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Brands in Disguise: The Role of Anthropomorphism in Crisis Communication

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ABSTRACT:
In the midst of a crisis, as public pressure and consumer expectations are elevated, companies may resort to humanizing their brands in order to mitigate the damage and potentially regain consumer trust and seek forgiveness. By implementing theories of anthropomorphism, this study explores how consumers' perceptions change when exposed to anthropomorphic crisis communication.

Previous research sought to understand and make use of brand anthropomorphism within the confines of marketing and sales. However, in this study, anthropomorphism is explored within the framework of crisis communication, combining business, psychology, and linguistics. The aim of this study is to further the knowledge associated with brand anthropomorphism by analysing how consumers perceive anthropomorphic crisis communication and the possible elements that can act as moderators of consumer trust and forgiveness.

By adopting a qualitative research approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a group of individuals. In addition to general questions about brand anthropomorphism and crisis communication strategies, participants were presented with an anthropomorphized brand navigating a crisis, and were asked to read and evaluate two apologies issued by the brand as a first response to the crisis at hand. Their evaluations were based on their thoughts, feelings, and opinions about the apologies. A first traditional corporate apology was in the form of a CEO statement. A second one was in the form of an anthropomorphic apology by the brand's mascot.

The results of this study demonstrate how anthropomorphism can constitute a key advantage for brands managing crises, if used properly. The findings saw the emergence of three main elements that decided how consumers reacted to both apologies. These are rational minds, emotional minds, and balanced minds. Rational minds gravitate toward traditional corporate apologies. Emotional minds are more drawn to anthropomorphic apologies. And Balanced minds usually prefer to combine the two. Furthermore, transparency, responsibility, and taking action were established as precursors to consumer forgiveness and trust during crises. The context of the crisis including the type of brand being investigated, the prior relationship of the participants with the brand, and how much they care or relate to the crisis also plays a role in determining how anthropomorphism in crisis communication is perceived.

This research study was able to provide a new perspective and a new layer to the potential use of brand anthropomorphism by applying it to crisis communication strategies. Moreover, it highlights the different components that consumers evaluate when deciding to forgive and place their trust in a brand anew. Essentially, it contributes to the existing literature by bringing a fresh new perspective to a phenomenon as old as time.

KEYWORDS: Anthropomorphism, brand anthropomorphism, crisis communication, consumer trust, consumer forgiveness, consumer perception

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1. Introduction

> *"A man never understands how anthropomorphic he is."* (Goethe, 1833, (165), p. 94)

Have you ever looked at a cloud and seen a face? Or perhaps perceived a company or a brand as friendly? Or maybe even thought that your computer was being stubborn and out to get you? If you have encountered any such instances, then you might have just experienced a phenomenon called anthropomorphism (Guthrie, 1993, p. 62; Ashforth, Schinoff, & Brickson, 2020, p. 29; Persson, Laaksolahti, & Lönnqvist, 2000).

Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo (2007) define anthropomorphism as the attribution of human-like characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions to nonhuman entities (p. 865). Moreover, according to Persson et al. (2000), anthropomorphism represents a way for us to simplify our understanding of the world around us and making sense of it in the process by "projecting human life" onto non-human aspects of our surroundings. We might perceive that a car's design makes it look like someone we know; we might even describe its personality in human-like terms, ultimately giving it a "mind of its own" (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017, p. 5). That is because it is extremely simple to anthropomorphize, it only takes a few "social cues" for people to engage in a nonconscious, spontaneous burst of anthropomorphism (Ashforth, Schinoff, & Brickson, 2020, p. 30). For instance, if a robot looks sad, people may respond as if it has feelings.

As stated by Stewart E. Guthrie (1993), anthropomorphism is not deviant, it is normal, as it is a consequence of "human perception" (p. 64). The concept of anthropomorphism has been mentioned by philosophers, theologians, and scientists throughout history (Guthrie, 1993, p. 62), however, the anthropomorphization of companies and brands remains a relatively new concept (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017, p. 3).

According to Golossenko, Pillai, & Aroean (2020), brand anthropomorphism represents the tendency to perceive a brand as having human-like features or characteristics, such as personality traits, emotions, and cognitive abilities that are typically associated with humans (p. 1). As reported by Golossenko et al. (2020), marketers often try to portray a brand as human or human-like, and this is usually done by imbuing brands as well as products and their marketing communications with human characteristics. Such examples include brands like Pret a Manger adding facial expressions to fruits and vegetables packaging, Danone shaping its health-focused products to resemble a human body, Amazon Alexa losing her voice (p. 1).

Another approach, as stated by Hosany, Prayag, Martin, & Lee (2013), involves the use of human-like characters developed by brands, which can help build emotional bonds with customers that could potentially influence their opinions of a brand beyond the qualities of the products (p. 50). These human-like characters could be brand characters in animation such as Mickey Mouse, or brand characters with identity such as the M&M's characters, or brand characters in design such as Hello Kitty (p. 50). All of which add a human element to the brands in question.

Consumers are generally exposed to a deeper level of brand anthropomorphism through "interaction and communication" (Jin & Qian, 2021, p. 4). And while this sort of communication is usually for marketing purposes, brand anthropomorphism has started making its way into another form of communication that is equally, if not even more important or critical to a brand or organization. This form of communication is what is commonly referred to as crisis communication. According to Coombs & Holladay (2010), crisis communication refers to the gathering, analysis, and distribution of information essential for responding to and managing a crisis (p. 20).

The PwC's Global Crisis Survey (2019) posits that 69% of business leaders have run into a crisis within the span of five years, and yet almost a third of them do not have a de-

partment equipped to handle such events. Brand crises can occur due to “product defects, social responsibility problems, bad corporate behavior, executive misconduct, bad business results, spokespeople’s bad behavior or controversial attitudes, loss of public support or disputes over ownership” (Salvador & Ikeda, 2018, p. 76).

Kuipers & Wolbers (2021) propose that organizational crises encompass any threats or negative events that would require an immediate response due to the uncertainty of their causes and outcomes (p. 3). Thus, effectively managing crises and reducing the risks involved therein are vital elements of every organization (Mizrak, 2024, p. 254). As reported by Wut, Xu, & Wong (2021), an organization’s response can influence its ability to handle crises, preserve its reputation, and restore consumer trust (pp. 9-10). Hence, when a crisis occurs, crisis managers should try and mitigate its impact and potentially control the situation (Kuipers & Wolbers, 2021, p. 11).

According to Sellnow & Seeger (2013), crisis communication is a continuous process that aims to “create shared meaning among groups, communities, individuals, and agencies” within the crisis environment, in order to prepare for, mitigate, and respond to “threats and harm” (p. 13). Effective crisis communication, then, starts with “proactive planning and preparation” which involves anticipating potential crises, recognizing vulnerabilities, and formulating crisis communication strategies that would help manage the responses set forth by organizations and brands (Gasana, 2024, p. 30).

As stated by Lee & Chung (2012), whenever an organization or brand is going through a crisis, its crisis communication strategy almost always includes an apology which serves to alleviate anger of the public (p. 932). An effective apology usually includes several components such as responsibility, assurance, sympathy, and compensation (p. 932). The varying degrees of these components can also play a role in terms of how successful an apology can be (p. 933). This is where anthropomorphism could potentially be a secret ingredient.

Given that anthropomorphism has the ability to transform a classic "human-to-object interaction" into a "human-to-human interaction" (Wan & Chen, 2021, p. 1), perhaps its use in crisis communication could potentially serve to mitigate the severity of a crisis and shape the way consumers perceive a brand or organization.

Several studies have been conducted throughout the years investigating the role of anthropomorphism in theology, psychology, sociology, marketing, as well as many other fields (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007, p. 864). Scholars have long debated whether anthropomorphism belongs in a scientific discussion and whether it can account for various phenomena "from religious belief to effective marketing campaigns" (Epley et al., 2007, p. 864; Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). And with the advancement of technology, its use is more and more apparent together with studies conducted to evaluate its effectiveness in many products and brands (Cornelius & Leidner, 2021). However, despite the great potential that anthropomorphism presents in helping brands overcome crises, this area of study remains largely unexplored.

In an effort to explore the dynamics of anthropomorphism and consumer perception when it comes to crisis communication, this thesis seeks to answer the following research question:

> **How does anthropomorphism in crisis communication affect consumers' perceptions of a brand?**

To delve further into this question, this study will adopt the following definitions as a framework for analyzing the effect of anthropomorphism on consumers' perceptions of a brand within a crisis context:

- Anthropomorphism:

  "Anthropomorphism is an act of seeing humanlike characteristics and traits in nonhuman agents" (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007, p. 880)

- Brand anthropomorphism:

  "Brand anthropomorphism is the extent to which a brand or a branded product is perceived as an actual human being" (Guido & Peluso, 2015)

- Crisis communication:

  "Crisis communication is a form of strategic communication that can lessen the negative effects of a crisis on an organization and its stakeholders" (Coombs, 2018, p. 1)

- Consumer perception:

  "The process by which a customer selects, organizes and interprets information / stimuli inputs to create a meaningful picture of the brand or the product" (Thiruvenkatraj & Vetrivel, 2017, p. 126)

- Consumer trust:

  "The willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function" (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001, p. 82)

- Consumer forgiveness:

  "Customers' internal act of relinquishing anger and the desire to seek revenge against a firm that has caused harm as well as the enhancement of positive emotions and thoughts toward this harm-doing firm" (Joireman, Grégoire, & Tripp, 2016, pp. 76-77)

This study seeks to analyze how the use of anthropomorphism by brands could potentially serve to lessen the impact of a crisis. By using anthropomorphic components such as mascots and anthropomorphic language in crisis communication strategies, brands may be able to navigate unpredictable crises efficiently. The research contained within this study will also provide theoretical insights into the motivations behind anthropomorphism as well as practical insights into how certain aspects of anthropomorphism could be exploited by brands to build a strong customer relationship as it explores how consumers derive meaning from human-like components in a crisis setting.

The findings gained from this study could further the understanding of anthropomorphism in branding as well as provide new insights within a previously unexplored setting, namely crisis communication. By integrating perspectives from psychology, consumer behavior, marketing, and linguistics, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the usage of anthropomorphism to promote forgiveness, restore trust, and reinforce consumer-brand relationships in times of crisis.

2. Literature review

In this part, we will explore the different aspects of anthropomorphism as well as its use and significance in different research fields. We will also delve into what defines a crisis and the common crisis communication strategies used by brands and organizations. Lastly, we will look into the use of anthropomorphic components by brands within the context of crises and its effects and consequences.

2.1. Foundations of Anthropomorphism

2.1.1. Anthropomorphism: Past, Present, and Future

"We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds." (Hume, 1757, p. 6)

Anthropomorphism is defined by Stewart Guthrie (2013) as "the interpretation of non-human things and events in terms of human characteristics". These human characteristics could refer to physical traits, for instance, a robot perceived to look human; feelings or emotions, such as a computer perceived to be vindictive; and attitudes or behaviors, such as a car believed to be refusing to start (Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo, 2008, p. 144).

It is also worth mentioning that anthropomorphism is more prevalent in children than adults (Epley et al., 2007, p. 865). However, it tends to be quite different in the case of children as it involves "imagining others' minds and internal states" (Severson & Woodard, 2018, p. 2). This means that, in the case of children, anthropomorphism may well go beyond the surface level as it can be linked to pretense, when children imagine invisible friends and personify their toys, since they both often share the same process (Severson & Woodard, 2018, p. 2).

When speculating about what gave birth to anthropomorphism as a concept, one may actually find its roots in evolutionary psychology. Justin L. Barrett (2000) posited that early humans developed a "Hyperactive Agency Detection Device" (HADD) (pp. 31-32) as a survival mechanism, enabling them to interpret ambiguous environmental stimuli such as rustling leaves as potential threats or allies by projecting human-like agency onto them (p. 40).

This cognitive bias allowed humans to err on the side of caution, enhancing survival odds (p. 39). Guthrie (1993) explains that our cognitive system is predisposed to interpret ambiguous stimuli by first considering those possibilities that matter most, typically those involving living or human-like entities (p. 39). This “better safe than sorry” approach meant that even if a shadow or a sound was misinterpreted as a potential person, the minimal cost of error was outweighed by the survival advantage of quickly detecting a threat (Guthrie, 1993, pp. 5-6). In essence, this strategy ensured that early humans were primed to notice and respond to any sign of animate presence in their surroundings.

Building on this fundamental survival mechanism, Guthrie (1993) argues that the same cognitive bias also paved the way for religious thought. As early humans encountered natural phenomena and ambiguous events, their tendency to attribute human-like intentionality provided a basis for interpreting these events, often deified or spiritual in nature, as acts of conscious agents (p. 21). In this view, anthropomorphism is not merely a perceptual error but a deeply embedded strategy that allowed our ancestors to impose order and meaning on an unpredictable world, ultimately shaping the emergence of religious beliefs and practices.

The cognitive systems that once helped early humans navigate survival challenges and interpret the world around them continue to influence modern behavior. Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo (2007) demonstrate that when anthropocentric knowledge, which consists of both “categorical knowledge about humans in general and egocentric knowledge

about the self", is readily accessible, individuals are more inclined to apply it to nonhuman agents, whether these are virtual assistants, devices, or robots (pp. 864–865, 879).

Categorical knowledge represents a memory trace that facilitates cognitive processes as well as the categorization of objects (Ell & Zilioli, 2012). Egocentric knowledge, however, evidently means knowledge that is centered around the self. Both categorical knowledge and egocentric knowledge, in this case, form anthropocentric knowledge, which, in turn, represents the knowledge agent evoked by humans when applying a judgment (Epley et al., 2007, p. 878).

Epley et al. (2007) propose that this tendency is driven by both a desire to explain and predict behavior (effectance motivation) and the need for social connection (sociality motivation) (p. 864).

Modern manifestations of these traits include anthropomorphizing brands, technology, and even natural phenomena like hurricanes (Epley et al., 2007, pp. 864, 871). For example, people name their cars or describe apps as "helpful," reflecting our innate desire to connect with the non-human world. Marketers capitalize on this as products are often given "human-like characteristics" in order to "exemplify" what brands stand for, with the ultimate goal being, to foster trust and relatability (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012, pp. 308-309).

Humanizing a brand or a product often leads to people unconsciously seeing them as human, thus perceiving them as trustworthy and identifying with certain traits they may regard as shared or mutual (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012, pp. 308-309). As a result, even if the focus has changed from analyzing natural occurrences to using advanced technology, the basic human urge to perceive the world in human-like shapes and forms is exceptionally constant.

2.1.2. Reasons behind Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is a concept that has existed around the world throughout history (Epley et al., 2007). Over the years, many theories have been proposed to explain this phenomenon and the reason why people have a tendency to anthropomorphize non-human agents.

Lee, Lau, Kiesler, and Chiu (2005) suggest that there are two key explanations for why we tend to attribute human characteristics to non-human objects. The first explanation focuses on the design of the artifact itself. It argues that people instinctively respond to lifelike or social signals from an object, relying on pre-existing stereotypes and mental shortcuts rather than deep analysis. The second explanation adopts a human-centered, cognitive approach, proposing that we anthropomorphize based on the mental models we develop to understand how an object functions.

Essentially, we assign human traits to things because doing so helps us make sense of aspects we find unfamiliar, using the most familiar reference point, which is ourselves as humans (Lemaignan, Fink, Dillenbourg, & Braboszcz, 2014).

In another vein, Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo (2008) argue that two motivational factors, sociality motivation and effectance motivation, play a key role in why we tend to anthropomorphize. Sociality motivation refers to our basic need for human connection. When we feel a lack of social ties, we might compensate by attributing human qualities to nonhuman agents, such as by increasing our belief in anthropomorphized religious figures or perceiving our pets as more human-like (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008, p. 114).

According to Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo (2008), in addition to providing social connection, interactions with other humans also give us a detailed, accessible idea of what it means to be human, or even of our own identity. This idea can help us explain, control,

and predict the behavior of others. However, the reliance on this heuristic is influenced by our drive to understand, control, and effectively interact with our surroundings (p. 146).

This drive, known as effectance motivation, which was first coined by Robert W. White, is amplified by factors that increase our need for competence, such as a desire for control or predictability, the potential for future interactions, or strategic exchanges (White, 1959). Consequently, anthropomorphism helps satisfy effectance motivation by giving us a sense of understanding and control over nonhuman agents, and we are more likely to anthropomorphize when this drive is strong (Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo, 2008, p. 146).

Alternatively, Fisher (1991) identified two distinct ways in which we engage in anthropomorphic thinking. The first, known as interpretative anthropomorphism, involves attributing human intentions, beliefs, and emotions to nonhuman entities based solely on their behavior. For example, when observing a cat arch its back and puff up its fur in response to a perceived threat, we might interpret these actions as signs of anger or fear, even though they are simply natural defensive reactions (pp. 60-61).

In contrast, imaginative anthropomorphism involves portraying imaginary or fictional characters as if they possessed human qualities. For instance, a children's story might feature a talking tree endowed with a wise, nurturing personality that guides other creatures, making the tree relatable and vivid through its human-like traits. Both forms of anthropomorphism allow us to understand and connect with the world by imbuing nonhuman agents with human characteristics (Fisher, 1991, pp. 60-61).

A study by Wan & Chen (2021) suggests that anthropomorphism also serves as a way to address three human needs when it comes to object attachment. First, the need for a "sense of comfort and pleasantness", which proposes that humans possess extensive knowledge of personality and behavior, which makes it easier for us to understand and

relate to familiar human traits (p. 2). When we attribute these traits to non-human objects that we are less familiar with, it simplifies our understanding and triggers an instinctive emotional response (Wan & Chen, 2021, p.2).

Typically, this anthropomorphic process leads to feelings of comfort and pleasure, although in some instances it can also evoke negative emotions (Wan & Chen, 2021, p. 2; Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011).

Second, anthropomorphism addresses a need for “self-identity”. This relates to the hierarchical ordering of the tripartite self by Sedikides, Gaertner, & O’Mara (2011), which divides the self-concept into three parts: the individual self (unique traits), the relational self (roles in relationships), and the collective self (shared group characteristics).

Wan & Chen (2021) suggest that anthropomorphism strengthens the individual self by allowing people to recognize aspects of themselves in humanized objects. In addition, akin to the “sociality motivation” aspect by Epley et al. (2008), it enhances the relational self and helps individuals assess whether an anthropomorphized object aligns with the kind of relationship they seek. Finally, anthropomorphism reinforces and even expands the collective self by incorporating non-human objects into one's sense of group membership (Wan & Chen, 2021, p. 3).

Third, the need for “self-efficacy” is further addressed by anthropomorphism. Not unlike the “effectance motivation” by Epley et al. (2008), it suggests that interacting with, or even just imagining interactions with, humanized objects gives individuals a chance to shape their self-efficacy (belief in one's ability to achieve goals). In assessing and responding to these objects, people take into account their own feelings of control, power, and dominance (Wan & Chen, 2021, p. 4).

2.2. Brand Anthropomorphism

2.2.1. What is Brand Anthropomorphism?

Brand anthropomorphism, or anthropomorphized brands, refers to brands that consumers perceive as having human qualities, such as emotions, thoughts, a soul, and intentional behaviors, which enable them to play significant roles within social relationships (Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocereto, 2009, pp. 413-414). Similarly, Guido & Peluso (2015) define brand anthropomorphism as the degree to which consumers view a branded product as an actual human being (p. 3).

Alternatively, Zheng, Li, Wang, & Yuan (2024) believe that brand anthropomorphism can be understood from two key perspectives. First, as a comprehensive personification strategy where it is not just about embedding human traits in the product itself, but also in every aspect of the brand (its services, culture, marketing, and advertising) to boost positive consumer attitudes.

Second, its purpose is to leave a memorable impression on consumers or to encourage them to engage further with the brand. So, when consumers encounter these human-like cues, they either form a lasting impression or are prompted to interact more deeply with the brand or product (Zheng, Li, Wang, & Yuan, 2024).

According to Golossenko, Pillai, & Aroean (2020), managers frequently shape their marketing communications and promotional tactics to portray a brand as having human-like qualities. They achieve this by blending attributes similar to those of people, such as human appearances, distinct personalities, and the capacity for speech, imagination, and emotion (p. 1).

This is further demonstrated by Guido & Peluso (2015) as marketers often assign human-related names or characteristics to products to encourage anthropomorphic associations (p. 2). Fournier (1998) also claims that in order for a brand to stand out in consumer-brand relationships, it must be anthropomorphized; that is, consumers should perceive it as having human qualities such as the ability to think, experience emotions, and feel (pp. 344-345).

2.2.2. Brand Anthropomorphism in Consumer Psychology:

In consumer behavior, anthropomorphism bridges the gap between impersonal brands and emotionally driven consumers. The Mind Perception Theory (Gray, Gray & Wegner, 2007) demonstrates this by arguing that humans attribute "minds" to entities based on perceived capacities for “experience” (the ability to feel emotions, pain, or pleasure) and “agency” (the capacity for intention, planning, and responsibility). The concept of agency is tied to responsibility, whereas experience is linked to moral consideration and entitlements. This suggests that mind perception is not a single dimension but consists of two distinct aspects that influence how morality is understood by consumers (p. 619).

These two concepts play a pivotal role in consumer-brand interactions. For instance, when a brand emphasizes agency, consumers may judge its actions based on social responsibility, since, as mentioned earlier, agency is tied to the capacity for intention, planning, and responsibility. Kim and McGill (2011) argue that anthropomorphized entities are perceived as having humanlike mental states, leading to expectations of accountability (p. 96).

Anthropomorphizing a product can lead consumers to judge a brand based on “social expectations” and “beliefs” that do not usually apply to an “inanimate entity” (Kim & McGill, 2011, p. 96). This contrast is further shown by other empirical studies. A study by Puzakova, Kwak, and Rocereto (2013) found that participants judged anthropomorphized brands more harshly for negative actions as they are seen as “responsible” for

them (p. 95-96). Such examples of anthropomorphized brands could include Hello Kitty, Michelin's "Michelin Man", M&M's characters, and Kellogg's Frosted Flakes "Tony the tiger".

Balancing between experience and agency can be quite tricky. As emphasized by Gray et al. (2007), perceiving a brand as having a mind involves two dimensions: first, attributing to it the capacity for conscious experience, which subconsciously compels consumers to treat the brand as a moral entity "worthy of care and concern", and second, recognizing its capacity for intentional action, which renders it accountable for its decisions (p. 619). Effective anthropomorphism thus requires harmonizing these dimensions.

On the other hand, anthropomorphism can be used as a way to bring more attention to positive changes. As Waytz, Cacioppo, and Epley (2010) propose, the anthropomorphizing of "nonhuman agents in nature" or the anthropomorphizing of nature could actually serve as an "effective" means of raising awareness of environmental issues such as climate change, water pollution, air pollution, since people seem to show increased "moral care" towards anthropomorphized agents (p. 225).

When assessing the need for anthropomorphism in branding, we look at how it can affect judgements and behaviors of consumers towards products and brands. According to Kim & McGill (2011), Anthropomorphism positively influences both judgments and actions in a way that fosters a sense of effectiveness in interacting with nonhuman entities or deepen emotional connections with them, which in turn leads to more favorable evaluations of these entities (p. 95).

Aggarwal & McGill (2007) demonstrate in their study that consumers tend to favor a product more when there is a match between the human traits suggested by the marketer and the product's own characteristics. This alignment makes the intended metaphor more apparent, enabling consumers to perceive the product as the person the marketer has portrayed (pp. 470-471, 473).

Kim & McGill (2011) suggest that anthropomorphism can be perceived as using “inductive reasoning” or simply describing “observable” traits and behaviors of nonhuman entities (p. 95). To make this clearer, they provide the example of a brand that consistently delivers on its advertising promises which might be labeled as “trustworthy”, much like a dependable “friend”, even though it may not actually possess the deeper human qualities of values and willpower (p.95).

Moreover, Aggarwal & McGill (2007) argue that the anthropomorphism of products is further encouraged by marketers since they typically view products that can be “humanized” or imbued with human-like qualities as having a greater potential for “long-term business success” (p. 470).

This tendency to anthropomorphize products and brands is also a by-product of the “ease of anthropomorphizing” that is created by marketers through prompting consumers to view their products as possessing human characteristics (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007, p. 470). These human characteristics could be seen as features of the product, whether it is their movement, shapes, sounds, voices, or even through language by referring to a product or brand with personal pronouns (“he” or “she”), thus implying that they are not objects (“it”) which may result in consumers perceiving the product or brand as human (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007, p. 470).

2.2.3. Anthropomorphic Language

“Human language is uniquely human”, states Stephen R. Anderson (2004, p.4). Building on this statement, we deduce that “nothing else—animate or inanimate—spontaneously uses our human languages or any form of communication that would qualify as language under most linguistic definitions” (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2010, p. 443).

Drawing from the definition by Epley et al. (2007), anthropomorphism, in essence, is attributing human-like features to non-human entities, the latter potentially being other living creatures or inanimate objects. We can, thus, generally infer that human language is, by nature, anthropomorphic. As stated by Jin & Qian (2021):

> *"Anthropomorphism is a quite interesting phenomenon in the development of human language."* (p. 1)

As a form of anthropomorphism, anthropomorphic language focuses on the linguistic strategies employed to evoke or reinforce human-like perceptions. Some of the key features of anthropomorphic language include the use of human pronouns. Brands can employ first-person ("we", "I") or second-person ("you") pronouns to personify non-human agents. For instance, S. C. Johnson and Co.'s advertising tagline reads "We work hard so you don't have to" (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012, p. 311).

Another feature is the use of emotive verbs such as "care", "learn", and "understand". This is especially apparent in Dove care and real beauty campaigns which include taglines such as "We do real care so you can do real beauty" (Dove, 2024) or "We see beauty all around us" (Cooney, Dove, 2017). Moreover, employing adjectives such as "thoughtful", "friendly", and "curious", that are usually used to describe human behavior or state of mind, can also be deemed as anthropomorphic language. Meta's description of its new AI is an example of this, calling it a "friendly AI assistant with a passion for helping others" (Zimmer, 2024).

Furthermore, narrative agency is also utilized by brands, which involves framing objects as protagonists in a story. For instance, in an advertisement for Dow Bathroom Cleaner by Dow Chemical Company, the following tagline was used, "We scrub your tub. We work hard so you don't have to" (Dow Chemical Company, 1988).

2.3. Crisis Communication in Organizations

2.3.1. What is an Organizational Crisis?

"Crises are unique moments in the history of organizations" (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2019). According to W.T. Coombs (2014), an organizational crisis is understood as the perception of an unforeseen event that jeopardizes stakeholders' vital expectations in areas such as "health, safety, environmental, and economic matters", potentially disrupting "an organization's performance" and leading to adverse outcomes (p. 19). Ulmer et al. (2019) further expand on their definition by stating that:

> *"An organizational crisis is a specific, unexpected, and nonroutine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and simultaneously present an organization with both opportunities for and threats to its high-priority goals."* (Ulmer et al., 2019, p. 7)

In addition, they categorize organizational crisis into two groups: crises that are intentionally caused, and crises that occur due to "natural, uncontrollable factors" (Ulmer et al., 2019).

Hermann (1963), on the other hand, believes that an organizational crisis is defined by three main components: first, it involves an unexpected surprise that goes beyond what is anticipated; second, it presents a threat where the risks surpass normal operations; and third, it requires organizations to respond swiftly and effectively (p. 64).

2.3.2. Crisis Communication

Building on Hermann's third element of organizational crises (1963, p. 64), an organization's ability to respond swiftly and effectively plays a key role in how the crisis is managed. As emphasized by Ulmer et al. (2019), some organizations manage crisis communication so poorly that they suffer lasting damage, ultimately losing the trust of both their "members and the public". This is where crisis communication comes in.

Crisis communication is the life blood of crisis management (W.T. Coombs, 2014, p. 13). For Timothy Coombs (2018), crisis communication is a strategic approach that helps reduce the adverse impacts a crisis can have on an organization and its stakeholders (p. 1). Moreover, Crisis communication is a “multidisciplinary” field that involves a range of strategies organizations use to communicate before, during, and after a crisis to restore normal operations (Spradley, 2017, p. 1).

When a brand is facing a crisis, its communication strategy often determines its survival. It can either help the brand regain its position and clean its reputation or it can sink it even further into turmoil. At the heart of this lies the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), a roadmap developed by Timothy Coombs (2007) to navigate crises.

SCCT sorts crises into three clusters: “victim (minimal attributions of crisis responsibility)”, which includes “natural disasters, rumors, workplace violence, and product tampering”; “accidental (moderate attributions of crisis responsibility)”, which includes “challenges, megadamage, technical breakdown-accidents, and technical breakdown-recalls”; and “preventable (strong attributions of crisis responsibility)”, which includes “human breakdown accidents, human breakdown recalls, organizational misdeeds–management misconduct, organizational misdeed with no injuries, and organizational misdeeds with injuries” (p. 179). The basic idea behind the SCCT theory is matching your response to the crisis type, which seems rather simple; however, real life can be messier than theory.

A prime example is Johnson & Johnson’s 1982 Tylenol crisis, which represents a masterclass in SCCT’s “rebuild” strategy. When cyanide-laced capsules killed thirteen people, the brand did not shy away from the spotlight. Instead, the company issued a public warning to cease using Johnson & Johnson’s drugs, withdrew all the Tylenol from stores, introduced tamper-proof packaging, and turned a catastrophe into a reputation win (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2019, p. 246-247).

Johnson & Johnson's CEO James Burke then appeared on national TV and reassured customers by stating that their health and well-being was much more important than the financial burden suffered by the drug manufacturing company (Department of Defense, 2019).

If we were to compare this to the manner in which the Valdez oil spill crisis was handled by Exxon, the difference is night and day. Instead of taking responsibility and making amends, Exxon proceeded to shifting the blame to the captain even though he was hired and given command of the ship by Exxon (Benoit, 1997, p. 184).

The chair of Exxon also attempted to "blame state officials and the coast guard for the delay…in cleaning up the oil", which served to damage Exxon's credibility (Benoit, 1997, p. 180). The later serves to show that even when faced with some of the most disastrous crises, the way a company delivers the message matters most to consumers.

Benoit's Image Repair Theory (1997) also comes into play by identifying five main strategies that can be used to restore the image of a company/brand. These strategies are: Denial (simple denial or shifting the blame), Evasion of responsibility (reaction to a provocation, defeasibility, claiming offensive action occurred by accident, claiming offense performed with good intentions), Reduce Offensiveness (bolstering, minimizing negative feelings, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, compensation), Corrective Action (restoring pre-existing state of affairs, promising to prevent the recurrence of the offense), and last but not least, Mortification ("confess and beg forgiveness") which can work in some instances but can also "invite lawsuits from victims" in others (Benoit, 1997, p. 179-182).

One or more of Benoit's strategies are often employed in order to respond to a crisis, with the best responses usually blending them. A good example of this is the Samsung Galaxy Note 7 Crisis, where the company did not just recall the devices, but instead showed accountability by issuing an apology at a press conference, investigated the

cause of the defect, introduced new quality check measures to ensure that such issues do not happen in the future, and enhanced their overall processes (Lopez, 2017).

2.4. Anthropomorphism: When it works, when it fails

2.4.1. During crises: To anthropomorphize or not to anthropomorphize?

2.4.1.1. Anthropomorphism and COVID-19

In 2019, in the midst of an unprecedented series of events due to the COVID-19 pandemic, people looked for answers all around them as a way to cope with a new reality. New restrictions such as isolation, quarantine, and social distancing as well as restricted travel were put in place to control the spread of the virus (Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020).

The real challenge, however, was convincing the public of the severity of the threat and having them comply with the imposed measures (Kowal & Sorokowski, 2020). One way to do this was through the anthropomorphism of nature, which refers to “assignment of human qualities to nature” (Tam, Lee, & Chao, 2013). Tam (2019) expands on this further and suggests that by anthropomorphizing nature, some people view the environment as deserving moral consideration, leading them to feel guilt when it is harmed (p. 2).

A prime example of this during the COVID-19 pandemic is the statement made by UN's environment chief, Inger Andersen where he says that "nature is sending us a message with the coronavirus pandemic and the ongoing climate crisis" (Carrington, 2020). This statement suggests that nature is providing a warning and may be “vengeful” (Pensini & McMullen, 2022, p. 2).

In their study, Pensini & McMullen (2022) sought to uncover how the relationship between connectedness to nature and the support for travel restrictions during the COVID-19 crisis was mediated by anthropomorphism of nature and anthropomorphism of nature in the context of COVID-19. The results have shown an overall positive relationship (p. 4).

Support for COVID-19 travel restrictions was linked to a sense of connectedness with nature, a relationship influenced by both general anthropomorphism of nature, and especially context-specific anthropomorphism related to COVID-19 (Pensini & McMullen, 2022, p. 4). Therefore, based on this example, it can be deduced that anthropomorphism can influence the general public opinion in times of crisis.

2.4.1.2. Anthropomorphism in Pepsi's apology

While social movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the #Metoo movement were at their peak, PepsiCo decided to join the fight and released a commercial titled "Live for Now", featuring supermodel Kendall Jenner and the song "Lions" by Skip Marley.

The ad depicts a protest with young activists carrying signs promoting peace and unity. Jenner, initially engaged in a photoshoot, is encouraged to join the protest after a cellist and a hijab-wearing photographer take part. She removes her wig and makeup, blending in with the crowd. The climax of the ad occurs when she hands a Pepsi to a white police officer, who drinks it, prompting cheers from the protesters. The commercial ends with the tagline "Live Bolder, Live Louder, Live for Now" alongside the Pepsi logo (T. H. R., 2017).

Shortly after the advertisement's release, Pepsi encountered significant public criticism and even boycotts, as many argued that the campaign trivialized important social movements. On social media platforms, individuals criticized the advertisement in various ways, arguing that it trivializes genuine issues and seeks to diminish the significance of social movements.

A significant example of this was the tweet made by Bernice King, the youngest daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who shared on social media an image depicting her father in the midst of a peaceful protest, visibly being pushed back by a police line. Accompanying the image was a tweet stating, "If only Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi".

The latter prompted a response and a subsequent apology from Pepsi that reads “Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding. Clearly we missed the mark, and we apologize. We did not intend to make light of any serious issue. We are removing the content and halting any further rollout. We also apologize for putting Kendall Jenner in this position.” (Smith, 2017)

Pepsi’s use of anthropomorphic language, such as using a first person pronoun (“we”) when addressing the public and suggesting that the brand possesses the quality of intentionality (“intend”), serves as a way to connect with its consumers and framing the brand as a “human” capable of making mistakes.

The use of anthropomorphism in the case of Pepsi may not have fully forgiven its transgressions, but it served as an example of a way to connect with its consumers and establish a human dialogue that can lead to understanding the brand’s actions and potentially moving past the crisis.

2.4.2. Ban of Anthropomorphic Mascots

In 2016, Chile's Servicio Nacional del Consumidor (SERNAC) announced legal action against Kellogg's, Nestlé, and Masterfoods (the importer and distributor of Mars' M&Ms). The agency targeted these companies for continuing to advertise products using materials such as "cartoons" aimed at children under 14 as well as containing "critical" nutrients. Chile's aim was to reduce the alarming obesity rate the country is experiencing and target the increasing obesity in children.

According to the new Article 100 bis of the Food Health Regulation, advertising is considered to target children under 14 if it incorporates elements such as "children's characters, figures, animations, cartoons, toys, or music" designed for kids. It also applies if the ad features "people or animals" that appeal to this age group, makes imaginative claims about the product or its effects, uses children's voices or expressions, or portrays everyday situations like "school, playgrounds, or games" (Carreño & Dolle, 2017, pp. 170-172).

The ban on these "cartoon" characters, which are actually anthropomorphic mascots of the brands in question, is due to them being considered "commercial hooks" for products that are "high in energy, sugar, fats or salt" (Carreño & Dolle, 2017, p. 173). According to Correa, Reyes, Taillie, Corvalán, & Dillman Carpentier (2020), in Chile, "food advertising is prohibited from featuring child-directed strategies" such as "child actors, animated characters, or toys" (p. 1).

The ban enforced by Chile has, thus, resulted in the disappearance of several anthropomorphic brand mascots such as Tony the tiger from Kellogg's cereal boxes, Quicky (rabbit character) from Nestlé's Nesquick, Chester Cheetah from Cheetos snacks and M&M's characters (Jacobs, 2018).

When asked about how the decisions to remove a brand mascot or character from a product, the Chilean ministry of health's head of nutrition, Dr. Lorena Rodriguez, when referring to anthropomorphic characters that brands use as their mascots, stated that:

> *"Sometimes it's easy, like if a dog is wearing glasses and talking like a person, but sometimes it's not"; "We fight and fight and fight until we have consensus."* (Jacobs, 2018)

This movement, which started in Chile, has made its way to different countries over the years, with Mexico (Paz F, 2023), the United Kingdom (BBC, 2020), and the Netherlands (Cockburn, 2016) all banning the use of anthropomorphic brand mascots in products aimed at children. In the UK, Lidl has removed all "cartoon characters" from its "own-brands cereals", with Caroline Cerny, Alliance lead of the Obesity Health Alliance, stating that:

> *"We know that the use of cartoon characters on sugary products is a marketing technique used by the food industry to put their unhealthy products firmly centre stage in children's minds"* (BBC, 2020)

Such instances show that anthropomorphism can sometimes cause backlash and tighten regulations in regards to marketing a brand or a product. Brands use anthropomorphic mascots in order to establish a connection with people through a character with human-like features. According to Stephen Brown (2010), "the closer the creature is to humankind, the more likely it is to be adopted as a brand mascot" (p. 217).

The question remains, however, will people cease to anthropomorphize brands if brand mascots cease to exist? The answer to this question comes soon after, stating that "brand animals may come and brand animals may go… but the urge to anthropomorphize is always with us" (Brown, 2010, p. 219).

2.4.3. When a Brand is anthropomorphized, is it judged more harshly?

According to Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips (2011), when consumers view a brand as having human qualities, they tend to attribute diverse personality traits to it and form stronger emotional bonds. This effect, driven by the positive bias associated with the ease with which consumers can detect human features (p. 123), generally results in favorable emotional responses and personality perceptions, which ultimately leads to an improved overall brand attitude (p. 124).

While anthropomorphism can generally instigate favorable or positive opinions of a brand, it is not always the case. As highlighted by Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocereto (2013) in their study “When Humanizing Brands Goes Wrong”, anthropomorphism can also lead to negative opinions and attitudes towards a brand when combined with negative publicity due to product wrongdoings (p. 85).

This is mediated by the so-called “Implicit Theory of Personality”, which seeks to explain “why people behave the way they do” (Schneider, 1973, p. 294). The theory suggests that some people hold the view that personality is composed of “fixed”, immutable traits (entity theorists), while others argue that even a person's most fundamental characteristics are “malleable” and subject to change (incremental theorists) (Preißinger & Schoen, 2018, p. 21). The experiments conducted in the study by Puzakova et al. (2013) have shown that entity theorists are more likely to apply a harsher judgement on an anthropomorphized brand than they would a nonanthropomorphized one, while incremental theorists tend to maintain the same stance about the brand (p. 90).

The entity theorists’ view can be explained by the notion that when a brand is anthropomorphized, consumers apply “human-like mental states” to it, which, in turn, causes them to rely on their existing social world beliefs when judging the brand (Puzakova et al., 2013, p. 85).

It is also further argued that an anthropomorphized brand is viewed as “intentional and mindful”, which leads people to attribute “greater responsibility” for its actions (Puzakova et al., 2013, p. 90).

On the other hand, the incremental theorists’ view is due to the fact that they focus more on “reform” or “rehabilitation” rather than “retribution”, thus, they give more weight to contextual details because they view traits as changeable and unreliable for making accurate judgments (Dweck & Molden, 2008, pp. 51-52; Puzakova et al., 2013, p. 85). While entity theorists and incremental theorists may judge an action as “equally wrong, serious, or negative”, they tend to differ when it comes to judging the “moral character” of the transgressors and the “punishment” deserved (Dweck & Molden, 2008, pp. 51-52).

When exploring the role of the response strategies employed by firms, Puzakova et al. (2013) propose that strategic responses by firms can vary in their effectiveness at countering negative brand information. The experiments, in this case, focused on three firm responses, namely “denial, apology, and compensation”. Their results show that entity theorists display less favorable attitudes and lower purchase intentions than incremental theorists toward an anthropomorphized brand in the case of a denial.

In addition, entity theorists remain largely unaffected by apologies in the case of anthropomorphized brands, perceiving the anthropomorphized brand's negative performance as more stable as opposed to incremental theorists. The only response that garnered less negative effects when it comes to anthropomorphized brands was compensation due to it being considered, by entity theorists, as a commitment to change (Puzakova et al., 2013, pp. 91, 94-95).

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study covers different complex aspects related to consumer responses which can be triggered by exposure to anthropomorphism, organizational crises, and crisis communication. Exploring the manner in which people react or what gave rise to such reactions can be quite difficult to quantify. Due to the intricate nature of the cognitive processes and emotional responses associated with this study, a qualitative approach was chosen in order to try and capture the depth of consumers' interpretations and experiences.

According to Ugwu & Hyginus (2023), qualitative research examines the intrinsic nature of phenomena, including their qualities, various manifestations, the contexts in which they occur, and the perspectives from which they are observed (p. 20). As this study aims to provide a glimpse into people's reactions and responses, a qualitative approach seems best suited as it allows to "get insights into people's experiences, behavior, beliefs, attitudes and motivation" (Oranga & Matere, 2023, p. 2).

Qualitative research makes it possible to uncover the underlying processes by "describing and interpreting phenomena", with the goal of preserving the complexities that are inherent in human behavior as well as "rich meaning" (Agius, 2018, p. 204; Ugwu & Hyginus, 2023, p.20). Furthermore, according to Steven J. Agius (2018), when seeking to understand the reasons or motivations that are fueling human behavior, the impact of events on people, how cultures developed to become what they are, how human attitudes and opinions are shaped, researchers might find qualitative methods particularly useful (p. 204).

A phenomenological research design was selected in order to explore the impact of the phenomenon from the point of view of consumers. As stated by Oranga & Matere (2023), a phenomenological approach seeks to understand experiences from the participants' own perspectives. It delves into the "lived experiences" of individuals to explore the reasons and methods behind their behavior as they perceive it. Essentially, in phenomenological research, the participants' lived experiences constitute the fundamental source of value and meaning (p. 4). In keeping with the aim of this study, a phenomenological approach would allow to capture the “essence or common themes” in people’s experiences (Padgett, 2012, p. 41).

An interpretivist research paradigm is appropriate for this thesis study as it is based on the assumption that human behavior cannot be examined in the same way as physical phenomena (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2019, p. 41). Interpretivism focuses on understanding in-depth, context-specific variables and factors, viewing human beings as distinct from physical phenomena because they generate “further depth in meaning” (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2019, p. 41).

Taking into account the fact that the current research study strives to understand human responses and behaviors within a particular setting or context, interpretivism emerges as an ideal paradigm to achieve that, since it centers on developing an empathetic understanding of an individual's emotions and the personal meaning they assign to daily life, ultimately aiming to deepen our insight into their behavior (Pulla & Carter, 2018, p. 11).

3.2. Data Collection Methods

When seeking to collect information from key informants who possess “personal experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs” pertinent to the topic at hand, semi-structured interviews present the ideal format (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019, p. 2).

For this study, semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method as they allow the researcher to acquire “qualitative, open-ended data”, investigate “participants' thoughts, emotions, and beliefs” regarding a specific subject, and explore personal, and occasionally sensitive, issues in depth (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019, pp. 2-3). Although generally guided by a structure of themes or topics, the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews leaves room for questions that may arise during the discussion (Mashuri, Sarib, Rasak, Alhabsyi, & Ruslin, 2022, p. 24).

The interviews were conducted face-to-face and virtually through Zoom in order to adapt to participants in different geographic locations. The length of the interviews varied between 18 minutes and 40 minutes as different themes were explored during each interview and some interviewees shared more details than others. With the informed consent of the interviewees, all the interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim to allow for the coding and analysis of the gathered data.

The participants were mostly university students between the ages of 21 and 26 years old, with the exception of a working professional aged 43 years old. They hailed from different backgrounds, cultures, and countries, namely France, Italy, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Morocco, and Nigeria. The study included 8 participants, 5 males and 3 females. The participants will subsequently be referred to as participant 1 to 8 according to the sequence in which the interviews were conducted.

Each participant was given as much time as possible to think and answer every question asked and, in some cases, a few questions were skipped as some of the participants could not recall examples of brands they trust or provide a relevant answer. The interviews were conducted in a way that fosters a friendly conversation ambience where participants could share their thoughts and opinions completely free of any judgement.

The interview included general questions to start with, where participants talked about brands they trust and the reasoning behind that trust. After each question, we delved deeper and deeper into the subject at hand.

The concepts of anthropomorphism and brand anthropomorphism were explained to each of the participants with simple enough definitions and examples while making sure that they have understood the general idea behind each concept. In fact, most of the participants knew the concepts but did not really know the words used to refer to them in research or general academic contexts.

After a progressively developing line of questioning, participants were presented with a fictional brand called “Everfrost” that operates in sustainable fashion. The brand itself used anthropomorphic language in describing its operations and values. It also included an anthropomorphic character (mascot) called “Frosty the penguin”, which is essentially an animated penguin wearing a knitted sweater made of recycled materials. This serves as a way for the brand to demonstrate its commitment to sustainability and ethical labor. Along with information about the brand, there were pictures of men, women, and children of different ethnicities proudly wearing Everfrost’s products in order to show the diverse and inclusive nature of the brand. (See Exhibit. 1, Appendix 1)

The choice for a fictional brand instead of a real one was not one taken lightly. The reasoning behind it is that, by talking to several people in the context of regular daily conversations, it was clear that many of them do not like to offer their opinions or share their true thoughts when a brand they like is involved in a scandal or an ethical crisis in fear of judgement as some people may still choose to support or purchase a brand they like even if it was deemed unethical. Presenting the participants with a fictional brand offered them the chance to reveal their true thoughts and opinions untainted by any prior relationships or history they may have with a brand.

The idea behind choosing a brand that operates in the fashion industry instead of other industries is to relate to the general public. Everyone buys clothes from various brands, albeit for different reasons. Choosing a different industry may have resulted in some of the participants not really consuming such products or using such services. Selecting a clothing brand meant that all participants would essentially be consumers of such products.

After having enough time to process the information and get to know the brand and what it stands for, participants were informed of a recent scandal involving Everfrost, where one of their supplier factories in south Asia was exposed for severe worker exploitation with key findings including unsafe working conditions and child labor concerns. Participants were also informed of the consequences of such news in the case of Everfrost. Examples include trending hashtags, retailers and brand ambassadors cutting ties with the brand as well as sustainability advocates condemning their actions. This served to demonstrate the severity of the crisis.

Afterwards, the participants were first presented with an apology in the form of a statement from the CEO of Everfrost. This apology used a traditional corporate tone without any components that would suggest an anthropomorphic approach (Exhibit. A, Appendix 1). Then, another apology which conveys the thoughts of the brand mascot was presented to the participants. This included the use of an informal tone and anthropomorphic language along with a depiction of the brand mascot, Frosty, crying and without its signature knitted sweater. The latter served to signify the level of distress experienced by the brand amid the revelations as well as a way to connect with consumers on a deeper, affective level. (Exhibit. B, Appendix 1)

The interviewees were later asked questions pertaining to each of the exhibits presented as well as more in-depth questions in regard to their personal preferences and the thinking or logic behind each one.

The following table demonstrate the order of participants, their education level, profession, the interview duration and language used.

Table 1. Interview Participants

	Education	Profession	Interview Duration	Interview Language
Participant 1	Master	Student	25 minutes	English
Participant 2	Bachelor	Student/Part-time employee	40 minutes	English
Participant 3	Master	Student	26 minutes	English
Participant 4	Master	Student/Part-time employee	18 minutes	English
Participant 5	Master	Student	23 minutes	English
Participant 6	Master	Working Professional	21 minutes	English
Participant 7	Master	Student/Part-time employee	28 minutes	English
Participant 8	Bachelor	Student/ Part-time employee	36 minutes	English

3.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis phase was conducted using two qualitative research methods. First, a thematic analysis was done in order to identify the common themes emerging from the responses of the interviewees. The data was transcribed mostly by hand with the exception of a few instances resorting to online resources to assist with converting a part of the audio to text and editing it afterwards to make sure that there are no inaccuracies. The interview data was transcribed directly into Word documents while taking notes along the way of any themes that may have been missed during the interviews in a separate document.

Then, using an inductive approach, the most recurring themes were identified and highlighted in order to make the analysis of the data easier. The highlighted themes constituted the codes by which the data was categorized. Through the thematic analysis method, it was also possible to pinpoint feelings and behavioral patterns shared by the interviewees.

Second, a comparative analysis was conducted in order to compare the responses of the participants when exposed to different scenarios. This was particularly helpful in exploring how different demographics and cultures could potentially influence the emotions and behavioral patterns of the participants. Finally, the collected data was paralleled to the reviewed literature and conclusions were drawn.

When conducting the interviews, notes were taken of any feelings, body language, and reactions experienced by the participants. As a result, some recurring themes were identified while still in the interview process. Moreover, by transcribing the interviews by hand, it was possible to make the analysis of the data easier as one gets to hear and write what was said, essentially reliving the interviews.

While the process by which the data was analyzed may be considered a bit unconventional, the relatively limited size of the data made it possible to conduct the analysis in such a way. Once recurring themes were identified, each one was linked to the corresponding quotes and then linked to the corresponding literature if available.

4. Findings

The findings associated with this study provide an outlook of the ways in which brand anthropomorphism is perceived by consumers by way of crisis communication. In other words, this section represents the insights drawn from the collective reactions, feelings, and opinions of select consumers when exposed to human-like characteristics and features embedded in brands within the context of crisis communication strategies. Overall, three main themes have emerged throughout each interview to comprise the following sections.

4.1. Transparency, responsibility, and taking action as precursors to consumer forgiveness and trust during crises:

When it comes to trusting a brand, most participants have emphasized quality as the main component they look out for when choosing to purchase a brand's products repeatedly. Some spoke about how a certain brand's products fit them perfectly, others stressed the longevity or durability of the products. For instance, participant 7, contrastingly, also pointed out design, appeal, and user-friendliness as antecedents of trust. However, within the context of crisis communication, transparency emerged as the most critical component for most participants, when choosing to trust a brand again.

Participant 1, surprisingly, indicated transparency as the main reason they trust a certain brand. They emphasized how the said brand was transparent in the way it produces its products. Taking the customer through the different development stages of a brand's products seemed to be a crucial step in establishing trust, according to participant 1. It was also mentioned that the reason for the trust was because "*they (the brand) try to be transparent in almost all points for the sustainable (sustainability) and how they develop also the product*". In accord with this view, claiming to be sustainable is not enough, it should come with a transparent process demonstrating all the steps taken in order for the products or the brand to be deemed sustainable.

Within the same vein, the sustainability aspect seemed to fit with participant 5's view as well, as they stated: "*I care about sustainability and I know those brands are into sustainability and actually do take action and take responsibility for their actions. And they have set goals or plans for sustainability that actually work*." This view also indicated responsibility and taking action as component of building trust when it comes to brands claiming to be sustainable.

Participant 2 highlighted a brand related to their passion, which is football. The comfort and fit of the football shoes were regarded as the top reasons for trusting the brand. The participant also added that "*it's really a practical reason. It's not a question of design or so, it's just in terms of football that I want to perform the best and these shoes helped me to do so*." On the other hand, participant 3 seemed to regard quality and after-sales service as the most important as they explained: "*I've purchased their products multiple times. And they serve... They serve me quite well. I had it for quite a long time and they were still in a good condition and I trust them because even when I had certain problems with them, I was able to go to any (…) store and to like resolve any issues about these products or if I had any problems with storage or anything, they helped me in the store*.

Most, if not all, participants struggled to answer the "why" than they did the "what". It was relatively effortless to articulate which brands they trust. Providing a justification for that trust, however, was more difficult than the mere statement. Generally, for the remainder of the participants, quality looked to be an integral element that participants resorted to when justifying the trust placed in a particular brand.

Within the framework of crisis communication, quality of the products and every other component associated with the brand seemed to disappear from view. The focus shifted entirely to one aspect that constituted a starting point or a building block in the reconstruction of the fortress of trust. Transparency was the most reiterated term by participants when asked about the possible regaining of trust and forgiveness of a brand after a crisis.

Participant 1 stressed the need to have a “real transparent solution” to the issue at hand. Participant 2 stated that “transparency is really important now”, referring to when brands go through crises, “transparency is now the (…) the most important key factor.” Similarly, participant 6 mentioned “a promise of transparency” as a way to regain consumer trust after a crisis. Brands should be “transparent about the fact that something happened and not to find excuses or try to reduce the problem” and “I would need transparency in the process of course if they say they make changes”, as pointed out by participant 5. Moreover, participant 7, when providing recommendations for brands in crisis, told brands to “be transparent” and “own your mistakes”.

Whether a brand is anthropomorphized or has used anthropomorphism in their crisis communication, transparency seems to be an ever-present condition for brands trying to regain consumer trust and promote forgiveness after a crisis. Initial brand trustworthiness seems to be determined by the products themselves while restored brand trust and forgiveness are contingent on the transparency of the anthropomorphized brand producing said products.

Responsibility also constituted a requirement for the participants to forgive and potentially trust the brand again. As observed during the interviews, in the case of brands claiming to be sustainable, participants tend to require them to take full responsibility of the crisis and admit their wrongdoings in a clear and honest manner.

Participant 1 talked about how they “need a brand that recognizes what they did before and what was wrong and…just saying okay, we did wrong.” In the case of participant 2, they thought the brand taking responsibility for their actions would require “showing to the entire world that they did (…) that mistake.” Participants 4, 5, and 6 also reiterated how the brand should “take responsibility” or be “taking responsibility.” This suggests that taking responsibility for actions is considered one of the very first steps that should be taken by a brand in crisis when trying to foster forgiveness and regain consumer trust.

Responsibility seemed to be especially important in the case of brands claiming to be sustainable. When sharing the brand “Everfrost” with each one of the participants, one could clearly notice how they liked what the brand stands for and its commitment to sustainability and caring for their workers and consumers alike. But at the same time, it was obvious that the participants were anticipating this looming cloud of deceit hovering nearby.

After finding out about the scandal that the brand was involved in, all the participants had a look that signified an absence of shock. The latter was to be expected due to the prevalence of “Greenwashing” scandals in this time and age. Participant 1 expressed their displeasure by stating: “I was really, really disappointed, because for me it was greenwashing.” Furthermore, participant 4 shared a similar opinion where they explained: “I think I wouldn't support them anymore after that just because I think it's greenwashing at this point.” This shows that higher expectations are associated with brands claiming to be sustainable.

Another aspect that also comes into play is the fact that brands should take concrete actions that can be clearly seen and understood in the context of the brand making changes and amends to repair the trust afforded to them by the consumers. Actions may seem like a broad term to describe the steps to take when managing a crisis effectively, but for most participants it consisted of an apology, compensation, a detailed process of changes to be made within the organization, and some proposed solutions to the problem at hand.

Participant 1 thought that companies should “provide a real solution for a real problem” and say: “I recognize I did wrong, but now my solutions are this and my results are this” instead of putting out a “big report”. Moreover, participant 2 explained that they “would like to be sure that they [the brand] have changed something about it and that they communicated it somehow.”

Furthermore, participant 3 also mentioned that they do not just want words like “we would change it” but they need to “see the action”, as they believe brands should communicate “what they are doing” and “how they changed what they are doing” with customers. Participant 4 thought that brands have to “maybe tell a little bit more about actions that they are going to take.” Participant 5 added that they “would need to see these big changes and these actions that they [the brand] are saying they are making.” Similarly, participant 6 expects brands to “showcase the actions that they are taking towards fixing the problem or at least some tangible measures to gain the trust.” On the other hand, participant 8 believed that brands need to “put a discount on the prices first, and then let people know they improved certain parts.”

Transparency, responsibility, and taking action all emerge as prerequisites for consumer trust and forgiveness in a time of crisis. Based on the data gathered, all of these aspects constitute steps that every brand needs to take in order to potentially acquire consumer forgiveness and regain the trust lost. The fact that a brand is anthropomorphized or employs anthropomorphism in its marketing or crisis communication strategies seems to have no influence when it comes to these three components, as they are ought to exist whenever a brand is trying to manage a crisis and make amends.

One might think that because anthropomorphized brands are seen as human or human-like, consumers might be more prone to let them skip certain steps by virtue of the human connection that was or is being built. However, that was not the case as participants have made the same, if not more, demands in regard to earning their forgiveness and trust. This view is consistent with the findings of Puzakova et al. (2013) which states that while humanizing a brand can increase consumers’ attachment and familiarity with it, which can also lead them to perceive the brand’s negative actions as more deliberate (p. 85). Perceiving a brand’s actions as intentional could potentially make forgiveness and rebuilding of trust much more difficult and demanding in terms of the different steps to be taken and conditions required by consumers.

4.2. Anthropomorphic Crisis Communication: Striking a Balance between Rationality and Emotion

When exposed to two different styles of apologies made by a brand as a means to react to a crisis, express their concern, and explain their wrongdoings, participants seemed to be divided in terms of their preferences or what appeals more to their mindset or nature. The differences observed did not only concern the anthropomorphic apology, but also the traditional non-anthropomorphic corporate apology.

As mentioned previously, the traditional apology consisted of a statement by the CEO of the "Everfrost" sustainable fashion brand. This was written in a formal tone addressing the issue by speaking in the name of the company without any anthropomorphic elements. The signature of the CEO was added below the statement in order to add elements of credibility, authenticity, and reliability. This apology was designed to appeal to the rational side of consumers and get them to use their logic and reason.

The anthropomorphic apology, on the other hand, had a more relaxed, informal tone and it was written from the point of view of the brand's anthropomorphic mascot "Frosty the Penguin". It included emotive verbs that served as a way to establish a "human" connection and appeal to the emotional side of consumers. With the mascot depicted as crying, this apology served not only to invoke the auditory part of the brain, but the visual part as well. Combining all these elements ensured a comprehensive exposure to brand anthropomorphism in crisis communication.

The data gathered included answers to the interview questions as well as notes taken during the interview of the reactions observed when each one of the exhibits was shown. While each participant was reading or hearing about the brand and the crisis it was involved in, distinct inescapable impulses of surprise, disgust, contempt, happiness, and uncertainty could be seen on their faces.

As the interviews came to an end, two patterns were observed whereby the participants experienced each component they were exposed to, through a rational mind and through an emotional mind.

4.2.1. The Rational Mind

As observed, the mental processes of a rational mind tend to be quite solution-oriented and results-oriented when dealing with the failings of a brand. There was no room left for emotions or feelings, they were irrelevant. Facts were the only thing that mattered at that moment. And while participants in this category were able to experience and appreciate brand anthropomorphism just like everyone else, its use in crisis communication seemed to have no bearing on them, if not to serve as a gateway to a more severe judgement.

When first finding out about the scandal that the brand was involved in, participant 1 displayed a look characterized by the absence of surprise. It appeared as if they do not usually build attachment to brands quickly and expect anything from them. A smirk here, a smile there, signifying the participant's amusement at the expectation that brands would act in any way other than unethically. Once exposed to both apologies and asked about their opinion, participant 1 was adamant about the need for a real solution as they stated:

> *"I think, with this type of problems, you need to…talk like some real people who provide a real solution for a real problem. I don't know what the mascot can do in this aspect. So okay, it's good for the communication. Maybe some people care a little bit more when it's the…when it's Frosty talking, but for me at this time, they need to…provide some real solution with some real people."*

When asked about their preferences in terms of the two apologies and which one appealed more to their way of thinking, participant 1 chose the first one (Exhibit. A) claiming that it is "real people" apologizing to you.

However, in terms of trust and forgiveness, participant 1 was more demanding and was not satisfied with an apology and a promise to do better. Instead they asserted:

> *"In the case they provide some real solution and be like, okay, we recognize we did this, this, and this and our solutions for those problems are this, this, and this. Okay, maybe I can understand and…and I will wait to have some real results about this solution. And when the results are good for me and I think it's real and we have some proof that they didn't contract another supplier who is even worse than the previous one. Okay, maybe at this point."*

Gaining the trust and forgiveness of participant 1 involves not only providing real solutions, but also real results that can be observed, measured, and eventually determined to be good enough or not. They also stated that they did not "really care if it's human or corporate style" as long as the brand is providing a concrete solution to the issue faced.

Likewise, participant 3 had a similar experience in some aspects and a different one in others. When first getting to know the brand "Everfrost", they appeared to be quite happy about it and even found the mascot and the outfits "cute" as they expressed their affinity towards it. However, the feelings associated with the exposure to brand anthropomorphism would soon disappear once they have read about the crisis at hand. A look of disgust and contempt was visible on their face, signifying their displeasure with the situation.

After being shown the two apologies issued by Everfrost and asked about their opinion and preferences, participant 3 reacted by stating:

> *"I don't like this really. Maybe I have an opposite view of what others would say, but for me it's just like using some mascot of your company, using some cute animal that is saying that it is sorry for the company. I would rather see the CEO take full responsibility of what happened than to see just some stuffed animal that is a mascot of the firm's products."*

Participant 3 seemed to also prefer the CEO statement over the anthropomorphic apology issued by the brand from the point of view of their mascot. They found that the use

of the mascot signifies an attempt from the company to free itself from the burden associated with the crisis instead of taking full responsibility of its actions. When asked to explain their view further and possibly justify their beliefs in regard to the apologies issued by the brand, participant 3 added:

> *"I would say that the more sincere is the first one, to be honest, because I still feel like they're trying to… I would rather see the responsibility taken by the person that is on a high position in a company and not from a mascot that is just superficially saying, because this is like too much focus on emotions, it's like the penguin that is apologizing for the workforces, for the lower wages, for the bad working conditions, for the child labor or something like that. But I like the concept of having the mascot of the company but not in a certain way when they are facing a critical situation like this."*

Simply put, participant 3 appreciates the presence of an anthropomorphic mascot and brand anthropomorphism in a brand's marketing efforts, however, they do not approve of its use in crisis communication or in situations that are deemed serious and involving critical issues. For them, it is better to have a person from the company take the responsibility and address consumers directly without much focus on the emotional aspect, but possibly more on the rational one.

When further asked what it would take for them to support the brand once more, thus gaining their trust and forgiveness, participant 3 mentioned:

> *"If they would change their stance and they would really truly change their practice in a way that would change their thoughts on it, if there is a way to change the policy of the company (…) if it is these efforts in action, then I would purchase the product."*

In the same way as participant 1, participant 3 also requires actual solutions and results that they can evaluate and observe before making a rational decision on whether to support said brand or not. Words and promises do not carry any weight in the case of participant 3 as they believe in being transparent and honest with your approach without trying to evoke any emotions or human connections in the process

In a similar vein, participant 6 had a neutral yet slightly displeased look when first hearing about the Everfrost scandal. The participant's reaction did not improve after viewing both apologies, it only worsened. Their reaction evolved to one of contempt and outrage demonstrated by their prolonged silence after being asked about their opinions and thoughts when it comes to the crisis and the brand's reactions to it. Participant 6 had this to say when comparing the apologies:

> *"Not good enough. And what's like, what's different from the other apology? It's sort of the same. But the other one at least has an official statement, as in we are launching an investigation. With this one, it feels more like dodging the subject."*

Participant 6 was not pleased with the anthropomorphic apology as they perceived it as more of an attempt to avoid the issue and deflect the responsibility. They also seemed to have a preference for the CEO statement as it was regarded as more official and straight to the point. Furthermore, when asked what sorts of factors would influence their decision to forgive and trust the brand again, participant 6 explained:

> *"Maybe if I see some tangible actions. First of all, taking responsibility, saying that we did this, we did this. And then an official statement from, the main guy or the CEO or somebody, instead of a mascot. And seeing actions, and they should report the actions."*

Just like participants 1 and 3, participant 6 also demanded that someone representing the brand takes responsibility instead of their mascot. The brand would also need to provide clear actions or solutions that can be observed and ultimately report on their progress or status to their consumers. Participant 6 added that the brand should potentially:

> *"Use social media or any outlet to showcase the actions that they are taking towards fixing the problem. Or at least some tangible measures to gain the trust. Because it's going to take time. But for that, you need to see some actions as a customer."*

Participants 1, 3, and 6 seemed to share the same thought process, a rational one. This approach essentially abolishes the employment of feelings and emotions or any anthropomorphic tactics by brands towards their customers during a crisis. Instead, it is believed that anthropomorphic elements should remain within the confines of marketing and sales, where they are perceived to have the most value.

These participants also appeared to apply a harsher judgement on anthropomorphized brands as they viewed them as being deceitful in using the mascot and emotive verbs to try to avoid or deflect responsibility. This view is in line with Puzakova et al.'s study (2013) about the role of implicit theory of personality in the perception of anthropomorphism, as it states that entity theorists (individuals who see personality as fixed) tend to judge anthropomorphized brands more harshly than non-anthropomorphized brands (p. 90). This is generally explained by the idea that people have a tendency to project their views of the social world onto anthropomorphized brands when judging their actions (p. 85).

Participants with a rational mind could, in this case, be considered entity theorists as they view human characteristics as fixed, and thus, when seeing anthropomorphized as human, they project their beliefs onto them. Moreover, they tend to require concrete evidence and confirmation of changes made by an anthropomorphized brand after a crisis, as they may not believe the brand to be capable of change just like they would not believe a human is capable of change.

Providing the said evidence and confirmation may serve to appease individuals with a rational mind; however, they may never be content enough to allow anthropomorphized brands to fully regain their trust and earn their forgiveness after a crisis. This was evidenced by their careful use, when answering, of words such as "maybe" or expressions such as "it's going to take time". This was also discernible in their body language when expressing their thoughts, with participants 1 and 6 crossing their arms and leaning away signaling uncertainty, participants 1, 3, and 6 touching their faces and glimpsing sideways from the corner of their eyes signaling doubt and mistrust.

4.2.2. The Emotional Mind

Unlike a rational mind, an emotional mind, as observed, tends to be geared towards emotions and interpreting the world around it in terms of feelings, moods, and senses. Experiencing brand anthropomorphism in crisis communication seemed to trigger various reactions and feelings in participants with an emotional mind. Participants in this category gave the impression that they care more about the impact of a crisis on them and consumers in general, and how the brand is working to remedy the issue so that their thoughts are once again in line with their feelings about a particular brand.

During the interviews conducted, participants 2, 4, 7, and 8 all demonstrated signs of an emotional mind, some more than others, unquestionably. When first introduced to the anthropomorphized brand “Everfrost”, there were clear signs of cheerfulness observed, with participants’ eyes opening up and smiling while reading about the brand and getting to know their mascot “Frosty”. In addition, they described the brand and the mascot by employing words that are usually used to describe humans such as “nice”, “cute”, and “funny”, and “little baby”. It was apparent that the anthropomorphized nature of the brand appealed more to this category of participants and encouraged attachment to the brand much faster than the traditional corporate image.

When finding out about the scandal Everfrost was involved in, participants 2, 4, 7, and 8 had a glaring look of disappointment. Some were more sensitive to certain findings than others as they uttered sounds and noises of surprise and distaste. Facial expressions were also quite appreciable with hints of anger and disgust. Body language, on the other hand, seemed to be quite neutral and in disconnect with the facial expressions observed and the sounds made by participants. This disconnect could, indeed, have been a consequence of the interview setting or personal beliefs associated with the industry where the brand operates. It could also have been the result of dubious reactions to an unfamiliar sequence of events involving the anthropomorphized brand.

After having been exposed to the apologies made by Everfrost and asked about their preferences and which one they connect with more, participant 2, talking about the anthropomorphic apology, explained:

> *"It's more empathetic. Yeah. So, um, yeah, I also felt a little sad when reading this. With this image, I was, I was really, like, a little touched by it. So, yeah, it was cuter and I felt like more like, oh this kind of little baby, the poor one…"*

Participant 2 also added:

> *"This kind of apology letter here from Frosty is somehow a better option than the previous one from the CEO, at least from my point of view, because it's not these default phrases they utilize here, it's more personally written. And therefore, I think to maintain the consumer relationship, it's really important to rely on this individualized and personalized tunnels to the consumers and perceive them as human beings and not as consumers. Secondly, I can highlight this all the time. Transparency is really important now so that they do not have to state that they are going to do something better, but that they also show it and can prove it to the customers. And therefore, I think, they have at least the possibility or the right to get some consumers back, that they lost in the past, maybe."*

It was clear from the answers of participant 2 that the anthropomorphic apology appealed more to them. They felt as though the brand was apologizing to them personally and that the mascot crying was the equivalent of a baby. This signifies that there was indeed a human or human-like connection that occurred when participant 2 was exposed to an anthropomorphic mascot apologizing on behalf of the brand. Additionally, the participant felt that it was essential for brands to communicate with customers as human beings than consumers.

Transparency and actions, as mentioned in the previous sections, are important. However, participant 2 believed that these two components not only could encourage trust and forgiveness, but entitled the brand to regain the trust of consumers. A heartfelt apology from the brand mascot speaking in human terms seemed to allow some leeway in terms of the pressure and expectations brands can face during and after a crisis.

Participant 4 was not as vocal when expressing their thoughts but mentioned that they believed that the anthropomorphic apology felt more sincere as *"it explains a little bit more about the reasoning and (…) the values of the company or at least tries to explain."* They also added:

> *"I think it feels more authentic even if they wouldn't, you know, really mean it but if they communicate it that way, it feels more authentic"*

In this case, the degree of authenticity of the apology was judged based on how anthropomorphic or human it is. The more human or human-like it is, the more it was perceived as authentic. This could stem from a subconscious tendency to perceive anything that exudes human characteristics or features as real or authentic. From the standpoint of an emotional mind, authenticity could play a significant role in discerning what to believe and what not to believe. It can also determine the way one might feel about a particular aspect or subject.

Participant 7, when asked about their preference in terms of apologies presented as well as a justification for their choice, said in reference to the anthropomorphic apology:

> *"This one, I like. I mean, I think that it is just more personal, like, towards me. Because, it talks from the mascot's point of view, rather than just a generic: hey, we are sorry. (…) More personal ways are a better way to apologize."*

In this case, participant 7 felt directly spoken to by the brand as a result of the anthropomorphic apology. The human aspect contained in the apology seemed to resonate more with participant 7 as they believed it to be a better way to apologize.

When asked what would the brand have to do to gain their trust and forgiveness, participant 7 added:

> *"Well, the apology is a good start. And then I think you just have to do those things that you actually promised to do. It is clear that you won't win the trust back right away. But if you just do it for a long time, then maybe at some point people could forget the situation and you could gain their trust back. But I don't know if there's, like, any one way on how to gain trust back. I think, in general, it's very hard to gain trust back if you lose it once."*

As evidenced by their answer, participant 7 thought that the brand would have to do a lot in order to gain back the trust of their customers starting with the apology and following with keeping the promises made to repair the damage inflicted.

Additionally, participant 8 also felt an emotional connection to the anthropomorphic apology stating:

> *"I think I feel like this apology is closer to the customers, yeah, that's how I felt. It's more personal. I feel like this one is more communicated properly, like, when you're closer to people, and you want people to feel that you actually felt the same way. This is the kind of text you put out there. The other one looks like a general text anyone can just draft and say."*

They also added:

> *"Yeah, I think with this second apology, I said, I can, I can trust the product again."*

In the case of participant 8, it was apparent that the anthropomorphic apology had an effect on them as they believed it to be more personal and closer to people. They also felt that the style of writing used in the apology conveys feelings and emotions well enough to seem empathetic. Moreover, the participant thought that the traditional corporate apology was devoid of any feelings or warmth towards the customers.

As for the steps needed for a brand to regain consumer trust and possibly earn forgiveness, participant 8, surprisingly, thought that a discount on their products would be the best way to tackle this issue along with an apology and a list of changes to be made in order to improve the products as well as the way the company operates.

Anthropomorphism, from the point of view of participant 8, served as a way to convey feelings of distress about their actions as well as concern for the wellness of their customers and employees. The participant was ultimately able to understand and feel what the brand was expressing.

The pattern observed in the responses of participants with an emotional mind suggests that they may be incremental theorists according to the Puzakova et al.'s study (2013, p. 90) about the role of implicit theory of personality in the perception of anthropomorphism. Puzakova (2013) states that incremental theorists tend to believe that personality is not fixed, but is rather prone to change (p. 90).

Thus, when applying a judgement to anthropomorphized brands, which are deemed as human, incremental theorists may see the brand's actions as nothing more than a bump in the road that does not reflect the true character of the brand, but more like something that can be changed and overcome. Individuals with an emotional mind could, therefore, be considered incremental theorists as they could actually feel and process the emotions and struggles that the anthropomorphized brand was attempting to convey.

4.2.3. The Balanced Mind

In contrast to previously mentioned participants, participant 5 stood out as possessing a balanced mind that sought to combine the best of both worlds. While they experienced brand anthropomorphism in similar ways to other participants, the crisis context brought about a mixed way of thinking that strived to make sense of the experience and possibly offer an ideal compromise.

When asked about the ease involved in connecting with a brand that communicates like a person, participant 5 explained:

> *"Yeah, I think so. I think if you find the specific kind of consumers you are willing to talk to, and you understand what they do, and what's their kind of life, I think if you manage to get on the same level from a communicative point of view, I think it's way easier to attract (…). And I think it works. I mean, to me it works."*

In terms of brand anthropomorphism, participant 5 thought that it makes it easier to connect with and attract consumers as long as the right consumers are found. This implies that a brand needs to tailor its communication based on its consumer base, and potentially choose when and where to employ anthropomorphism in its communication efforts.

When exposed to the crisis Everfrost was involved in, the body language of participant 5 suggested a neutral yet slightly uncertain stance. This involved a neutral facial expression combined with momentary face touching suggesting uncertainty and perhaps a bit of discomfort upon hearing the news.

In response to the both the anthropomorphic and the traditional corporate apologies, participant 5 expressed the following view:

> *"In this case, if I were a consumer I don't know if I'd like to see the mascot talking because I think I need also the point of view of the CEO saying words, I need somebody to take responsibility and it's not the mascot, it must be somebody, but if you put this with a CEO statement, if you put them together, I think this is this absolutely works now, this is better."*

They also added:

> *"I think the mascot alone probably to me wouldn't work, I need a person to take responsibility for this, but I think the role of the mascot if you put it together with the one of the CEO, I think it would work."*

In these statements, participant 5 explains that they believe it would be better to combine the anthropomorphic apology with the traditional corporate apology (CEO statement). In this case, the apology expressed from the point of view of the mascot would be delivered by the CEO herself. Moreover, the brand would need to use anthropomorphic communication but change the delivery vessel.

By having a CEO deliver a human statement, participant 5 feels it would add more "credibility" and a more "personal" component to the apology or statement. As for the steps needed for a brand to regain the trust and earn forgiveness of its consumers, participant 5 had a similar view to other participants, stating:

> *"I would need to see these big changes and these actions that they are saying they are making, so I would need transparency in the process, of course. If they say they made changes and then I don't see a report by them talking about that or the result of their investigations, then I would probably think that they are not actually making the effort even though maybe they made it. I think if I am already a consumer of this brand, probably I can take a break from them, then if I see the results and the results are fine then yeah I think I would probably still support the brand. I think mistakes happen."*

Participant 5 detailed the steps that the brand would need to take in order for them to prove to their consumers that they made the necessary changes. They believed that mistakes can happen and the brand can potentially overcome the crisis if some steps are taken to remedy the issue and bring about some changes.

However, the way the brand communicates these changes would need to be in the previously mentioned combined format of the CEO statement with the anthropomorphic elements of the mascot apology as they feel that "it's an easier way to get directly to the point with the consumers" since "you have to put yourself at the same level" and "you need that kind of communication" in order to get to consumers quicker.

4.3. Context Matters

In analyzing the how participants experienced and perceived anthropomorphism in crisis communication, an essential aspect came into view, namely context. It does not necessarily relate to the study itself or the setting in which the interviews were conducted. It has more to do with the type of brand being investigated, the prior relationship of the participant with the brand, and how much they care or relate to the crisis the brand was involved in.

Determining how participants react and perceive brand anthropomorphism seemed to involved these previously mentioned aspects within the umbrella of context. As the brand chosen was fictional, the prior relationship of the participant with the brand became a moot point.

However, it is worth mentioning as it came up in several instances, such as participant 2, when asked whether they would still support the brand after apologizing for the crisis and making promises to change, saying:

> *"If it would be now something like Adidas, and they would have the same issue regarding football shoes (…), then, and I would stop."*

Participant 5 also added:

> *"If I am already a consumer of this brand probably I can take a break from them."*

Similarly, participant 7 explained:

> *"If I was, like, a supporter of that brand, then it would also depend on my own personal opinions."*

These instances made it apparent that a prior relationship with an anthropomorphized brand could potentially produce different results. These results could be in a way that

consumers with a prior relationship with an anthropomorphized brand might perceive its shortcomings in a more positive/more negative light, or consumers with no prior relationship with an anthropomorphized brand perceiving it in a more positive/more negative light.

The type of brand going through the crisis can also be a factor in determining its influence on consumers during crises, as participant 2 said: "*The fact is that I'm not that much into fashion."* This statement demonstrates that the type of brand or the industry in which it operates can also be important.

Perhaps, a brand that produces products related to a hobby or something that consumers like or engage in might be perceived differently in a crisis than one in which consumers show no interest. This difference could be positive or negative depending on consumers' attachment to the product or brand. Additionally, participant 7 explained:

> *"If I would just have bought the products because they were nice looking and affordable, then maybe, yes. Then that wouldn't, like, shock me at all or, like, I wouldn't care about it. But I think it just depends so much on the personality and my own opinions."*

Another aspect that comes into play is the type of crisis that the brand has been involved in, signaling that the type of crisis might determine the level of harshness by which consumers will judge the brand. Some consumers care or relate more to certain crises than others, and that can have a direct or indirect influence on the lens by which they view the transgressions of a particular brand.

In this study, as the brand selected operates in sustainable and ethical fashion, and with sustainability becoming more and more a hot topic nowadays, some participants had harsher reactions than others to the broken promise of sustainability by the brand. Participant 1 reacted by saying:

> *"You can see it was clearly greenwashing because they work in a non-ethical way. They work with children. They also do some harassment and made intimidations. So that's not at all ethical. They don't really use some sustainable products. So yeah, it's the perfect example of greenwashing."*

Participant 4 added:

> *"I think the whole company is based on ethical and sustainability and then there's preaching that. I just think I wouldn't support them anymore after that just because I think it's green washing at this point."*

Similarly, Participant 5 said:

> *"If I were a consumer of this brand, I wouldn't care about them saying we remain dedicated to ethical and sustainable fashion, like that's the point of your brand."*

When asked how a brand can regain the trust of its consumers after a crisis, participant 3 explained:

> *"It definitely depends on the crisis, but if we are talking about this crisis within ethical practices and sustainability, then to really put efforts into the field that went wrong."*

Different aspects seemed to matter to different consumers. The fact that sustainability and ethics are in vogue presently might have played a part in the severity of the participants' reactions, opinions, and the demands made toward the brand in response to the crisis. The anthropomorphized nature of the brand in the study may have also increased the severity of its actions as the human-like nature of the brand is quite often seen as responsible when it comes to ethical matters and some participants may have held the brand's actions to a human standard as a result.

5. Conclusion

Through the contemplation of the manner in which consumers experience and perceive brand anthropomorphism in crisis communication, it is revealed that, just like with every human experience, our prior thoughts, opinions, and inclinations as well as our very nature can hold a significant weight. The process that consumers undergo when analyzing and interpreting brand anthropomorphism on its own can be quite different when the crisis element is added.

As explored in the literature review, anthropomorphism alone can trigger various subconscious mechanisms that guide the way we feel and experience the world around us. Applying the concept of anthropomorphism to brands may enable companies to build a direct human rapport with consumers, most of whom might remain unaware of its existence. The few that are, however, either fully embrace it or utterly detest it. In other words, some consumers may enjoy the feeling that a brand understands them on a deeper level and aims to fulfill their wants and needs. Others, howbeit, may regard it as a figurative invasion of their privacy as individuals and consumers.

In the quest to uncover the underlying processes that determine the effects of the use of brand anthropomorphism in crisis communication, we also learn whether it can be an effective strategy for brands aiming to regain the trust of their consumers and possibly earn their forgiveness after a crisis. Thus, how does anthropomorphism in crisis communication affect consumers' perceptions of a brand?

The answer is manifold. The use of anthropomorphism in crisis communication can indeed be helpful to brands navigating crises, but only if used correctly. As revealed in the findings, participants with a rational mind did not appreciate an apology coming from the brand's anthropomorphic mascot. They preferred a more direct approach coming straight from the person leading the company. Having an actual human, instead of a human-like entity, seemed to be of absolute importance to this category of participants.

These participants also seemed to react in a negative way to the use of anthropomorphism in crisis communication, as they deemed it non-serious and potentially deceptive. The use of the mascot, especially, was the element that irritated this category of participants. In addition, some emotive words used in the apology seemed to trigger a few negative reactions. Overall, it was clear that, in the case of consumers with a rational mind, anthropomorphism should only exist within the realms of a brand's marketing campaigns and sales efforts, since any use of it by brands outside of these confines is perceived as a transgression or an attempt to deceive the consumers.

For the participants with an emotional mind, the anthropomorphic apology from the point of view of the mascot seemed to achieve the desired outcome, which is a human or human-like connection where consumers can understand and feel the empathetic words expressed by the brand as if it was human. The anthropomorphic mascot was able to trigger certain emotions from the participants as it was perceived as a baby-like creature that can look and be sad. As a result, participants with an emotional mind were able to perceive the apology as more personal and tailored to them.

Contrastingly, only one participant with a balanced mind emerged. In this case, the traditional corporate apology and the anthropomorphic apology both seemed to have an effect on them, albeit in different ways. The participant not only appreciated the credibility contained within the traditional corporate apology (CEO statement), but the emotional component enclosed in the anthropomorphic apology. Thus, for them, it was crucial that these two elements be combined in order for the apology to be persuasive enough.

Essentially, the idea was that the human element contained in the traditional corporate apology, that is the CEO herself, and one of the human elements that comprises the mascot apology, which is the anthropomorphic message, be brought together; fundamentally, creating an actual human-to-human interaction using personal communication free of any corporate jargon.

An anthropomorphic apology, however, is not enough to get you through a crisis. Along with that, a brand should demonstrate transparency, take responsibility of its actions, and produce actions and results that could potentially remedy the situation. These measures were common to all participants as they stressed that, while the apology may be a good start, what follows may matter even more. Moreover, providing consumers with regular updates about the actions taken and their results seemed to be of utmost importance as they would like to be part of the brand's journey in overcoming the crisis

It was also revealed in the course of this study that the context behind which anthropomorphism takes place can also determine its effectiveness in crisis communication. A prior relationship with the brand, the type of brand, and whether consumers relate or care about the crisis at hand are all considerations to be taken in evaluating the efficacy of anthropomorphism in helping brands overcome crises.

Regaining consumer trust and earning their forgiveness can be quite a rocky road to navigate and can also take a long time. But for the participants interviewed, following these steps carefully can potentially persuade them to trust a brand once again and learn to forgive them in time. Anthropomorphism can, thus, be an ace up a brand's sleeve when used properly.

This study aims to provide an additional layer to the use of anthropomorphism by brands by exploring its use in crisis communication as well as its impact and influence on consumers within that specific setting. The findings contained within this study could serve to advance our knowledge of brand anthropomorphism and how people experience it in a crisis situation. Thus, it would add to the richness of the studies conducted throughout the years to further our understanding of the complex phenomenon of anthropomorphism. Within this study, there was also a particular focus on anthropomorphic language. An approach that exists and is widely used by brands, yet rarely talked about or explored. This study shines a light on a few aspects of anthropomorphic language as a way to examine anthropomorphism from a linguistic perspective.

5.1. Limitations of the study

As with every study, certain limitations arise during and after conducting the necessary research. The study relied on qualitative methods in gathering and analyzing the data which suggests that the findings may not be generalizable or applicable to the general population. Using qualitative methods was, however, beneficial in capturing the full extent of the participants' thoughts and examining their reactions.

While the interviews were conducted in an informal, relaxed setting, some participants may have held back in terms of their true opinions and feelings, and thus tried to follow what they believed to be the most common or popular opinion. While instances such as these may have been minimal to non-existent, the fact remains that they can still have an effect on the data gathered.

Eight participants were interviewed. They were all students between the ages of 21 and 26 except for one participant who is a working professional aged 43, which suggests that the results might be quite different if another age group or a one with a different profession is selected. This could also be the case if a bigger sample of participants was selected and more interviews were conducted.

Only two of the participants were originally from non-European countries, namely Morocco and Nigeria, albeit both participants reside in European countries. As opinions, thoughts, and feelings tend to change from one country to another, and from one culture to another, participants from other continents and cultures could have entirely different views which makes this study fairly limited as far as diversity is concerned.

In this study, a fictional brand was chosen as an anthropomorphized brand going through a crisis as a way to get people's reactions. Choosing a different brand or a non-fictional might also produce different results, since participants may have a prior relationship to the brand, which may influence their thoughts and opinions about the anthropomorphism contained within the brand and the crisis communication strategies.

Since part of the study's aim was to evaluate the thoughts and feelings of participants when exposed to anthropomorphism, temporal constraints can arise. The timings of the interviews can affect participants' moods, which can in turn influence their thoughts and feelings about a certain subject. As interviews were conducted at different times of the day, participants' thoughts and feelings might produce different results if interviews were conducted if timings are changed. Additionally, the fact that some interviews were conducted through Zoom, instead of in-person, could have had some implications on the perceived reactions of the participants to the exhibits shown.

5.2. Suggestions for further studies

While this study explored the way anthropomorphism is perceived by consumers within the context of crisis communication, it opens the door for studies to be conducted in order to explore brand anthropomorphism and consumers' perceptions further. Embedded in the limitations of this study are a few suggestions that could advance our understanding of this phenomenon.

An interesting approach would be to conduct a comparative cross-cultural study of brand anthropomorphism, collecting data from different countries and comparing how brand anthropomorphism is perceived by consumers in each country. A large enough sample size would be needed as well as similar ages of participants. This study could potentially help us learn more about the effects of brand anthropomorphism on consumers by adding a cultural element to the equation. Using qualitative methods to collect the data and analyze the differences between cultures would enable us to find out how cultural influence can constitute a factor in how we view and understand brand anthropomorphism.

Exploring the possible use of anthropomorphism in other areas of business, outside of marketing, sales, and crisis communication could also prove quite insightful. This could provide brands with a beneficial element to add or apply to their strategies, thus strengthening consumer-brand relationships.

Moreover, determining the role of personality traits in consumers' perception of anthropomorphism may be instrumental in tailoring communication strategies to different consumer segments. This could help further our understanding of the individual differences that decide how we think, feel, and judge anthropomorphism. Using the results of the aforementioned study, brands would be able to craft communication strategies that appeal to different segments of consumers.

Finally, tracking consumer perceptions over time during a crisis in the form of a longitudinal study can also prove beneficial in measuring whether the impact of anthropomorphism in crisis communication persists or ceases to exist in the long term. Within this study, one can also track the exact moment consumer trust and forgiveness come into play and determine which specific component of crisis management is most responsible. Overall, the data gathered and analyzed can prove useful to brands or companies in evaluating the effectiveness of anthropomorphism in crisis management in the long run.

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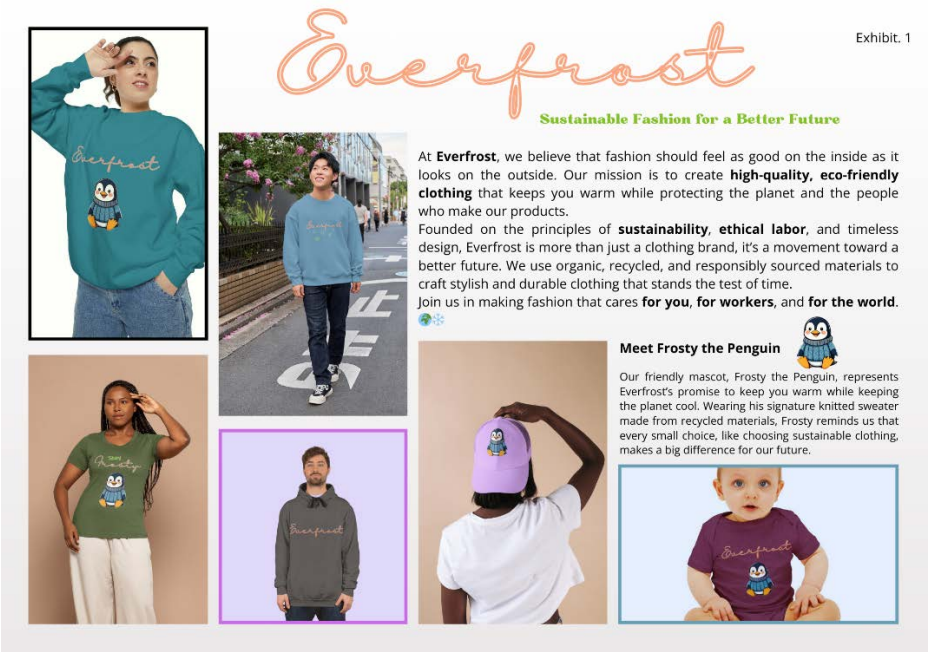
Appendices

Appendix 1. Exhibit. 1



Appendix 1. Exhibit. A

Appendix 1. Exhibit. B

Everfrost

Exhibit. B

Hey Friends,

I need to talk to you about something really important. Everfrost was built on a promise to create sustainable clothing that's kind to people and the planet. But we let you down. A factory producing our garments did not meet the ethical standards we stand for, and that's not okay.

Hearing about the tough conditions some workers faced broke my heart. No one should have to work in unfair or unsafe conditions, and we're making big changes to fix this. We're listening, learning, and making things right, because you deserve better.

Thank you for believing in us.
Together, we can make fashion truly ethical.

With warmth and honesty,

Frosty