IlLUminate Blog Transcript: Marina Puzakova on Anthropomorphism in Tourism Advertising

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ANNOUNCER: 00:01	[music] This podcast is brought to you by ilLUminate, the Lehigh Business Blog. To learn more, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news.
JACK CROFT: 00:13	Welcome. I'm Jack Croft, host of the ilLUminate podcast for Lehigh University's College of Business. Today is September 21st, 2022, and we're talking with Marina Puzakova about her research on humanizing brands, also known as anthropomorphism, in marketing and advertising for everything from destination travel to various products. Dr. Puzakova is an associate professor of marketing in Lehigh's College of Business who holds the Alison and Norman H. Axelrod '74 Summer Research Fellowship. Her research interests are in branding strategies, brand anthropomorphism, and negative brand performance. Specifically, she examines consumers attributions and brand inferences, consumer-brand relationships, and the impact of different brand positioning strategies on performance and consumer responses to marketing communications. Thanks for being with us today, Marina.
MARINA PUZAKOVA: 01:17	Jack, thank you for having me. It's always a pleasure.
CROFT: 01:20	Let's start by talking about this term anthropomorphism, and let's define it and if you could explain a little about how it relates generally to branding, marketing, and advertising, the things we'll be talking about today.
PUZAKOVA: 01:39	Absolutely. So anthropomorphism is a very exciting phenomena, and it means very simple things. Basically, it means that people are prone to attributing different humanlike traits and features to different types of nonhuman entities. Just to give you some simple examples, people can see faces in the clouds, or they could see smiling cars, or sometimes, in contrast, they can perceive a car as having an aggressive face. For example, people can talk to their pets or dogs or cats as they are living entities. So anthropomorphism also is a very popular brand communication strategy. It also enhances consumer perceptions of brands as humanlike.
PUZAKOVA: 02:27	And marketers, in general, can use a variety of different means to humanize or anthropomorphize their brand or help consumers to see their marketplace offerings in humanlike terms. For example, this humanlike brand perception could be induced by enlisting anthropomorphic brand characters and some example, very famous example, is Joe Camel or Michelin Man. Sometimes, marketers can humanize product depictions, their products, like, California Raisins are humanized, M&M's candies-- or even represent the product as exhibiting humanlike actions. One example is a [inaudible].
PUZAKOVA: 03:12	Or sometimes, even a product can adopt a first-person communication. You can see communication from a brand saying take me home or eat me. And, in general, this tactic is very popular because it creates very positive emotional connection to products. It enhances product liking. People are more prone to buy it. Some research shows that it enhances attributions of brand personality. So people can perceive a brand as more competent, as more sincere, as more exciting, and directly translate

those types of attribution-- directly translates from humanlike characters. So overall, it's a very popular brand communication tactic.

CROFT: 03:51 I'm curious, what was it that led you to focus your recent research efforts on anthropomorphism? Was there anything, in particular, you had noticed that kind of piqued your interest in this?

PUZAKOVA: 04:05 Absolutely. That's a great question. I've honestly always been fascinated by the phenomena. But just to give you a little bit of background, I went to art school, so I have an art background, and I really like this idea or phenomena that an artist's work reflects his or her personality, and it always fascinated me. So when I began my PhD program, one of the first articles that I got interested in was that consumers' choices also reflect who they are, they also reflect their personalities. And I began studying first as a brand personality and effective brand strategy. It wasn't brand anthropomorphism, yet. But extending those ideas and in combination with my interest in the concept of brand personality, I became very interested and very excited by the phenomenon of attributed mind, emotions, the core definition of anthropomorphism, right, attributed mind, emotions, conscious will to nonhuman entities. And given that marketers frequently rely on anthropomorphism as an important branding strategy, as I mentioned, for example, M&M's brand characters and at that time, very limited understanding of the phenomena. So the investigation of different aspects of humanizing brands became the sense of my research focus.

CROFT: 05:32 Now, this year, as, hopefully, the worst of the pandemic has eased at least somewhat, a new term has been introduced to the tourism lexicon: "revenge travel." I don't recall it popping up before this year. And that refers simply to people who have been cooped up, like most of us, for most of the past couple of years during the pandemic, finally taking the dream vacations they missed out on during the pandemic lockdowns and the aftermath. I do think that provides a great context to talk about the most recent study you published with three of your colleagues, which looked at the benefits and risks of what you call destination anthropomorphism and tourism. So again, what is destination anthropomorphism, specifically, and what are some examples of it in real life?

PUZAKOVA: 06:27 In fact, destination anthropomorphism is a term that my colleagues and I came up together, and we define destination anthropomorphism as attributing or endowing a destination with humanlike characteristics, intentions, emotions, so to say, mind of its own. Basically, it is making consumers or tourists think of a destination as a real human being, as alive, as having humanlike traits. And in fact, this is not a new phenomenon. Advertising practitioners often strategically rely on the tactic of imbuing tourist destination, such as vacation spots or cities or countries or hotels, with a particular persona, or communicating about the tourist destination as if it were a human. And some example, just to give you some example, to put it in perspective, Bulgaria as a country is very frequently referred to as "Mother Bulgaria" or India, or Egypt as "Mother of the World."

PUZAKOVA: 07:34 And destination advertising provides, in fact, many opportunities for marketers when a destination is anthropomorphized in the advertisement. And the general idea is to enhance its appeal to tourists. So one of the prominent examples of destination anthropomorphism that my colleagues and I discussed was the Australia's wildlife park. Australia's wildlife park created a promotion with Patrick the Wombat, that acts as an ambassador of the wildlife park, and it also became a local celebrity and

attracted even other famous celebrities beginning since 2013. So another example of that would be a Godzilla mascot that have been commonly used as a tourist ambassador to attract tourists to Tokyo. In fact, Japan is one of the countries that came up very frequently in my discussion with my colleagues. Japanese region of Kumamoto Prefecture has used the anthropomorphized mascot, Kumamon, beginning in 2010, to successfully promote tourists to this region. So we can see this is a very frequent communication tactic, and as I already mentioned, it's called destination anthropomorphism.

CROFT: 08:57   What were the main questions that you and your colleagues were looking to answer in undertaking this study?

PUZAKOVA: 09:04   So we were looking at what kind of downstream outcomes destination anthropomorphism has in the marketplace. And our initial discussion began with the idea that given positive aspects of anthropomorphism, we would expect to find that destination anthropomorphism increases, in fact, tourists' desire to visit that destination. This was our initial point. This is where we began our research journey.

CROFT: 09:37   Now the study that you embarked on with your colleagues included hypothetical examples of destination anthropomorphism for participants in the study to react to. So if you could talk a little about the destinations you chose and why they were included, because they were included for very specific reasons to get at different questions you were looking at.

PUZAKOVA: 10:02   Excellent question, Jack. So we started, in fact, multiple destinations in our research. So we looked at different destinations in Japan, we looked at Tokyo, we looked at Inazawa, Japan, we looked at Hanoi, Vietnam, we looked at London, England, Sydney, Australia, and some of the local destinations such as Seward, Alaska in the United States. So we were trying to utilize a variety of different destinations because as-- I can talk a little bit later about it. We were trying to cover an entire range of different destinations that are close in terms of cultural distance and are further away from cultural distance, some familiar destinations, less familiar destinations, destinations from foreign cultures, destinations from local cultures. I mentioned we looked at, also, Alaska as a destination. So that was our main reasoning.

CROFT: 11:06   And how did you show participants these different destinations? It seemed that there were two different kinds of images and accompanying text, which was very important, of course, to kind of differentiate between the two approaches.

PUZAKOVA: 11:27   We, as a team, as a research team, created a variety of different advertisements with the images, the most popular images within those specific tourist destinations. And we separated our treatment groups into one that saw anthropomorphized communication and the other group that didn't see anthropomorphized communication. There are different ways to induce anthropomorphism or perception of humanization in advertising communication. But one of the most frequently utilized methods of doing that is to include humanized character in communication.

PUZAKOVA: 12:08   So similar to branding humanization, branding examples or advertisement examples, we also included a humanized character. For example, it was a humanized-- most of our communication included humanized person, especially on set of our studies when we started Japan, Tokyo, Inazawa, Hanoi, London and England, Sydney, Australia. But later on, we also wanted to control for the similarity in images. So we also control how nationally symbolic the humanized character looks like. And we include in just a

reference to [inaudible] a similarity to a human being without providing specific culturally similar humanized character.

CROFT: 13:01 | And looking at the-- obviously, we're doing this by audio-only, so we can't show the slides, but I can probably include those in this when we put the podcast online, one of them has the text, "I am the city of Osaka, Japan," and there's a character with that. "Come visit and explore my heritage." So that's what you're talking about in terms of the anthropomorphizing or humanizing the city for readers.

PUZAKOVA: 13:37 | That is correct. So we were trying to include the-- or really facilitate consumer perception of a brand as humanlike or destination, branded destination, as humanlike. And as I already mentioned, one way to do that is to include a humanized character, but to really facilitate perception of the destination as a humanlike, we also included what we call a first-person communication. So the destination comes alive by appealing to consumers, by really talking to a consumer, which is again a very popular communication tactic that is utilized across a variety of different academic articles and in the real world examples, talking to a customer or a tourist, in this particular case from the first-person language.

CROFT: 14:26 | And then just to follow up on that, the same image from Osaka, Japan also had another treatment with-- I guess it would be third-person text communication. "This is the city of Osaka, Japan. Come visit and explore the city's heritage." So the only difference really is "I am" and "my heritage" between those two. So as we talk about the main findings now, those were the things that people were reacting to. And I'm curious, how did they react to those two different treatments that they were exposed to?

PUZAKOVA: 15:06 | It's actually very interesting because I'd like to mention what we expected when we began this research, when we posed this research question. So at the beginning, as I already mentioned, we expected to find that destination anthropomorphism would in fact enhance tourist desires to visit the destination. But our findings were really fascinating, and I would say even quite surprising. We found that anthropomorphizing destination from the same culture-- and the example of that would be visiting a city in Alaska, United States, right? And we studied participants in the United States.

PUZAKOVA: 15:47 | So anthropomorphizing destination from the same culture would increase people's desire to visit destination, we found that. That part was very consistent with our expectations. But what really surprised us and then where we put most of our thinking in trying to explain the findings, anthropomorphizing a culturally distant tourist destination such as those that I mentioned, Japan or Vietnam, leads to in fact lower consumers' or tourists' intention to travel to that destination. And this negative destination anthropomorphism effect disappears for destinations that are culturally close to tourists' destination, such as London and England or Sydney, Australia. So what we found that, in fact, destination anthropomorphism does not have a universal positive effect. And cultural distance really impacts the way destination anthropomorphism works.

PUZAKOVA: 16:49 | So by cultural distance, we mean how similar the culture where people are going or how different the culture where people are going from the tourists, from a person's own culture. We actually based those predictions-- and we found answers in the intergroup contact theory, which basically suggest that people frequently feel very uncomfortable when interacting with members of different social groups and oftentimes even expect that the out-group member contact is likely to be

disapproved by in-group members. So for example, interactions with out-group members that are less dissimilar to an in-group such as culturally close destination, they should reduce perceptions of risks associated with traveling to those destinations. And we in fact found that traveling to London, England or-- those are our similar-- or Sydney, Australia, destination anthropomorphism didn't have any effect at all. So there was no negative effects and no positive effect, and this is our main finding. So again, based on the intergroup contact theory that traveling to culturally distant destinations from a person, from the tourist, own culture would lead to really negative outcomes, which was very surprising for us.

CROFT: 18:10   So what are the key takeaways that those working in the tourism industry should take away from this study?

PUZAKOVA: 18:18   So provided that destination anthropomorphism is a very prevalent tactic in hospitality and tourism and travel industry as we already discussed, our findings show that the use of anthropomorphism promoting certain destinations might be both an effective and detrimental strategy for destination branding. So most importantly, our work, in fact, establishes that destination anthropomorphism could be an effective strategy for destinations within the same culture. For example, in promoting tourism in Alaska or United States national parks to American consumers, marketers are very strongly advised to incorporate anthropomorphic imagery and communication, for example, first-person communication. However, our findings reveal, in contrast, that advertisers should carefully design their destination promotions or advertisement messages and be really cognizant of cultural distance because cultural distance influences the effectiveness of their campaigns. For example, in design and communication to foreign tourists, advertisers should exercise caution prior to incorporating destination anthropomorphism strategies in their marketing communication. So what our findings also show that firms are also advised to assess the level of knowledge of their target destination, the travelers in their target market currently possessed. If travelers' familiarity with the advertised destination is pretty low, then our work would caution the use of destination anthropomorphism as a communication tactic.

CROFT: 19:57   Previous studies you've done have looked at other potential risks for companies that humanize their brands. One found that humanizing a product could lead some consumers to actually wind up viewing it as a rival. If you could talk a little bit about how that happens, what's going on there?

PUZAKOVA: 20:20   So to answer that question, which is an excellent question, thank you for posing it, and thank you for bringing up that study. I'd like to mention that, in fact, past work on anthropomorphism shows that effect of anthropomorphism is context-dependent. So the context or the situation where anthropomorphism effect happened is really important. So in a series of research studies that you mentioned, Jack, we studied the context of unique brands or products. So more specifically, those particular broad products or brands that consumers can use to express their identity to others, to express their individuality. And this is very important. This is a very important context.

PUZAKOVA: 21:05   So our findings in that particular context suggests that the managers of brands that are used by consumers to express different individuality or unique characteristics, those managers of those brands should really exercise caution when employing a brand anthropomorphism strategy. While brand anthropomorphism could be successful with certain consumer groups, for example, with our simulation goals, as

part of the research suggests, it may really backfire with other consumers who seek uniqueness or distinctiveness, because humanization means that consumers view a product as a real human being and humanizing product means it is another unique human being. And people like to express their identity specifically with products, not with other human beings. And in that particular context, where really people try to express who they are to others, humanizing those unique products and brands could really backfire.

CROFT: 22:13   Yeah, that really is interesting because it's almost like in wanting to express our uniqueness and identity, if the product is really unique and has a very strong identity of its own as a humanized brand, then the thought process, I guess, is that people are thinking, "Well, this is actually conflicting with me. This is drawing more attention than I am, and I'm the one who wants to express my own individuality."

PUZAKOVA: 22:46   Absolutely. It's almost similar to the idea that the product-- or the brand that has humanized a unique product or brand becomes almost like a rival to a consumer, to a competitor to a consumer's identity. And consumers dislike products like that because they are the ones who really want to express their identity, and they want to take credit for expressing their own identity. They don't want to give another human being entity this credit for expressing who they are.

CROFT: 23:19   Now, there was another earlier study that we had talked about a few years ago that I found really fascinating because, while humanizing a brand can create, as you were just talking about, really strong bonds between consumers and products, it also can cause an even stronger backlash if something goes wrong, because it's humanized. So it's almost like there's someone to blame as opposed to just some faceless corporation or product. So what did you look at in that study, and how did you come to that conclusion?

PUZAKOVA: 24:02   Jack, that was actually one of my first studies done in the area of brand anthropomorphism. Well, we showed in that study that when a product fails, it doesn't perform based on how consumers expect it to perform, then anthropomorphizing a product makes consumers attribute greater responsibility to that product, to the product itself, and as such, they decrease their intentions to buy the product again in the future. That was all my main findings, that basically when something goes wrong, the product fails, doesn't perform based on consumers' expectations, consumers attribute more responsibility for the product, and then it decreases their likelihood to purchase the product in the future.

CROFT: 24:53   So that kind of leads us to, I think, what the bottom line question is, is what do companies, and particularly their marketing and communications teams who are thinking about using an anthropomorphism strategy-- what should they know about the potential benefits and possible pitfalls?

PUZAKOVA: 25:13   Overall, anthropomorphism is greatly effective. It may enhance brand equity. It can enhance overall positive associations about the brand, create greater consumerliking. However, it is very important for marketers to understand that anthropomorphism effects are context-dependent. They are situation-dependent. As we may not always welcome other people in certain contexts-- for example, when we feel very overcrowded, we want socially withdrawal. Consumers may not always welcome humanized products in certain contexts as well. Thus, it is very important to take into account a context, a particular situation, understand it in detail, where

anthropomorphism effects specifically take place, what is the uniqueness or characteristics of that context.

CROFT: 26:11   Well, thank you so much for being with us on ilLUminate today, Marina.

PUZAKOVA: 26:15   Thank you very much, Jack. I appreciate that.

CROFT: 26:18   Marina Puzakova is an editorial board member at Journal of Advertising and International Journal of Advertising. And in addition to those two publications, has published in such prestigious journals as the Journal of Marketing, the Journal of Consumer Research, International Journal of Research in Marketing, Journal of Business Research, and Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice. This podcast is brought to you by ilLUminate, the Lehigh Business Blog. To hear more podcasts featuring Lehigh Business thought leaders, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news. And don't forget to follow us on Twitter @LehighBusiness. This is Jack [music] Croft, host of the ilLUminate Podcast. Thanks for listening.