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## The effect of verbal brand personification on consumer evaluation in advertising: Internal and external personification

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## ABSTRACT

In spite of the ubiquity of brand personification (BP) in advertising, research that examines its effects directly is limited. This study explores the effect of verbal BP on consumer response and the underlying mechanisms involved. In addition, we identified the conditions under which BP has no effect. Unlike prior research, this study focuses on the two types of verbal BP images: internal (“kind”) and external (“good-looking”). Specifically, Study 1 tests the moderating effect of Brand Knowledge (BK) between internal verbal BP and consumer’s evaluation of brand and the underlying mechanisms (brand intimacy and psychological discomfort). Study 2 validates the effect—in particular, that of the need-for-cognition on the attitude toward a BP advertisement—of external verbal BP on the evaluation of advertisements and the underlying mechanisms (perceived novelty and cognitive resistance). This research could provide marketers developing headline copies and slogans for BP advertisements with useful guidelines through a better understanding of the boundary conditions and mechanisms determining the impact of BP.

### 1. Introduction

Advertisers have frequently created novel advertisements to gain more attention of, and impressions for, the brand’s target consumers (Batra, Lehmann, Burke, & Pae, 1995; Eastlack & Rao, 1986; Cornwell, Lipp, & Purkis, 2016; Taylor & Costello, 2017). Brand personification (BP) strategy is a branding tool that cultivates a unique brand personality and brand differentiation (Fleck, Michel, & Zeitoun, 2014). It shapes consumers’ brand image (Islam & Rahman, 2016); imbuing the brand with human-like traits encourages target consumers to have affective associations with the brand, thereby increasing emotional attachment toward it (Fleck et al., 2014; Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Park & Kim, 2015). Brand-elicited human-like traits and emotions affect brand preference, while strengthening the brand-consumer relationship (Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011; Fleck et al., 2014).

BP is “the use by a brand of a character with human-like characteristics in packaging, promotion, public relations, or other marketing related purposes” (Cohen, 2014, p.3). Imbuing the brand with human-like characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions is the essence of BP. Therefore, it creates favorable consumer responses, such as positive brand outcomes and advertising outcomes (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007).

Despite the pervasive use of BP by marketers, limited research has been conducted on the causes and conditions of people’s positive attitudes toward BP (Delbaere et al., 2011; Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocereto, 2013). Moreover, the how and why of BP’s influence has not yet been fully studied. Thus, the current research empirically investigates the effect of BP on consumer evaluation.

BP is a rhetorical expression that has been used in various marketing tactics (Leigh, 1994). It is used in advertising for various reasons (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996). Previous findings on rhetorical expression in the advertisement context highlight the importance of elaboration level and type, which play a critical role in judgment and persuasion (Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999a, 1999b). Extant research suggests that advertisements with rhetorical expressions might create arousal and pleasure for consumers interpreting the message through elaboration. Therefore, if people experience positive affects (pleasant and fun) after facing new stimulation and experience arousal, they need elaboration. The level and type of elaboration tend to vary, depending on the individual characteristics, such as knowledge and NFC; the latter is particularly relevant to our study. One of the boundary conditions is the quantity of cognitive resources available for finding the relations between the words used to personify the brand and the brand itself. What is important in the interpretation of the personified brand is personal

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cognitive capability in the form of brand knowledge (BK) and cognitive resource (e.g., NFC) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Roehm & Sternthal, 2001). Such cognitive efforts and capabilities can vary by consumers' characteristics. Accordingly, it is necessary to test the impact of consumers' characteristics on advertisements that utilize inconsistent and ambiguous rhetorical expression (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992, 1999).

Thus, based on the research gap, this study aims to examine the impact of customer characteristics (BK and NFC) on the responses toward personified-brand advertisements and to explore the underlying mechanisms of their effect on consumers. It could provide useful guidelines for advertising managers to utilize the personification method when planning the headline copy or slogan for their advertisements.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Brand personification (BP)

BP refers to “the use by a brand of a character with human-like characteristics in packaging, promotion, public relations, or other marketing related purposes” (Cohen, 2014, p.3). It can be also defined as “imbuing product and service brands with human-like form and/or human traits, including an external physical appearance (e.g., good-looking, glamorous) and personality (e.g., kind, cool)” (Cohen, 2014; Kniazeva & Belk, 2010; Chen, Lin, Choi, & Hahm, 2015).

BP strategy involves developing a desirable brand personality (Aguirre-Rodriguez, 2014), which is defined as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). People may describe and assess a brand using personalities and brand character attributes (Ingenhoff & Fuhrer, 2010), and then, associate the brand with human-like traits to mentally retain the brand's image (Aguirre-Rodriguez, 2014; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; McCracken, 1989).

Early research on BP concentrates on the incongruity between the brand image and the consumer's self-image. It was suggested that brand anthropomorphization produces enhanced brand likability and favorable consumer responses, such as an increase in positive emotions and a more favorable attitude toward the brand (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Puzakova et al., 2013). Aggarwal and McGill (2007) investigate the positive effect of BP by suggesting that product evaluation is more favorable when the brand is anthropomorphized. Other literature shows that brand humanization generates positive attitudes and strong brand performance (Delbaere et al., 2011). However, Puzakova et al. (2013) proposed that BP can have a negative effect on brand evaluation in the context of a brand facing negative publicity due to any misconduct or offensive behavior by those associated with the brand.

There are two types of BP—visual and verbal. The extant literature mainly investigates the visual or combined effect of BP without differentiating the two. To address this gap, we focus on the latter, which is less studied (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Chandler & Schwarz, 2010). Verbal BP itself exists in the form of two images—external and internal (Aaker, 1997). External personification image describes physical appearances (e.g., good-looking, glamorous); it includes strategic and intentional advertising expressions. Internal personification image describes characteristics, such as personality (e.g., honest and friendly). The image established is based mainly on the brand personality; it refers to an anthropomorphic image that consumers associate with the brand. Consequently, we validate the effect of internal or external verbal BP separately in a series of experiments.

### 2.2. Literature on brand personification as a rhetorical expression, ambiguity, and schema incongruent theory

Rhetorical expression is a unique and novel lingual expression method. Rhetoric is a technique that refers to choosing a language method that uses effective expressions for communication. Firms

traditionally use rhetorical expressions in advertisements to gain more consumer attention in the midst of advertising clutter. A notable study in the field by McQuarrie and Mick (1992) focuses on advertisements that utilize resonance. Resonant advertising enables multiple interpretations by using similar or figurative words in a context in which the phrase itself is common, but the illustration is not (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992).

In rhetoric, depending on the condition and/or circumstances of the recipient of the information, ambiguity allows subjective interpretation of a word or a message due to dual meanings (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992). Berlyne (1971) conducted an important research on the persuasive effect of ambiguous message. This study argues that messages incongruent with consumer's pre-existing cognition can facilitate a positive response. The effect of ambiguity is based on the consumers' active participation; therefore, comprehensibility is a basic element when studying the effect of rhetorical figures of speech (e.g., personification, metaphor, resonance, etc.). In case of rhetorical transfer (i.e., metaphor, resonance, paradox, personification, etc.) that creates ambiguity, consumers attempt to make sense of the advertising message; they are thus likely to evaluate it positively. Therefore, when an advertising message with rhetorical expressions is delivered, it is important to make them effective by considering consumers' involvement. In other words, given a high level of consumer involvement, the rhetorical expression used in the advertising message can be more ambiguous, and thus, more effective (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992).

Incongruity refers to “the extent that structural correspondence is achieved between the entire configuration of attribute relations associated with an object, such as a product, and the configuration specified by the schema” (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989, p.40). In consumer persuasion contexts, advertising often uses incongruent elements as the intensified arousal and cognitive effort caused by the increases in incongruity between a schema and an object increases the extremity of evaluation (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989). A positive evaluation or outcome depends on the satisfactory resolution of the incongruity by the processor (Mandler, 1982). Mandler (1982) also suggests that resolving moderate incongruity leads to a positive state, such as curiosity or interest, whereas failing to resolve extreme incongruity leads to a negative state, such as anxiety or discomfort.

## 3. Hypotheses development

### 3.1. Consumer's cognitive resource and information processing

Extant research has established that advertisements with rhetorical figures of speech induce higher levels of elaboration compared to those without them (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996; Mothersbaugh, Huhmann, & Franke, 2002; Toncar & Munch, 2001). Advertisements with rhetorical expression can create arousal and pleasure when consumers interpret their message (Freire, 2014; Joy, Sherry, & Deschenes, 2009; Olsen, Pracejus, & O'Guinn, 2012). Therefore, when consumers face new stimulation, they experience arousal.

The review of existing literature review offers a starting point for analyzing the persuasiveness of a rhetorical device. McQuarrie and Mick (1999) suggested that interpretation of rhetorical figures prompts the association (elaboration) of message content with the information in one's memory. In cognitive psychology, elaboration “reflects the extent to which information in working memory is integrated with prior knowledge structures” (MacInnis & Price, 1987, p. 475). Incongruent elements in an advertisement are known to provoke elaboration (Heckler & Childers, 1992). Since greater elaboration of positive information leads to significantly greater message persuasion (e.g., Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981), our prediction is that an advertisement with a rhetorical figure of speech should have greater persuading power than a generic one.

Extant literature suggests that two factors are likely to moderate the persuasive impact of a BP—the ability to detect relations in the

evaluation of a rhetorical figure of speech and the resources available for processing it. This task requires substantial cognitive resources. BP, like other figures of speech (e.g., metaphor), also needs boundary conditions to exert a positive effect. One of the boundary conditions is the amount of available cognitive resources that can search for relations between the words used to personify brands and the brands themselves. In the interpretation of such personification, personal cognitive capability (e.g., BK) and motivation (e.g., NFC) (Roehm & Sternthal, 2001; Kim, 2009) are critical; however, such cognitive efforts and capabilities vary by individuals' characteristics. Accordingly, it is important to test the impact of individuals' characteristics on the advertisements that utilize inconsistent and ambiguous rhetorical expressions (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992).

BK refers to the individual meaning of a brand that is stored in memory; in other words, it is the descriptive or evaluative information about a brand (Keller, 2003a, 2003b). On the other hand, NFC implies a characteristic whereby an individual enjoys cognitive thinking. Here, we note a difference at the individual level in cognitive efforts made (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Those with low NFC do not enjoy cognitive thinking, and thus, avoid activities that make them think. On the other hand, individuals with high NFC enjoy cognitive thinking by processing certain information more carefully and thoroughly. Thus, they expend more effort searching for information in order to understand the existence of and the relations between stimulus and incidents (Haugtvedt & Petty, 1992; Sung & Han, 2009). Each of these factors is considered in greater detail.

### 3.2. BK as a personal cognitive capability

BK is one factor that may help overcome the difficulty in mapping relations presented in BP advertisements (Gregan-Paxton & John, 1997). McQuarrie and Mick's (1999) study gave support to this, especially their observation that a rhetorical figure was more persuasive than a controlled one for nationals who were knowledgeable about basic relations, but not for non-nationals who were not (Roehm & Sternthal, 2001).

BK refers to the personal meaning of a brand that is stored in a consumer's memory; thus, BK is all the evaluative and descriptive brand-related information (Keller, 2003a, 2003b). Consumer BK has two dimensions—familiarity and expertise. Familiarity refers to product-related experiences that have been stored by the consumer, while expertise is the capability to perform product-related tasks automatically and more successfully (Alba & Hutchinson, 2000).

Prior empirical research shows different characteristics (elaboration level and type) of BK in consumer information processing. Gregan-Paxton and John (1997) investigated the effect of consumer's expertise on the analogical learning process. Specifically, they found that novices depend on similarity in attribute level, while experts depend on relational similarity. Roehm and Sternthal (2001) have also empirically examined this notion. Thus, BP can be considered a stimulus that is incongruent with a consumer's existing schema.

According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model and Resource Matching Principle, the persuasive effect can be maximized when there is consistency in the amount of cognitive resources available and that required for information processing (Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 1997; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This is, in turn, is related to information-processing ability in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zhang, 2014; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In other words, the higher the personal importance, perceived risk, responsibilities demanded, and NFC, the higher the amount of available cognitive resources needed. Furthermore, repeated exposure to product information, prior information on the product, and experiences enhance the consumers' information-processing ability. Thus, they increase the amount of available cognitive resources (Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 1997). Consumers must be persuaded first if their attitude toward the brand is to be influenced by personification. With the assumption that

an important element in the interpretation of such personification is the amount of available cognitive resources, consumer's BK can bring about different results (Haugtvedt & Kasmer, 2008; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). We can thus claim that different interpretations of advertising messages, which arise due to individual differences in information processing, influence the persuasive power of advertising (Haugtvedt & Kasmer, 2008).

Based on associative network theory, consumers with high BK have a more favorable attitude toward BP than brand non-personification (BNP) because they are likely to use their existing resources by means of relational association (Gregan-Paxton & John, 1997). This leads to an increase in the consumer's similarity perception toward a BP due to their existing knowledge or schema. Therefore, when consumers with high BK face novel stimuli in BP, they simultaneously experience intimacy (Gregan-Paxton & John, 1997). The positive experience of intimacy motivates them to elaborate on the stimuli, and thus, increases the tendency to resolve the new stimuli (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989). This newness is resolved by the relational elaboration. The positive experiences caused by this entire process can lead to positive attitudes toward BP.

In contrast, consumers with low BK are relatively less favorable to novel stimuli because they are likely to use their scarce existing resources in an item-specific (Gregan-Paxton & John, 1997). Thus, they are less sensitive to unique or novel stimuli, and might experience discomfort or present counterarguments in response to BP. This negative experience reduces the likelihood that they will be motivated to elaborate on the stimuli (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989). Instead, it increases the difficulty of resolving the incongruity, resulting in a negative impression of BP and less favorable attitudes than when they are exposed to BNP.

### 3.3. Brand intimacy and psychological discomfort

Brand intimacy can be defined as a relationship built on intimate interactions with a brand (Prager, 2000). The degree of intimacy is contingent on how the brand and consumer define each other's relationship; it is a consumer's perception of the intimacy of their relationship with the brand (Monga, 2002). This intimacy is affected by the consumer's intimate actions toward the brand and vice versa. This issue is crucial for firms because their survival may be affected by the ability to cultivate intimacy in brand relationships with consumers (Cross, 2000; Hoard, 1997). Thus, it is important to understand the kinds of marketing activities that influence consumer's perception toward a brand.

Advertisers have made numerous attempts to create novel advertisements in order to gain more consumer attention. Researchers too have focused on the concept of "incongruence" in order to elaborate on the phenomena (Lee & Mason, 1999). In general, psychological discomfort, defined as a psychological response toward incongruent stimuli, motivates or drives people to take action to decrease the level of discomfort caused by the conflict. (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; Mandler, 1982). If information is incongruent with existing schema, it leads to psychological discomfort, which then results in information processing effort geared toward solving this incongruence (LaTour & Rotfeld, 1997; LaTour & Tanner, 2003; Thayer, 1978). Moderate incongruity is usually resolvable, as it can be solved with a consumer's existing cognitive structure. Therefore, resolving moderately incongruent BP leads to a positive state, such as interests or intimacy. This eventually results in a favorable evaluation of a brand (Mandler, 1982; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989). Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

**H1.** *BK will moderate the relationship between internal BP and attitude toward a brand.*

**H1a.** *High BK will have a more favorable attitude toward a personified brand than a non-personified brand.*

**H1b.** *Low BK will have a more favorable attitude toward a non-personified brand than a personified brand.*

**H2.** *The relationship between internal BP and attitude toward a brand will be mediated by brand intimacy for high BK, whereas it will be mediated by psychological discomfort for low BK.*

### 3.4. Need-for-cognition (NFC)

Fully understanding BP requires adequate resources that help complete the mapping tasks for BP stimulus. When considerable resources are not allocated to information processing, consumers may have difficulty in comprehending personification. NFC implies a personality marked by enjoyment of cognitive thinking, and further, that each individual displays differences in cognitive efforts (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). For instance, individuals with high NFC are more likely to process certain information more carefully and thoroughly (Haugtvedt & Petty, 1992). They enjoy cognitive thinking, and thus, expend more effort searching information in order to understand the existence of and the relations between stimulus and incidents (Sung & Han, 2009). However, those with low NFC do not enjoy cognitive thinking, and thus, avoid activities that make them think.

BP can be considered as a stimulus that is incongruent with consumer's existing schema. At the same time, the incongruity levels of BP may differ. Hence, this study focuses on moderate levels only. To resolve this kind of incongruity, consumers must have adequate cognitive resources (ability) and motivation. According to the Mandler's (1982) Schema Incongruity Theory, resolving moderate incongruent stimuli that only require existing schema and motivation leads to a positive result (e.g., favorable attitude toward an advertisement). However, failing to resolve stimuli, which are not a part of the schema of poorly motivated consumers, leads to a negative result (e.g., unfavorable attitude toward an advertisement). If a person has a higher NFC, it is likely that he or she has a higher ability of information processing, which leads to a higher focus on the stimuli. This attention enables the integration of verbal and nonverbal information in the advertisement by the consumer (Schirmer et al., 2006).

### 3.5. Perceptions of novelty and cognitive resistance

The perceived novelty of an advertisement is defined as the degree to which a consumer perceives an advertisement to be a new and exciting alternative to existing advertising (Eisend, 2007). Novelty increases high-level construal relative to familiarity (Kim, Hunt, & Lancioni, 2015). It is critical for the effectiveness of advertising (Mandler, 1982). Advertisements with novel cues can draw attention and elicit consumer creativity; positive responses occur when consumers perceive novelty from the advertisement (Fiske, 1980; Fiske & Taylor, 2013). Mandler (1982) and Fiske (1980) maintained that novel stimuli, because of their unexpected nature, will produce a stronger response than familiar stimuli. Chu, Lee, and Kim (2016) found that non-conventional advertising can elicit a more favorable response from some consumers than conventional advertising because of the novelty of stimuli.

Further, cognitive resistance to brand provides an additional insight into the underlying process of BP because cognitive responses are often used to provide insights on the process mechanism (Eisend, 2007). Some audiences have a sense of resistance when exposed to BP and change in a living brand, which is rooted in differences and inconsistencies in their perceptions of existing schema of the brand. Literature on cognitive psychology indicates that consumers have an intrinsic desire for psychological equilibrium (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955). Therefore, consumers are inclined to resist this schema change, which is a normal response to experiencing novel stimuli (Ram, 1987). This suggests that consumers may experience cognitive resistance to a brand when confronted with novel BP, evoking negative consequences for

marketers.

In the information processing context, NFC manifests itself in the tendency to recall and remember stimuli that are different from others (Malaviya, Kisielius, & Sternthal, 1996). This suggests that exposure to incongruent information can enhance the enjoyment of information-processing experiences among those with high NFC, whereas consumers with low NFC do not place value on incongruent information (Malaviya et al., 1996; Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999a, 1999b). Malaviya et al. (1996) found that those with high NFC are less sensitive to traditional marketing tactics. Therefore, they seek new and potentially discrepant information, whereas those with low NFC are uninterested in seeking new stimuli that contain unmatched information and prefer the norm.

These characteristics suggest that high NFC consumers may have a more favorable attitude toward BP than those with low NFC. They are likely to focus on the novel cues of BP due to their tendency to use cognitive resources. When high NFC consumers face novel stimuli in BP, they may experience curiosity and interest simultaneously (Malaviya et al., 1996; Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999a, 1999b). These positive experiences are likely to motivate consumers to elaborate on the stimuli, and thus, increase the tendency to resolve them (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989). Therefore, consumers can resolve brand incongruity through relational elaboration. The positive experiences—the resultant psychological arousal and pleasure—can lead to a positive attitude toward BP. Consumers thus value novelty, recognize novel advertising as interesting, and accept BP more easily.

In contrast, low NFC consumers are less sensitive to unique or novel advertising stimuli; they might experience discomfort or present counterarguments in response to BP. This negative experience reduces the likelihood stimuli elaboration (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989), while it increases the difficulty of resolving incongruity. Therefore, low NFC consumers perceive novel stimuli less favorably, with a likely cognitive resistance toward the incongruence. This results in a negative impression of BP by consumers, and thus, less favorable attitude. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

**H3.** *High NFC consumers will have a more favorable attitude toward a verbally personified brand advertisement than low NFC.*

**H4.** *The relationship between external BP and attitude toward an advertisement will be mediated by perceived novelty for high NFC consumers, whereas it will be mediated by cognitive resistance for those with low NFC.*

## 4. Research methodology and results

### 4.1. Study overview

We conducted two studies. Study 1 examined the predicted differences of BK and the dual mechanisms of brand intimacy and psychological discomfort (H1 and H2). Study 2 tested the predicted differences of NFC and the dual mechanisms of the perceived novelty and cognitive resistance (H3 and H4). We adopted a moderate level of BP in choosing human-like internal/external brand traits and excluded extreme personification in terms of incongruity, since Mandler (1982) argues that resolving moderate incongruity leads to positive responses (e.g., interest and curiosity), whereas failing to resolve extreme incongruity leads to negative states (e.g., anxiety and irritation). If people find a resolution by making associative links between human-like traits and the brand through elaboration, the level of incongruity can be moderate. However, if people fail to find such associative links despite detailed elaboration and cannot understand the reasons why the brand is sentimental or glamorous, the level of incongruity might be considered extreme.

The current research conducted several pretests before the main experiments to identify the moderate level of incongruity (i.e., the moderate level of incongruity between human-like brand traits and the

product categories, such as travelling bag and telecommunication) and the BP level of the headline copy. Consumers perceived traits such as kind, honest, and good-looking as moderately incongruent among the internal/external human-like traits of a brand, while spirited, sentimental, and glamorous were perceived as extremely incongruent. Human-like brand traits for the head copy of advertisements were derived from Aaker's (1997) research, in-depth interviews, and real advertising cases.

## 4.2. Study 1

### 4.2.1. Method

**4.2.1.1. Design and participants.** The study used a 2 (BP: yes vs. no)  $\times$  2 (BK: high vs. low) between-subjects design. The convenience sample was composed of 116 Korean consumers (age ranged from 20 to 49 years; 45% were male) enrolled in an MBA program. The participants were randomly assigned to each condition. The respondents' ages were well distributed and they had diverse occupations.

**4.2.1.2. Pretests and stimulus development.** For the purpose of the study, several pretests were conducted to select a product, brand, and headline copy for BP/BNP and photo stimuli. The purpose of the first pretest (total  $n = 20$ ) was to select a product. One product was selected from a pool of five fashion and electronic products. A bag was evaluated in the pretest in terms of whether 1) there was familiarity with the product and the participants had prior experience of relevant purchase and use, and 2) the product was one with higher involvement. The second pretest ( $n = 20$ ) determined a brand (Samsonite Red) that was appropriate for the product category and moderately familiar to consumers. For the third pretest ( $n = 20$ ), the participants were asked to evaluate the attractiveness of stimuli photos on a seven-point semantic differential scale. We chose an averagely attractive product. For the fourth pretest ( $n = 30$ ), to decide the advertisement's headline copy, we measured the perceived schema incongruity between the human-like traits and the product category, and the BP level of the headline copy. First, we examined participants' ratings of the perceived incongruity of the new advertisements' headline copy (human-like brand traits) on two items anchored by typical/atypical and usual/unusual ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ), with higher values indicating greater perceived incongruity. The results showed "Kind" ( $m = 5.12$ ) is an internal human trait. Next, we measured the BP level in the pretest as a manipulation check for the independent variable BP. Participants rated the BP level of the headline copy by using four items (e.g., the headline copy personifies the brand as a human, the brand is seen as human, and the brand looks like a person) adopted from Aggarwal and McGill (2007). The results for kind and good-looking were  $m = 5.50$  and  $m = 5.76$ , respectively. Thus, we selected "a kind brand" as a headline copy for BP, because this can be considered a moderate level of BP; we selected "good brand" as the headline copy for BNP.

**4.2.1.3. Procedures and measures.** After individually seeing the printed advertisements in the questionnaire, including headline copy and the product's images, the participants were asked about brand/advertisement attitudes and brand intimacy, psychological discomfort, BK, BP level, and internal personification perception. They were also asked about general prior attitudes toward the brand, product involvement, mood, and demographics. The BK ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ) measures were adopted from Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman (1996) and Lichtenstein, Netemeyer, and Burton (1990). The brand intimacy ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ) measures were adopted from Monga (2002) and Sternberg (1997) (e.g., I give considerable emotional support to this brand). The psychological discomfort ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ; uneasy, uncomfortable, and bothered) measures were adopted from Elliot and Devine (1994). The brand attitude ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ) measures were adopted from MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch (1986). The other variables were adopted from various

literatures, such as product involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1985) and mood (Batra & Stayman, 1990). We considered general previous attitude toward a brand as a covariate, based on extant research.

### 4.2.2. Data analysis

We used analysis of covariance and planned contrast for H1. For H2, we used Baron and Kenny's (1986) mediation analysis.

### 4.2.3. Results and discussion

**4.2.3.1. Manipulation check.** We conducted a manipulation check for the BP level of the headline copy (BP vs. BNP) with four seven-point scales (e.g., the headline copy personifies the brand as a human) adopted from Aggarwal and McGill (2007). The results showed that personification scores are significantly higher for a personified brand than for a non-personified brand ( $M = 5.54$  vs.  $2.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, manipulation was successful.

**4.2.3.2. Testing the moderating effect of brand knowledge.** To verify H1, we conducted ANCOVA that included the prior attitude toward the brand as a covariate. Next, for H1a, we conducted a planned contrast. This test indicates that individuals with high BK have more favorable attitudes toward the personified brand ( $M = 4.44$ ) than the non-personified brand ( $M = 3.82$ ) ( $F(1, 110) = 10.914$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). Next, for H1b, the planned contrast indicates that individuals with low BK have more favorable attitudes toward the non-personified brand ( $M = 3.89$ ) than the personified brand ( $M = 2.98$ ) ( $F(1, 110) = 24.018$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). These results support H1a and H1b (see Tables 1, 2, and 3; Figs. 1 and 3)

**4.2.3.3. Testing the mediation effect of brand intimacy and psychological discomfort.** For H2a, we conducted Baron and Kenny's mediation analysis to determine if brand intimacy was responsible for the causal effect of BP on brand attitude for those with high BK. It was first necessary to test whether brand intimacy is influenced by BP. As shown in Table 4, the regression analysis with brand intimacy as the criterion is significant (BP:  $b = 1.229$ ,  $t = 4.235$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Next, there is a significant effect of BP on brand attitude (BP:  $b = 0.516$ ,  $t = 2.110$ ,  $p = 0.040$ ). Finally, when brand intimacy is entered as a predictor in the regression of brand attitude, it still exerts a strong effect on brand attitude ( $b = 0.387$ ,  $t = 3.727$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). BP is no longer significant ( $b = 0.041$ ,  $t = 0.160$ ,  $p = 0.873$ ). These results support H2a.

Next, we conducted Baron and Kenny's mediation analysis for H2b also to examine if psychological discomfort was responsible for the causal effect of BP on brand attitude for those with low BK. It was first necessary to test whether it was influenced by BP. As shown in Table 5, the regression analysis with psychological discomfort as the criterion is significant (BP:  $b = 0.763$ ,  $t = 3.295$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). Next, there is a significant effect of BP on brand attitude (BP:  $b = -0.640$ ,  $t = -4.830$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Lastly, when psychological discomfort is entered as a predictor in the regression of brand attitude, psychological discomfort still exerts a significant effect on brand attitude ( $b = -0.185$ ,  $t = -2.541$ ,  $p = 0.014$ ). BP is still significant, but is significantly reduced, compared with step 2 ( $b = -0.498$ ,  $t = -3.607$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). These results support H2b.

**Table 1**  
Cell size of study 1.

| BP    | BK   |     | Total |
|-------|------|-----|-------|
|       | High | Low |       |
| Yes   | 32   | 24  | 56    |
| No    | 24   | 35  | 59    |
| Total | 56   | 59  | 115   |

**Table 2**  
The results of ANCOVA in study 1.

| Source               | Type III SS | df  | Mean square | F      | Sig.  |
|----------------------|-------------|-----|-------------|--------|-------|
| Prior brand attitude | 11.563      | 1   | 11.563      | 23.677 | 0.000 |
| BP                   | 0.012       | 1   | 0.012       | 0.025  | 0.875 |
| BK                   | 10.149      | 1   | 10.149      | 20.782 | 0.000 |
| BP × BK              | 7.662       | 1   | 7.662       | 15.691 | 0.000 |
| Error                | 53.718      | 110 | 0.488       |        |       |

**Table 3**  
Cell mean(SD) in study 1.

| BP    | BK          |             |             |
|-------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|       | High        | Low         | Total       |
| Yes   | 4.43 (0.75) | 2.98 (0.49) | 3.81 (0.97) |
| No    | 3.81 (1.21) | 3.88 (0.51) | 3.85 (0.85) |
| Total | 4.17 (1.01) | 3.52(0.66)  | 3.83 (0.91) |

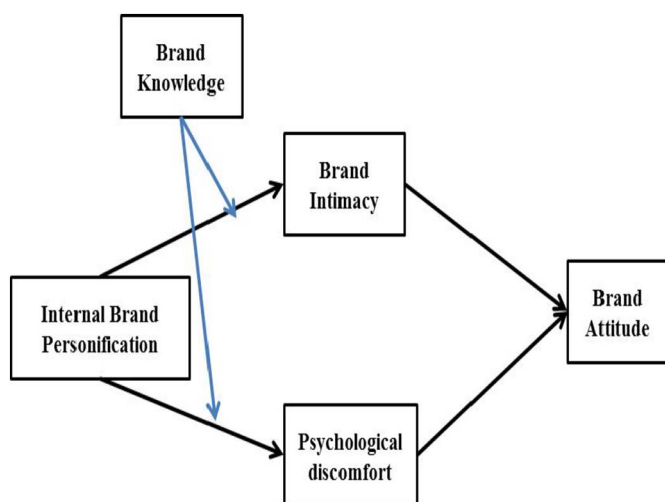


Fig. 1. Research model of study 1.

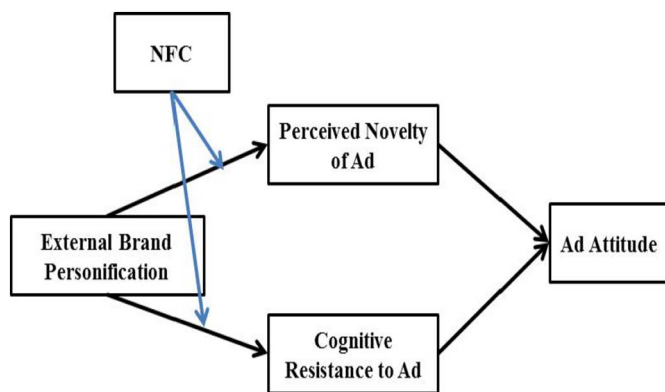


Fig. 2. Conceptual model of study 2.

4.3. Study 2

In study 2, we tested H3 and H4.

4.3.1. Method

4.3.1.1. Design and participants. This study used a 2 (NFC: high vs. low) between-subject design, wherein NFC was measured. Using the median split method, we assigned participants to high and low conditions of

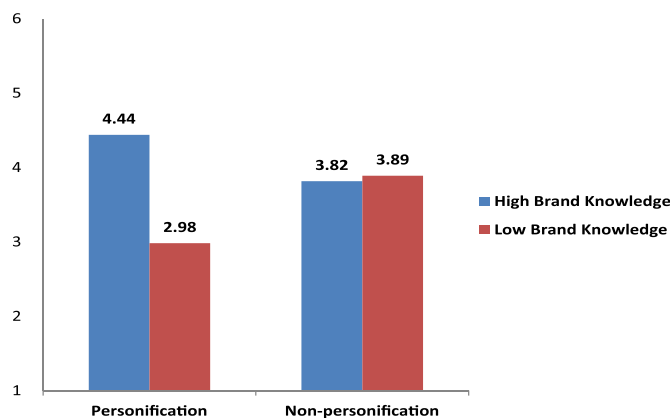


Fig. 3. The results of ANCOVA (H1) in study 1.

**Table 4**  
The mediation effect of brand intimacy (H2a) for high BKs in study 1.

| Predictors | IV → M |          | IV → DV |         | IV, M → DV |       |          |
|------------|--------|----------|---------|---------|------------|-------|----------|
|            | b      | t        | b       | t       | b          | t     |          |
| IV         | 1.229  | 4.235*** | 0.516   | 2.1107* | IV         | 0.041 | 0.160    |
| M          |        |          |         |         | M          | 0.387 | 3.727*** |

Notes: IV = BP; DV = brand attitude; M = brand intimacy. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < 0.000$ .

**Table 5**  
The mediation effect of psychological discomfort (H2b) for low BKs in study 1.

| Predictors | IV → M |         | IV → DV |           | IV, M → DV |        |          |
|------------|--------|---------|---------|-----------|------------|--------|----------|
|            | b      | t       | b       | t         | b          | t      |          |
| IV         | 0.763  | 3.295** | -0.640  | -4.830*** | IV         | -0.498 | -3.607** |
| M          |        |         |         |           | M          | -0.185 | -2.541*  |

Notes: IV = BP; DV = brand attitude; M = psychological discomfort. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < 0.000$ .

NFC. The convenience sample was composed of 78 Korean consumers (age ranged from 20 to 49 years; 50% male). The participants were randomly assigned to each condition. The ages of the respondents were well distributed and their occupations were diverse.

4.3.1.2. Pretests and stimulus development. We conducted several pretests to check the appropriateness of a real advertisement of a corporate brand, South Korean Telecommunications (SKT), in order to proceed with our study. SKT is a leading Korean telecommunications company. First, we measured the perceived schema incongruity between human-like traits (good-looking), the product category (telecommunications), and the BP level of the headline copy, “good-looking.” We examined participants’ ratings of the perceived incongruity of the headline copy (good-looking) on two items anchored by typical/atypical and usual/unusual ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ), with higher values indicating greater perceived incongruity. The results for good-looking as an external human trait were found to have  $m = 5.56$ . Next, we measured the BP level as a manipulation check for the independent variable BP. Participants rated the BP level of the headline copy (good-looking) using four items (e.g., the headline copy personifies the brand as a human) adopted from Aggarwal and McGill (2007). The result for good-looking was found to be  $m = 5.76$ .

Based on the pretests, we decided to use the actual launching of an SKT advertisement in February 2014. Immediately after the advertisement was released, we conducted an experiment to avoid the confounding effect of advertisement familiarity. The advertisement

included a slogan called “It is looking good! SKT.”

**4.3.1.3. Procedures and measures.** After viewing the SKT video advertisement, the participants were asked for brand/advertisement attitudes, perceived novelty, cognitive resistance, NFC, BP level of the advertisement, external personification perceptions of the advertisement, service involvement, and attitudes toward the spokesperson in the advertisement, the general attitude toward SKT, moods, and demographics.

The *perceived novelty* ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ) measures (e.g., familiar/unusual) were adopted from Holbrook (1981). The *cognitive resistance* ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ) measures were adopted from Wright (1975) (e.g., the slogan concerning the brand contained in the advertisement was convincing). The *attitude to the advertisement* ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ) measures were adopted from MacKenzie et al. (1986). The other variables—*service involvement* (Zaichkowsky, 1985) and *mood* (Batra & Stayman, 1990)—were adopted from the literature. We asked the participants to express their attitudes toward the spokesperson and to indicate their agreement with a statement, such as like “I like the actor,” using a seven-point scale. The results showed no differences in attitude toward the actor between the two groups (high vs. low NFC). Hence, based on extant research, we only considered the *general attitude toward SKT* as a covariate.

**4.3.2. Data analysis**

We used ANCOVA and planned contrast for H1; for H2, we used Baron and Kenny’s mediation analysis.

**4.3.3. Results and discussion**

**4.3.3.1. Manipulation check.** We conducted a manipulation check for the personification level of the SKT advertisement’s slogan by using four seven-point scales (e.g., the slogan personifies the brand as a human) adopted from Aggarwal and McGill (2007). The results showed SKT personification score of  $M = 5.98$ . Thus, the manipulation of external verbal personification was successful.

**4.3.3.2. Testing the effect of the NFC.** To verify H3, we conducted ANCOVA and included the general attitude toward SKT as a covariate. Next, we conducted planned contrast. This indicated that those individuals with high NFC have a more favorable attitude toward the SKT advertisement ( $M = 4.73$ ) than those with low NFC ( $M = 3.63$ ) ( $F(1, 75) = 15.525, p = 0.000$ ). These results support H3 (see Tables 6, 7, and 8; and Figs. 2 and 4).

**4.3.3.3. Testing the mediation effect of perceived novelty and cognitive resistance.** For H4a, we conducted Baron and Kenny’s mediation analysis to examine whether perceived novelty was responsible for the causal effect of NFC on attitude to the advertisement. It was first necessary to test whether perceived novelty was influenced by NFC. As shown in Table 9, the regression analysis with perceived novelty as a criterion is significant (NFC:  $b = 1.007, t = 5.869, p = 0.000$ ). Next, there was a significant effect of NFC on attitude to the advertisement (NFC:  $b = 0.871, t = 3.940, p = 0.000$ ). Lastly, when perceived novelty is entered as a predictor in the regression of attitude to the advertisement, perceived novelty still exerts a strong effect on this attitude ( $b = 0.907, t = 8.517, p = 0.000$ ). NFC is no longer significant ( $b = 0.042, t = 0.219, p = 0.827$ ). These results support H4a.

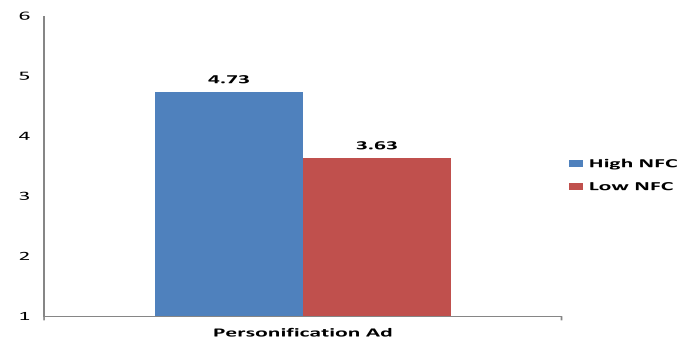
Next, for H4b, we conducted Baron and Kenny’s mediation analysis to examine whether cognitive resistance was responsible for the causal

**Table 7**  
The results of ANCOVA (H3) in study 2.

| Source                      | Type III SS | df | Mean square | F      | Sig.  |
|-----------------------------|-------------|----|-------------|--------|-------|
| Prior attitude toward brand | 5.083       | 1  | 5.083       | 6.423  | 0.013 |
| NFC                         | 12.289      | 1  | 12.289      | 15.525 | 0.000 |
| Error                       | 59.359      | 75 | 0.791       |        |       |

**Table 8**  
Cell mean (SD) in study 2.

| NFC         |             |             |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| High        | Low         | Total       |
| 4.73 (0.77) | 3.63 (1.05) | 4.19 (1.06) |



**Fig. 4.** The results of ANCOVA (H3) in study 2.

**Table 9**  
The mediation effect of perceived novelty (H4a) in study 2.

| Predictors | IV → M |          | IV → DV |          | IV, M → DV |          |
|------------|--------|----------|---------|----------|------------|----------|
|            | b      | t        | b       | t        | b          | t        |
| IV         | 1.007  | 5.869*** | 0.871   | 3.940*** | IV 0.042   | 0.219    |
|            |        |          |         |          | M 0.907    | 8.517*** |

Notes: IV = NFC; DV = advertisement attitude; M = perceived novelty. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < 0.000$ .

**Table 10**  
The mediation effect of cognitive resistance (H4b) in study 2.

| Predictors | IV → M |          | IV → DV |          | IV, M → DV |           |
|------------|--------|----------|---------|----------|------------|-----------|
|            | b      | t        | b       | t        | b          | t         |
| IV         | -0.630 | -3.123** | 0.871   | 3.940*** | IV 0.393   | 2.302*    |
|            |        |          |         |          | M -0.760   | -8.269*** |

Notes: IV = NFC; DV = ad attitude; and M = cognitive resistance. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < 0.000$ .

effect of NFC on attitude to the advertisement. It was first necessary to test whether cognitive resistance was influenced by NFC. As shown in Table 10, the regression analysis with cognitive resistance as a criterion is significant (NFC:  $b = -0.630, t = -3.123, p = 0.003$ ). Next, there is a significant effect of NFC on attitude to the advertisement (NFC:  $b = 0.871, t = 3.940, p = 0.000$ ). Lastly, when cognitive resistance is entered as a predictor in the regression of attitude to the advertisement, psychological discomfort still exerts a strong effect on brand attitude ( $b = -0.760, t = -8.269, p = 0.000$ ). NFC is still significant, but is reduced, compared with step 2 ( $b = 0.393, t = 2.302, p = 0.024$ ). These results support H4b.

**Table 6**  
Cell size of study 2.

| NFC  |     |       |
|------|-----|-------|
| High | Low | Total |
| 40   | 38  | 78    |

## 5. General discussion and conclusion

Our research suggests the conceptual framework for BP effect and identifies the conditions in which there is no effect of BP. Moreover, this research indicates the relevance of two mechanisms each for brand evaluation and advertisement evaluation. First, for the brand evaluation, study 1 indicates that the positive effect of BP via brand intimacy can be neutralized or even overcompensated by the negative effect via psychological discomfort (interference mechanism). Next, the absence of a positive effect via brand intimacy can be caused by the condition inhibiting the occurrence of this positive effect (i.e., low BK). This study indicates that the negative effect results from a lack of BK.

Next, for the advertisement evaluation, study 2 indicates the relevance of two mechanisms—perceived novelty and cognitive resistance. It indicates that the sign of the overall effect of BP on advertisement attitude is composed of two opposing effects and depends on NFC. It investigates the conditions in which the positive or the negative effect is likely to prevail. The positive effect via perceived novelty exists only for the high NFC but not for the low NFC. The negative effect via cognitive resistance only appears when consumers have low NFC.

The main contribution of this research is to suggest two important factors that affect the persuasive impact of BP messages. Present work hypothesizes that (1) BK, an ability to understand the relationships between BP cue and brand, and (2) NFC, the availability of adequate resources to perform this task successfully moderate the persuasive impact of BP. Although we have focused on verbal BP, our research provides a starting point for examining various types of BP or rhetoric expressions (e.g., metaphors, puns), which are different in resource demands (Roehm & Sternthal, 2001). We also contribute to an understanding of why the BP effect may occur. This study on the underlying psychological dynamics that justify selecting of factors and their causal relationships will contribute to academic development (Whetten, 1989). Furthermore, the present work adds to the increasing literature on rhetoric expressions. Individuals' cognitive resource has been found to encourage the accessibility of associations that relate structural relations between target attributes and base objects (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987; Lee & Sternthal, 1999; Roehm & Sternthal, 2001). The present research validates that individuals' characteristics (knowledge and NFC) can be important requirements for the effectiveness of advertising in the context of BP. Finally, on a more general level, for numerous rhetoric expression cues, the four mechanisms of this study should be taken into account when considering the use of these rhetoric cues.

This research can provide useful guidelines for marketers on the use of the personification method when planning headline copy and slogans for advertisements. BP is likely to be a more effective tool when the target audience has substantial BK. Advertisers should plan advertisements featuring a BP carefully by understanding the boundary conditions related to the impact of BP and utilizing this knowledge for consumer segmentation.

This study has the following limitations. First, we only focus on Korean consumers; thus, cross-cultural research that compares the responses of consumers in different countries would be valuable. Second, brands are endowed with faces, names, and human emotions (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012). Brand names sometimes resemble real people (e.g., Mr. Bread or Mrs. Fields). Thus, future research needs to test the effects of the personification of a brand name. Next, we focused only on a moderate incongruity level in BP. Therefore, future research is needed on the effect of the level of incongruity used. Last, we did not consider the interaction effect of BK and NFC. Therefore, whether they have a synergistic effect or not awaits further investigation.

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