:76) rather than on what was intended by marketers. Thus, for the purposes of this study, exploring and understanding the influence of the bear brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender was an important consideration in this study. While the brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender was the focus of this study, the characters' intended gender was also included in the data analysis of this study to ascertain whether different results would be yielded, that might have important implications for marketers. Table 1 compares the frequencies of the bear brand spokes-characters' *acknowledged* as female, gender-neutral, and male, with the frequencies of those *intended* to be female, gender-neutral, and male respectively, according to the 300 male and the 300 female respondents who participated in this study.

Table 1: Frequencies of the bear brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender vs its intended gender according to both male and female respondents

Respondents' gender	Intended gender	Acknowledged gender			Total
		Female	Gender-neutral	Male	
Female	Female	27	46	27	100
	Gender-neutral	14	39	47	100
	Male	8	20	72	100
	Total	49	105	146	300
Male	Female	27	36	37	100
	Gender-neutral	13	46	41	100
	Male	7	18	75	100
	Total	47	100	153	300
Total	Female	54	82	64	200
	Gender-neutral	27	85	88	200
	Male	15	38	147	200
	Total	96	205	299	600

Since a gender quota was set, 100 males and 100 females (i.e., 200 respondents) were respectively exposed to a bear brand spokes-character *intended* to be either female, gender-neutral or male. As is evident in Table 1, only 54 of the 200 (27%) respondents exposed to the character intended to be female correctly acknowledged

it as such, while 85 of the 200 (42.5%) respondents exposed to the character intended to be gender-neutral, and 147 of the 200 (73.5%) respondents exposed to the character intended to be male, correctly acknowledged it as such respectively. Thus the character intended to be male was the most correctly acknowledged according to its intended gender. In terms of *acknowledged* gender, 96 of the 600 (16%) respondents acknowledged the bear brand spokes-characters as female, 205 of the 600 (34.17%) respondents acknowledged the bear brand spokes-characters as gender-neutral, and 299 of the 600 (49.83%) respondents acknowledged the bear brand spokes-characters as male, irrespective of its intended gender. Thus the most acknowledged gender was male, confirming the male dominance in society, because when in doubt, respondents acknowledged the characters more as male than as female or gender-neutral.

4.3. Validity and reliability

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the convergent and discriminant validity of the scales, and the reliability of the scales was assessed through calculating Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) values (Hair *et al.*, 2014:618–619). An item from the masculine brand personality scale, MBP2 (*Jojo appears to be aggressive*) and an item from the feminine brand personality scale, FBP1 (*Jojo appears to be fragile*) were eliminated from further analysis owing to factor loadings that were below 0.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2014:617). In addition, item MBP5 (*Jojo appears to be dominant*) was also eliminated from the masculine brand personality construct for further analysis, owing to discriminant validity issues in which the construct's inter-construct correlation coefficient was above the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) (Malhotra, 2010:749) for *Masculine brand personality*. After the elimination of these three items, the final 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 also calculated in order to make the reliability analysis more robust. As evident from Table 2, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients and CR were all above 0.7 (Hair *et al.*,

2014:619), which indicates the good reliability of all the scales involved. Convergent validity was assessed using the AVE, and all constructs were above the expected cut-off of 0.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2014:619), as illustrated in Table 2. Statistical evidence of convergent validity of the final measurement model in this study was thus provided.

Table 2: Reliability and convergent validity assessment

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

Note: BP = Brand personality

As seen in Table 3 below, there was discriminant validity because the square root of the final AVEs for each construct was above the inter-construct correlation coefficients (Malhotra, 2010:749). Thus the instruments used in the final measurement model were deemed reliable and valid for the purposes of this study.

Table 3: Discriminant validity analysis

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

Note: BP = Brand personality; BA = Brand anthropomorphism

4.4. Descriptive statistics

The mean scores and standard deviations for the bear brand spokes-characters acknowledged and intended gender (i.e., female, gender-neutral, and male) for masculine brand personality, feminine brand personality, trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and brand anthropomorphism are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4 shows that the bear brand spokes-characters *acknowledged* as female attained higher mean scores for masculine brand personality (M = 5.04, SD = 1.40), feminine brand personality (M = 5.59, SD = 1.32), trustworthiness (M = 5.35, SD = 1.49), expertise (M = 5.27, SD = 1.32), attractiveness (M = 4.83, SD = 1.49), and brand anthropomorphism (M = 5.16, SD = 1.42) than those *acknowledged* as gender-neutral or male. Similarly, the bear brand spokes-characters *intended* to be female attained higher mean scores for masculine brand personality (M = 4.82, SD = 1.34), for feminine brand personality (M = 5.41, SD = 1.39), for attractiveness (M = 4.57, SD = 1.60), and for brand anthropomorphism (M = 4.94, SD = 1.34) than those characters *intended* to be gender-neutral or male.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics for brand spokes-characters' acknowledged and intended gender

		Acknowledged gender			Intended gender		
		N	Mean	Std. deviation	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Masculine BP	Female	96	5.04	1.40	200	4.82	1.34
	Gender-neutral	205	4.91	1.26	200	4.79	1.33
	Male	299	4.67	1.39	200	4.82	1.39
	Total	600	4.81	1.35	600	4.81	1.35
Feminine BP	Female	96	5.59	1.32	200	5.41	1.39
	Gender-neutral	205	5.41	1.27	200	5.31	1.36
	Male	299	5.22	1.48	200	5.30	1.43
	Total	600	5.34	1.39	600	5.34	1.39
Trustworthiness	Female	96	5.35	1.49	200	5.28	1.38
	Gender-neutral	205	5.32	1.33	200	5.24	1.43
	Male	299	5.21	1.40	200	5.30	1.35
	Total	600	5.27	1.39	600	5.27	1.39
Expertise	Female	96	5.27	1.32	200	4.96	1.46
	Gender-neutral	205	4.96	1.36	200	4.77	1.50
	Male	299	4.81	1.61	200	5.08	1.50
	Total	600	4.94	1.49	600	4.94	1.49
Attractiveness	Female	96	4.83	1.49	200	4.57	1.60
	Gender-neutral	205	4.57	1.46	200	4.29	1.45
	Male	299	4.20	1.62	200	4.43	1.62
	Total	600	4.43	1.56	600	4.43	1.56
Brand anthropomorphism	Female	96	5.16	1.42	200	4.94	1.34
	Gender-neutral	205	4.87	1.35	200	4.87	1.41
	Male	299	4.85	1.43	200	4.91	1.46
	Total	600	4.91	1.40	600	4.91	1.40

Legend: **Highest mean**, **Medium mean**, **Lowest mean**

However, it was the bear brand spokes-characters *intended* to be male that attained higher mean scores for trustworthiness ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.35$) and for expertise ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.50$) than those *intended* to be female and gender-neutral. It therefore appears that the characters *intended* to be female and male, both attained higher mean scores across most of the constructs, except for feminine brand personality, where those *intended* to be gender-neutral attained higher mean scores than those *intended* to be male. However, interestingly in terms of *acknowledged* gender, it was the characters *acknowledged* as female and gender-neutral that mostly attained the higher mean scores across all the constructs.

4.5. Hypothesis testing

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) is used to test for statistically significant differences between three or more independent sample means (Allen, Bennett and Heritage, 2018:79). Therefore, in order to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in masculine and feminine brand personality, trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and brand anthropomorphism based on brand spokes-characters' gender (H_1 to H_6), multiple ANOVAs were deemed suitable for the data analysis in this study.

ANOVAs were initially only conducted for *acknowledged* gender (H_1 to H_6), yet due to the interesting results yielded between *acknowledged* and *intended* gender, as evident in Table 4, it was deemed appropriate also to conduct ANOVAs for *intended* gender. Before the interpretation of the ANOVAs, the underlying assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance first needed to be confirmed (Allen *et al.*, 2018:82). To test for normality, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistics were inspected, and it was found that the assumption of normality was violated ($p < 0.05$); however, the ANOVAs were quite robust with respect to moderate violations of this assumption, which is common for larger samples (Allen *et al.*, 2018:82; Pallant, 2011:63). Yet visual inspections of the histograms and normal quantile-quantile (Q-Q) plots were also made, and the distribution appeared approximately normal. To test for the homogeneity of variance, Levene's test for equality of variance was conducted. For *acknowledged* gender, the Levene's statistics were not significant at $\alpha = 0.05$ for all differences scores, except for 'expertise'. Therefore the assumption of homogeneity of variance was not violated, except for 'expertise', suggesting the interpretation of the ANOVA statistics for most of the differences scores, and the interpretation of the Welch statistics (Allen *et al.*, 2018:86) exclusively for the 'expertise' differences score. However, for *intended* gender, the Levene's statistics were not significant at $\alpha = 0.05$ for all the differences scores, implying that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was not violated at all for *intended* gender, and therefore only the ANOVA statistics were interpreted.

4.5.1. ANOVA for *acknowledged* gender

The ANOVA results for *acknowledged* gender indicate that at $\alpha = 0.05$ there were statistically significant differences between the bear brand spokes-characters' *acknowledged* gender (i.e., female, gender-neutral, or male) 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, based on the bear brand spokes-characters' *acknowledged* gender, there were statistically significant differences in expertise, Welch's $F(2, 272.83) = 4.05$, $p = 0.018$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$. In contrast, based on the bear brand spokes-characters' *acknowledged* gender, there were no statistically significant differences in trustworthiness, $F(2, 597) = 0.53$, $p = 0.588$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$; or brand anthropomorphism, $F(2, 597) = 1.88$, $p = 0.153$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$. In summary, hypotheses H₁, H₂, H₄, and H₅ were accepted, and hypotheses H₃ and H₆ were rejected.

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 5, the bear brand spokes-characters *acknowledged* as female ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.40$) attained statistically significantly higher scores for masculine brand personality than those *acknowledged* as male ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.39$). According to Cohen's measure of effect size, a d of 0.2 is considered small, a d of 0.5 is considered medium, and a d of 0.82 is considered large (Cohen, 1988:25–26). Therefore the differences in masculine brand personality between the characters *acknowledged* as female and male were small ($d = 0.2$). Similarly, the bear brand spokes-characters *acknowledged* as female also attained statistically significantly higher scores for feminine brand personality than those *acknowledged* as male ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.32$ vs. $M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.48$), and for attractiveness ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.49$ vs. $M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.62$). Based on Cohen's measure of effect size, these differences in feminine brand personality and attractiveness were both small: $d = 0.2$ and $d = 0.3$ respectively. In terms of attractiveness, the bear brand spokes-characters *acknowledged* as gender-neutral also attained statistically significant higher scores than those characters *acknowledged* as male ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.46$ vs. $M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.62$). Based on

Cohen's measure of effect size, this difference was also small ($d = 0.2$). Due to unequal variances and unequal sample sizes between the three groups (i.e., characters *acknowledged* as female, gender-neutral, and male) in terms of 'expertise', a Games-Howell post hoc procedure was performed (Field, 2013:459) for 'expertise', and was interpreted at $\alpha = 0.05$. These results indicated that the bear 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'. Based on Cohen's measure of effect size, this difference was small ($d = 0.3$).

Table 5: Results from the post hoc tests and Cohen's d for acknowledged gender

	Female	Gender-neutral	Male	p-value	Cohen's d
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 ^a
Attractiveness	4.83 ^a	4.57 ^b	4.20 ^{a b}	0.002* ^a	0.3 ^a
				0.027* ^b	0.2 ^b
BA	5.16	4.87	4.85	N/A	N/A

Notes:

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 *italicised p-value* is based on the interpretation of the Games-Howell post hoc procedure, and the *italicised 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 $\alpha = 0.05$

4.5.2. ANOVA for intended gender

The ANOVA results for *intended* gender indicate that at $\alpha = 0.05$ there were no statistically significant differences in masculine brand personality, $F(2, 597) = 0.03$, $p = 0.974$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$; feminine brand personality, $F(2, 597) = 0.39$, $p = 0.675$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$;

trustworthiness, $F(2, 597) = 0.10$, $p = 0.905$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$; expertise, $F(2, 597) = 2.29$, $p = 0.102$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$; attractiveness, $F(2, 597) = 1.63$, $p = 0.198$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$; and brand anthropomorphism, $F(2, 597) = 0.14$, $p = 0.867$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$, between any of the bear brand spokes-characters' *intended* gender.

5. DISCUSSION

In previous studies, brand anthropomorphism has mostly been explored using gender-neutral personified brand stimuli (e.g., Awad and Youn, 2018), while the degree of its occurrence has been explored by comparing the scores of those exposed to personified stimuli versus the scores of those exposed to non-personified stimuli (e.g., Kim and McGill, 2011). Unlike these previous studies, this study explored the role of personified non-human brand stimuli's (specifically brand spokes-characters) *acknowledged* gender in brand anthropomorphism, and its role in other perceptions of brand spokes-characters – specifically, the gender dimensions of brand personality and source credibility.

First, the results indicated that, based on bear brand spokes-characters' *acknowledged* gender, there were statistically significant differences in masculine and feminine brand personality. Consistent with the findings of Grohmann (2009:111–112), this study reveals that the bear brand spokes-characters *acknowledged* as female had statistically significant higher mean scores for feminine brand personality than those *acknowledged* as male. However, the characters' *acknowledged* as male attained statistically significant lower mean scores for masculine brand personality, as opposed to those *acknowledged* as female. According to Darden (1972:205), this may be attributable to the trends in male-female role reversal and fashion designs, which appear to be narrowing the gap between the traditional views of masculinity and femininity. Thus, depending on situational appropriateness, perceptions of males being considered more feminine and females more masculine are increasing more than ever before (Bem, 1974:155). An example of fashion designs narrowing the gap between males and females is that of tied scarves worn around the necks of females, including the female character in this study (refer to Figure 1). According to an article in *Harper's Magazine*, a tied scarf can be perceived similarly to that of a male tie ("Dress for Success in Court", 1984 in Johnson, Crutsinger and Workman, 1994:27).

Consequently, females in the workplace generally opt to wear their scarves this way to increase perceptions that they have similar managerial qualities to their male co-workers, and inadvertently also possess more masculine personality traits (Johnson *et al.*, 1994). As roles reverse, females are taking on more roles that traditionally were more masculine, including those of being a spokesperson, advocate, or voice of authority for brands (Cohen, 2014:4; Peirce, 2001:846). Thus the brand spokes-characters *acknowledged* as female may have attained higher mean scores for masculine brand personality than those *acknowledged* as male, because of the nature of the brand spokes-character role that they are fulfilling in this study.

Second, in terms of the dimensions of source credibility, the findings of this study indicated that, based on brand spokes-characters' *acknowledged* gender, there were no statistically significant differences in trustworthiness. This may be attributable to NPOs being built on trust (Kelly, Morgan and Coule, 2014:66), and trust lying at the heart of these organisations (Sargeant and Lee, 2004:612). Irrespective of the brand spokes-characters' *acknowledged* gender in this study, the characters thus may all have been equally perceived as trustworthy (i.e., mean scores exceeding 5) because of the type of organisation they were portrayed as representing. The findings also indicated that, based on brand spokes-characters' *acknowledged* gender, there were statistically significant differences in expertise – specifically, that the characters *acknowledged* as female attained significantly higher mean scores for expertise than those *acknowledged* as male. These findings are contrary to the previous study of Brownlow and Zebrowitz (1990), which may be attributable to females' communal nature (i.e., more likely to show concern for the wellbeing of others than males are) (Eagly and Steffen, 1984), which is also often a primary purpose of NPOs (Venable *et al.*, 2005:297). Therefore, since brand spokes-characters were used to represent an NPO in this study, those characters *acknowledged* as female may have attained higher mean scores for having expertise and knowledge of NPOs than those *acknowledged* as male. Based on brand spokes-characters' *acknowledged* gender, there were also statistically significant differences in attractiveness – specifically, those *acknowledged* as female attained higher mean scores than those *acknowledged* as male, which aligns with the previous studies by Hume and Montgomerie (2001:99) and Principe and Langlois (2012:116). And the five items measuring attractiveness, based on the scale by Ohanian (1990), may also lend themselves more to traits easily

associated with females (e.g., elegance, beauty, class) than males. This may therefore have explained why those characters *acknowledged* as gender-neutral may have also attained higher mean scores for attractiveness than those *acknowledged* as male, because the items measuring attractiveness may not be as easily associated with males. Thus, it may still have been more easily associated with the characters *acknowledged* as gender-neutral than those *acknowledged* as male.

Third, contrary to the existing literature, the findings of this study indicated that, based on brand spokes-characters' *acknowledged* gender, there were no statistically significant differences in the brand anthropomorphism of these characters. This may have been attributable to the design of the bear brand spokes-character, as all three versions of the character had identical observable human-like cues (i.e., human-like eyes, mouth, and physique). Since personified stimuli with observable human-like cues are likely to elicit anthropomorphism (Epley *et al.*, 2007:869; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:358), the characters *acknowledged* as female, gender-neutral, or male may all have elicited equivalent perceptions of having unobservable human-like qualities (i.e., mind, intentions, desires, consciousness, and an ability to experience emotions). This may have been due to their identical human-like attributes, as these attributes were more likely to elicit the anthropomorphism of these characters, irrespective of their subtle gender cues, than brand anthropomorphism of these characters. Yet, the significant differences evident in the brand spokes-characters' perceived gender dimension of brand personality and the dimensions of source credibility, both of which could also be considered unobservable human-like qualities, suggest that the brand spokes-characters *acknowledged* gender may still play a role in the brand anthropomorphism of these characters.

The last and interesting finding indicated that, based on the characters' *intended* gender, there were no statistically significant differences in masculine and feminine brand personality, trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and brand anthropomorphism. However, interestingly based on *intended* gender, the bear brand spokes-characters with gender cues (i.e., female or male) mostly attained higher mean scores for brand anthropomorphism (i.e., *stronger brand anthropomorphism*), the gender dimensions of brand personality, and the dimensions of source credibility. This could be confirmation that the manipulation of adding gender cues to the bear

brand spokes-character *intended* to be male and female may have been successful. In contrast, in terms of *acknowledged* gender, it was mostly the characters *acknowledged* as female and gender-neutral that attained the higher mean scores. This difference in the results between *intended* and *acknowledged* gender confirms that what is intended by marketers is not always interpreted and perceived as such by consumers, which may have several implications for marketers.

5.1. Theoretical implications

The role of gender, specifically of non-human gendered stimuli in brand anthropomorphism remains under-explored in the branding domain. This study therefore proposes three theoretical implications.

First, previous studies have often explored the influence of gender-neutral personified brand stimuli on brand anthropomorphism (e.g., Awad and Youn, 2018; Reavey *et al.*, 2018; Touré-Tillery and McGill, 2015). Yet this study, as far as could be determined, is one of only a few to explore the role of personified non-human brand stimuli's *acknowledged* gender in brand anthropomorphism, using brand spokes-characters with gender cues. Even though there were no statistically significant differences in brand anthropomorphism, the characters *acknowledged* as female attained higher mean scores than those *acknowledged* as gender-neutral or male. And, those *intended* to be female and male still attained higher mean scores (i.e., *stronger brand anthropomorphism*) than those without gender cues. According to Ryle (2018:120), through *gender socialisation* human beings develop an internal gender identity from infancy, which becomes an internalised part of each human being, making gender an important part of what makes human beings human. Evident in this study, the brand spokes-characters with gender cues in this study were anthropomorphised to a stronger degree than those devoid of such cues. This study thus sheds light on the importance of not only using personified non-human stimuli with observable human-like cues when exploring anthropomorphism, but also of endowing these stimuli with gender cues. This could be done in order to gain further insight into the variance between stronger and weaker anthropomorphic beliefs, based on the dehumanisation literature (Haslam, 2006:253).

Second, this study extends prior research by confirming gender differences in masculine and feminine brand personality and in two dimensions of source credibility, namely attractiveness and expertise (Bem, 1974; Brownlow and Zebrowitz, 1990; Grohmann, 2009; Hume and Montgomerie, 2001; Principe and Langlois, 2012). This study extends this stream of research by showing that gender differences are evident not only among the genders of real-life human communicators or spokespersons, but also among the genders of personified non-human brand stimuli.

Third, this study extends prior research by shedding light on brand anthropomorphism in an NPO context – specifically, as it highlights the importance of personified non-human brand stimuli's (i.e., brand spokes-characters') unobservable human-like qualities, and the importance and effects of their endowed and acknowledged gender in this context.

5.2. Managerial implications

From a practical perspective, this study first, suggests that the *acknowledged* gender of brand spokes-characters, or of brands in general, may yield different consequences for brands (e.g., brands *acknowledged* as male may be perceived as being more knowledgeable than those *acknowledged* as female). Marketers should therefore be mindful of the gender ascribed to, or carefully shape, the gender perceptions of their products or brands, in order to yield the desired outcomes.

Second, the findings in this article revealed that the *intended* gender of marketing stimuli may not always be *acknowledged* as such. Marketers should therefore consider conducting consumer perception studies on all gendered marketing or brand stimuli before going to market, to ensure that its gender is acknowledged as intended in order to yield the anticipated benefits.

Third, the bear brand spokes-characters in this study were identical in their human-like cues, with only subtle gender cues; and they were designed in a two-dimensional format, which may have accounted for there being no statistically significant differences in brand anthropomorphism based on the characters' *acknowledged* and *intended* gender. Marketers may thus want to consider the use of stimuli designed in

other formats that look more realistic and convincing, such as three-dimensional designs, or characters that move.

Fourth, the brand spokes-characters in this study were perceived as having unobservable human-like qualities such as a gendered personality (i.e. a feminine brand personality) and credibility (i.e. expertise). Thus to elicit brand anthropomorphism, marketers should consider the use of endowing brand stimuli with human-like cues, whether it be observable (e.g. human-like eyes) or unobservable (e.g. an audible human-like voice) as it has been found to elicit perceptions that the stimuli have human-like qualities, which is likely to yield several brand benefits as a result.

Fifth, the nature of the brand being represented – which in this case was an NPO – may appear to play a role in the perceptions of the spokes-characters representing them. In this study, the characters *acknowledged* as female attained higher mean scores for their perceived trustworthiness and expertise, which may be attributable to the communal (i.e., concern for others) nature of females (Eagly and Steffen, 1984), which is also often the purpose behind NPOs (Venable *et al.*, 2005:297). Thus marketers of both profit and not-for-profit organisations should carefully consider the nature and purpose of their brands when selecting or designing stimuli, especially with gender cues, to represent their brands, in order to yield the maximum brand benefits.

5.3. Limitations and directions for future research

Despite the contributions made by the findings of this study, no social science research is without limitations that could be addressed by future research. First, there are many human-like and gender cues that can make non-human stimuli appear more human-like and as having a gender. However, for the purposes of this study, consideration was mostly given to physiological human-like cues (e.g., eyes, mouth) and social gender cues (e.g., clothing accessories). Thus a recommendation for future research is to explore brand anthropomorphism based on other human-like and gender cues, such as an audible human-like voice, or human-like motion. These cues may have effects on brand anthropomorphism that have not been uncovered in this study.

Second, this study focused specifically on the use of gendered personified brands, using brand spokes-characters with *observable* human-like attributes. Yet anthropomorphism is mostly informed by the perceptions of brands' *unobservable* human-like qualities. Previous studies have explored the influence of stimuli with no observable human-like attributes (e.g., logo and product design, copy used in marketing communications) on anthropomorphism (e.g., Payne, Hyman, Niculescu and Huhmann, 2013; Wen Wan *et al.*, 2017). Yet little research has been done on the influence of these stimuli devoid of observable human-like attributes, but with unobservable gender cues (e.g., copy used in marketing communications that portrays a brand as masculine or feminine) on brand anthropomorphism. This can be done to ascertain whether gender, solely as an unobservable human-like quality, would still play a role in brand anthropomorphism.

Third, the acknowledgement of the bear brand spokes-characters' gender in this study was not always in accordance with their *intended* gender. This may have been attributable to the design of the character stimuli in this study, the recent trend of male-female role reversals, or other unexplored factors. This study focused on the acknowledgement of the characters' gender, not on the accuracy of the acknowledgment of the brand spokes-characters' gender, nor on male-female role reversals. Future research could therefore explore the effects of the accuracy of gender acknowledgement and male-female role reversals. This may offer valuable insights not only to the study of gendered marketing stimuli, but also to the broader study of gender. And, because not all of the bear brand spokes-characters were *acknowledged* as either male or female in this study, future research might need to explore other gender categories too. Since gender is starting to exist beyond the culturally accepted male and female divide (Adams, 2017), future research may need to start adapting current measurement of gender perceptions (e.g., the masculine and feminine brand personality scale) in order to be more inclusive.

6. CONCLUSION

In an attempt to determine the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in brand anthropomorphism, the gender dimensions of brand personality, and the dimensions of source credibility, this study's findings suggest that statistically

significant differences between brand spokes-characters' *acknowledged* gender do exist – specifically, in terms of masculine and feminine brand personality, expertise, and attractiveness. However, even though one of the main purposes of this study was to explore the role of brand spokes-characters' gender in the brand anthropomorphism of these characters, no significant differences were found to exist among both the characters' *acknowledged* and *intended* gender with regard to brand anthropomorphism. Yet the findings indicated that the characters' *acknowledged* gender played a role in their other perceived unobservable human-like qualities, namely masculine and feminine brand personality, expertise and attractiveness, which essentially can also be considered to constitute brand anthropomorphism. In addition, it was found that the characters *intended* to be female and male appeared mostly to attain higher mean scores for brand anthropomorphism (i.e., *stronger brand anthropomorphism*) than those devoid of gender cues (i.e., gender-neutral), who may be more likely to elicit *brand anthroblivion*. Thus, in an era when androcentrism is still prevalent even though gender-neutrality is on the rise, marketers should be paying a lot more attention to their brands' *acknowledged* gender. As evident in this study, gender in its entirety is a complicated issue, as it is more than just skin-deep and deserves far more attention in future research, especially where brand anthropomorphism is concerned.

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- CHAPTER 4 -**ARTICLE 3: TO DONATE OR NOT TO DONATE?
THE ROLE OF POTENTIAL DONORS' GENDER IN BRAND
ANTHROPOMORPHISM OF BRAND SPOKES-CHARACTERS AND PROSOCIAL
BEHAVIOUR****ABSTRACT**

Purpose – The increasing competitiveness in the non-profit sector and the prevalence of gendered consumption in the market provides the basis for this study. The purpose was therefore to explore the role of potential donors' gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour by considering brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour.

Design/methodology/approach – In order to elicit brand anthropomorphism, a gender-neutral brand spokes-character was used as the stimulus in a survey questionnaire distributed via an online panel to 200 respondents currently residing in South Africa. The data was analysed using multi-group moderation structural equation modelling (SEM) and mediation analyses.

Findings – The findings indicate that the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters has an influence on brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour in an NPO context, and that these influences differ based on potential donors' gender. The relationship between brand anthropomorphism and intention to donate was also found to be stronger for potential male donors, even though potential female donors donated more money to the NPO than did males.

Research implications – From a theoretical perspective, this study extends the existing body of knowledge on brand anthropomorphism by shedding light on the favourable influence that brand anthropomorphism has in a non-profit context, and that consumers' gender influences brand anthropomorphism and its subsequent outcomes.

Practical implications – From a practical perspective, this study highlights the effectiveness of eliciting brand anthropomorphism in an NPO context, while leveraging the gender of potential donors, in order to derive the most favourable prosocial behaviours toward an NPO.

Originality/value – This study advances the literature on brand anthropomorphism, especially in an NPO context. The findings provide new insights by proposing that potential donors' gender has an effect on the influence of brand anthropomorphism on prosocial behaviour, suggesting that consumers' gender may also play a role in brand anthropomorphism in general.

Keywords – Brand spokes-characters, Brand anthropomorphism, S-O-R framework, Theory of selectivity hypothesis, Brand affect, Intention to donate, Donation behaviour, Non-profit organisation

Paper type – Research paper

1. INTRODUCTION

“Because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different.” Kate Millett

Competitive rivalry between non-profit organisations (NPOs) continues to increase at a rapid rate (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2015:134; Ranganathan and Henley, 2008:134), yet financial support from governments for these organisations are diminishing (Kashif, Sarifuddin and Hassan, 2015:90). Therefore, marketing and brand strategies – including brand identification elements (e.g., logo, name, jingle, design, brand representatives, etc.), used more often in the profit sector – have become fundamental tools that NPOs use in order to differentiate themselves (Michel and Rieunier, 2012:701; Venable *et al.*, 2005:296). This may be especially useful in an NPO context, because eliciting donations has always proved challenging for NPOs; people are generally reluctant to support social causes (e.g., child welfare), as they often require a form of personal sacrifice (Ahn *et al.*, 2014:224). Examples of personal sacrifice include the donation of time, money, or non-monetary goods and services (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2015:135). Yet, Eagly and Steffen (1984) propose that females are generally perceived to be more concerned about others’ wellbeing, and are thus more likely to engage in prosocial behaviour than are males. However, according to Meyers-Levy and Loken (2015:130), understanding how males and females process information, provides great insight for marketing practice, and is often used by marketers to anticipate brand and product choices and preferences in the profit sector. It is therefore apparent that understanding gender differences is not only valuable for marketers of profit organisations, but may also be an important consideration for marketers or managers of NPOs.

An effective element in a marketing or brand strategy that may be worth considering by NPOs is the elicitation of brand anthropomorphism – that is, consumers’ perceptions of brands as having *unobservable* human-like qualities, as alluded to by MacInnis and Folkes (2017:356). Anthropomorphism has been considered useful in social spheres, such as the NPO context, because it enables non-human agents to be perceived as moral beings in need of care and concern (Epley *et al.*, 2007:880), which may entice

potential donors to engage more in prosocial behaviour in such contexts. However, the instances in which anthropomorphism within NPO contexts has been explored in the literature, have often placed more focus on the influence of the *observable* human-like traits of stimuli (i.e. personification) (e.g. Ahn *et al.*, 2014; Ketron and Naletelich, 2019; Reavey *et al.*, 2018; Williams *et al.*, 2015), than on its perceived *unobservable* human-like qualities (i.e. brand anthropomorphism). Thus there appears to be a gap in the existing literature regarding the influence that brand anthropomorphism may have in an NPO context. This study therefore aims to address this by using personified non-human brand stimuli – specifically, brand spokes-characters – to elicit brand anthropomorphism in this context. This may consequently prove effective, especially amidst the increased competitive rivalry in the NPO sector.

In using a brand spokes-character stimulus to elicit brand anthropomorphism in an NPO context in this study, the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework has been deemed an appropriate theoretical framework to underpin the conceptual framework of this study. The S-O-R framework theorises that a *stimulus*, such as a brand spokes-character, evokes emotional and cognitive states in individuals (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982:37; Islam and Rahman, 2017:98). These are referred to as the *organism* component (of which brand anthropomorphism is an example), which may eventually prompt behavioural *responses*. According to Nan *et al.* (2006) the use of personified characters on a website positively influenced the emotional responses toward the website, which, according to Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001:82), is what constitutes *brand affect*. Therefore, the use of a personified character such as a brand spokes-character in this study is also likely to evoke positive emotional *responses*, such as brand affect. Yet, in turn, brand affect has also been found to influence behavioural intentions (Morris *et al.*, 2002:14), which are likely to influence actual behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, brand affect toward the brand spokes-character to be used in this study is also likely to influence prosocial behaviour, including *intention to donate* and subsequently *donation behaviour*. The use of the S-O-R framework to underpin the conceptual framework of this study is thus outlined as follows: brand spokes-characters (i.e., *stimuli*) may elicit emotional and cognitive states such as brand anthropomorphism (i.e., *organism*), which may prompt behavioural responses in an NPO context such as brand affect, donation intention, and donation behaviour (i.e., *response*).

However, the way in which information or even stimuli are processed and responded to, has been found to differ between males and females, based on the theory of selectivity hypothesis (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991). Thus the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters and their subsequent effects in an NPO context may result in the decision either to donate or not to donate, based on the gender of the potential donors. According to Letheren *et al.* (2016:979), limited literature exists about the effects of consumers' gender on anthropomorphism, let alone brand anthropomorphism. Therefore, in order to understand the influence of brand anthropomorphism in an NPO context, it is important also to consider the role of the consumers' gender, or more aptly for this context, potential donors' gender, based on the premise of the theory of selectivity hypothesis. Broadly, the aim of this study is therefore to explore the role of potential donors' gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour. More specifically, the study aims first, to explore the direct relationships between brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters, brand affect, intention to donate and donation behaviour. Second, to explore the indirect relationships between brand anthropomorphism and intention to donate through brand affect, and between brand anthropomorphism and donation behaviour through intention to donate. Third, to explore potential donors' gender as a moderator on the direct relationships in the conceptual framework. The S-O-R framework underpins the entire conceptual framework of this study, while the theory of selectivity hypothesis specifically underpins the importance of considering the role of potential donors' gender in this study.

The data for this study was collected using a survey questionnaire, distributed to an online panel of 200 respondents. The findings indicate that the brand anthropomorphism of a brand spokes-character has an influence on prosocial behaviour in an NPO context, and that this influence differs between male and female potential donors. Thus this study adds to the existing body of knowledge on brand anthropomorphism by providing insight into the benefits – such as prosocial behaviour – that brand anthropomorphism can yield, even in a non-profit context, and into how brand anthropomorphism and its subsequent outcomes can differ between male and female consumers.

The next sections of this article provide an overview of the theoretical framework for this study, the S-O-R framework, and a literature review pertaining to brand anthropomorphism, brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour toward NPOs. Thereafter the methodology, data analysis, and results are discussed. The article concludes with a discussion of this study's implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical framework: Stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework

The stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) which was later adjusted by Jacoby (2002), explains how stimuli in an environment evokes emotional and cognitive states in individuals (i.e., their perceptions) that, in turn, incite behavioural responses toward the stimuli (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982:37; Islam and Rahman, 2017:98). The S-O-R framework is a result of the extension of the stimulus-response (S-R) framework that was initially proposed by Ivan Pavlov (Pavlov and Gantt, 1941), which comprises the three components of stimulus, organism, and response. First, *stimulus* refers to external factors or environmental inputs that an individual encounters, which can include brands, products, logos, and advertisements (Jacoby, 2002:54). These factors or inputs have the ability to stimulate individuals and affect their internal and organismic states (Eroglu *et al.*, 2001:179). Second, *organism* refers to the subconscious processing of stimuli, and is represented by the affective / emotional and cognitive state of an individual (Eroglu *et al.*, 2001:180; Jacoby, 2002:54). 'Emotional states' represent an individual's emotions, such as pleasure and/or arousal, while 'cognitive states' represent their internal mental processes (Islam and Rahman, 2017:98). According to Mehrabian and Russell (1974), *organism* has been considered to be mediator in the relationship between a stimulus and the subsequent behavioural reaction or response. Third, *response* refers to an individual's external and behavioural reactions or responses, which can be categorised as approach or avoidance behaviours. 'Approach behaviour' refers to a favourable or positive reaction, while 'avoidance behaviour' refers to a non-favourable or negative reaction (Bitner, 1992:60; Donovan and Rossiter, 1982:41; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). In an NPO context, approach behaviour could entail favourable intentions to

donate to an NPO, while avoidance behaviour could entail little to no intention to donate to such organisations.

The S-O-R framework underpins the conceptual framework of this study as follows: first, the brand spokes-character used to elicit brand anthropomorphism reflects the *stimulus* component of the S-O-R framework. Second, the *organism* component of the framework manifests itself through the potential donors' emotional and cognitive states while processing the brand spokes-character stimulus, such as the brand anthropomorphism of such a character (i.e., the perceptions that it has unobservable human-like qualities). Last, the *response* component of the framework manifests itself through potential donors' subsequent behavioural reactions or responses, such as brand affect toward the brand spokes-character stimulus, the intention to donate, and their donation behaviour toward the NPO represented by the stimulus.

2.2. Brand anthropomorphism and brand affect toward brand spokes-characters

The attribution of humanness to non-human agents has been referred to as 'anthropomorphism', and has been defined as the perception of non-human agents as having unobservable human-like qualities such as intentions (Epley, 2018:591; Epley *et al.*, 2007:864–865). However, according to Epley (2018:592), Gray *et al.* (2007) and Haslam *et al.* (2008:254), having a mind with mental capacities or states such as intentions, desires, and emotions is often what makes human beings uniquely human, compared with non-human agents. Thus the perception of non-human agents as having unobservable human-like qualities – specifically, mental capacities or states – is essential to anthropomorphism (Epley, 2018:592). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, anthropomorphism will be delimited to the perception of non-human agents as having unobservable human-like qualities such as those associated with mental states or capacities.

In a branding context, brand anthropomorphism has received considerable attention from marketing scholars (e.g. Awad and Youn, 2018; Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2019; Guido and Peluso, 2015; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017). It has been found to yield several brand benefits, including brand loyalty and commitment, a willingness to pay a

premium price, and spreading positive word-of-mouth (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:371). According to MacInnis and Folkes (2017:356), brand anthropomorphism has been defined as “consumers’ perceptions of brands as having human-like qualities”. One of the most explicit attempts at eliciting brand anthropomorphism has been through personification, such as the use of spokes-characters (Delbaere *et al.*, 2011:122), owing to their observably human-like appearance. A spokes-character has been defined as “a fictional, animate being or animated object that has been created for the promotion of a product, service or idea”, but that is not necessarily a legal trademark (Phillips, 1996:146). Examples of well-known spokes-characters include the Michelin Man, Pillsbury Doughboy, and the M&M spokes-candies. Since the personification of non-human agents is key to easily elicit anthropomorphism, a brand spokes-character was used as the stimulus in this study, thereby reflecting the *stimulus* component of the S-O-R framework. For the purposes of this study, a brand spokes-character is defined as *a fictional animated character with observable human-like attributes that represents a brand for promotional purposes, and is not necessarily a registered trademark for the brand* (Callcott and Lee, 1995; Hosany *et al.*, 2013; Phillips, 1996). At this stage, it is important to delineate that, in this study, ‘brand anthropomorphism’ refers solely to the anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-character, not to the brand itself. Since anthropomorphism refers to the subconscious and inherent processing of non-human stimuli, such as brand spokes-characters, it reflects the *organism* component of the S-O-R framework underpinning this study.

A study conducted by Connell (2013) found that, when animal mascots were transformed to appear observably similar to human beings, consumers’ responses toward these mascots were enhanced. This was similar to how personified characters were found to have a positive influence on affect toward the website on which it was used (Nan *et al.*, 2006). ‘Affect’ has been defined as a psychological process such as emotions, moods, and attitudes (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1999:184); and is considered a component of attitude and a driver of persuasion (Morris *et al.*, 2002:7). In the branding literature, affect or a brand’s potential to incite positive emotional responses in consumers after they have used or experienced a brand (for example, an interaction with a brand spokes-character) is referred to as ‘brand affect’ (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001:82), which reflects the *response* component of the S-O-R framework underpinning this study. According to Delgado-Ballester *et al.* (2019), it was found that

through brand anthropomorphism, consumers are able develop stronger emotional connections with these brands, than with brands that are objectified. Therefore, the elicitation of brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-character used within this study is also likely to evoke positive emotional connections and responses from consumers (i.e. brand affect) toward the character. It can therefore be hypothesised that:

- H₁: The brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters will positively influence brand affect toward these characters.

2.3. Intention to donate and donation behaviour toward NPOs

According to a study by Morris *et al.* (2002:14), consumers' emotional responses were found to determine their behavioural intentions. Similarly, Bechara and Damasio (2005) and Naqvi *et al.* (2006) propose that emotional responses play a critical role in decision-making, and ultimately guide behaviours. Since brand affect comprises positive emotional responses, and is considered a component of attitude (Morris *et al.*, 2002:7), it is likely to lead to favourable reactions such as a positive intention to donate (Ranganathan and Henley, 2008:8), which essentially also forms the *response* component of the S-O-R framework underpinning this study. It can therefore be hypothesised that:

- H₂: Brand affect toward brand spokes-characters will positively influence intention to donate to an NPO.

With the global expansion and concomitant increase in competitive rivalry between NPOs (Casey, 2016:190,217; Michaelidou *et al.*, 2015:134; Ranganathan and Henley, 2008:2), such organisations are in a continuous bid to encourage prosocial behaviour, as they compete for donations (Venable *et al.*, 2005:297). NPOs have therefore been urged to develop a strong brand image through effective marketing and communication strategies in order to attain a competitive advantage and elicit more donations (Small and Verrochi, 2009; Venable *et al.*, 2005:296–297). According to Venable *et al.* (2005:298), it is the brand image of NPOs that can influence donors' intentions to donate money, time, or non-monetary goods or services, that is subsequently likely to

influence behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), such as donation behaviour. Relevant and likable brand spokes-characters have been considered an effective way to change brand preference (Ogilvy, 1983:108), essentially enhancing a positive brand image. These personified non-human agents are also likely to be anthropomorphised, owing to their observable human-like attributes (Epley *et al.*, 2007:869; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:358; Morewedge, Preston and Wegner, 2007), resulting in increased perceptions of these agents as moral, warranting care, respect, and concern toward them (Epley, 2018:596; Epley *et al.*, 2007:880; Gray *et al.*, 2007:619). This was evident in a study by Hills (1995), in which it was found that, when animals were anthropomorphised, greater empathy was shown toward these animals, which may explain why – when social causes or their symbolic entities are personified – customers are more likely to behave prosocially toward these causes (Ahn *et al.*, 2014). These prosocial behaviours include increased behavioural intentions (e.g., intention to comply) and increased donation behaviour (Ahn *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, in a study by Zhou, Kim and Wang (2019) it was found that respondents were more likely to donate and donated more money when they anthropomorphised money. Even through the use of non-personified brand stimuli, a study by Huang *et al.* (2020) found that the extent of brand anthropomorphism, based purely on perceiving a brand as being able to *think* or *feel*, influenced the extent of consumers' prosocial behaviour toward a brand. It can therefore be hypothesised that:

- H₃: Brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters has a positive influence on intention to donate to an NPO.

According to Kashif *et al.* (2015), behavioural intentions such as donation intentions positively further influence approach behaviour, such as actual donation behaviour, which also forms the *response* component of the S-O-R framework underpinning this study. It can therefore be hypothesised that:

- H₄: Intention to donate to an NPO has a positive influence on donation behaviour toward the NPO.

Based on the aforementioned literature, brand anthropomorphism is likely to influence brand affect and intention to donate. However, the prior marketing and psychology

literature suggests that brand affect and intention can play an important mediating role in such research. Studies have shown brand affect to mediate the relationship between brand loyalty and brand commitment (i.e., attitudinal loyalty) (Lin and Lee, 2012; Matzler, Grabner-Kräuter and Bidmon, 2008), both of which can be considered positive reactions toward brands. Other studies have shown intention to have a mediating effect, mostly on behaviour (De Cannière, De Pelsmacker and Geuens, 2009; Hagger and Chatzisarantis, 2005). Both brand affect and intention to donate to an NPO are thus likely to play a mediating role in this study too. It can therefore be hypothesised that:

- H₅: Brand affect mediates the relationship between brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and intention to donate.
- H₆: Intention to donate mediates the relationship between brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and donation behaviour.

Meyers-Levy and Loken (2015:130) propound that gaining insight into how males and females differ with regard to the processing of, and the response to marketing stimuli (such as brand spokes-characters) is essential, specifically for marketers, to anticipate product choices and preferences. Such insights are also welcome, as gendered consumption has increased more now than when gender roles were less blurred (Avery, 2012:333).

2.4. Gender differences: The theory of selectivity hypothesis

According to the theory of selectivity hypothesis, males and females do differ in terms of how they process and respond to information (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991). Putrevu (2001:5) suggests that males and females are likely to think differently because of the different roles they each fulfil in society. Males have been labelled as more 'item-specific processors', while females have been labelled as more 'relational processors' due to their respective self-focused and relationship-oriented natures. Males are therefore likely to process only information from advertising campaigns that directly affects them, whereas females are likely to process all the information they receive from advertising campaigns (Putrevu, 2001:7–8). The premise of the theory of selectivity hypothesis is that females follow a

more comprehensive approach to processing information than do males (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991). This may explain why females are more likely to accurately interpret nonverbal cues, which consequently may allow them to infer thoughts and feelings of others more accurately (Klein and Hodges, 2001; Rosip and Hall, 2004), than are males. Consumers' gender can therefore play an influential role in how they cognitively process and perceive advertising or brand-related information or stimuli – which, for the purposes of this study refers to brand spokes-character stimuli. Thus the theory of selectivity hypothesis posits that males and females may differ in their interpretation and perception of brand spokes-characters as having unobservable human-like qualities (i.e., brand anthropomorphism). They may also differ in the affect they show toward these characters, and in their intention to donate and their donation behaviour toward NPOs.

According to Meyers-Levy and Loken (2015:130), gender is often used as a moderating variable in studies, as opposed to a subject requiring further theoretical exploration. For the purposes of this study, the role of gender will also be explored by considering gender as a moderating variable, as supported by the following literature. First, according to Epley *et al.* (2007:872), anthropomorphism is likely to be used to increase predictability and comprehension of what may seem uncertain or unpredictable, such as non-human agents. Since females are likely to process any information or stimuli more comprehensively than males (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991), females may rely more on anthropomorphism – the perception of non-human agents as having unobservable human-like qualities – to make sense of these agents than do males. Thus gender differences are expected to exist in brand anthropomorphism. Second, according to Sahay, Sharma and Mehta (2012), even though both males and females build relationships with brands, females base their relationships with brands more on affect, while males base their relationships more on cognition. So gender differences are expected to exist in brand affect toward the brand spokes-characters. Third, in addition to the expected gender differences in brand anthropomorphism, Eagly and Steffen (1984) posit that females are generally perceived to be more communal in nature (i.e., being concerned for the wellbeing of others) than are males. Consequently, females are motivated by a different voice from within, a voice based on care, responsibility, concern, and connection with others (Gilligan, 1982). Since NPOs generally exist to help others (Venable *et al.*, 2005:297),

females are expected to engage more actively in prosocial behaviour than are males. This is further confirmed in a study by Mesch, Brown, Moore and Hayat (2011), in which gender differences were apparent in the motives, probability, and amount of charitable giving by each gender. Based on the prior literature and the theory of selectivity hypothesis, the consumers' (i.e. potential donors') gender in this study can be considered a notable moderating variable. Therefore it can be hypothesised that:

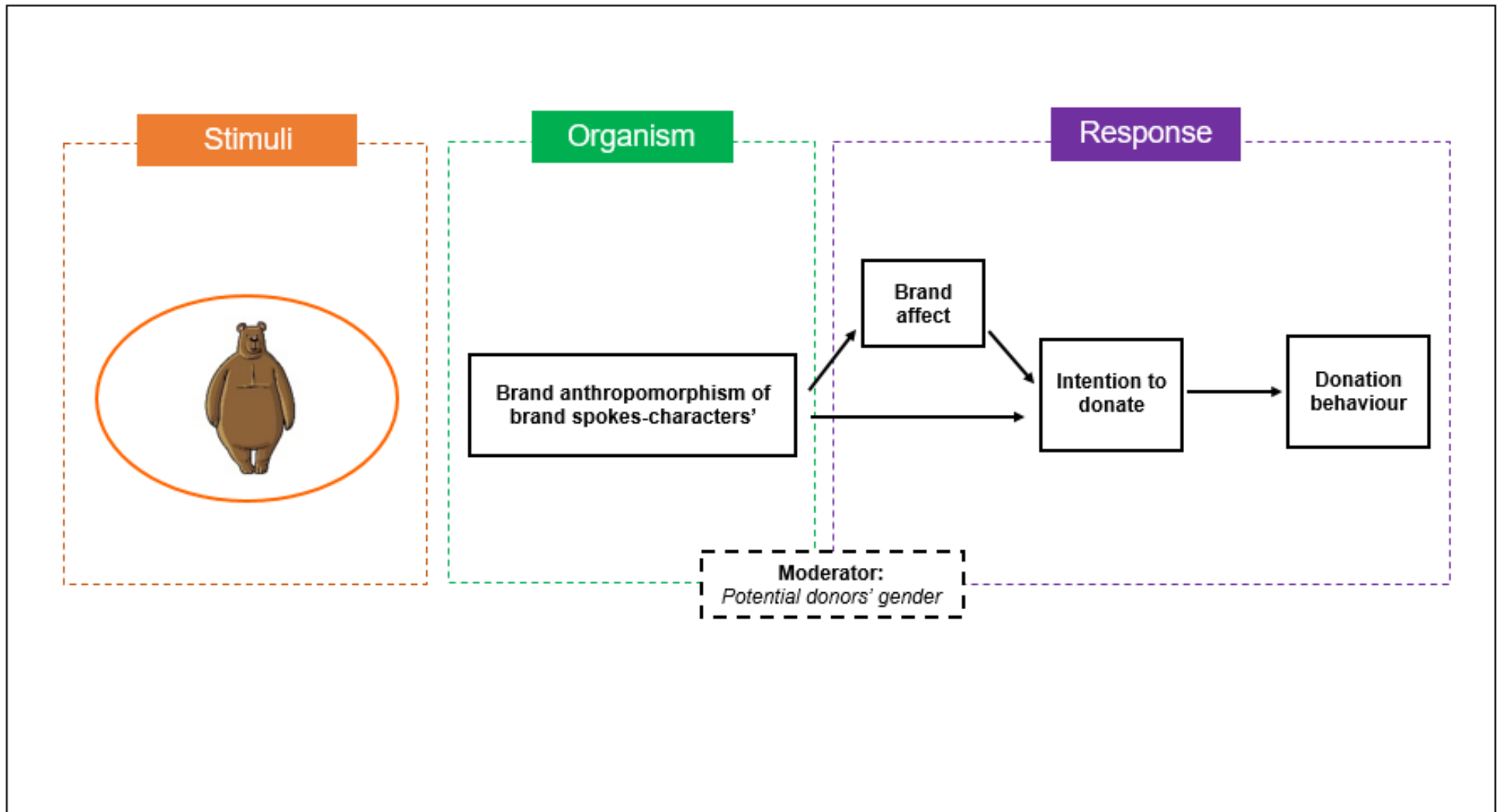
- H₇: Potential donors' gender moderates the direct relationships depicted in the conceptual framework.

A visual representation of the conceptual framework and how it is underpinned by the S-O-R framework is given in Figure 1.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to elicit brand anthropomorphism in this study, a brand spokes-character endowed with observable human-like attributes and a 'human' name ('Jojo') was used as the stimulus. This was done because, according to Epley *et al.* (2007:869) and MacInnis and Folkes (2017:358), non-human agents with observable human-like attributes and an ascribed name (Bucklin (2017) are likely to lead to increased perceptions of these agents being human-like, or essentially anthropomorphised. Due to the observably human-like attributes of bears, such as their ability to walk bipedally for short distances (Connell, 2013:463), a bear was deemed a suitable non-human agent to use as the brand spokes-character stimulus in the study. A previously unknown bear brand spokes-character was specifically designed for the purposes of this study in order to avoid biased responses, rather than using a well-known bear character. Since exploring gender (especially potential donors' gender) was key to the aim of this study, an attempt was made to avoid biased responses and skewed results by only using a gender-neutral brand spokes-character as the stimulus.

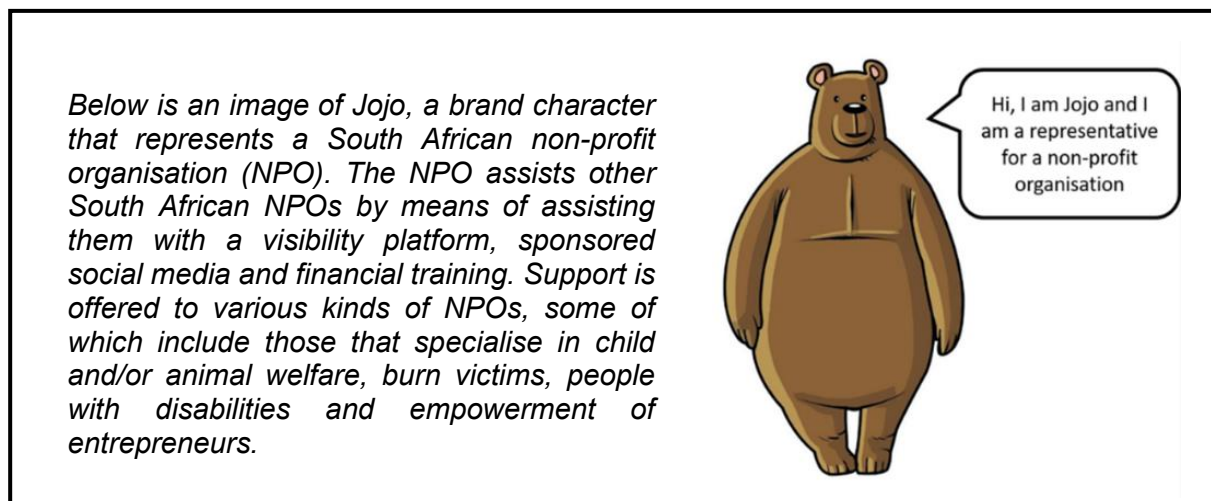
Figure 1: Conceptual framework for this study



3.1. Sample

Empirical data was collected from respondents 18 years and older currently residing in South Africa. A reputable marketing research company recruited a convenience sample of 200 respondents using an online panel. Based on the standard practices of the research company, the respondents were all incentivised for their participation in this study, and were also provided with an additional incentive in order to probe donation behaviour for the specific purposes of this study. Since gender was examined in this study, a gender quota was set to avoid unbiased results. Thus the target population consisted of 100 males and 100 females who were exposed to the gender-neutral bear stimulus depicted in Figure 2. Along with an image of the stimulus, a brief scenario was provided in order to introduce the brand spokes-character by name (i.e., Jojo), as a representative of a non-profit organisation (NPO) that operates across multiple industries and categories. On the first introduction of the NPO, its name was not disclosed.

Figure 2: Gender-neutral bear brand spokes-character stimulus and the scenario



3.2. Questionnaire design

The questionnaire consisted of questions pertaining to the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-character, brand affect, intention to donate, donation behaviour, and the demographic profile of the respondents. Brand anthropomorphism was measured through five adapted items (e.g., “Jojo appears to have a mind of its own”,

and “Jojo appears to have consciousness”) used by both Epley *et al.* (2008:115) and Waytz *et al.* (2010:422). Brand affect was measured through three items (e.g., “Jojo makes me feel good”), adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2002). Based on a study by Coyle and Thorson (2001), intention to donate was measured using four items (e.g., “I am likely to donate to the non-profit organisation”). Items were adapted from each of the aforementioned studies and were measured on seven-point Likert scales with points between 1 (“Strongly disagree”) and 7 (“Strongly agree”). Donation behaviour was not measured through scale items, but according to a measurement of the actual purchase behaviour of a personified product by Wen Wan *et al.* (2017). The respondents in this study were therefore provided with an additional monetary incentive to probe and measure their donation behaviour and the extent of their donation behaviour. It was at this stage in the questionnaire that the name of the NPO described in Figure 2 was disclosed as Loving Thy Neighbour, an NPO currently operational in South Africa. Loving Thy Neighbour was the NPO of choice for this study, as it spans multiple industries and categories. It was also chosen to avoid the bias and skewed results that might have ensued if an NPO in a specific category (e.g., an animal shelter or a child welfare organisation) were selected. Respondents were then given a choice either to be paid the full additional incentive or to donate some or all of it to Loving Thy Neighbour, represented by Jojo the bear brand spokes-character. The options for the amount to be donated were in increments of R5.00 (+/- USD 0.33), and respondents could donate up to R30.00 (+/- USD 1.97) to the NPO. The researcher administered and facilitated the process to ensure that all the proceeds collected through this study were actually donated to Loving Thy Neighbour. Questions pertaining to respondents’ prior patronage of NPOs (e.g. ‘have you ever donated to non-profit organisation(s) before?’) were also included in the study, along with demographic questions about the respondents’ gender and age. Before the final questionnaire was fielded, a pre-test was conducted among 60 respondents to determine any weaknesses in the instrumentation of the questionnaire (Cooper and Schindler, 2011:89).

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

To explore the role of potential donors’ gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour, multi-group moderation structural

equation modelling (SEM) and mediation analyses were used. First, the direct relationships were analysed using structural model estimation (H₁ to H₄), followed by the analysis of the indirect relationships by considering mediation (H₅ and H₆), and the moderation of potential donors' gender (H₇). The data for this study was analysed using IBM SPSS software package version 25 and the Mplus software package version 8.4.

This section outlines the results of the data analysis, and is organised by descriptive statistics, univariate statistics, and multivariate statistics.

4.1. Descriptive statistics

4.1.1. Demographic profile

Since an equal gender quota was set for this study, 100 respondents who identified as male and 100 who identified as female participated in this study. The ages of the respondents ranged from 20 to 70 years, with 71.5% of the respondents between the ages of 20 and 35.

4.1.2. Respondents' prior donation behaviour

With regard to the respondent's prior donation behaviour to any NPO, most of the respondents (75%) indicated that they had donated to an NPO before, with males donating slightly more (51.33%) than females (48.67%), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequencies for prior donation behaviour

	Prior donation behaviour		
	Yes	No	Total
Female	73 (48.67%)	27 (54%)	100
Male	77 (51.33%)	23 (46%)	100
Total	150 (75%)	50 (25%)	200

4.2. Univariate statistics

The mean scores and standard deviations for the constructs used in this study per gender group are displayed in Table 2. Evidently the male respondents attained higher mean scores for brand anthropomorphism ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.46$), brand affect ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.55$), and intention to donate ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.54$) than the female respondents.

Table 2: Mean scores and standard deviations per gender group

		N	Mean	Std. deviation
Brand anthropomorphism	Female	100	4.81	1.36
	Male	100	4.93	1.46
	Total	200	4.87	1.41
Brand affect	Female	100	4.70	1.57
	Male	100	4.85	1.55
	Total	200	4.77	1.56
Intention to donate	Female	100	4.84	1.48
	Male	100	5.16	1.54
	Total	200	5.00	1.51

In terms of donation behaviour toward the NPO used in this study (Loving Thy Neighbour), 54.5% of the respondents indicated that they would donate to the NPO. Of this total, 49.54% were female and 50.46% were male, as is evident in Table 3, indicating that slightly more males donated to Loving Thy Neighbour than females, corresponding to the prior donation behaviour seen in Table 1. Yet, on closer inspection of the amounts donated to Loving Thy Neighbour, the females collectively donated more money ($R\ 825.00 = +/-\ USD\ 52.65$), than the males ($R\ 770.00 = +/-\ USD\ 49.14$).

Table 3: Frequencies for donation behaviour

	Donation behaviour		
	Yes	No	Total
Female	54 (49.54%)	46 (50.55%)	100
Male	55 (50.46%)	45 (49.45%)	100
Total	109 (54.5%)	91 (45.5%)	200

4.3. Multivariate statistics

4.3.1. Validity and reliability

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to test the psychometric properties of the measurement model. The scales used to measure the constructs, brand anthropomorphism, brand affect, and intention to donate were assessed for convergent and discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981:45–46; Hair *et al.*, 2014a:618–620). Since the data was not normally distributed, the MLM estimator, which is robust to non-normality, was used to estimate the measurement model. The MLM estimator refers to the maximum likelihood parameter estimates with standard errors and a mean-adjusted chi-square test statistic, which is also known as the Satorra-Bentler chi-square test statistic (Muthén and Muthén, 1998:667–668). The measurement model displayed acceptable fit ($\chi^2 = 62.289$, $df = 51$, Satorra-Bentler χ^2 / df ratio = 1.22; scaling correction factor for MLM = 1.5446; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.033; comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.993; Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = 0.991; standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.026), based on the cut-off points (Hair *et al.*, 2014a:579–581,584; Hooper, Coughlan and Mullen, 2008:58; Hu and Bentler, 1999).

Table 4 provides statistical evidence of reliability and convergent validity. The factor loadings are all above 0.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2014a:618), and are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. Furthermore, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients and composite reliability (CR) are all above 0.7 (Hair *et al.*, 2014a:619), indicating the acceptable reliability of all the scales. Finally, the average variance extracted (AVE) per construct is above 0.5, thus confirming that convergent validity is evident (Hair *et al.*, 2014a:619).

Table 4: Convergent validity and reliability analysis

	Estimate*	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Brand anthropomorphism		0.920	0.920	0.698
BA1	0.780			
BA2	0.796			
BA3	0.864			
BA4	0.875			
BA5	0.857			
Brand affect		0.959	0.959	0.887
BAffect 1	0.937			
BAffect 2	0.959			
BAffect 3	0.929			
Intention to donate		0.942	0.943	0.805
Intent 1	0.882			
Intent 2	0.868			
Intent 3	0.932			
Intent 4	0.906			

Note: * All loadings were statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, two-tailed

Next, by calculating the square root of the AVE per construct and comparing each one with the inter-construct correlation coefficient, discriminant validity is assessed (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Malhotra, 2010:749). From Table 5, discriminant validity is evident, as the square root of the AVE for each construct, exceeds the inter-construct correlation coefficients.

Table 5: Discriminant validity analysis

Constructs	Brand anthropomorphism	Brand affect	Intention to donate
Brand anthropomorphism	0.835		
Brand affect	0.685	0.942	
Intention to donate	0.525	0.712	0.897

4.3.2. Estimating the structural model: Testing H_1 to H_4

To test hypotheses H_1 to H_4 , a structural model was estimated. Since the model included a categorical dependent variable (i.e., donation behaviour), the structural model was estimated using the weighted least squares mean and variance adjusted (WLSMV) estimator (Sass, Schmitt and Marsh, 2014:171). Donation behaviour was

recoded (where 0 = No, and 1 = Yes) and then included in the structural model. Evidently, from Table 6, the structural model indicates acceptable fit (Hair *et al.*, 2014a:579–581,584; Hooper *et al.*, 2008:58; Hu and Bentler, 1999).

Table 6: Model fit statistics of the structural model

Fit indices	Value	Recommended cut-off value
Chi-square (χ^2)	70.194	NA
Degrees of freedom (<i>df</i>)	62	NA
RMSEA	0.026	< 0.08
CFI	0.983	> 0.9
TLI	0.978	> 0.9
SRMR	0.025	< 0.08

Following the estimation of the structural model, the structural paths were inspected. From Table 7 it is evident that, while most of the paths are statistically significant, only the path between brand anthropomorphism and intention to donate was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.088$, $p = 0.195$). As a result, there is support for H₁, H₂ and H₄, but no support for H₃.

Table 7: Standardised estimates in the structural model

Fit indices			Standardised estimate	S.E. est.	p-value	t-value	Result
BA	→	Brand affect	0.815	0.084	0.0001	9.661	Significant
BA	→	Intention to donate	0.088	0.068	0.1950	1.296	Not significant
Brand affect	→	Intention to donate	0.657	0.065	0.0001	10.081	Significant
Intention to donate	→	Donation behaviour	0.418	0.056	0.0001	7.453	Significant

BA: Brand anthropomorphism

4.3.3. Mediation analysis: Testing H₅ to H₆

‘Mediation’ refers to the indirect assessment that an independent variable (i.e., a proposed cause) has on a dependent variable (i.e., outcome) through a proposed

mediator (Preacher and Hayes, 2004:717). Mediation analysis was therefore conducted to ascertain whether the relationship between the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-character and intention to donate is mediated by brand affect, and whether the relationship between the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-character and donation behaviour is mediated by intention to donate. Using the bootstrapping procedure in the PROCESS macro of SPSS (Model 4) (Preacher and Hayes, 2004:720), the mediation effects of brand affect and intention to donate was assessed. Bootstrapping is considered a powerful resampling method to test the effects of a mediating variable to obtain more accurate confidence limits (MacKinnon, Lockwood and Williams, 2004). Bootstrapping direct and indirect effects at a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval, based on 10 000 bootstrap samples, were generated in this study. The results are shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Bootstrapping direct and indirect effects at 95% confidence intervals (CIs)

Variables X >> M >> Y	Direct effect			Indirect effect	
	Effect (LLCI; ULCI)	SE	t-value (p-value)	Effect [LLCI; ULCI]	Boot SE
BA >> Brand affect >> Intention to donate	0.105 [-0.038;0.248]	0.073	1.445 (0.150)	0.430 [0.324; 0.553]	0.058
BA >> Intention to donate >> Donation behaviour	0.099 [-0.170;0.368]	0.137	(0.470)	0.394 [0.214; 0.646]	0.113

Notes:

1. Using Model 4 in PROCESS, X – exogenous variable, M – mediating variable, Y – endogenous variable; LLCI – lower limited confidence interval, ULCI – upper limit confidence interval
2. BA: Brand anthropomorphism

The results in Table 8 indicate that the indirect effects of brand affect ($B = 0.430$; 95% bias-corrected interval = 0.324 - 0.553) and intention to donate ($B = 0.394$; 95% bias-corrected interval = 0.214 - 0.646) are positive and statistically significant, and that the direct effects are negative and non-significant. These results suggest that there is full mediation between brand anthropomorphism and intention to donate through brand affect; and between brand anthropomorphism and donation behaviour through

intention to donate (Zhao, Lynch and Chen, 2010:200). As a result, there is support for H₅ and H₆.

4.3.4. Multi-group moderation analysis: Testing H₇

To conduct a multi-group moderation analysis to ascertain whether the structural paths in this study could be compared across the two gender groups (i.e., male and female) to test hypothesis H₇, measurement invariance had to be evaluated. 'Measurement invariance' refers to the degree to which items in a measurement instrument are comparable (i.e., they measure the same concept) across various subgroups of respondents (Davidov, Meuleman, Cieciuch, Schmidt and Billiet, 2014:58; Hair, Hult, Ringle and Sarstedt, 2014b:279). Measurement variance can be evaluated by ascertaining configural, metric, and scalar invariance (Muthén and Asparouhov, 2018:639). Configural invariance confirms that the same basic factor structure exists across the groups being compared. Metric invariance implies that all factor loadings of items are the same, confirming the equivalence in the relationships between constructs across the groups being compared. Scalar invariance tests that there is equality between the groups being compared in terms of the intercepts (i.e., means) of the measured variables (Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson, 2010:760; Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson, 2019:738–739). According to Hair *et al.* (2019:738–739), a chi-square test can be used to compare the collective set of group models for each type of invariance to obtain an overall chi-square value.

Evidently, from Table 9, there are no statistically significant differences between the three models when assessing each type of invariance; thus invariance between the three models in this study is evident. This suggests that any differences in the structural paths would be as a result of the potential donors' gender, and not because the concepts in the questionnaire were perceived differently by the male and female respondents.

Table 9: Chi-square results for invariance testing

Models compared	Chi-square	df	p-value
Metric against configural	6.596	9	0.6791
Scalar against configural	13.216	18	0.7786
Scalar against metric	6.619	9	0.6767

Since the dependent variable (i.e., donation behaviour) in this study is categorical, the structural models for males and females were estimated using the WLSMV estimator. To determine whether the male and female structural models differ from one another, the grouping function (0 = male and 1 = female) in Mplus was used. Two structural models were then estimated; an unconstrained structural model across groups (male and female), and a constrained structural model (where factor loadings were set to be equal across groups). The fit indices for the structural model estimated across the male and female group indicated acceptable fit (RMSEA = 0.051; CFI = 0.923; TLI = 0.915; SRMR = 0.053) (Hair *et al.*, 2014a:579–581,584; Hooper *et al.*, 2008:58; Hu and Bentler, 1999). Thus the unconstrained and constrained structural models could then be compared using DIFFTEST in Mplus. The results indicated that the unconstrained and constrained structural models were different from one another ($\chi^2 = 13.585$, $df = 5$, $p = 0.0185$), suggesting that the structural paths in the models for males and females are different. Table 10 shows the unconstrained structural paths for males and females.

To determine whether the individual structural paths differ significantly from one another across the groups (male and female), the Wald test for parameter constraints was used. The Wald test determines whether an unconstrained structural path equals a constrained structural path. High p-values (> 0.05) indicate that coefficients between the groups are reasonably equal, while low p-values (< 0.05) indicate that the coefficients between the groups are not equal (i.e., they are different from one another). Table 10 shows that the structural coefficients for the relationship between brand anthropomorphism and brand affect, between brand anthropomorphism and intention to donate, and between brand affect and intention to donate are significantly

different between the female and the male groups, yet the relationship between intention to donate and donation behaviour is not. Specifically, the relationship between brand anthropomorphism and brand affect is significant for both the female and the male groups, but stronger for the male group ($\beta = 0.943$, $p = 0.0001$) than for the female group ($\beta = 0.657$, $p = 0.0001$). However, the relationship between brand anthropomorphism and intention to donate is significant and stronger only for the male group ($\beta = 0.355$, $p = 0.01$), while the relationship between brand affect and intention to donate is significant for both groups, but stronger for females ($\beta = 0.715$, $p = 0.0001$) than for males ($\beta = 0.445$, $p = 0.0001$). Subsequently, H_7 is partially supported.

Table 10: Unconstrained structural model paths for males and females & Wald test results

Path			Female			Male			Wald test		
			Standard estimate	S.E.	t-value (p-value)	Standard estimate	S.E.	t-value (p-value)	χ^2	df	p-value
BA	→	Brand affect	0.657	0.119	5.536 (0.0001)	0.943	0.106	8.879 (0.0001)	4.313	1	0.037*
BA	→	Intention to donate	-0.036	0.069	-0.515 (0.607)	0.355	0.138	2.577 (0.01)	6.264	1	0.012*
Brand affect	→	Intention to donate	0.715	0.072	9.975 (0.0001)	0.445	0.115	3.867 (0.0001)	4.270	1	0.038*
Intention to donate	→	Donation behaviour	0.394	0.074	5.333 (0.0001)	0.472	0.080	5.903 (0.0001)	0.553	1	0.4572

* Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

BA: Brand anthropomorphism

5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of potential donors' gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour by considering brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour using a multi-group moderation SEM and mediation analyses. The use of the S-O-R framework to underpin the conceptual framework in this study sheds light on the applicability of the S-O-R framework in understanding the benefits that may be derived from the brand anthropomorphism of non-human brand stimuli, specifically in an NPO context.

Aligning with previous empirical studies, the results of this study indicate that the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-character positively influences brand affect toward the character (Connell, 2013; Nan *et al.*, 2006). The positive influence of brand affect toward the brand spokes-character on intention to donate to an NPO, as found in this study, is also supported, and is alluded to in prior studies by authors such as Morris *et al.* (2002:7) and Ranganathan and Henley (2008:8). The findings of this study further indicate that intention to donate to an NPO positively influences donation behaviour toward the NPO, as proposed by previous studies (Ahn *et al.*, 2014; Kashif *et al.*, 2015). Yet, contrary to previous findings by authors such as Ahn *et al.* (2014) and Hills (1995), the results of this study show that the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-character does not directly influence intention to donate to an NPO. However, brand affect was shown to fully mediate the relationship between brand anthropomorphism and intention to donate, in accordance with previous studies that have explored the mediating effects of brand affect (Lin and Lee, 2012; Matzler *et al.*, 2008). Evidently indirect-only mediation is present (Zhao *et al.*, 2010:200).

This study also found brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-character to have a positive indirect effect on donation behaviour, as fully mediated by intention to donate. Evidence of the mediating effects of intention to donate is in accordance with previous studies by De Cannière *et al.* (2009) and Hagger and Chatzisarantis (2005). These results indicate that brand anthropomorphism influences intention to donate through brand affect, while also influencing donation behaviour through intention to donate. If only direct relationships had been explored in this study, the importance of considering brand affect and intention to donate in these relationships would not have been highlighted; instead, these relationships would not even have been evident. Thus these findings reveal the overall importance of considering indirect effects when exploring brand anthropomorphism and its subsequent outcomes.

The role of potential donors' gender in the relationships in the conceptual framework of this study was explored to ascertain whether or not donors would decide to donate to the NPO. The findings revealed that potential donors' gender moderated the relationships between brand anthropomorphism and brand affect, between brand affect and intention to donate, and between brand anthropomorphism and intention to

donate. These findings provide support for previous literature in which gender differences were evident with regard to the processing and interpretation of information and/or stimuli (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991). According to Sahay *et al.* (2012), males and females also differ with regard to the basis on which they build relationships with brands: females base it more on affect, while males base it more on cognition. Gender differences are also found to be apparent in the motives and likelihood of engaging in prosocial behaviour (Mesch *et al.*, 2011), with females being more likely to do so due to their communal nature (Eagly and Steffen, 1984). The results of this study specifically found that the relationships between brand anthropomorphism and brand affect, and between brand anthropomorphism and intention to donate, are stronger for males than for females, with the latter relationship not being significant for females. This alludes to the important role that brand anthropomorphism may play in encouraging potential male donors to engage in prosocial behaviour. However, the relationship between brand affect and intention to donate is stronger for females than for males, highlighting the important role that positive emotional responses may play in encouraging potential female donors to engage in prosocial behaviour.

Contrary to the studies by Gilligan (1982) and Venable *et al.* (2005:297), the findings also indicated that the gender of respondents does not moderate the relationship between intention to donate and donation behaviour toward an NPO. These contrary findings may be due to the predictive validity of behavioural intention on actual behaviour, which is also considered an immediate antecedent of actual behaviour; and that accounts for a considerable portion of its variance, as often explored in consumer behaviour (Ajzen, 2008). In a study by Hagger, Chatzisarantis, Barkoukis, Wang, Hein, Pihu, Soós and Karsai (2007), it was found that there was no variation in the effect of behavioural intention on actual behaviour across multiple cultural groups, suggesting that intentions generally appear to influence actual behaviour positively, despite cultural or even demographic variables. This may therefore explain why there may have been no significant variation between male and female potential donors with regard to the influence of their intention to donate on their donation behaviour. Another interesting finding from this study was that, even though more males donated to Loving Thy Neighbour, the female donors collectively donated more money to the NPO than the males. This aligns with the prior literature, which suggests that females are more

communal and more motivated by care, responsibility, and connection with others (Eagly and Steffen, 1984; Gilligan, 1982), and thus may generally be motivated to make larger donations than males make.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study extends the existing literature about brand anthropomorphism by demonstrating the suitable use of the S-O-R framework as a theoretical underpinning to explore the reactions and responses as a result of the brand anthropomorphism of personified non-human brand stimuli in an NPO context. The study also builds on the existing literature about gender differences by confirming how males and females differ in the way in which they process information, thus providing confirmation of the suitability of the theory of selectivity hypothesis to explore the role of consumers' gender in brand anthropomorphism. By considering these two novel perspectives, this study suggest several theoretical implications.

First, the literature on anthropomorphism – and even on brand anthropomorphism – in a non-profit organisation (NPO) context remains limited, despite increased competitive rivalry between NPOs (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2015:134; Ranganathan and Henley, 2008:134). Several studies in the literature to date appear to have explored the influence of anthropomorphism on prosocial behaviour, although mostly, and often mistakenly, by considering the influence of only the physical human-like attributes of stimuli (e.g. Ahn *et al.*, 2014; Ketron and Naletelich, 2019; Reavey *et al.*, 2018), which essentially constitute personification. Yet anthropomorphism is mainly constituted by the perceptions of non-human stimuli as having unobservable human-like qualities, such as a mind or mental states (Epley, 2018:592). A study by Huang *et al.*, (2020) who explored the perceptions of brands as having a mind, on two dimensions namely think and feel, and found them both to influence prosocial behaviour based on consumers' moral judgment of the brand. Yet, as far as could be determined the influence of the brand anthropomorphism - solely on the perceptions of brands as having unobservable human-like qualities, on prosocial behaviour, still remains relatively limited in the existing literature. The research study therefore extends the existing body of knowledge on brand anthropomorphism, especially within an NPO context, as it provides evidence that brand anthropomorphism yields prosocial

behaviour to an NPO, as actual donation behaviour was evident. Thus, providing further confirmation that personified non-human brand stimuli does appear to be perceived as moral agents evoking feelings of empathy (Epley *et al.*, 2007:880), as favourable brand benefits were yielded toward the NPO used in this study.

Second, the findings reveal that brand anthropomorphism influences donation behaviour through the indirect effects of brand affect and intention to donate. Thus, although previous studies have highlighted the brand benefits that brand anthropomorphism has been found to yield – such as a willingness to pay a premium price (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:371) – the findings shed light on the importance of the indirect effects that lead to these brand benefits. This study, therefore, provides evidence that brand benefits arising from brand anthropomorphism may not always be as a result of a direct effect, but rather as a result of an indirect effect; and while this has received little attention in the existing literature, it has the potential to broaden our understanding of the brand anthropomorphism phenomenon.

Third, studies exploring the influence of consumers' gender on anthropomorphism, let alone brand anthropomorphism, appear scant (Letheren *et al.*, 2016:979). This study therefore provides a different perspective on brand anthropomorphism by considering the effects of consumers' gender, specifically potential donors' gender, on it. The moderating effects of potential donors' gender on the influence of brand anthropomorphism on prosocial behaviour highlights the importance of not treating potential donors as a homogeneous group, because males tend to yield differing results from those for females, based on the theory of selectivity hypothesis (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991). This study contributes, therefore, to the existing literature on brand anthropomorphism by further confirming that it should not be considered a universal trait – as initially proposed by Guthrie and Guthrie (1993) – but rather as a trait that can vary beyond the psychological and cognitive determinants proposed by Epley *et al.* (2007). This study thus provides evidence that brand anthropomorphism and its subsequent outcomes can vary, based also on demographic determinants too, such as consumers' gender, which to date remains underexplored.

Fourth, the intention-behaviour gap (Van der Linden, 2011:356) was assessed by measuring actual behaviour in addition to behavioural intentions. Behavioural intention is often used in studies as a substitute for behavioural measures because it has been shown to be a good indication of people's actual behaviour (Ajzen, 2008:537). Yet the current study is one of a limited number of studies to measure both intentions and actual behaviour as a result of brand anthropomorphism. The findings reveal that the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-character yielded actual donation behaviour toward the NPO through the mediating effects of brand affect and intention to donate. This study, therefore, not only builds on the literature about the intention-behaviour gap in an NPO context, but it also extends the existing body of knowledge on brand anthropomorphism by providing evidence that actual behaviour toward a brand can stem from this inherent psychological process.

5.2. Managerial implications

The findings of this study provide marketers and management, specifically in the non-profit sector, with three practical implications. First, the results highlight that using personified non-human brand stimuli in charitable messages to elicit brand anthropomorphism can subsequently yield prosocial behaviour. This may be attributed to the anthropomorphism of non-human stimuli evoking feelings of sympathy and empathy (Epley *et al.*, 2007:880). Non-human brand stimuli that have observable or audible human-like attributes should therefore be considered when advocating support for social causes by conveying charitable messages. For example, an animal shelter could post a video of an animated dog with physical and/or audible human-like features (e.g., eyes / mouth / voice) on their social media platforms (e.g. Instagram or Facebook), in order to appeal to potential donors to donate to the shelter or even to adopt an animal.

Second, as gendered consumption becomes more important today than when gender roles were less blurred (Avery, 2012:333), the results in this study demonstrate the effect of potential donors' gender on the influence of brand anthropomorphism on prosocial behaviour. The results reveal that the influence of brand anthropomorphism on intention to donate is stronger for potential donors who are male, while the influence of brand affect toward personified non-human brand stimuli on intention to donate is

stronger for potential donors who are female. Thus the use only of personified non-human brand stimuli to convey charitable messages is not enough to encourage prosocial behaviour from both male and female potential donors. Based on this study, eliciting brand anthropomorphism using personified non-human brand stimuli is likely to encourage prosocial behaviour from more potential male donors, while the ability of such stimuli also to incite an emotional response is likely to encourage prosocial behaviour from both male and female potential donors alike. This may be attributable to females' communal nature (Eagly and Steffen, 1984). Therefore, personified non-human brand stimuli used in charitable messages to elicit brand anthropomorphism and incite emotion are more likely to yield prosocial behaviour from both male and female potential donors. For example, NPOs supporting the conservation of forests can make use of an image of a personified tree – portrayed as lonely and sad due to deforestation – on their website or pamphlets in order to encourage support from both male and female potential donors.

Third, the results reveal that, even though more male donors donated to the NPO in this study, female donors collectively donated more money to the NPO. Thus, in order for NPOs to understand better the profile of donors donating to their NPOs, this finding highlights the importance of considering both the frequency of donations and the amounts donated. This may give NPOs better insight into who their most effective donors are, which may prove useful when targeting their charitable messages to current and potential donors.

5.3. Limitations and directions for future research

Even though the study has made a number of theoretical and practical contributions, several areas for future research have been identified. First, the data collected from an online panel for this study was a convenience sample, and so was not representative of the entire population, thus limiting the generalisability of its findings. In order to obtain results that are more representative and more generalisable, a recommendation for future research is to conduct similar research that spans other countries, both developing and developed.

Second, this study focuses on the use of non-human brand stimuli that are explicitly personified, as these were found to elicit anthropomorphism more easily (Epley *et al.*, 2007:869; MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:358). However, the anthropomorphism of non-human stimuli can also occur despite these stimuli having no observable human-like attributes (e.g., Payne *et al.*, 2013; Waytz, Heafner and Epley, 2014). A recommendation for future research, therefore, is to consider the use of stimuli devoid of observable human-like attributes in a similar research context, to ascertain whether the effect on brand anthropomorphism and the subsequent outcomes for brands would yield differing results. This comparison could reveal important implications for both theory and practice.

Third, only the mediating role of brand affect and intention to donate were explored in this study. Yet the results reveal the importance of considering indirect effects when exploring the brand anthropomorphism of brand stimuli and its subsequent outcomes; future research could thus investigate other mediating variables, such as brand experience, brand attitude, and brand trust. First, brand experience, which refers to sensation, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses, is likely to be evoked after exposure to brand stimuli such as brand spokes-characters (Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello, 2009:53). Second, Rauschnabel and Ahuvia (2014) found that brand anthropomorphism positively influences attitude valence (i.e., the overall evaluation of a brand). Third, the brand anthropomorphism of a vehicle was found to influence trust in the vehicle positively (Waytz *et al.*, 2014). The use of brand stimuli, or the elicitation of brand anthropomorphism, is therefore likely to play a role in the three proposed mediating variables, thus warranting further exploration in similar conceptual frameworks in future studies.

6. CONCLUSION

With increased competitive rivalry between NPOs (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2015:134; Ranganathan and Henley, 2008:134) and dwindling government funding for these organisations (Kashif *et al.*, 2015:90), the development of marketing strategies has become an important tool for NPOs (Venable *et al.*, 2005:296). This study aimed, therefore, to explore the influence of the brand anthropomorphism of personified non-human brand stimuli – specifically, brand spokes-characters – on prosocial behaviour

as one such effective element in the strategy. Yet, based on prior literature and the theory of selectivity hypothesis, understanding the role of consumers' gender was highlighted as providing important insights for marketing practice in the for-profit sector. It was thus highlighted as an important consideration in an NPO context too; thus the role of potential donors' gender was explored in this study through multi-group moderation SEM in order to ascertain whether their gender would influence their decision on whether to donate or not to donate. The findings indicate that the brand anthropomorphism of a brand spokes-character has an influence on brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour in an NPO context, and that these influences differ based on potential donors' gender. It is thus evident that the brand anthropomorphism of personified non-human brand stimuli can yield prosocial behaviour through brand affect and intention to donate, while influenced by the potential donors' gender. Evidently, whether or not to donate to an NPO appears to be influenced not only by the brand anthropomorphism of non-human brand stimuli used by NPOs, but also by the potential donors' gender; which has several important implications for both theory and practice.

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- CHAPTER 5 -

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the role of gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters in an NPO context. Since anthropomorphic beliefs about non-human agents can vary along a continuum (Epley *et al.*, 2007:865) between *stronger brand anthropomorphism* and *brand anthroblivion*, it was deemed necessary to explore this variance. This was done based on the actual occurrence of the brand anthropomorphism of personified non-human brand stimuli (i.e., brand spokes-characters) using a gendered lens – an approach that, to date, has received little attention in the literature. According to the dehumanisation literature, gender appears to play a role in the degree to which human beings are denied their full humanness (Haslam, 2006:252). Thus it was anticipated that the acknowledged gender of personified non-human stimuli would also play a role in the degree to which such stimuli are anthropomorphised. Yet, not only may the acknowledged gender of personified non-human stimuli play a role in the extent to which they are anthropomorphised, but – based on the theory of selectivity hypothesis – male and female consumers differ in the degree to which they cognitively process information (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991). Thus it was anticipated that consumers' gender might also shed light on the degree to which anthropomorphism may occur. To date, the anthropomorphism of gender-neutral personified non-human stimuli has often been explored in the literature (e.g., Awad and Youn, 2018; Reavey *et al.*, 2018), with little consideration for gendered stimuli. In addition, the role of consumers' gender in the anthropomorphism of personified non-human stimuli remains limited (Letheren *et al.*, 2016:979), and even more so in the brand anthropomorphism domain.

Since non-profit organisations (NPOs) rely on prosocial behaviour, the development of various effective marketing strategies, such as eliciting brand anthropomorphism, is a necessary consideration for NPOs to differentiate themselves in an attempt to encourage more prosocial behaviour. Therefore, understanding the variance in the

occurrence of brand anthropomorphism in an NPO context, which in this case may be attributable to gender, can provide valuable insights. Thus an NPO context was warranted for this study.

The remainder of this chapter stipulates the research problem statement, the objectives that were set, a summary of the findings, the theoretical and managerial contributions of the study, recommendations based on the research objectives, the study's limitations, and recommendations for future research.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT AND OBJECTIVES

Brand anthropomorphism has been found to yield several brand benefits, including brand loyalty and commitment, as well as positive word-of-mouth (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:371), pointing to its effectiveness as a marketing tool. However, as gender-neutrality becomes a notable trend in the market (Claveria, 2016; Kasriel-Alexander, 2016:18), and since gendered consumption has gained more prevalence in the market than in earlier times, when gender roles were less blurred (Avery, 2012:333), understanding whether gender plays a role in brand anthropomorphism and, if so, what that role is, has become more important. Yet to date the perceived or acknowledged gender of personified non-human brand stimuli used to elicit brand anthropomorphism, and the role of consumers' gender, appears to have received very little attention in the literature with regard to its role in brand anthropomorphism. While the prior literature has made an attempt to elicit the anthropomorphism of stimuli through the use of personification, it has often done so with very little consideration for the acknowledged gender of these stimuli. More often than not, such stimuli have appeared gender-neutral (e.g., Awad and Youn, 2018; Reavey *et al.*, 2018; Touré-Tillery and McGill, 2015). Furthermore, the lack of understanding of the role of consumers' gender in brand anthropomorphism has also been noted in the literature (e.g., Letheren *et al.*, 2016:979). First, however, based on gender socialisation, developing a gender identity is considered an internalised part of how human beings think of themselves (Ryle, 2018:120), and can therefore be considered an important part of what makes human beings human. Also, based on the dehumanisation literature – an inverse process of anthropomorphism (Waytz *et al.*, 2010) – females are often attributed less humanness, and are often objectified more than males

(Haslam, 2006:253). This suggests, therefore, that the acknowledged gender of personified non-human brand stimuli with gender cues may also play a pertinent role in the degree to which such stimuli are perceived as human-like and are thus anthropomorphised. Second, based on the theory of selectivity hypothesis, females are able more accurately to detect and interpret nonverbal cues, allowing them more accurately to infer the thoughts and feelings of others than males do (Klein and Hodges, 2001; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991; Rosip and Hall, 2004). Females are thus more likely accurately to interpret the nonverbal cues of personified non-human brand stimuli, such as its observable and unobservable human-like qualities, and may consequently infer the thoughts and feelings of such stimuli. This suggests that consumers' gender may also play a role in the brand anthropomorphism of brand stimuli, which to date is still underexplored. This study therefore aimed to explore the role of the gender both of personified non-human brand stimuli and of consumers in the brand anthropomorphism of such stimuli. However, in line with the principles of cognitive consistency, the acknowledged gender of a personified non-human brand stimulus is likely also to influence perceptions of such a stimulus as having a specific and associated gender brand personality (i.e., a masculine or feminine brand personality) (Grohmann, 2009:111–112; Bem, 1974:160–161). Furthermore, the acknowledged gender of a personified non-human brand stimulus is also likely to influence its perceived credibility (Pearson, 1982:5). Thus, in order to understand the role of stimuli's acknowledged gender in its brand anthropomorphism, it is evident that its acknowledged gender is also likely to play a role in other perceptions of such stimuli, such as its perceived gendered brand personality and its credibility; and so that was also explored in this study.

According to Epley *et al.* (2007:880), the anthropomorphism of non-human stimuli is useful in social spheres, as it often increases perceptions of these stimuli as being moral and worthy of care or concern. Thus eliciting brand anthropomorphism in an NPO context may be an effective strategy to increase prosocial behaviour toward an NPO. Yet the literature to date that appears to have explored the influence of anthropomorphism on prosocial behaviour has mostly focused on the influence of the *observable* human-like attributes of personified non-human stimuli, which essentially constitutes personification (e.g., Ahn *et al.*, 2014; Ketron and Naletelich, 2019; Reavey *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, very little focus has been placed on the influence

that the perceptions of specifically non-human brand stimuli as having *unobservable* human-like qualities (i.e., brand anthropomorphism) has on prosocial behaviour, let alone the influence of gender, both of the stimuli and of the consumer or potential donor, thereon. The primary objective of this study, therefore, was to explore the role of gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters in an NPO context. In support of the primary objective, several secondary objectives were also set, as follows:

- To unearth deeper meanings associated with personified stimuli – specifically, gendered brand spokes-characters – and their role in brand anthropomorphism in the NPO context.
- To explore the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters.
- To determine the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in other perceptions of brand spokes-characters – specifically, the gender dimensions of brand personality and source credibility.
- To explore the role of potential donors' gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour by considering brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour.

3. SUMMARY AND MAIN FINDINGS OF EACH ARTICLE

3.1. Chapter 2: Pictures speak a thousand words – Exploring gendered brand spokes-characters

Chapter 2 (Article 1) addressed the first **secondary objective** of this study, which was to unearth deeper meanings associated with personified stimuli – specifically, gendered brand spokes-characters – and their role in brand anthropomorphism in the NPO context. The specific **aims** of this article were to explore: 1) the acknowledgement of brand spokes-characters' gender, 2) the role of gendered brand spokes-characters in the brand anthropomorphism of such characters, and 3) the role of gendered brand spokes-characters in their suitability for NPOs. Given the scarcity of research into the role of gendered personified brand stimuli in brand anthropomorphism, this study was exploratory in nature, and therefore **qualitative** descriptive and **quantitative** research methods were deemed fitting. Brand spokes-

characters that were personified through observable human-like attributes and gender cues were specifically designed and used as the stimuli in this study. A total of 5 types of brand spokes-characters were designed, along with a male and female version for each type. Several rounds of refinements to these stimuli ensued in order to test and vet the designed stimuli. The testing and vetting were done through unstructured interviews and a focus group, both comprising 10 participants, as well as a small online panel comprising 60 respondents, thus highlighting the many complexities involved in the meanings associated with stimuli but, more specifically, those with observable human-like attributes and gender cues.

The main **findings** of Chapter 2 were three-fold. First, even though the brand spokes-characters' gender was acknowledged, it was not always in accordance with its observable gender cues. More characters were acknowledged as male or female than as gender-neutral, with most of the characters being acknowledged as male. Second, the brand spokes-characters endowed with clothing or clothing accessories as gender cues were acknowledged as more human-like than those that were devoid of these gender cues. Consequently, it appears that, in addition to the characters' *observable* human-like attributes, its *observable* gender cues also increased the perceptions of the characters as having *unobservable* human-like qualities, such as personality traits, essentially eliciting the brand anthropomorphism of these characters. The brand spokes-characters' unobservable human-like qualities (e.g., perceived personality traits) were often also referenced when the characters' gender was discussed, suggesting that gendered brand spokes-characters may play a role in the characters' perceived unobservable human-like qualities such as personality traits, and so could play a role in the brand anthropomorphism of these characters too. Third, the brand spokes-characters endowed with clothing or clothing accessories as observable gender cues were acknowledged as being less suitable for NPOs than those devoid of these gender cues. This suggested that these gender cues used to endow the brand spokes-characters with a gender play a role in the perceived suitability of such characters as representatives of NPOs. Evidently the prominence of gender cues as playing a role in brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender, in their perceived human-likeness, and in their perceived suitability as representatives of an NPO was confirmed in this study, which highlights their importance in the meanings associated

with personified non-human brand stimuli. Further details pertaining to these findings can be reviewed in Chapter 2.

3.2. Chapter 3: Gender is more than skin deep – Exploring the role of brand spokes-characters' gender in brand anthropomorphism

Chapter 3 (Article 2) addressed the second and third **secondary objectives** of this study, which were: 1) to explore the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters, and 2) to determine the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in the other perceptions of brand spokes-characters – specifically, the gender dimensions of brand personality and source credibility. There were three **aims** for Article 2, which were to explore the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in: 1) the brand anthropomorphism of these characters, 2) the gender dimensions of the brand personality of these characters (i.e., masculine or feminine brand personality), and 3) the dimensions of these characters' source credibility (i.e., trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness). This article was **quantitative** in nature; thus the data was collected using a survey questionnaire distributed to an online panel of 600 respondents based on an equal gender quota. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three scenarios, with the questionnaire remaining the same across all three scenarios; the only difference was the gender of the brand spokes-character stimulus used in each. As a result, 100 male and 100 female respondents were tasked with completing a questionnaire depicting a female, gender-neutral, or male brand spokes-character respectively. The hypothesised differences between brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in masculine and feminine brand personality, trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and brand anthropomorphism were analysed using multiple analysis of variance (ANOVA).

From the **findings** presented in Table 1, it is evident that four of the six hypotheses were supported. First, there was a statistically significant difference in the masculine and the feminine brand personality, based on the brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender. The characters acknowledged as female attained statistically significant higher mean scores for feminine brand personality than those acknowledged as male. Surprisingly, the characters acknowledged as female also

attained higher mean scores for masculine brand personality than those acknowledged as male. Second, there were statistically significant differences in only two of the dimensions of source credibility of the brand spokes-characters – namely, expertise and attractiveness – based on the characters’ acknowledged gender. The characters acknowledged as female attained statistically significantly higher mean scores for expertise and attractiveness than those acknowledged as male. In addition, the characters acknowledged as gender-neutral also attained statistically significantly higher mean scores – specifically, for attractiveness – than those acknowledged as male. There were, however, no statistically significant differences in trustworthiness and brand anthropomorphism based on the brand spokes-characters’ acknowledged gender; thus these two hypotheses were not supported. Possible explanations for these results can be reviewed in Chapter 3.

Table 1: Results of the hypotheses testing in Chapter 3

Hypotheses		Result
H ₁	Based on brand spokes-characters’ gender, there are significant differences in masculine brand personality.	Supported
H ₂	Based on brand spokes-characters’ gender, there are significant differences in feminine brand personality.	Supported
H ₃	Based on brand spokes-characters’ gender, there are significant differences in trustworthiness.	Not supported
H ₄	Based on brand spokes-characters’ gender, there are significant differences in expertise.	Supported
H ₅	Based on brand spokes-characters’ gender, there are significant differences in attractiveness.	Supported
H ₆	Based on brand spokes-characters’ gender, there are significant differences in brand anthropomorphism.	Not supported

3.3. Chapter 4: To donate or not to donate? The role of potential donors’ gender in brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour

Chapter 4 (Article 3) addressed the fourth **secondary objective** of this study, which was to explore the role of potential donors’ gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour, by considering brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour. The specific **aims** of the article were three-fold. The first was to explore the direct relationships between brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters, brand affect, intention to donate, and

donation behaviour. The second was to explore the indirect relationships between brand anthropomorphism and intention to donate through brand affect, and between brand anthropomorphism and donation behaviour through intention to donate. The third was to explore the moderating effects of potential donors' gender on the direct relationships. This article was **quantitative** in nature, as the data was collected using a survey questionnaire comprising 200 respondents (i.e. 100 female and 100 male respondents, based on the equal gender quota that was set across the entire study). Each respondent was exposed to a gender-neutral brand spokes-character that was used as the stimulus in the questionnaire. The hypotheses for this article were tested using multi-group moderation structural equation modelling (SEM) and mediation analyses, using Model 4 in PROCESS.

The **findings** presented in Table 2 indicate that only one hypothesis was not supported. First, the positive relationships between brand anthropomorphism and brand affect, between brand affect and intention to donate, and between intention to donate and donation behaviour were confirmed in this study. However, contrary to the existing literature, the hypothesis testing the influence of brand anthropomorphism on intention to donate was not supported. Second, brand affect was found to fully mediate the relationship between brand anthropomorphism and intention to donate, which may have explained why brand anthropomorphism had no direct influence on intention to donate. In addition, intention to donate was also found to fully mediate the relationship between brand anthropomorphism and donation behaviour. Third, potential donors' gender moderated the relationship between brand anthropomorphism and brand affect, and between brand anthropomorphism and intention to donate, with these two relationships being stronger for males than for females. Yet, even though more males donated to the NPO in the study, females collectively donated more money to this NPO. Potential donors' gender also moderated the relationship between brand affect and intention to donate; however, this relationship was stronger for females than for males. Yet, contrary to the existing literature, the relationship between intention to donate and donation behaviour was not moderated by potential donors' gender. Possible explanations for these findings can be reviewed in Chapter 4.

Table 2: Results of the hypotheses testing in Chapter 4

Hypotheses		Result
H ₁	The brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters will positively influence brand affect toward these characters.	Supported
H ₂	Brand affect toward brand spokes-characters will positively influence intention to donate to an NPO.	Supported
H ₃	Brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters has a positive influence on intention to donate to an NPO.	Not supported
H ₄	Intention to donate to an NPO has a positive influence on donation behaviour toward the NPO.	Supported
H ₅	Brand affect mediates the relationship between brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and intention to donate.	Supported
H ₆	Intention to donate mediates the relationship between brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and donation behaviour.	Supported
H ₇	Potential donors' gender moderates the direct relationships depicted in the conceptual framework.	Partially supported

4. CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

4.1. Theoretical contributions

First, this study provides a novel perspective from which gender – specifically, gender perceptions – could be explored by unearthing the deeper meanings associated with gendered brand spokes-characters. The findings revealed that the gender of the brand spokes-characters was more often acknowledged than not, even though it was not always in accordance with its observable gender cues. Since gender in society has traditionally been segmented according to the binary categories of male and female (Blair, 2018), many academic studies, especially in the marketing domain, also often explore gender based only on these two categories (e.g., Azar, 2013, 2015; Grohmann, 2009). Yet the gender landscape in society is rapidly changing, with movements such as gender-neutrality having gained prominence (Claveria, 2016) and having become a notable consumer and marketing trend in recent years (Kasriel-Alexander, 2016:18), despite the ongoing prevalence of androcentrism (male bias) in society. This study is thus one of a limited few that unearth the meanings associated with gender – specifically, gendered stimuli – amidst the dynamic and continually changing gender perceptions that are emerging. From the results of this study, it is evident that, even though gender appears to be easily acknowledged, the way in which it is acknowledged is no longer as clearly based on the binary gender

categories as it once was. This may therefore warrant consideration of more inclusive gender categories, from the perspective of both brand spokes-characters and consumers, in future studies. However, more importantly, this study also highlights the significance of first understanding gender perceptions in a marketing domain before exploring its influence therein, because this can yield several noteworthy implications that may not have been previously accounted for when the gender categories were less blurred.

Second, this study builds on an existing body of knowledge on brand anthropomorphism by using a gendered lens. Studies to date have often made use of personified non-human stimuli in an attempt to elicit their anthropomorphism, yet often such stimuli have appeared gender-neutral (e.g., Awad and Youn, 2018; Kwak *et al.*, 2017; Reavey *et al.*, 2018; Touré-Tillery and McGill, 2015). Thus this study is one of the first to explore the role of the acknowledged gender of a personified non-human brand stimulus in brand anthropomorphism. The findings consequently revealed that the acknowledged gender of such stimuli does play a role in their brand anthropomorphism. Even though the acknowledged gender of the brand spokes-characters did not play a role in brand anthropomorphism based on the human-like qualities that were delimited in this study, it played a role in the brand spokes-characters' other perceived *unobservable* human-like qualities, such as their perceived gendered brand personality and credibility, which essentially still constitutes brand anthropomorphism. This finding therefore builds on our current understanding of brand anthropomorphism, and offers additional insight into its variance, which evidently may go beyond just the three psychological determinants proposed by Epley *et al.* (2007) – namely, elicited agent knowledge, sociality, and effectance motivation – by highlighting the role that the acknowledged gender of stimuli may play therein.

Third, this study extends the existing knowledge on the gender dimensions of brand personality and the dimensions of source credibility by highlighting the influence of the acknowledged gender of personified non-human brand stimuli – specifically, brand spokes-characters. Studies to date have explored the role of the gender of real-life human beings in the gender dimensions of brand personality (i.e., masculine and feminine brand personality) (Grohmann, 2009:111–112; Bem, 1974:160–161) and in

the dimensions of source credibility (i.e., trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness) (Pearson, 1982:5). Yet the findings of this study suggest that the acknowledged gender of personified non-human brand stimuli, such as brand spokes-characters, may also influence their perceived gendered brand personality and source credibility. Thus the influence of acknowledged gender on the gender dimensions of brand personality and source credibility is not only limited to those of real-life human beings, but also of inanimate beings that have *observable* human-like attributes, and may even extend to brand stimuli with only perceived *unobservable* human-like qualities.

Fourth, this study found brand anthropomorphism to have a positive influence on prosocial behaviour through brand affect and intention to donate. Based on the existing literature, the influence of anthropomorphism in an NPO context remains limited (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2015:134; Ranganathan and Henley, 2008:134). While the literature appears to have explored the influence of anthropomorphism on prosocial behaviour, it is more often based on brand personification (e.g., Ahn *et al.*, 2014; Reavey *et al.*, 2018) than on brand anthropomorphism. Yet brand anthropomorphism, as defined in this study, is based on the perceptions of brands as having *unobservable* human-like qualities, and it is solely from this perspective that the literature appears limited. This study therefore builds on the existing knowledge on brand anthropomorphism specifically in an NPO context, in which it was found that brand anthropomorphism influences prosocial behaviour – specifically, donation behaviour – through brand affect and intention to donate. This provides further insight that brand anthropomorphism yields brands benefits not only in the profit sector, but also in the non-profit sector.

Fifth, according to Letheren *et al.* (2016:979), there is little in the literature about the role of consumers' gender in the anthropomorphism of personified non-human stimuli. Yet, based on the role of gender in the dehumanisation literature (Haslam, 2006:252) and based on the theory of selectivity hypothesis (Meyers-Levy and Loken, 2015; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991), it is likely that consumers' gender does play a role in the brand anthropomorphism of personified non-human brand stimuli too. Therefore, this study is one of only a few to explore the role of consumers' gender in the brand anthropomorphism of personified non-human brand stimuli, and to find

that consumers' (i.e. potential donors') gender influences the relationships between brand anthropomorphism and its subsequent outcomes. This may provide further insight, as it highlights the acknowledged gender of personified non-human brand stimuli, and consumers' gender, as other possible determinants than those proposed by Epley *et al.* (2007), which may also cause variation in the occurrence of brand anthropomorphism between *stronger brand anthropomorphism* and *brand anthroblivion*.

4.2. Managerial contributions

First, as consumers make a more concerted effort to support brands that do not uphold traditional gender stereotypes, and as brands strive for more gender-neutrality to be conveyed in their communication, caution should be exercised about how gender-neutral stimuli are perceived. The findings suggest that, if such stimuli are personified, a gender is most likely still to be perceived. Marketers therefore need be cognisant that, while the use of gender-neutral stimuli in marketing or brand communication may help to break down traditional gender stereotypes, such stimuli is still likely to be perceived as gendered, especially if they are personified. Thus the perceptions of stimuli used in marketing or brand communication should never be underestimated, because what was once easily interpreted may no longer be the case, especially not only as conversations around gender evolve, but also as consumers evolve. Thus conducting perception studies on any marketing or brand communication is now more warranted than ever before, to ensure that what marketers intend through their communication or use of stimuli is correctly interpreted as such.

Second, irrespective of gender cues, or of their absence, most of the brand spokes-characters in the study were still acknowledged as having a gender, which led to increased perceptions of these characters as being human-like. Since brand anthropomorphism has been found to yield several brand benefits, such as positive word-of-mouth, and a willingness to pay a premium price (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017:371), the findings confirm the effectiveness of brand personification to elicit brand anthropomorphism. However, they also highlight the importance of considering the acknowledged gender of stimuli, whether or not gender cues are observable, in order to elicit brand anthropomorphism. Thus, even if brand personification is not used

in communication, marketers are still encouraged to make use of subtle or even unobservable gender cues in their communications, as evidently this may also elicit brand anthropomorphism and consequently yield brand benefits. For example, marketers could endow their brands and/or products with an audible human-like gendered voice.

Third, this study revealed that the brand anthropomorphism of personified non-human brand stimuli can yield prosocial behaviour toward an NPO, thus highlighting the effectiveness of eliciting brand anthropomorphism as part of marketing strategies to be implemented by NPOs in a bid to encourage prosocial behaviour. This could be especially welcome amidst intense competitive rivalry between NPOs (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2015:134; Ranganathan and Henley, 2008:134) and dwindling financial support from governments to support such organisations (Kashif *et al.*, 2015:90). Marketers or managers of NPOs are therefore encouraged to make use of personified non-human brand stimuli, such as brand spokes-characters, to advocate for the social causes that they represent, in an attempt to elicit the brand anthropomorphism that is likely to encourage prosocial behaviour, whether it be donations of time, money, and/or in-kind goods or services. For example, an animal shelter could make use of a personified dog (perhaps with a human-like mouth, a pair of glasses, and a bow tie around its neck) to represent the organisation and so encourage potential donors to donate.

Fourth, the findings revealed that brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender played a role in the brand anthropomorphism and perceptions of these characters, and that potential donors' gender played a role in the subsequent outcomes of brand anthropomorphism. Marketers are therefore encouraged to endow brand stimuli with gender-specific cues, whether observable (e.g., human-like features such as a beard) or not (e.g., an audible human-like voice, such as a faint or soft-spoken voice) in order to enhance certain brand perceptions. As an example, in this study, brand spokes-characters acknowledged as female were perceived as having more expertise when it comes to NPOs than those acknowledged as male. In addition, marketers are encouraged to consider the use of different communication appeals for male (e.g., rational) and female consumers (e.g., emotional) when eliciting brand anthropomorphism, as these are likely to have different effects on the brand outcomes.

Fifth, evidence of gender-role reversal was also evident in this study, as what was anticipated to be a norm for brand spokes-characters acknowledged as having a specific gender, was not always the case. This implies that what was once acceptable and suitable for a specific gender may no longer be the case due to increasingly blurred gender lines and gender-role reversal. Brands are thus starting to come under fire for continuing to enforce traditional gender stereotypes in their communication (BBC News, 2019), even though gender as traditionally perceived and understood is changing at a rapid pace. Marketers are therefore encouraged to focus more on breaking down traditional gender stereotypes and keeping abreast with changing gender perceptions in order to maintain their relevance in the market in the future.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this study was to explore the role of gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters in an NPO context. As a result, four secondary research objectives were defined in support of the primary purpose of the study, and were operationalised through the respective hypotheses set out in Chapter 2, 3 and 4. This study was underpinned by the S-O-R framework, as it explains that exposure to stimuli arouses internal emotional and cognitive states that ultimately drive behavioural responses to the stimuli. The secondary research objectives, as underpinned by each component of the S-O-R framework, are outlined below, along with their respective recommendations.

Objective 1: *To unearth deeper meanings associated with personified stimuli – specifically, gendered brand spokes-characters – and their role in brand anthropomorphism in the NPO context.*

This objective was addressed in Chapter 2 (Article 1) and is underpinned by the *stimulus* component of the S-O-R framework. Differently designed, personified, and gendered brand spokes-characters were used as stimuli to spur discussions about the acknowledgment of these characters' gender, the role of these gendered characters in brand anthropomorphism, and their suitability for NPOs. The findings uncovered the complexities involved in designing gendered marketing stimuli. The gender of the brand spokes-characters used in this study was acknowledged more

often than not, and the gendered brand spokes-characters appeared to play a role in the brand anthropomorphism of these characters and in the suitability of these characters for NPOs. Based on these findings, recommendations are outlined below.

First, in this study, most of the brand spokes-characters were acknowledged as having a gender – even the gender-neutral characters. This suggests the ease with which respondents were able to assign a gender to brand stimuli with observable human-like attributes. This implies, therefore, that even if gender-neutral personified brand stimuli were to be used in brand communication, it is likely that they would be acknowledged as having a gender, which may also inadvertently evoke other perceptions associated with the acknowledged gender that may not be accounted for. Similarly, despite the binary divide between male and female, gender appears no longer to be as clear-cut as it once was. Gender lines are becoming more blurred in societies with an ever-present male bias and a simultaneous rise in gender-neutralism. It appears, then, that gender perceptions are becoming more complex, and comprise a myriad of meanings that exist far deeper than meets the eye. The results thus unearthed the fact that the deeper meanings associated with the gendered brand spokes-character stimuli led to their gender not always being correctly acknowledged, based on their observable gender cues. This points to the importance, now more than ever, of understanding gender perceptions of brand stimuli, rather than taking for granted that gender will be perceived as intended, in case the perceptions do not yield the anticipated brand benefits. It is therefore recommended that gender perception studies of brand stimuli used in brand communication, whether endowed with gender cues or not, be continually conducted by marketers in order to ascertain whether a gender is perceived and, if so, which gender is perceived. This should be done to ensure that what marketers intend by using these stimuli is perceived as such by consumers, and thus yields the anticipated brand benefits.

Second, according to Greenberg *et al.* (2008:117–118), human beings generally engage in activities such as adorning their bodies with clothing and/or jewellery in order to negate their similarity to non-human animals. It was found that the brand spokes-characters that were endowed with gender cues, particularly clothing accessories or clothing accessories, were perceived as more gendered and thus as

more human-like than those devoid of such cues. This suggests that not only are personified non-human brand stimuli likely to elicit brand anthropomorphism, but so too are stimuli that are gendered through socially constructed gender cues – in fact, more so. Marketers should therefore increase perceptions of brand stimuli as having human-like qualities by attributing a gender to such stimuli. This can be done, for example, through attributing gender cues to any stimuli used in brand communications, such as gender-specific facial features (e.g., a beard), clothing/clothing accessories (e.g., a bow tie), or an audible voice (e.g., a deep voice).

Objective 2: *To explore the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in the brand anthropomorphism of the brand spokes-characters.*

This objective was addressed in Chapter 3 (Article 2), and is underpinned by the *organism* component of the S-O-R framework. To date, research about the role of non-human agents' perceived gender in the extent to which these agents are anthropomorphised appears scant. In Chapter 3, the research objective was addressed by exploring whether there would be any statistically significant differences in brand anthropomorphism based on brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender (i.e., female, gender-neutral, and male). It was found that there were no statistically significant differences in brand anthropomorphism based on the brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender. There were, however, statistically significant differences in the gender dimensions of brand personality and in two of the dimensions of source credibility, based on the brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender. The characters acknowledged as female generally attained higher scores than those acknowledged as gender-neutral or male. This suggests that, in this context, the acknowledged gender of personified non-human brand stimuli influences their brand anthropomorphism, as the stimuli's acknowledged gender influenced the degree to which they were perceived as having other unobservable human-like qualities, such as perceived gendered personality and perceived credibility. Marketers are thus recommended that in order to elicit stronger brand anthropomorphism and the subsequent brand benefits as a result, the brand stimuli used in brand communication should be endowed with gender-specific cues, which may be dependent on the brand category or context. As an example, a personified razor blade with a rugged and deep voice for male shaving devices, may elicit

perceptions of the blade having unobservable human-like qualities such as credibility, trustworthiness and expertise to a greater extent, than if the personified razor blade had a faint and soft-spoken voice.

Objective 3: *To determine the role of brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender in other perceptions of brand spokes-characters – specifically, the gender dimensions of brand personality and source credibility.*

This objective was addressed in Chapter 3 (Article 2), and is underpinned by the *organism* component of the S-O-R framework. In Chapter 3 this research objective was addressed by exploring whether there would be statistically significant differences in the gender dimensions of brand personality and in the dimensions of source credibility, based on the brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender. It was found that there were statistically significant differences in both gender dimensions of brand personality (i.e., masculine and feminine brand personalities), and in two of the three dimensions of source credibility (i.e., expertise and attractiveness) based on the brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender. Based on these findings, the recommendations are as follows:

First, the brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender had an influence on the gender dimensions of brand personality – namely, masculine and feminine. Interestingly, while the brand spokes-characters acknowledged as female were perceived as having a more feminine brand personality than the males, those acknowledged as male were perceived as having less of a masculine brand personality than the females. This confirms the changing roles and evolving gender perceptions. Marketers are therefore recommended to make less use of traditional gender stereotypes in their communications (e.g., males being the sole providers or breadwinners in their families) and to downplay gender-specific roles, which appear to be changing at a rapid pace. The focus should rather be shifted to portraying gender equality in brand communications, as a failure to do so may eventually lead to damaging consequences for brands.

Second, in accordance with Pearson (1982:5), the acknowledged gender of the brand spokes-characters influences perceptions of their credibility – specifically, their

perceived expertise and attractiveness. It was the characters acknowledged as female that were perceived as having more expertise and being more attractive than those acknowledged as male, suggesting that the perceptions of brand stimuli can be influenced by their acknowledged gender. As is evident in this study, the brand spokes-characters acknowledged as female were perceived as having more expertise as representatives of an NPO than those acknowledged as male. This could be attributed to females' communal nature (Eagly and Steffen (1984)). It is therefore recommended to marketers that, in order to enhance certain brand perceptions, the brand stimuli used in brand communications should reflect and be endowed with explicit gender-specific cues that would subsequently evoke the anticipated and desired brand perceptions.

Objective 4: *To explore the role of potential donors' gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters and prosocial behaviour, by considering brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour.*

This objective was addressed in Chapter 4 (Article 3), and is underpinned by the *response* component of the S-O-R framework. Therefore, in Chapter 4 this research objective was addressed by exposing respondents to a gender-neutral brand spokes-character, and exploring whether there would be significant differences in the relationships between the brand anthropomorphism of this character and the outcomes thereof in an NPO context, based on potential donors' gender. It was found that the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters has an influence on brand affect, intention to donate, and donation behaviour, with brand affect and intention to donate playing a mediating role, and that potential donors' gender plays a moderating role in most of the direct relationships in the conceptual framework. Based on these findings, the recommendations are as follows:

First, the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters had a positive influence on prosocial behaviours toward an NPO, which included intention to donate and donation behaviour. It is therefore recommended that marketers or managers of NPOs elicit the brand anthropomorphism of the stimuli used in charitable communications through endowing stimuli with observable (e.g., a human-like face) or unobservable (e.g., a human-like personality) human-like attributes or qualities.

According to Epley *et al.* (2007:880), the anthropomorphism of such stimuli evokes feelings of sympathy and empathy that are likely to lead to prosocial behaviour. A practical example would be that an NPO supporting water conservation, make use of an animated water droplet with a sad human-like face in its printed communications, to evoke feelings of sympathy towards it, subsequently to encourage water conservation.

Second, this study found that potential donors' gender plays a role in the relationships between brand anthropomorphism and its subsequent outcomes in an NPO context. The influence of brand anthropomorphism on intention to donate was stronger for potential male donors, yet the influence of brand affect toward brand spokes-characters on intention to donate was stronger for potential female donors. It is therefore recommended that marketers consider the use of different appeals (e.g., more rational ones for males and more emotional ones for females) in charitable communication, to encourage prosocial behaviour from respective gender groups.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY, AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the contribution of the findings in this study, no social science research is without limitations that should be addressed by future research.

First, due to time and financial constraints, this study used convenience-based sampling drawn from a South African online research panel. Therefore the findings of this study should be interpreted cautiously, as this sample was drawn from one developing country, which limits the generalisability of these findings to a wider population. The recommendation for future research would therefore be using a wider sample population spanning different countries, both developed and developing.

Second, there are many human-like and gender cues that can make non-human stimuli appear more human-like. However, for the purposes of this study, consideration was mostly given to physiological human-like cues (e.g., eyes, mouth) and observable social gender (e.g., clothing accessories). Thus a recommendation for future research

is to use other human-like cues to elicit brand anthropomorphism (e.g., an audible human-like voice, or human-like motion). These cues may have effects on brand anthropomorphism and/or even perceived credibility of such stimuli that were not uncovered in this study.

Third, even though support was provided for the use of a bear as the animal stimulus used in this study, the use of another type of animal may have offered different insights. A recommendation for future research is therefore to consider the use of other types of animals, which may inherently be perceived differently from a bear, and as a result may find uncover insights to that found in this study.

Fourth, this study focused on the use of personified non-human brand stimuli that are gendered – specifically, brand spokes-characters with *observable* human-like attributes, some of which were also endowed with *observable* gender cues. However, not much research has been done on the influence of non-personified brand stimuli with perceived unobservable gender cues (e.g., copy in marketing communications that portrays a brand as masculine or feminine) on brand anthropomorphism. Future research in this regard can therefore ascertain whether gender, solely as an unobservable human-like quality, would still play a role in brand anthropomorphism.

Fifth, because not all of the brand spokes-characters were acknowledged as explicitly male or female in this study, future research could explore other gender categories by adapting the current measurement of gender perceptions (e.g., the masculine and feminine brand personality scale) in order to be more inclusive.

Sixth, this study only focused on brand spokes-characters' gender and consumers' gender in the field of brand anthropomorphism. However, the investigation of other demographic variables is also warranted, as alluded to in an article by Aguirre-Rodriguez (2014), whose argument highlighted the importance of considering the impact of cultural groups on the effectiveness of brand personification strategies. A recommendation for future research is thus to consider exploring other demographic variables such as age, income, ethnicity, cultural groups and education level, as these may provide deeper insights into brand anthropomorphism and its effectiveness in certain contexts. The use of these other demographic variables could also be explored

as a moderator of gender perceptions, in a similar way to how Akotia and Anum (2012) found education level to play a role in gender role perceptions.

Seventh, this study explored the influence of the brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender and of consumers' gender in two separate articles without considering the interaction between the two. According to Worth *et al.* (1992:28), this interaction has at times been considered more influential than when each is considered and explored individually. A recommendation for future research is thus to explore the interaction effects between brand spokes-characters' acknowledged gender and consumers' gender on brand anthropomorphism, and the outcomes for brands.

Lastly, this study along with several previous studies have primarily focused on the positive outcomes of brand anthropomorphism, with little consideration of the negative outcomes thereof. Therefore, the negative outcomes of brand anthropomorphism, especially through a gendered lens, also deserves some attention in future research.

7. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore brand anthropomorphism elicited through brand personification, particularly using brand spokes-characters, as one such effective element in a marketing strategy for NPOs. Yet, as we find ourselves in a landscape in which gender conversations are becoming more prominent, gender lines are becoming more blurred, and gender roles are being reversed, the role of such characters' gender in their brand anthropomorphism could not be overlooked in this context. Thus the primary objective of this study was to explore the role of gender in the brand anthropomorphism of brand spokes-characters in an NPO context. The findings consequently revealed the deeper meanings often associated with the gendered brand spokes-characters, and suggested that the acknowledged gender of such characters plays a role in their brand anthropomorphism. In addition it was found that the brand anthropomorphism of these characters has a positive influence on prosocial behaviour – specifically, donation behaviour through brand affect and intention to donate – which was found to be influenced by the gender of potential donors.

Evidently, brand anthropomorphism can be considered an effective element in a marketing strategy, as it has the potential to yield long-term business success for brands in the profit sector; but this study also found evidence of this potential in the non-profit sector, where competition has become rife. The findings of this study also revealed the importance of eliciting brand anthropomorphism by being mindful of the role that gender plays in it: not only did brand anthropomorphism differ based on the acknowledged gender of the brand spokes-characters, but also the influence of brand anthropomorphism on its subsequent outcomes differed based on the potential donors' gender. Gender, therefore, has the potential to cause variation along the continuum on which brand anthropomorphism occurs, between *stronger brand anthropomorphism* and *brand anthroblivion*. This therefore highlights the importance of gender as another notable determinant of anthropomorphism that is worth considering and further exploring in future studies, as just in this study alone, it has shown the potential to yield several important implications for both theory and practice.

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Appendix A

Historical overview of brand spokes-characters and the frameworks and typologies defining such characters

Origin of trade characters

According to Callcott and Lee (1994, 1995) and Huang *et al.* (2011), the use of animation in advertising was once a technique reserved only for situations in which budgets and creativity were limited. Today, however, there is an exponential growth in the use of animation, and specifically in the use of animated characters in advertisements. Its popularity could be because of its ability to reduce the distance between brands and consumers, to generate more positive advertising outcomes than real-life people can, and to allow consumers to transfer their likability of these characters onto the brands they represent (Heiser, Sierra and Torres, 2008:75; Huang *et al.*, 2011:9972). Therefore the brand personification through characters in this study referred to characters that are animated in their design. As far as could be determined, the earliest form of brands using animated characters dates back to 1877, when the Quaker Oats Company, an American food conglomerate, introduced the market to an animated illustration of a man in 'Quaker garb' (refer to Figure 1 below). This illustration later became the registered trademark of the brand.

Figure 1: Quaker Oats character



Source: Quaker Oats, 2018

Animated characters such as these used to be referred to as 'trade characters' because often they were recognised as registered trademarks of the brands they

represented (Callcott and Lee, 1995:144). According to Lamb *et al.* (2015:289), a trademark can be defined as the exclusive right to use a brand or part of a brand. It is suggested, therefore, that the term *trade character* was derived from the term *trademark* because, more often than not, these characters were registered trademarks for brands (Callcott and Lee, 1995:144). Similar to trademarks, trade characters were introduced into the market to distinguish products from one another; but trade characters also had the unique ability to develop a personality for a brand, making it easier for consumers to build a relationship with that brand (Callcott and Lee, 1995:144; Fleck *et al.*, 2014:84).

Defining trade characters

According to Phillips (1996:143), there was – and still is – very little consensus on the definition of trade characters. As a result, Phillips (1996) attempted to create an explicit definition of trade characters based on four areas of contention (Phillips, 1996:143–145).

The first element is *animate versus inanimate*. Here the author suggests that the term ‘character’ implies a living persona (Merriam-Webster, 2018), thus excluding any lifeless (or inanimate) visual symbols in advertising from the definition, and including only living personas such as real-life animate beings (e.g., human beings or animals) and/or lively animated objects or characters (Phillips, 1996:144). Interestingly, a study of advertising characters in the food industry by LeBel and Cooke (2008) identified animated objects or characters as the most preferred spokespersons for brands, this may be due to their humour, silly behaviour, and animation (Callcott and Phillips, 1996).

The second element is *fictional versus real*. Phillips (1996:145) suggests that the value of real characters depends on their perceived credibility as realistic spokespersons for the brand, whereas the value of fictional characters depends purely on their perceived ability to represent the brand symbolically. It was suggested, therefore, that when defining trade characters, only fictional characters should be included, as they are easier for consumers to accept than real characters.

The third element is *trade versus celebrity characters*. Here the author suggests that celebrity characters (e.g., Mickey Mouse or Bart Simpson) that were initially created for television programmes and for purposes other than advertising fulfil very different roles when used in advertising, compared with trade characters that are created purely for advertising purposes. According to Hosany *et al.* (2013:50), celebrity characters are often part of a rich storyline; and when they are used in advertisements, marketers' intentions are to allow their brands to leverage these characters' existing popularity. Phillips (1996:145) therefore recommends that only trade characters, which are created solely for promotional purposes, be included when defining trade characters.

The fourth and last element is *trademarked versus no-trademarked characters*. Phillips (1996:144) argues that trademarked characters limit the definition of trade characters to include only characters that are registered trademarks for their brands. It was suggested, therefore, that the definition of trade characters not be limited only to those that are registered trademarks, but also to include those characters that are created purely for promotional purposes (Phillips, 1996:145).

After teasing out these four areas of contention, Phillips (1996:146) defined a trade character as "a fictional, animate being or animated object that has been created for the promotion of a product, service or idea".

Trade characters versus spokes-characters and brand characters

The term *trade characters* used to have the connotation that trade characters needed to be registered trademarks of the brands they represented. However, since this notion was debunked by Phillips in 1996, the then premature suggestion by Callcott and Lee (1995:145) to replace the term *trade characters* with *spokes-characters* appeared to be a logical recommendation. According to Callcott and Lee (1995:45), the term *spokes-characters* is intended to imply that animated characters mimic the same characteristics and roles portrayed by conventional real-life spokespersons and/or endorsers. This suggests that these characters not only speak and advocate for brands, as intended with real-life brand spokespersons or endorsers, but that they also

provide a visual demonstration of the brands they represent (Callcott and Lee, 1995:145).










Similar to the four areas of contention that Phillips (1996) used to define *trade characters*, Callcott and Lee (1995) also proposed a framework with which to define spokes-characters in four dimensions. However, they suggested that spokes-characters first meet two criteria: 1) spokes-characters should always be used together with the product they advertise, and 2) spokes-characters should have easily recognizable personas (Callcott and Lee, 1995:147) before they can be defined according to the four dimensions. A brief description of each of the four dimensions, referred to as the 'AMOP' framework (Callcott and Lee, 1995:147–149), is outlined below, followed by a visual illustration hereof (refer to Figure 2).

The first dimension, *appearance*, refers to the distinction between fictitious human and non-human spokes-characters. Fictitious human spokes-characters are usually realistically depicted through illustration, animation, or caricatures (e.g., the Quaker Oats man or the Campbell Kids), while non-human spokes-characters are often classified as an animal (e.g., Tony Tiger from Kellogg's) or a mythical character (e.g., the mermaid from Chicken of the Sea tuna), or as the product that has itself been personified (e.g., Mr Peanut). Illustrations of these examples are presented hereunder (refer to Figure 2). The second dimension, *medium*, refers to the medium in which the spokes-characters are presented to consumers (e.g., print, film, radio, or on the merchandise). The third dimension, *origin*, makes a distinction between non-celebrity spokes-characters that are created solely for promotional purposes, such as the Chester Cheetah from Cheetos, and celebrity spokes-characters that are created for movies, television, publications, or comic strips, such as Mickey Mouse, but that feature or associate with a product or brand. The fourth and last dimension, *promotion*, differentiates between spokes-characters that are active and speak for or demonstrate the product or brand they represent, such as the Energizer bunny that is shown to use Energizer batteries to keep it going. This dimension also includes characters that are passive and symbolically represent a product or brand, such as the Morton Salt girl, which purely symbolises the brand's unique proposition (i.e., Morton salt does not become sticky in humidity). Refer to the Figure 2 hereunder for a visual representation of the entire 'AMOP' framework. Callcott and Lee (1995:147) suggest that, based on

the purpose of research, all of these four dimensions, or any combination of them, can be used to define spokes-characters.

Similar to the areas of contention defined by Phillips (1996) and the AMOP framework of Callcott and Lee (1995), Hosany *et al.* (2013:49–52) suggest three typologies for spoke-characters, or what they refer to as *brand characters*. The first, *brand characters in animation*, refers to animated characters that originate from publications, television programmes, or comic strips (i.e., celebrity spokes-characters) and that offer a rich storyline with supporting characters as background. Second, *brand characters with identity* are characters that carry a distinct brand identity because they are closely associated with the brand, such as Bibendum (i.e., the Michelin Man). Third, *brand characters in pure design* are characters that have a simple storyline, as their value lies in their design and style, and most of their success is dependent on merchandise sales (e.g., Hello Kitty).

Figure 2: Framework for spokes-character definition (Callcott and Lee, 1995: 147)

Dimensions	Descriptions & examples			
Appearance	<p>Fictitious human</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actors  <p>Source: Armin, 2012</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Caricatures  <p>Source: Marvellous, 2016</p>	<p>Non-human</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Animal  <p>Source: The Telegraph, 2017</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mythical  <p>Source: Thai Union, 2017</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Product Personification  <p>Source: Brands of the World, 2008</p>		
Medium	<p>Print</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Illustration Photography 	<p>Film</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Animation Puppetry Live action 	<p>Radio</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personas 	<p>Merchandise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Premiums Character licensing
Origin	<p>Advertising</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-celebrity  <p>Source: Credle, 2019</p>	<p>Non-advertising</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Celebrity  <p>Source: Mirror, 2018</p>		
Promotion	<p>Active</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speak about / demonstrate product  <p>Source: TV Tropes. Not dated</p>	<p>Passive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Symbolic  <p>Source: History Daily, 2019</p>		

Appendix B

Ethical clearance



Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences

RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Tel: +27 12 420 3434

E-mail: alewyn.nel@up.ac.za

23 October 2018

Dr L van der Westhuizen
 Department of Marketing Management

Dear Doctor van der Westhuizen

The application for ethical clearance for the research project described below served before this committee on 22 October 2018:

Protocol No:	EMS146/18
Principal researcher:	JL Verbeek
Research title:	The influence of gender on brand spokes-characters' anthropomorphism
Student/Staff No:	27219250
Degree:	PhD (Marketing Management)
Supervisor/Promoter:	Dr L van der Westhuizen / Prof M Wiese
Department:	Marketing Management

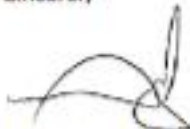
The decision by the committee is reflected below:

Decision:	Approved
Conditions (if applicable):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please include a question in questionnaire where participants confirm that they are 18 years or older
Period of approval:	October 2018 – September 2019

The approval is subject to the researcher abiding by the principles and parameters set out in the application and research proposal in the actual execution of the research. The approval does not imply that the researcher is relieved of any accountability in terms of the Codes of Research Ethics of the University of Pretoria if action is taken beyond the approved proposal. If during the course of the research it becomes apparent that the nature and/or extent of the research deviates significantly from the original proposal, a new application for ethics clearance must be submitted for review.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely



pp PROF JA NEL
CHAIR: COMMITTEE FOR RESEARCH ETHICS

cc: Prof M Wiese
 Prof Y Jordaan
 Student Administration

Appendix C

Informed consent for participation in the academic research study


 UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
 UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
 YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences
 Department of Marketing Management

THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER ON BRAND SPOKES-CHARACTERS' ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Dear Participant

You are invited to participate in an academic research study conducted by Jade Verbeek, from the Department of Marketing Management at the University of Pretoria.

The purpose of the study is to explore your perceptions of a brand character (such as the Michelin Man and the Energizer Bunny) and your donation behaviour within a non-profit context.

Please note the following:

- This is an anonymous study survey, as your name will not appear on the questionnaire. The answers you give will be treated as strictly confidential as you cannot be identified in person based on the answers you give.
- Your participation in this study is very important to us. You may, however, choose not to participate and you may stop participating at any time without any negative consequences.
- Please answer the questions in the attached questionnaire as completely and honestly as possible. This should not take more than **15 minutes** of your time.
- The results of the study will be used for academic purposes only and may be published in an academic journal. We will provide you with a summary of our findings on request.
- Please contact my study leaders, Dr L. Van der Westhuizen and Prof. M. Wiese at liezl-marie.vanderwesthuizen@up.ac.za and melanie.wiese@up.ac.za, respectively, if you have any questions or comments regarding the study.

Please click below to indicate that:

- You have read and understand the information provided above.
- You give your consent to participate in the study on a voluntary basis.

YES	NO
------------	-----------

Appendix D

Stimuli used in Unstructured Interviews

Two main questions that guided the short unstructured interviews:

1. Does the each character appear human-like? If so, why or why not?
2. Do you perceive each character to be female, gender-neutral or male? Why?



Appendix E

Discussion guide (I) and individual task (II) used in focus group

I. DISCUSSION GUIDE:

- Sample: Consumers residing in South Africa over the age of 18 years
- Introduction :
 - Welcome everyone, introduce researcher as moderator and ask each participant to introduce himself or herself.
- Provide purpose of the focus group:
 - *The purpose of the focus group is to ascertain the suitability of a brand character as representative of a non-profit organisation that will be used as stimuli in my study.*
- Provide guidelines for the interaction within the group:
 - *There are no right or wrong answers during this discussion group. I want to hear your thoughts, so please feel free to be honest and share your opinions.*
- Informed Consent Form – *All participants to sign*
- Session will be recorded – *Please speak up*
- Timing of this is 60 to 90 minutes – *doing an individual exercise, will bring out some snacks*

[START RECORDING]

- A few proposed questions to guide the discussion:
 1. Do you understand the term “brand character” and if so what do you understand by this term? [Document answers on flipchart]
 - a. Simple definition for purposes of my study: ***Fictional animated human or non-human characters that have observable human-like physique that represents brands for promotional purposes.***
 2. Can you provide examples of brand characters? [Document answers on flipchart]
 3. If we had to split them and separate those that are perceived as male from those that are perceived as female. [Most appear to be male] Can you provide examples of any female brand characters?
 4. Why do you think there are limited female brand characters in the market?
 5. Do you think there should be more female brand characters in the market? Why / Why not?
 6. Provide the individual task and after completed, discuss:
 - a. Human:
 - i. Do you perceive any to be human?
 - ii. What in your mind makes them appear human?
 - b. Gender:
 - i. Have you been able to identify whether bears have gender (male, female or gender-neutral)?
 - ii. What in your mind makes them appear to have a certain gender?

7. There are five sets of characters (Character A to E), each with a male, female and gender neutral counterpart. If I had to ask you to choose your two favourite characters (Character A to E), which would you choose? Why? [Show all the characters].

Following questions only applicable to the two favourite sets of brand characters chosen:

[PUT TWO CHARACTERS ON SCREEN AND DELETE THE REST]

8. Do these two brand characters appear to be human? If so, what in your mind makes them appear human?
- a. [Observable]
 - i. Looks like a person.
 - ii. Has a human neck.
 - iii. Has a human torso.
 - iv. Has a human face.
 - v. Has a nose.
 - vi. Has eyes.
 - vii. Has a mouth.
 - viii. Has ears.
 - b. [Unobservable]:
 - i. A mind of its own.
 - ii. Intentions.
 - iii. Free will.
 - iv. Consciousness.
 - v. Desires.
 - vi. Beliefs.
 - vii. The ability to experience emotions.
 - viii. A spirit.
 - ix. A soul.
 - x. Motivations.
 - xi. Goals.
 - xii. Thoughts.
9. Physically do these characters appear human enough? If not, what changes would you suggest we make to make them appear more human?
10. Do these characters respectively appear to have a gender (male, female or gender-neutral)? If so, let us list the gender per character. Would you make any changes so that male appears more male, female appears more female or gender-neutral appears more gender-neutral?

Questions pertaining to non-profit organisation:

11. The brand characters will be developed to represent a non-profit organisation. Do you think these two characters are suitable representatives for a non-profit organisation? If not, do you have any suggestions on how to improve it to make them all more suitable representatives of a non-profit organisation?
12. Between the two sets of favourite characters, which are you most likely to donate towards and why?
13. In your opinion, do you think the bears are emotion-less in their facial expressions? If not, what would you change to make them appear emotion-less?

14. What do you think would be a suitable [gender-neutral] name for the brand character that represents a non-profit organisation? If we had to name the brand character Jojo, would you consider this a suitable name?
15. Let us summarise our discussions – would you like to add anything else?
16. Do you have any questions?

Thank you for your willingness to partake in these discussions!

Checklist for facilitator:

Stationery & equipment needed:

- Projector & laptop
- Informed consent form
- Recorder
- Printed individual tasks & pens
- Flipchart (incl. markers) Pens x 6

Checklist of topics to be covered:

1. Meaning of term “brand character”
2. Examples female brand characters
3. Characteristics that make characters appear human (observable and unobservable)
4. Characteristics that make character appear to have gender
5. Favourite two characters of the 5 sets of characters.
 - HUMAN**
 - Are they specifically human?
 - What characteristics makes them human?
 - Anything you would change to make them more human?
 - GENDER**
 - Do they have gender – what is their gender?
 - What characteristics makes them appear to have a certain gender?
 - Anything you would change to make them look more male/female or gender-neutral?
6. Are both brand characters suitable rep for non-profit?
 - If so, which is more suited and why?
7. A gender-neutral name for character

II. INDIVIDUAL TASK (Part A)

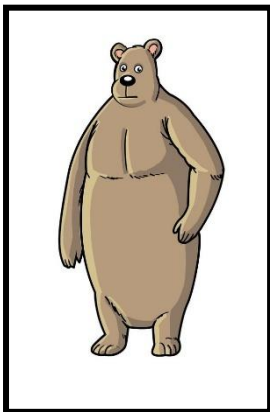
Before you start:

- Please indicate which gender you identify with (male or female): _____
- In which year were you born: _____

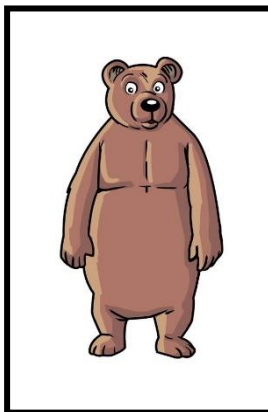
Please take the next few minutes to have a look at the characters and answer the following three simple questions for each character:

- **Question 1:** Does the character appear to be human to you? [Answer Yes or No]
- **Question 2:** Do you perceive the character to have a gender? [Answer male, female or gender-neutral]
- **Question 3:** Would you consider this character to be a suitable representative for a non-profit organisation? [Answer Yes or No]

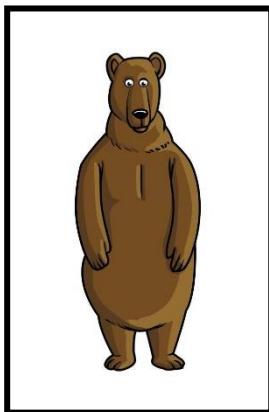
Character A:



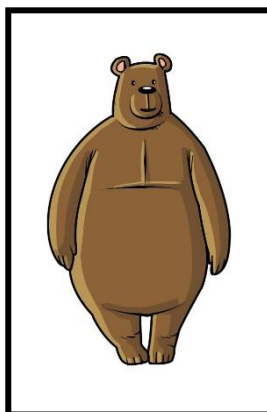
Character B:



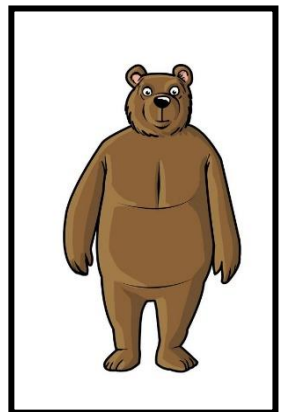
Character C:



Character D:



Character E:



	Character A	Character B	Character C	Character D	Character E
Q1					
Q2					
Q3					

II. INDIVIDUAL TASK (Part B)

Before you start:

- Please indicate which gender you identify with (male or female): _____
- In which year were you born: _____

Please take the next few minutes to have a look at the characters and answer the following three simple questions for each character:

- **Question 1:** Does the character appear to be human to you? [Answer Yes or No]
- **Question 2:** Do you perceive the character to have a gender? [Answer male, female or gender-neutral]
- **Question 3:** Would you consider this character to be a suitable representative for a non-profit organisation? [Answer Yes or No]

Character A



Character B



Character C



Character D



Character E



Character F



	Character A	Character B	Character C	Character D	Character E	Character F
Q1						
Q2						
Q3						

II. INDIVIDUAL TASK (Part B) - Continued

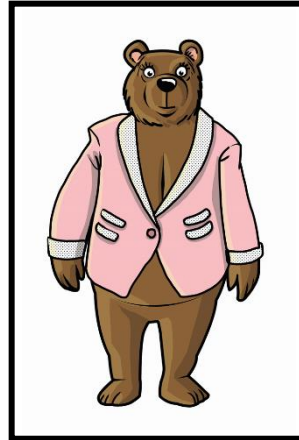
Character G



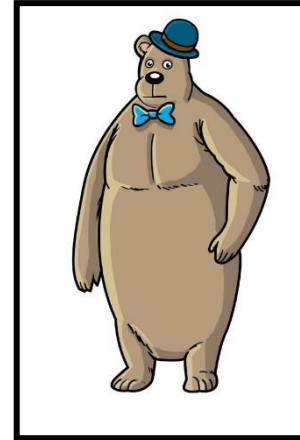
Character H



Character I



Character J



	Character G	Character H	Character I	Character J
Q1				
Q2				
Q3				

Appendix F

Questionnaire distributed via online panel (Gender-neutral stimulus)

 Resp. no.

Please answer all the questions by clicking on the appropriate block.

Section A: Demographic Question

Q1	Please indicate which gender you identify yourself with:	
	Female	1
	Male	2

Section B: Patronage of non-profit organisations

Q2	Have you ever donated to non-profit organisation(s) before?		
	Yes	1	→ Proceed to Q3
	No	2	→ Proceed to Q6

Q3	How often do you donate to non-profit organisation(s)?	
	Daily	1
	Weekly	2
	Monthly	3
	Bi-Annually	4
	Yearly	5
	Ad hoc basis	5

Q4	On average, how much money do you donate to non-profit organisation(s) based on the frequency you selected in the previous question? [E.g. if you indicated that you donate weekly to non-profit organisation(s), how much do you donate weekly]	
	R1 – R 200	1
	R 201 – R 400	2
	R 401 – R 600	3
	R 601 – R 800	4
	R 801 – R 1000	5
	More than R 1000	6


Q5 **What is /are the primary reason(s) that you donate to non-profit organisation(s)?**
[You can select more than one option]

I want to make a difference.	1
I want to help people less fortunate than me.	2
I care about the cause.	3
I believe that we all need to help solve social problems.	4
It makes me feel good.	5
My religion encourages giving.	6
It helps me become a better person.	7
Other	8
<i>"Other" please specify:</i>	

Section C: Intention to donate

Below is an image of Jojo, a brand character that represents a South African non-profit organisation (NPO). The NPO assists other South African NPOs by means of assisting them with a visibility platform, sponsored social media and financial training. Support is offered to various kinds of NPOs, some of which include those that specialise in child and/or animal welfare, burn victims, people with disabilities and empowerment of entrepreneurs.



Please indicate the extent to agree or disagree with the statements below, regarding your intention to donate to the non-profit organisation that Jojo represents:		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Q6								
6.1	I am likely to donate to the non-profit organisation.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6.2	I will donate next time.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6.3	I will definitely donate to the non-profit organisation.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6.4	I will recommend others to donate to the non-profit organisation.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section D: Donation Behaviour

You will be provided with an additional R30, as a monetary incentive for your participation in this study. You can decide to be reimbursed the full R30, or you can donate some or all of it to the non-profit organisation, Loving Thy Neighbour that the brand character, Jojo represents.



Q7	Based on Jojo's above request, please indicate whether you would like to donate to the <i>Loving Thy Neighbour</i> non-profit organisation.	
	Yes	1
	No	2

→ Proceed to Q8
 → Proceed to Q10

Q8 **How much would you like to donate to the Loving Thy Neighbour non-profit organisation? [Please keep in mind that the donation indicated below will be subtracted from your additional incentive of R30 and will actually be donated to *Loving Thy Neighbour*].**


R5.00	1
R10.00	2
R15.00	3
R20.00	4
R25.00	5
R30.00	6

Q9 In order to facilitate payment of the additional incentive of R30, please provide us with your email address. Please note that the email address you provide should be the same as the one that Springvale Online uses to communicate with you.

Q10 You have chosen not to donate to the *Loving Thy Neighbour* non-profit organisation. Please indicate why by selecting one or more reasons below:

I would like to be reimbursed the full additional incentive of R30.	1
I am not particularly fond of Jojo.	2
I am unsure of what cause Loving Thy Neighbour stands for AND/OR I do not support the cause that Loving Thy Neighbour stands for.	3
I already donate enough to other non-profit organisations and charities.	4
Other.	5

Section E: Reactions toward the brand character Jojo

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statements below, regarding your affection toward Jojo.		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Q11								
11.1	Jojo makes me feel good.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11.2	Jojo makes me feel happy.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11.3	Jojo gives me pleasure.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7


Section F: Perceptions of brand character




Q12 Please indicate which gender you think Jojo is.


Female	1
Gender-neutral	2
Male	3


Q13

To what extent would you agree or disagree that Jojo appears to:		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
								
13.1	Be adventurous	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.2	Be aggressive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.3	Be brave	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.4	Be daring	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.5	Be dominant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.6	Be sturdy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.7	Be fragile	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.8	Be graceful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.9	Be sensitive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.10	Be sweet	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.11	Be tender	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.12	Express tender feelings	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q14		To what extent would you agree or disagree that Jojo appears to be:								
				Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
14.1	Attractive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
14.2	Classy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
14.3	Beautiful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
14.4	Elegant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
14.5	Sexy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
14.6	Dependable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
14.7	Honest	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
14.8	Reliable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
14.9	Sincere	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
14.10	Trustworthy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
14.11	Expert	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
14.12	Experienced	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
14.13	Knowledgeable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
14.14	Qualified	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
14.15	Skilled	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		

Section G: Humanisation (anthropomorphism) of brand character

Q15		To what extent do you agree or disagree that Jojo appears to have:								
				Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
15.1	A mind of its own.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
15.2	Intentions.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
15.4	Consciousness.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		

To what extent do you agree or disagree that Jojo appears to have:		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Q15								
	Desires.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	The ability to experience emotions.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section H: Demographic Questions *(The following 2 questions pertain to you as an individual)*

Q16 In which year were you born? [19__ __]: _____

Q17 Which racial group do you identify yourself with?

Black	1
Coloured	2
Indian	3
White	4
Other	5
<i>If "Other" please specify:</i>	
Prefer not to answer	6

Thank you very much for your time and for participating in this survey