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Creating Connections Through Characters: A Study of Brand Mascots and Their Influence on Consumer Purchase Intentions

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to investigate the impact of brand mascots on consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions, emphasizing the significance of emotional connections in the competitive business landscape and deciding on the best strategy to formulate to capture the market chunk.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Employing a hybrid research approach, a sample of 568 respondents was collected within India. SmartPLS was utilized for analysis. The research delves into brand awareness, personification, and self-congruence as determinants of consumer attitudes and intentions.

Findings: The study uncovers positive associations between brand awareness, brand personification, brand self-congruency, attitude towards advertisements, and consumer purchase intentions when a brand mascot is used as an endorsement strategy, particularly in the food sector where brands use brand mascots as a promotional strategy. The integration of brand mascots as tools to establish connections with branding aspects and capture consumer attention is affirmed.

Research Limitations: While providing valuable insights, this research acknowledges its limitations. Future studies should address these limitations by encompassing diverse industries, investigating supplementary factors, and exploring various contexts to deepen understanding of the intricate relationship between brand mascots and consumer behavior.

Practical Implications: This research underscores the functional significance of integrating brand mascots in marketing strategies to foster connections with consumers by adding value to branding aspects such as the usage of brand mascots, creating brand awareness, enhancing brand personality and brand self-congruency, thereby potentially enhancing purchase intentions, especially in branding-sensitive sectors like the food industry.

Social Implications: The study implies that successfully incorporating brand mascots can contribute to stronger brand-consumer relationships by enhancing the branding aspects, potentially leading to positive social implications such as enhanced brand engagement, positive attitude, and affirmativeness towards advertisements and purchase intention.

Originality/Value: By delving into the multifaceted aspects of brand mascots and their influence on enhancing the brand aspects and consumer behavior, this research contributes to the existing body of knowledge. It underscores the originality of considering mascot compatibility crucial to strengthening and creating brand awareness, personification, and self-congruence.

Keywords: Brand Mascot, Anthropomorphism, Attitude, Intention to buy.
JEL Classification: M3, M31, M37.

1. Introduction:

Animism proposes that non-human entities possess a soul, resulting in anthropomorphism, where human attributes are assigned to various living beings and objects. This concept involves giving human-like traits to things. Before this concept emerged, products, brands, and services were presented objectively to consumers. However, with anthropomorphism, brands create characters that can think and feel, allowing businesses to convey emotions, thoughts, and identities to consumers, thus differentiating themselves (Guthrie, 1997). Recently, anthropomorphism has gained significant attention. Delbaere, et al. (2011) and Aggarwal and McGill (2012) found that advertising human traits in products can trigger anthropomorphism and enhance brand affinity. May and Monga (2014) noted that anthropomorphism aligns individuals with similar mental states, affecting consumer purchasing decisions. Consumers expect more than just products or services from businesses in the modern era. Thus, using anthropomorphic brand mascots offers businesses strategies to connect with consumers. This research explores the multifaceted aspects of brand mascots and their impact on brand awareness, personification, and self-congruence, contributing to existing knowledge (Agrawal, et al., 2021).

A mascot, rooted in anthropomorphism, represents a wide range of human, animal, or inanimate characters used as symbols for products and services (Tek, 2004). In essence, a mascot serves as an entity, living or not, that businesses use to communicate with consumers (Garretson & Niedrich, 2004). Mascots have emerged as potent and versatile marketing tools, finding their place in advertisements. Creating a mascot is a recognized strategy for establishing corporate identity and generating public interest. Mascots offer visual engagement opportunities, enhancing brand awareness. These characters help consumers identify, remember, and understand the brand. Mascots must strongly associate with the brand, product, or service to be effective marketing tools (Cohen, 2014). These fictitious characters, representing a product, a company, or both, hold considerable advertising value. They function as communication conduits between consumers and products, offering a creative, sustainable, cost-effective model for conveying a brand's values and personifying its desired image (Nasr Esfahani, et al., 2022). The strategic use of a brand mascot in advertising aims to elicit favorable emotions and enhance the brand value, aspects, and opinions among consumers towards the brand (Cohen, 2014). Businesses aspire to attain a competitive edge and sustain their competitive prowess by employing a brand mascot. Marketing endeavours to instill life into brands and products and often strives to evoke animistic or anthropomorphic consumer thinking. This, in turn, is believed to facilitate attitudes (Sivaramakrishnan, et al., 2007), behaviours (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012), and consumption choices (Murray & Häubl, 2009). Mascots have become integral to various industries, including FMCG, manufacturing, transportation, finance, education, and paint, and are effectively used for promotion by brands like Amul, 7UP, Tata Power, Duracell, and Pillsbury.

Previous research has identified key drivers of brand anthropomorphism, such as brand personification (Aguirre-Rodriguez, 2014; Chen & Lin, 2018; Mourey, et al., 2017), brand self-congruity (BSC) (Guido & Peluso, 2015) and brand advertisements and awareness (Puzakova, et al., 2013; Reavey, et al., 2018). These elements collectively shape customers' attitudes toward a brand. Brands characterized by personified traits resembling human attributes enhance customers' propensity to anthropomorphize, a phenomenon similarly observed in brands with similar traits (R. J. Cohen, 2014). Additionally, the alignment between a FMCG brand identity

and a customer's self-identity significantly affects customer attitudes and intentions toward the brand (Grzeskowiak, et al., 2016), nurturing a human-like relationship with the brand (Agrawal, et al., 2021). Sarkar, et al. (2019) found that advertising human traits in products can trigger anthropomorphism and enhance brand affinity which is crucial in contemporary marketing strategies, as it plays a pivotal role in fostering long-lasting relationships. The establishment of the customer-brand relationship is facilitated through the elicitation of reactions from customers towards the brand. Marketers meticulously strategize and design their brands to establish strong customer connections (Singh, et al., 2021). To create a long-term connection between the brand and the consumer, it is important to focus on certain factors such as awareness, personification, and congruity because each element plays a vital role in establishing a successful brand on a long-term basis. Hence, our research endeavours strive to discern the impact of factors like brand awareness, brand personification, and brand self-congruity—particularly in the context of brands utilizing anthropomorphic mascots—on both attitudes towards the brand aspects and purchasing intentions (Çizer, 2023).

2. Literature Review

Animism posits the presence of a soul in non-human entities (Proctor, 2018). This belief induces anthropomorphism, wherein human attributes are ascribed to living organisms, encompassing flora, fauna, and inanimate entities like objects and occurrences. Anthropomorphism is a concept that talks about giving human-like characteristics to any object or creature. Before the emergence of anthropomorphism, commodities, brands, and services were represented objectively, existing as abstract entities in the consumer psyche. Through the lens of anthropomorphism, brands introduce characters imbued with the ability to reason, emote, and act. This enables enterprises to transmit their emotions, thoughts, and personas to consumers, thereby effecting differentiation (Guthrie, 1997). The concept of anthropomorphism has garnered substantial attention in recent years. For example, in the discourse surrounding anthropomorphism and brand personification, Delbaere, et al. (2011) and Aggarwal and McGill (2012) observed that advertisements portraying human product characteristics could trigger anthropomorphism and heighten brand affinity. Hogg (1998), Lee, et al. (2009) and May and Monga (2014) highlighted that anthropomorphism tends to align individuals with mental states akin to their own, potentially diminishing consumer patience and influencing purchasing choices. Fournier (1998) contended that consumers mentally visualize products, forging relationships with them that might encompass attachment, engagement, or even detachment. In the post-modern era, consumers demand more than mere products or services from enterprises. Consequently, businesses are compelled to address needs beyond those of consumers. Within this framework, using an anthropomorphic brand mascot offers diverse strategies for businesses to establish and perpetuate connections with consumers. By delving into the multifaceted aspects of brand mascots and their influence on enhancing brand aspects and consumer behaviour, this research contributes to the existing body of knowledge (Agrawal et al., 2021). It underscores the originality of considering mascot compatibility as crucial to enhancing and creating brand awareness, personification, and self-congruence.

2.1. Brand Mascot

A mascot is a concept that arose from the ideology of anthropomorphism, encompassing a wide array of human, animal, and inanimate characters that serve as symbols for products and

services (Tek, 2004). Broadly defined, a mascot signifies a living or non-living entity harnessed by businesses to communicate their products or services to consumers (Garretson & Niedrich, 2004). The notion of mascots manifests in diverse forms within the literature. For instance, it is characterized as a commercial character (Callcott & Phillips, 1996), a spokes-character (Garretson & Niedrich, 2004; Neeley & Schumann, 2004; Peirce & McBride, 1999), or an animated character. A brand mascot constitutes a fictional, non-human character that embodies the values and personas associated with a brand (Cayla, 2013). Developing a brand character or mascot has been widely recognised as an effective strategy for establishing and enhancing a corporate identity while attracting public interest. Using a mascot presents many possibilities for stimulating consumer engagement and fostering brand awareness by providing visual stimuli to the target audience. Characteristic figures are individuals who possess distinct qualities that contribute to forming an identity and aid in developing and articulating a brand's personality. In addition to their primary function, it is noteworthy that these marketing efforts also facilitate the target market's ability to recognise, retain, and comprehend the brand in question. As pivotal tools of marketing communication, mascots must be readily identifiable. This necessitates a strong association between the mascot and the brand, product, or service, establishing a coherent relationship. Brand mascots serve as visual prompts for consumers, assuming distinctive personas that aid in crafting an identity and conveying the brand's personality. They play a role in assisting the target audience's recognition, recall, and comprehension of the brand (R. J. Cohen, 2014). Mascots have captured many industries as promotional tactics, such as the FMCG, manufacturing, transport, finance, educational institutions, and paint industries. Out of which, FMCG sectors are widely using mascots to promote their products, like Amul girl for Amul butter, Fido Dido for 7up beverage, Roshini for Tata Power, Bunny for Duracell batteries, Dough boy for Pillsbury.

2.2. Brand Awareness (BA)

Brand awareness encapsulates the prominence of a brand within a consumer's mental landscape (Aaker, 1997). This pertains to the strength of the brand's cognitive node or imprints in memory, evident in a consumer's capacity to recognize the brand across various scenarios (Keller, 2005). While brand awareness constitutes the primary and fundamental step towards cultivating brand equity, it may not be an independently sufficient factor for its establishment. Hence, marketers often initiate their brand strategies by instilling brand awareness through diverse communication channels like advertising, personal selling, publicity, and direct marketing. Notably, brand awareness bestows marketers an array of competitive advantages (Aaker, 1997). The significance of brand awareness within consumer consciousness has spurred the adoption of mascots by businesses. Mascots play a vital role in maintaining the visibility of products and services in consumers' minds. They serve as a means of embodying the brand's personality and forging an emotional bond between the intended audience and the brand (Nasr Esfahani et al., 2022). In essence, mascots facilitate the reflection of brand identity while nurturing a profound emotional connection between the brand and its target demographic. Utilizing a brand mascot in advertising also confers an additional benefit: it enhances brand recall by imbuing intangible products with a tangible source of identification (Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013). Consequently, when a brand occupies a prominent space in consumers' top-of-mind awareness, it increases the likelihood of consumers selecting its products (Keller, 2001). Drawing from the premises mentioned above, the ensuing hypotheses are formulated:

H$_1$: BA has a significant impact on purchase intention.

H2: Brand awareness has a significant impact on advertisements.

H3: Advertisement attitudes mediate between BA and purchase intention.

2.3. Brand Personification (BP)

Consumers exhibit a preference for brands endowed with persona or personification attributes. Brand personification entails portraying a brand that resonates with customers' inclination to attribute human characteristics to it (Huang & Mitchell, 2014). Concurrently, brand anthropomorphism involves perceiving and interpreting a brand as possessing human-like attributes, constituting a crucial element bolsters customers' capacity to anthropomorphize the brand. Aguirre-Rodriguez (2014) defines brand personification as presenting a product or brand with human-like features resembling the brand. BP is pivotal in fostering an emotional consumer-firm relationship (Huang & Mitchell, 2014). Customers aspire to align themselves with personified brands within the marketplace (R. J. Cohen, 2014). By engendering a connection with customers, BP stimulates affectionate behaviours towards the brand (Chen & Lin, 2018). Additionally, a brand mascot can effectively convey the brand's personality, thereby facilitating consumers' identification with the brand (Aaker, 1997). When consumers resonate with this personality, their affinity towards the brand increases, making them more likely to purchase (Aaker, 1997). Building on these foundations, the hypotheses underpinning the study are formulated as follows:

H4: BP has a significant impact on purchase intention.

H5: BP has a significant impact on advertisements.

H6: Advertisement attitudes mediate between BP and purchase intention.

2.4. Brand Self-Congruity (BSC)

Guido and Peluso (2015) according to them the concept of the (BSC) provides a practical framework for fostering brand anthropomorphism. Grzeskowiak, et al. (2016) stated that the activation of an 3individual's self-concept significantly impacts the expression of anthropomorphism where the individuals seek to strengthen their self-concept by associating with brands with a symbolic identity that resonates with various aspects of their self-identity, according to. According to Rehman (2019), an individual's self-concept is divided into three categories. The 'actual self,' which represents one's current self-perception; the 'ideal self,' which represents one's desired self-perception; and the 'social self,' which includes perception influenced by societal norms, are among these categories. Customers focus on their self-concept to establish a sense of alignment with the brand. This factor is critical in developing the phenomenon of customer-brand anthropomorphised characters (Epley, et al., 2007). The presence of a brand mascot aids in forming a bond between the brand and the individual's sense of self. When this connection is strong, there is a greater likelihood of increased purchase intentions. Furthermore, Fetscherin and Heinrich (2014) and Nguyen, et al. (2022) stated that by establishing a strong bond between consumers and a brand frequently results in recurring purchases Customers seek brands that align with their self-image, striving to establish congruity between the brand's image and identity through brand identification. The incorporation of the BSC effectively contributes to nurturing emotional attachment between customers and the brand, fostering an affectionate relationship (Bıçakcıoğlu, et al., 2018). In light of the above assertions, the hypotheses underpinning this study are:

**H7: BSC has a significant impact on purchase intention.**

H8: BSC has a significant influence on attitudes.

H9: Advertisement attitudes mediate between BSC and purchase intention.

2.5. Attitude Towards Advertisements (AA)

Advertisements play a pivotal role in infusing brands with human-like attributes, thereby contributing to the development of anthropomorphised characters (Puzakova, et al., 2013). The advertisements impact customers' purchasing behaviour responses and overall attitudes toward specific brands (Agrawal, et al., 2021). Advertisements employing anthropomorphism positively shape customers' attitudes towards particular brands (BAŞFIRINCI & Cilingir, 2015). Diverse mascots are strategically integrated into brand advertisements to enhance customers' perception of the brand as possessing human-like characteristics or a humanized essence (Reavey, et al., 2018). Such branding strategies that involve humanization or the projection of brands through human characteristic-laden advertisements are pivotal for fostering brand anthropomorphism. This trend has been bolstered by the proliferation of brand mascots in online advertising due to new technological avenues (Stafford, et al., 2002). The surge in brand mascot usage in advertising can be attributed to several potential advantages. One such advantage is the ability of brand mascots to facilitate communication between brand managers and consumers through a relatable character (R. J. Cohen, 2014). Furthermore, creating a brand mascot falls under the firm's jurisdiction, allowing for greater control over the thoughts and emotions evoked when consumers contemplate the brand. This contrasts with using an endorser in advertising (Keller, 2005). Brand mascots are a strategic tool for aligning positive thoughts and emotions with the brand, thus enhancing consumers' overall attitude towards it (Keller, 2005). The more favourable consumers' attitudes are towards a brand, the higher the likelihood of product purchases from that brand (Park & MacInnis, 2006). Hence, the hypotheses formulated for this study are:

H10: There is a considerable impact of advertisement attitudes on purchase intention.
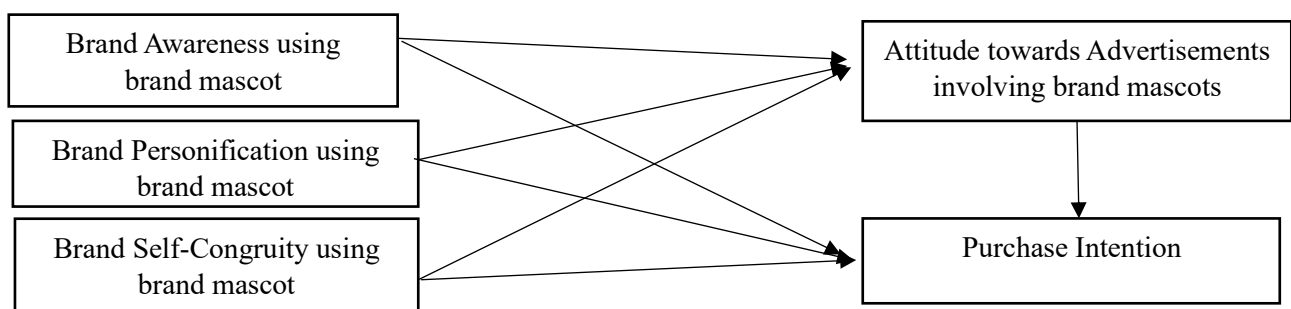
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The figure 1 represents the conceptual framework of the derived hypotheses. Here Brand awareness, Brand personification and Brand self-congruity are the independent variables, Attitude towards advertisement is the mediating variable and Purchase intention is the dependent variable. The straight lines indicate the relationships which have been measured.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and data collection

The research method used in this study was a questionnaire survey. The participants were chosen using a convenience sampling method, and the survey was conducted in English using a hybrid data collection method. The responses of respondents were graded on a five-point Likert scale. The collected data was then analysed with the Smart-PLS software. The study's target participants were regular Indian consumers who made frequent product purchases. The survey was distributed using a hybrid approach, yielding 581 data sets. Following a thorough data screening, 568 of these sets were determined to be valid records. The study's primary goal is to investigate the impact of brand mascot advertisements on consumer purchasing behaviour.

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) is a nonparametric method that offers the advantage of not necessitating the fulfillment of multivariate assumptions. Various multivariate assumption tests encompassing aspects like normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were conducted in this context. The collected data meets all the criteria these multivariate assumption tests set.

4. Results and Findings

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

As indicated in Table 1 below, the demographic profile of the respondents, out of a total of 568 participants, comprises 337 females (representing 59.33 percent of the total) and 231 males (constituting 40.67 percent). Most responses fall within the age bracket of 18 to 39, accounting for 312 respondents (54.92 percent). Among the respondents, the most prevalent level of education was an undergraduate degree, held by 327 individuals (57.57 percent). Regarding annual income of 2 lakhs to 5 lakhs per annum, 212 respondents (37.32 percent) accounted for high.

Table 1. Demographic Data

	Demographic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	337	59.33
	Male	231	40.67
Age	18-39	312	54.92
	40-49	156	27.46
	50-64	74	13.02
	65-Above	26	4.57
Education	Schooling	112	19.71
	Undergraduate	327	57.57
	Postgraduate (Including Ph.D.)	129	22.71
Income Level	Less than 2 lakhs per annum	60	10.56
	2 lakhs to 5 lakhs per annum	117	20.59
	5 lakhs to 10 lakhs per annum	212	37.32
	Above 10 lakhs per annum	147	25.88
	Retired	32	5.63

As indicated in Table 1 the maximum number of respondents of the study are females; it is understood that the age group between 18-39 is more into purchasing, indicating that marketers can focus on this chunk, around 327 respondents from our study have completed they're under graduation and most of our respondents in our study earn around 5 lakhs to 10 lakhs.

4.2. Results of Measurement Model

In Table 2, measurement model analysis is done where the factor loading, composite reliability, and AVE for the collected sample are analysed. The measurement model elucidates the connections between measurement variables (MVs) and their corresponding latent variables (LVs). It encompasses evaluating the constructs' quality, incorporating reliability and validity assessments. Factor loadings within the model gauge the extent to which an item accurately represents the latent construct, with a general recommendation for factor loadings to exceed .70 for robust representation.

Table 2. Measurement Model

Construct	Item	Loadings	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
AA	AB1	0.806			
	AB2	0.842			
	AB3	0.848	0.915	0.933	0.698
	AB4	0.861			
	AB5	0.831			
	AB6	0.822			
BA	BA1	0.750			
	BA2	0.806			
	BA3	0.786	0.887	0.912	0.634
	BA4	0.806			
	BA5	0.821			
	BA6	0.807			
BP	BP1	0.816			
	BP2	0.831			
	BP3	0.821	0.894	0.918	0.652
	BP4	0.742			
	BP5	0.821			
	BP6	0.810			
BSC	BSC1	0.832			
	BSC2	0.842			
	BSC3	0.798	0.876	0.910	0.668
	BSC4	0.802			
	BSC5	0.812			
PI	PI1	0.837			
	PI2	0.805			
	PI3	0.756	0.891	0.915	0.643
	PI4	0.787			
	PI5	0.802			
	PI6	0.822			

The study's construct validity was evaluated through convergent and discriminant validity assessments. The statistical findings in Table 2 demonstrate that all items' loadings surpass the 0.7 threshold. Remarkably, all constructs' composite reliability (CR) values exceed the accepted minimum of 0.7, and the average variance extracted (AVE) values are more significant than 0.5. It's noteworthy that according to Chin (1998), factor loadings above 0.6 are considered acceptable, and with CR and AVE values falling within acceptable ranges, the construct validity is affirmed. Based on the outcomes of this study, it is evident that all constructs exhibit high reliability, substantiated by the well-established relationship between latent constructs and observed variables. Furthermore, all constructs demonstrate strong internal consistency, as evidenced by RhoA values exceeding 0.7 (Hair, et al., 2017; Hair, et al., 2019).

Discriminant validity assesses whether theoretically unrelated constructs demonstrate no significant relationships. The primary objective of discriminant validity analysis is to confirm that a reflective construct establishes more robust connections with its indicators than any other construct within the PLS path model. This examination ensures that the construct is distinct and exhibits stronger associations with its own measures than those of other model constructs.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity- HTMT

	AA	**BA**	**BP**	**BSC**
AA				
BA	0.801			
BP	0.829	0.862		
BSC	0.879	0.814	0.856	
PI	0.783	0.854	0.852	0.803

As presented in Table 3, the findings reveal that the square root of AVE for each construct exceeds the inter-construct correlations. Furthermore, Table 3 shows the ratio of correlations within constructs compared to correlations between constructs. The outcomes notably fulfil the criteria for both HTMT.90 and HTMT.85. Consequently, the findings offer reassurance that there are no issues concerning discriminant validity (Hair, et al., 2017; Hair, et al., 2019).

4.3. Results of Structural Model

The structural model's outcomes were examined utilizing a bootstrapping method involving 5000 samples to ascertain the significance of path coefficients. Path analysis aids researchers in quantifying the significance of potential relationships, distinguishing those that hold substantial importance from those that may prove negligible in their impact.

In this study, the hypotheses were accepted or rejected based on the Z Statistics value, which should be more than 1.645, corresponding to a probability value less than 0.05. This significance level indicates the hypotheses' strength according to Hair Jr, et al. (2017), who proposed that probability values should be below 0.05 for 95% significance and 0.01 for 99% significance. The summarized results in Table 4 encompass the path coefficient, t-value, p-value, and a 95% confidence interval for the proposed hypotheses. To assess the fitness of the Inner model and determine the acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses, the study employed the Coefficient of Determination (R^2). According to Ali, et al. (2018), R square should exceed 0.100 to be considered substantial. In this case, significant values around 0.813 and 0.863

indicate that the endogenous construct is adequate and statistically significant. The F2 values were utilized to measure effect size. Effect sizes can be classified as very small (below 0.01), medium (between 0.02 and 0.15), and large (above 0.35) according to Cohen's classification (J. Cohen, 2013). According to the analysis, BSC has a more significant effect on AA, and BP has a lesser impact on PI.

Table 4. Path Analysis

	Beta	SM	SD	T value	P Values	Decision	F square	R square
BP -> AA	0.231	0.237	0.068	3.389	0.001	Accepted	0.056	
BA -> AA	0.186	0.187	0.068	2.746	0.006	Accepted	0.045	0.813
BSC -> AA	0.532	0.527	0.076	7.031	0.000	Accepted	0.391	
AA -> PI	0.322	0.318	0.062	5.168	0.000	Accepted	0.143	
BSC -> PI	0.328	0.331	0.058	5.703	0.000	Accepted	0.146	0.863
BA -> PI	0.246	0.246	0.061	4.007	0.000	Accepted	0.103	
BP -> PI	0.091	0.093	0.056	1.614	0.107	Rejected	0.011	

Path analysis assists researchers in evaluating the significance of potential relationships, distinguishing between those of substantial importance and those with negligible impact. By examining the strength of the mediator variable's relationships with other constructs, researchers can substantiate the mechanisms underlying the cause-effect relationship between an exogenous and endogenous construct. This analysis provides insights into the pathways through which variables influence each other in a model. The investigation in the study extends to examining the indirect effects of brand anthropomorphism (BA), brand personification (BP), and brand self-congruence (BSC). The bootstrapping method has been employed to assess these indirect effects. The outcomes of the indirect effects analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Mediation Analysis

	Beta	SM	SD	T value	P Values	Decision
BA -> AA -> PI	0.06	0.059	0.024	2.509	0.012	Accepted
BP -> AA -> PI	0.075	0.075	0.027	2.758	0.006	Accepted
BSC -> AA -> PI	0.172	0.167	0.042	4.093	0.000	Accepted

According to the results of Table 5, all the mediation relationships are accepted, stating that AA has created a positive impact and enhanced the relationship between BA and PI, BP and PI, and BSC and PI, saying that attitude towards advertisement plays a significant role in the minds of the consumers and marking that marketers need to pay a massive focus on the promotions of their product.

5. Discussion

In the initial phase, the comprehensive model is developed incorporating the variables of brand awareness (BA), brand personification (BP), and brand self-congruence (BSC), with attitude towards advertisement (AA) acting as a mediator between these branding aspects and purchase intention (PI) where the brands as using brand mascots as a promotional strategy to understand the attitude and intention of consumer towards these branding aspects when a brand mascot is used as an endorser. The analysis yielded the following insights:

Direct Effects of BA, BP, and BSC on PI: It was observed that BA and BSC exhibited a positive influence on advertisement intention, which in turn positively affected purchase intention, which implies that brand mascot creates brand awareness and brand self-congruity developing a positive attitude towards advertisements endorsing brand mascot leading to purchase intention (Çizer, 2023; Keller, 2005). However, BP did not exhibit a significant positive impact on PI.

Indirect Effects of AA: In terms of attitude towards advertisement (AA), all three branding aspects - BA, BP, and BSC - exhibited a positive and significant impact on AA, stating that when a brand uses a brand mascot as their promotional strategy it not only enhances the branding aspects but also creates a positive impression on advertisements featuring brand mascot making a positive intention towards the brand and brand aspects. Hence, if a brand employs a mascot in advertisements, it elicits a positive attitude from consumers by capturing their attention (Chen & Lin, 2018; Huang & Mitchell, 2014).

Statistical and Practical Significance: The study examined both statistical significance (indicated by p-values) and practical significance (indicated by F Square values). It was concluded that BA and BSC held both statistical and practical significance in relation to AA and PI. This implies that when consumers harbour positive intentions towards both advertisements and the brand having brand mascot, they are more inclined to make purchases. BP also demonstrated both statistical and practical significance with AA, indicating that a favourable attitude towards an advertisement featuring a brand mascot tends to drive consumer preference for products from that brand.

Mediating Effects: The study further explored the mediating role of AA. It was found that AA mediated the between BA and PI, as well as with BP and PI. Additionally, this mediating effect was established between BSC and PI. In essence, the presence of a brand mascot in advertisements enhanced brand awareness, brand personification, and brand self-congruence, thereby capturing consumer attention and influencing purchase intention (Aaker, 1997).

Using bootstrapping, a robust statistical technique, facilitated the establishment of relationships within the model. The bootstrapped results underscored significant paths, with notably strong links observed between BSC and AA (0.000), BA and PI (0.000), BSC and PI (0.000), and BP and PI (0.000). The F Square values were employed to gauge effect size, wherein values below 0.01 represent minimal effects, values between 0.02 and 0.15 indicate minor to medium effects, and values above 0.15 signify significant effects (J. Cohen, 2013). Table 5 demonstrates that hypotheses H1, H7, H8, and H10 exhibit large effect sizes, representing their substantial real-world implications. Hypotheses H2 and H5 possess medium effect sizes, while H4 has a negligible effect size, indicating its importance but with a relatively minor impact.

In summary, nine hypotheses were validated through this study: H1, H2, H5, H7, H8, and H10 reflect direct relationships, while H3, H6, and H9 showcase mediating effects of attitude towards advertisement. Hypothesis H4's direct relationship between BP and PI was rejected, yet when mediated by AA, the relationship was accepted.

6. Conclusion

In the current competitive landscape, enterprises striving for a competitive edge must establish sustained and robust communication with their target customers and decide on the best strategy.

This endeavour to establish communication is intricately linked with creating an emotional bond between the brand and its intended audience, a role that brand mascots play a crucial part in fulfilling. These mascots, seamlessly integrated with the brand, possess the unique capability to captivate attention. By infusing a distinct personality into the brand, these mascots have the potential to etch their presence within the consumer's mind firmly. The study under examination delved into the exploration of consumers' intentions to make purchases in relation to various brands. Through meticulous analyses, the study arrived at compelling conclusions. Brands leveraging anthropomorphic brand mascots experience a heightened inclination from consumers toward making purchases. Furthermore, a noteworthy observation emerged: the positive relationship between brand awareness, brand personification, brand self-congruence, and the propensity of consumers to make purchases towards brands featuring anthropomorphic mascots. As a result, this study underscores the importance of cultivating solid emotional connections through effective communication, with mascots serving as vehicles to facilitate the connection. By doing this, we find that incorporating anthropomorphic mascots enhances both brand attractiveness and consumer purchase intention. Moreover, the study illuminates the valuable roles played by brand awareness, brand personification, and brand self-congruence in bolstering consumer intentions to make purchases within the context of anthropomorphic mascots. In essence, the study contributes to the broader understanding of how anthropomorphic mascots can be strategically employed to foster brand-consumer relationships, generate higher purchase intentions, and establish a distinctive brand image in consumers' minds.

7. Implications

Firstly, our findings imply that the brand mascot has emerged as a pivotal branding component, capable of shaping customers' emotions and sentiments towards the firm and its advertised products (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2017), fostering a desire for a meaningful relationship with the brand. Moreover, this research contributes significantly to the literature on brand anthropomorphism and mascots in the context of the customer-brand relationship using brand mascots. It sheds light on the role of anthropomorphized brand mascots in influencing customers' purchase intentions. This research study is poised to benefit academics and researchers delving into related subjects, offering a deeper comprehension of how a brand mascot creates customer-brand relationships by enhancing the branding aspects from diverse dimensions (Çizer, 2023; Sarkar, et al., 2019).

For marketers, our research contribution serves as a guidepost for humanizing brands based on design elements (Guido & Peluso, 2015), brand persona, and related personal appeal, all aimed at enhancing customers' experiences. The study underscores the importance of embedding human attributes into brand advertisements (Reavey, et al., 2018) and aligning identity with customers' self-concept. Anthropomorphism is instrumental in crafting brand mascots that capture consumers' attention, emerging as a cornerstone of contemporary marketing communication strategies across industries.

In today's competitive landscape, businesses foster emotional connections by fostering meaningful dialogues with consumers through anthropomorphic brand mascots. These mascots transcend mere symbols, evolving into powerful communication tools. In this vein, brands can achieve a distinct and memorable position by establishing profound connections with customers

using brand mascots as an advertising strategy. It enhances brand awareness, personification, and self-congruency, making the advertisements more attractive and memorable. This approach allows businesses to cater to consumers' innermost desires beyond their explicit needs, ultimately building long-term profitability and gaining a competitive edge.

The managerial implications of this study are that the findings underscore that employing brand anthropomorphism, encompassing BA, BP, and BSC through mascots, substantially influences consumers' attitudes towards advertising, consequently driving enhanced sales and revenue. As a result, brand managers are urged to meticulously consider these aspects and leverage mascots to not only establish brand awareness and image associations but also forge potent connections with consumers. This aligns with the current marketing landscape where brands seek meaningful and lasting relationships with their customers through innovative approaches, and anthropomorphic mascots present a promising avenue to achieve this goal (Nasr Esfahani, et al., 2022).

8. Limitations and Future Scope of Study

This study has several limitations, the most prominent of which is its confined focus solely on brand mascots within the food sector, disregarding the potential contributions of brand mascots across diverse industries like paints and various other fields. To overcome this limitation, future research initiatives could broaden their scope by investigating the impacts of brand mascots across a broader spectrum of industries and sectors. This approach would offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

While the current study successfully examines the influence of brand mascots on dimensions like brand awareness, brand personification, and self-congruence in shaping consumers' perceptions of brands and advertisements, several crucial aspects merit further exploration. Future research endeavours incorporating additional worthy mediating factors will have the potential to unveil deeper insights into the efficacy of brand mascots as a marketing tool.

Furthermore, it's worth highlighting that this study specifically centres on the impact of employing a mascot on consumers' purchasing intentions in the context of food products. Future studies could extend the investigations in this study to encompass a broader array of products, brands, or services to enhance the literature on this subject. This expansion would contribute to a more well-rounded and comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics between brand mascots and consumer behaviour.

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