

BRINGING BRANDS TO LIFE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF BRAND ATTACHMENT IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BRAND ANTHROPOMORPHISM, BRAND LOVE, AND EWOM

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Annotation. Brand anthropomorphism, defined as the act of personifying brands, has gained significant attention from research scholars within the current market. The present research investigates how brand anthropomorphism, a powerful branding strategy, promotes brand attachment, particularly in the confectionery industry. The study employs the theory of attachment and anthropomorphism. Responses from 463 participants were collected via social media, specifically from those who interacted with anthropomorphised brands used in the confectionery industry. PLS-SEM was employed to analyse the relations between variables and examine the mediating role of attachment with the brands. Results confirmed that anthropomorphic brands significantly enhance attachment and help strengthen brand love, thus inspiring consumers towards a positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). The analysis reveals that brand attachment fully mediates the effect of anthropomorphism on brand love and partially mediates its impact on eWOM. The results propose that brand humanisation can be a powerful approach to building emotional connections, driving consumer encouragement, and strengthening brand perceptibility through eWOM. The research provides valuable insights for marketers, highlighting the importance of anthropomorphism in fostering stronger consumer relationships with the brand, leveraging these bonds to establish long-term relationships and promote a positive eWOM.

Keywords: brand anthropomorphism, brand love, brand attachment, e-word of mouth, confectionery industry, anthropomorphism theory, attachment theory.

JEL classification: D91, L66, M31.

Introduction

Brand anthropomorphism is defined as the act of personifying brands; the concept has gained considerable attention within the current market, particularly in the confectionery sector (Vernuccio *et al.*, 2025). Researchers argue that when consumers perceive a brand as anthropomorphic, their interpersonal

feedback toward the brand becomes stronger, and brand love may develop (Chen, Lin, 2021; Rauschnabel, Ahuvia, 2014). This notion fosters emotional connections, which are vital for brands that require emotional resonance in the market (Nguyen *et al.*, 2024). The social media presence of brands is becoming an essential factor in marketing and advertising (Mirzaei *et al.*, 2024). It enables consumer interaction and makes them more inclined to anthropomorphise brands by eliminating emotional distance.

Human-like brands are challenging to anthropomorphise, and it is considered a crucial strategy in the marketing setting (Lee, Oh, 2021). Brands' visual appearance and social media presence are becoming the primary focus for consumers; this approach makes it increasingly relevant for brands to build accessible and engaging personas (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021). Applying attachment theory to this research framework suggests a consensus that humanising a brand can enhance its perceived value, thereby influencing and enriching the consumer's sense of self. Anthropomorphism enables individuals to attribute human-like qualities to a brand, fostering a sense of self-identification with the brand (Milheiro *et al.*, 2024). This study highlights how anthropomorphism strengthens and fosters attachment to non-human objects (Herak *et al.*, 2020).

Brand love is a unique marketing conception, which describes the emotional attachment and significant affection that consumers feel toward a specific brand. It extends beyond simple adoration or satisfaction and reflects a deep, enduring bond that fosters loyalty, advocacy, and a positive eWOM (Carroll, Ahuvia, 2006). Brand love develops when a consumer symbolises the brand in an anthropomorphic character (Tan, Lim, 2022; Kumar *et al.*, 2021). Consumers with an optimistic cognitive experience are more likely to have a positive relationship with personified products or brands. Consumers anthropomorphise brands, which leads to brand love, particularly for confectionery brands (Rauschnabel *et al.*, 2024). It explains that anthropomorphic rationality is beneficial in fostering brand love (Huang, Guo, 2020).

Over the coming years, the global e-commerce market for chocolate and sweets is expected to experience significant growth (Liu, Li, 2024). According to the *Statista Report*, the global confectionery market was expected to reach a revenue of USD 586.30 billion in 2024. Additionally, the market is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.40% from 2024 to 2029. In Pakistan, the confectionery industry is expected to generate revenues of USD 5.75 billion in 2024. Additionally, the market growth in the sweets and chocolate ecommerce sector is 7.36%, contributing significantly to Pakistan's GDP. This suggests that the profitable confectionery industry is expected to attract more brands to enter the market. Hence, an anthropomorphic branding strategy can add value for the organisations in a competitive market.

The value of brand anthropomorphism lies in its ability to transform the nature of consumer-brand connections by fostering emotional bonds and brand identification (Marvi *et al.*, 2024). This is particularly relevant in the confectionery category, where products evoke feelings of comfort, nostalgia, and indulgence, which can help build strong brand associations (Saha *et al.*, 2023). Despite the growing importance of brand anthropomorphism, over the last decade, brands have bombarded consumers with numerous advertisements, whether through conventional or social media. Globalisation and widespread accessibility of social media platforms have significantly intensified competition among brands.

Another challenge faced by the confectionery market is the increasing competition from other snack categories. As consumers become more diverse in their snacking habits, they are exploring a variety of different snack options, such as nuts, seeds, and fruits. These snacks are often promoted as healthier alternatives to conventional candy, which can make it challenging for companies to maintain their competitiveness (Milheiro *et al.*, 2024).

A critical issue in the industry is understanding how the parameter of social presence, defined as the intensity of personally experienced interactions in online environments, affects the results of brand anthropomorphism, such as brand attachment and love (Sameeni *et al.*, 2024). Several studies have examined anthropomorphic branding in various industries, including the automotive, beverage, hospitality, tourism, and fashion sectors. However, research on the confectionery sector as a whole remains unexplored. The second gap in this research is that it contributes to the theoretical extension of two theories: the theory of anthropomorphism and the theory of attachment, which are applied in this context for the first time. The advertising of anthropomorphic brands via social media platforms, rather than conventional ones, is examined as a theoretical contribution in this research, specifically about brand anthropomorphism and brand attachment, to understand the online relationship between the brand and the consumer.

These results are particularly significant because the research is the first to authenticate and examine the experiential individuality of brand anthropomorphism to extensive numerical and abstract concepts. The research objective is to understand the confectionery industry, where stakeholders rely heavily on the visual appearance of brands, resulting in a strong attachment to anthropomorphic products.

Therefore, the primary reason for conducting this research is to investigate the impact of anthropomorphism on brand attachment and brand love. The study aims to examine how brand attachment mediation enhances social media presence and improves consumer-brand relationships, ultimately leading to strong brand love. These insights are especially pertinent in online settings, which can create an emotionally distant consumer who is closely connected to the product (Kim *et al.*, 2020; Ahmed *et al.*, 2019). Hence, this research examines the process by which anthropomorphic brands can foster brand love, with a focus on their online presence and how consumers become emotionally attached to them. Brand attachment is a key element in this study, which investigates anthropomorphism as a channel that facilitates integration (Kim *et al.*, 2024).

1. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

1.1 Theoretical Background

Building on the theoretical foundations of anthropomorphism and attachment theory, this study argues that anthropomorphism plays a pivotal role in helping consumers form connections with brands. It further suggests that this connection fosters brand love and encourages positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). This association affects consumers' behaviour in terms of their tendency to follow through on purchase intentions. Building on anthropomorphism theory (Epley *et al.*, 2007) and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), this research study explores the influence of anthropomorphic branding on customers' purchase intentions. The research further explores how brand attachment mediates this relationship within the context of the confectionery industry. According to anthropomorphism theory, consumers tend to perceive an advertised object as human-like when the marketing communication portrays the object in a manner that resembles humans (Epley *et al.*, 2007). According to Epley *et al.*'s (2007) theory, it is rational to assume that brand anthropomorphism can activate psychological drivers, including consumers' love and attachment to the brand. Building on attachment theory, these factors proficiently result in consumers' emotional connection to human-like brands. Inspired by attachment theory, Wan and Chen (2021) also proposed a context that clarifies the connection between anthropomorphism and attachment to a product or brand.

Encompassing the application of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and the framework suggested by Wan and Chen (2021), this study experimentally investigates a strong relationship between brand anthropomorphism and brand attachment. This study generally supports the view that anthropomorphising brands can provide values that strengthen a sense of belonging and emotional comfort. The effects of these primary psychological pillars combine to create brand attachment.

The present study examines how anthropomorphism promotes positive e-word-of-mouth (eWOM), thereby bridging the research gap between anthropomorphism and attachment theories. The researchers suggest that anthropomorphising a confectionery brand encourages customers to perceive the product or brand as sincere, thereby increasing their purchase intention.

1.2 Conceptual Background and Hypotheses Development

1.2.1 The Nexus between Brand Anthropomorphism and Attachment

Several scholars have debated that self-image is a vital concept when studying brand attachment. Brand attachment is defined as a perceptual state of mind characterised by a strong mental and emotional bond that connects a brand with an individual, allowing the brand to be perceived as an extension of self-representation (Hussain, Ahmed, 2020). In other words, brand attachment relies on the extent to which individuals identify the brand as being part of themselves and reflecting their identity (Kim *et al.*, 2024). The perceived fit between a brand and self-congruence significantly strengthens brand attachment (Epley *et al.*, 2008). In this regard, prior research extended the concept of attachment to anthropomorphic brands. Anthropomorphism fundamentally involves acquiring, activating, and applying human knowledge to a target (Dhaoui, Webster, 2021). Once consumers perceive the brand as human-like, they can expand their self-concept to reason about the brand and view it as an extension of themselves (Klipfel *et al.*, 2014). This belief strengthens the emotional attachment between the anthropomorphised brand and consumers' self-concepts (Kim, Swaminathan, 2021). Drawing on the theories of anthropomorphism (Epley *et al.*, 2008) and attachment (Thanasi-Boçe *et al.*, 2024), it is logical to hypothesise that humanising a confectionery brand can effectively strengthen brand attachment. This belief is consistent with prior research, as mentioned by Thanasi-Boçe *et al.* (2024). Thus, the hypothesis is illustrated as follows:

H1: Brand anthropomorphism has a significant positive impact on brand attachment.

1.2.2 Impact of Brand Anthropomorphism on Brand Love

Brand love is a unique marketing concept, which describes the emotional attachment and significant affection that consumers experience toward a specific brand. It goes beyond simple adoring or satisfaction and echoes a deep, enduring bond that drives loyalty, advocacy, and positive eWOM (Carroll, Ahuvia, 2006). Brand anthropomorphism is a significant element of brand love (Vernuccio *et al.*, 2025). The consumer-brand relationship and attachment behaviour towards a brand are gaining considerable attention for products whose visual appearance fascinates the consumer, particularly confectionery brands (Nguyen, Trinh, 2023). Emotional attachment can trigger brand love. Brand love emerges when a consumer humanises the brand despite its anthropomorphic elements (Nguyen, Trinh, 2023). According to Aro *et al.* (2018), brand love is conceptualised as a profound, multifaceted, and positively charged emotional bond between a customer and a brand, typically characterised by identification with the brand. Therefore, it is essential to examine these changes and gain a comprehensive understanding of brand love when a brand fully employs an anthropomorphism strategy. These brands employ anthropomorphic branding to enhance consumer satisfaction with their social media presence, and anthropomorphic rationality fosters

a sense of attachment between consumers and the anthropomorphic brand. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Brand anthropomorphism has a significant positive impact on brand love.

1.2.3 Significance of Brand Anthropomorphism and EWOM

With the growing influence of the Internet, contemporary studies have increasingly focused on the role of anthropomorphism in online platforms (Aro, Suomi, 2024). The level of aptitude and the display of a brand in an anthropomorphic manner has increased with a more significant set of social cues. The Internet is facilitating the interaction and humanising it, while simultaneously enhancing social interactions.

Positive eWOM is strongly associated with brand love (Aro, Suomi, 2024; Shankar *et al.*, 2024). Consumers who develop a strong emotional attachment to a brand are likely to express affection toward its humanised attributes (Carroll, Ahuvia, 2006). The anthropomorphic strategy of online platforms is now playing a crucial role in forming positive eWOM, thus influencing conversational quality and people's interactions with brands and creating positive impressions that foster brand attachment among consumers (Tassiello *et al.*, 2024). As soon as a consumer is assured and, based on their experience with the brand, they are inclined to love and trust it, this feeling engrosses them in positive eWOM within their social circles, such as among colleagues, friends, and close relatives. With eWOM, as analytic evidence, it is most often associated with individuals' decision-making (Chinelato *et al.*, 2022). Attachment to the brand is significant in consumers' verdict when they encounter eWOM in a positive frame. However, there is a lack of research available on the use of anthropomorphic branding on social media platforms. Further research is necessary to explore how consumers generate eWOM while networking online, as such contributions could provide invaluable insights (Chinelato *et al.*, 2022). Thus, it is hypothesised that:

H3: Brand anthropomorphism has a significant positive impact on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM).

1.2.4 Influence of Attachment and Brand Love

To foster brand love, consumers need to develop a strong sense of connection with the brand. This connection enables them to perceive the brand as unique and irreplaceable, leading to a sense of loss and longing in its absence (Milheiro *et al.*, 2024). Although scholars widely acknowledge attachment as a fundamental component of love, empirical evidence supporting the notion that brand love precedes brand attachment remains limited. Chinelato *et al.* (2022) recommend that brand attachment endorses brand love. According to Ali *et al.* (2021, p.9), "Brand attachment is an antecedent of brand love." Furthermore, Madadi *et al.* (2022) claim that satisfied customers develop an emotional attachment to a brand, and as this attachment deepens over time, it fosters a stronger emotional bond, ultimately leading to brand love. Marketing literature has extensively explored brand attachment and brand love (Ahmed *et al.*, 2023). Nonetheless, certain studies have indicated that the distinctions between the two conceptions remain unclear and difficult to comprehend today (Amaral, Redden, 2024). The study aims to investigate the influence of brand image and brand features on consumer attachment to the brand, and how this attachment enhances customer love. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Brand attachment has a significant positive impact on brand love.

1.2.5 The Impact of Brand Attachment and EWOM

A positive impression of a brand or product can evoke unforgettable memories, fostering an emotional attachment to the brand (Amaral, Redden, 2024). Their presence on online social platforms can enhance

brand attachments. Sehgal *et al.* (2023) emphasised that if consumers can feel emotions with anthropomorphic brands, they can associate the brands with themselves and develop a sense of product attachment. Tassiello *et al.* (2024) noted that e-word of mouth (eWOM) could be utilised to build a relationship with anthropomorphic brands through social media and technology. Tóth *et al.* (2022) also supported the above argument and found that social media eWOM can increase brand awareness, invite their connections to form an opinion about the brand's existence, and indirectly attract new potential consumers to try and develop an attachment towards the products.

According to Kim *et al.* (2020), the problem faced is that many brands are still not present on digital platforms, so building brand attachments with consumers using eWOM on social platforms is seen as very limited. This study builds on the research conducted by Chinelato *et al.* (2022), modifying it to align with the study's research objectives and field circumstances. Based on the above context, it is motivating to research the eWOM analysis of brand attachment for brands that apply this strategy. Therefore, this research study empirically examines the following hypothesis:

H5: Brand attachment has a significant positive impact on eWOM.

1.2.6 Mediating Relationship of Brand Attachment between Brand Anthropomorphism and Brand Love

The concept of brand attachment has garnered significant interest in marketing and consumer behaviour (Nguyen *et al.*, 2024). Brand attachment is the term used to describe the intense emotional connections that consumers often form with particular brands, which extend beyond simple preference or affection (Ali *et al.*, 2021). Attachment to brands is a result of the emotional bonds and relationships that exist between customers and their brands (Nguyen, Trinh, 2023). According to Rauschnabel and Ahuvia (2014), "A brand love model with symbolic representation appeals to intense emotions, attachment, positive sentiments, favorable brand ratings, and open professions of love." Hence, one of the significant contributions of this study is to scrutinise these changes to understand the concept of brand love (Ahmed *et al.*, 2019). This finding is consistent with a previous study, which suggests that individuals with an anthropomorphic understanding can satisfy their social needs (Epley *et al.*, 2008). A study by Araujo *et al.* (2017) highlighted that anthropomorphic branding increases the feeling of connection between consumers and brands. Therefore, the the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Brand attachment mediates the relation between brand anthropomorphism and brand love.

1.2.7 Relationship between Brand Attachment, Brand Anthropomorphism, and EWOM

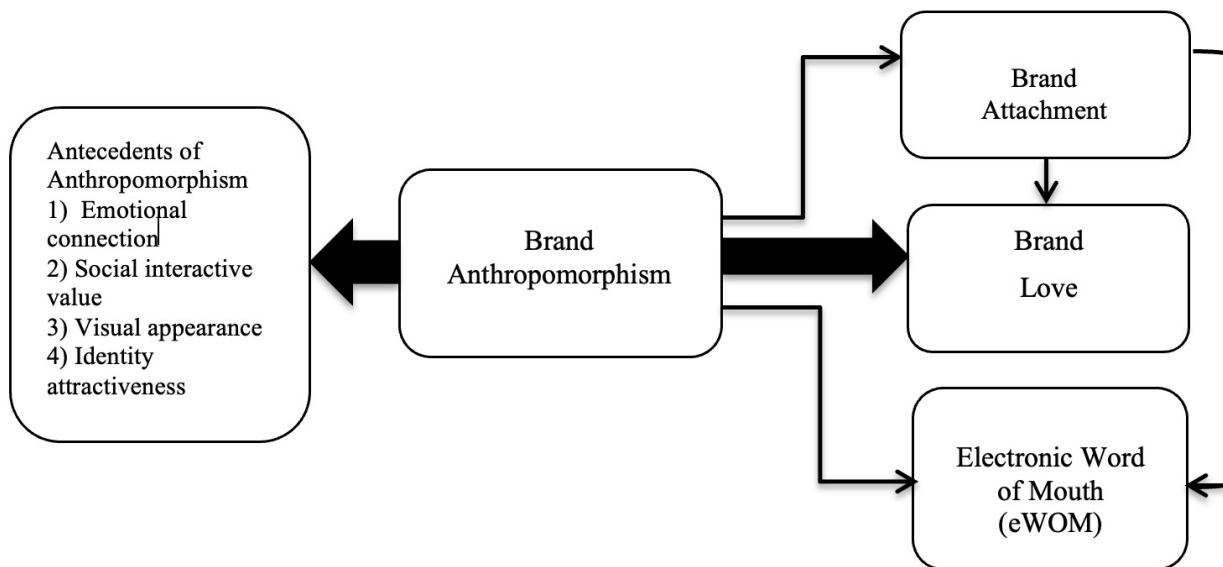
Araujo *et al.* (2017) explain brand attachment as the emotional connection that develops between a brand and its consumers. In recent years, the branding strategy has evolved to encompass the total consumer experience that the company offers its customers. Wieland *et al.* (2024) found that the way a brand advertises can help build a relationship between brands and consumers, resulting in the formation of positive electronic word of mouth (eWOM). This creates a practical and emotional bond, thus contributing to a preference for a particular brand, which is anthropomorphic.

Brands serve numerous purposes for consumers, resulting in benefits that strengthen the relationship (Ahmed *et al.*, 2023). Similarly to friends, family, or romantic partners, customers form strong bonds with companies, including sentiments of love and commitment. Brand anthropomorphism can substantiate the phenomenon of consumers identifying their cherished belongings, such as boats, bicycles, cars, and bikes (Mahdiraji *et al.*, 2024). Boakye *et al.* (2023) explain that associating a human element with the brand creates a long-term effective relationship, thereby anthropomorphising the brands.

Currently, consumers’ networking with one another has undergone significant reform due to the rapid advancement of technology and the widespread use of cyberspace. It allows consumers to share their consumption experiences and recommendations on online platforms. Mahdiraji *et al.* (2024) agreed that eWOM is one of the most critical components that impact brand image. Therefore, eWOM empowers consumers to influence their purchasing decisions. Hence, communication through eWOM has a significant impact on a consumer’s attitude when making a buying decision (Hussain, Ahmed, 2020). Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H7: Brand attachment mediates the relation between brand anthropomorphism and eWOM.

Figure 1 demonstrates a conceptual model that explains the present study.



Source: created by the authors.

Figure 1. Proposed Research Model of the Study

2. Methodology

2.1 Target Population and Research Sample

The present study targets confectionery users who show a preference for anthropomorphic brands. The focus of this research study is on Pakistani brands that utilise this advertising strategy. The chosen population is deemed suitable for answering the research questions, as they actively use anthropomorphic products. Hence, the respondents can respond appropriately, as they can understand and empathise with the characters and have already had experience recognising these brands.

A sample comprising respondents who have used confectionery brands and were aware of anthropomorphic characters was engaged in the survey. The researchers included a short video in the questionnaire to help the respondents to better understand the concept under study. Non-probability convenience sampling techniques were used (Mahdiraji *et al.*, 2024). In total, 463 complete surveys were received. The responses that were collected were usable and justified for the current research study. According to Hair *et al.* (2019), “The sample size must be more than 100 for structural analysis.” The

proposed sample size is suitable for selecting relevant statistical techniques. The researchers received 463 responses from the participants and used them for the study analysis.

2.2 Research Tool

The study was conducted by administering a survey with several questions to collect primary data, asking participants to respond based on their level of knowledge and understanding. *Google Forms* was used as a tool to execute the survey questionnaire. Following Chiung *et al.* (2017), the survey employed a five-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 5 indicating “strongly agree”. For the preparation of the research questionnaire, the variables used were adopted from earlier studies that employed similar variables. The researchers adopted the items of the questionnaire from previous studies. *Table 1* signifies that the items in the survey questionnaire were adapted from the following research studies.

2.3 Mitigating Bias and Error

In the research survey, one of the observed problems is common method bias. The quality of the measurement items influences their reliability, validity, and the relationships between the theoretical constructs (Kock *et al.*, 2021). Several statistical procedures, such as Harman’s (1967) single-factor test and others, are available to screen for common method bias and mitigate this issue. According to Guide and Ketokivi (2015), to minimise the prevalent method bias in survey research, an emphasis on research design is also necessary.

For this study, the researchers focused on examining and designing methods to minimise common method bias and implemented some of the solutions recommended by Kock *et al.* (2021). Initially, the selected respondents must possess the pertinent knowledge (Fiske, Kinder, 1981) associated with the subject to enhance their ability to relate the main term throughout the related notions.

2.4 Measures of the Constructs

The questionnaire was reviewed carefully, in line with Krosnick’s (1991) recommendation, to avoid double-barreled questions. Based on the studies by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) and Muhammad (2023), the researchers explained to the respondents the importance of providing correct answers, considering the personal, organisational, and practical aspects of the current study. To improve the accuracy of responses, the survey was shortened and the questions were modified to enhance respondents’ motivation (Krosnick, 1999). The measures used in this study were derived from previous literature (see *Table 1*).

Table 1. Sources of Research Constructs

| Variables | | Number of research items | Author/s |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Antecedents of brand Anthropomorphism | Emotional Connection | 3 | Boakye <i>et al.</i> (2023) |
| | Social Interactive Value | 4 | Pérez-Vega <i>et al.</i> (2018) |
| | Visual Appearance | 4 | |
| | Identity Attractiveness | 4 | |
| Brand Attachment | | 4 | Shimul (2022), |
| Brand Love | | 9 | Yin <i>et al.</i> (2023) |
| Electronic Word-of-Mouth | | 4 | Nguyen <i>et al.</i> (2024) |

Source: created by the authors.

2.5 Statistical Analysis

The research study data were analysed using PLS-SEM with Smart PLS 4.0, as suggested by Hair *et al.* (2011). This research has employed structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the hypotheses, a multivariate statistical method used to evaluate the relationships between high-order constructs simultaneously (Ahmed *et al.*, 2024).

3. Results

3.1 Assessments of the Measurement Model

3.1.1 Reliability and Validity Measures

The Smart PLS 4.0's output revealed acceptable values that are higher than the required rate of 0.70. As shown in *Table 2*, the internal consistency and convergent validity requirements were validated by the AVE and CR values exceeding 0.6 and 0.7, respectively. Smart PLS 4.0 is used when preconceived relationships are not present. This research uses both exploratory and confirmatory analyses simultaneously to establish relationships in new dimensions and categories. It also facilitates the understanding of repeated behaviour across more than 5,000 iterations. This approach yields precise results by addressing multicollinearity among variables, thereby enhancing the model's interpretability and reliability, particularly in terms of the R-squared relationships among the study's variables. The iterations of sample testing using the bootstrapping method in Smart PLS 4.0 facilitate the creation of a model fit test, which also helps to explain the relationship between variables.

In evaluating the study's outcomes, *Table 2* presents outer loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). The outer loadings of all items are greater than 0.658, indicating that the items have strong correlations with their corresponding construct. It also demonstrates the item's substantial contribution to measuring the constructs and signifies the reliability of the indicators (Hair *et al.*, 2010).

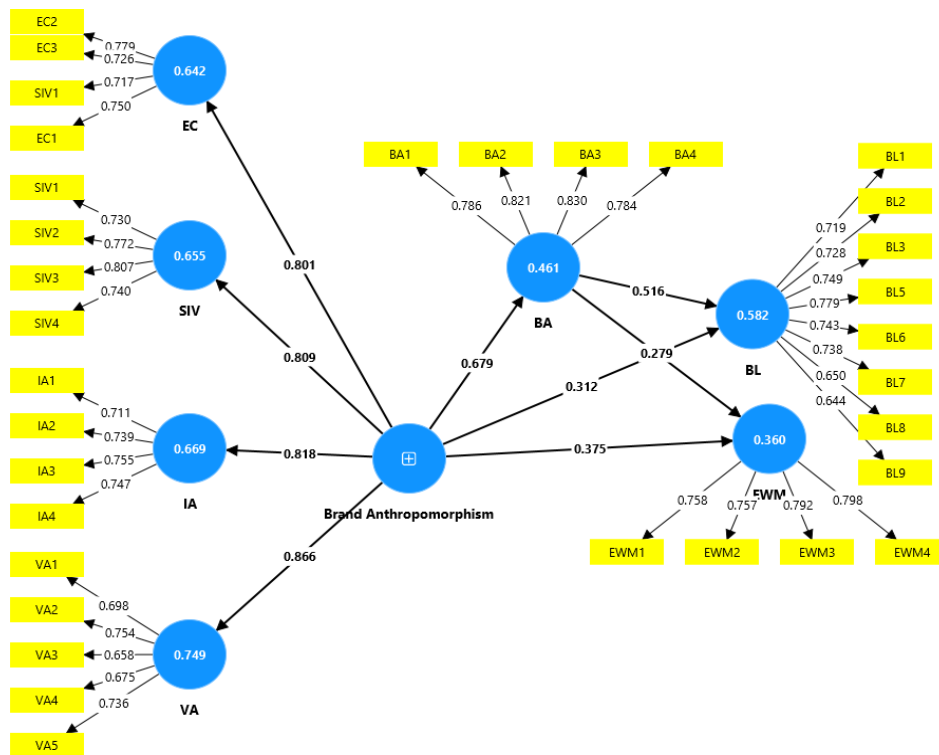
Table 2. Measurement Model Results

| Variables | Items | Outer Loadings | CR | AVE |
|---------------------------------|-------|----------------|-------|-------|
| | EC1 | 0.750 | | |
| | EC2 | 0.779 | 0.831 | 0.552 |
| | EC3 | 0.726 | | |
| | SIV1 | 0.730 | 0.831 | 0.497 |
| | SIV2 | 0.772 | | |
| | SIV3 | 0.807 | | |
| | SIV4 | 0.740 | | |
| Antecedents of Anthropomorphism | VA1 | 0.698 | 0.831 | 0.497 |
| | VA2 | 0.754 | | |
| | VA3 | 0.658 | | |
| | VA4 | 0.675 | | |
| | VA5 | 0.736 | 0.827 | 0.545 |
| | IA1 | 0.711 | | |
| | IA2 | 0.739 | | |
| | IA3 | 0.755 | | |
| | IA4 | 0.747 | | |

Table 3 (continuation). Measurement Model Results

| Variables | Items | Outer Loadings | CR | AVE |
|------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------|-------|
| Brand Attachment | BA1 | 0.786 | 0.881 | 0.649 |
| | BA2 | 0.821 | | |
| | BA3 | 0.830 | | |
| | BA4 | 0.784 | | |
| Brand Love | BL1 | 0.719 | 0.896 | 0.519 |
| | BL2 | 0.728 | | |
| | BL3 | 0.749 | | |
| | BL5 | 0.779 | | |
| | BL6 | 0.743 | | |
| | BL7 | 0.738 | | |
| | BL8 | 0.650 | | |
| | BL9 | 0.644 | | |
| | E-Word-of-Mouth | EWM1 | | |
| EWM2 | | 0.757 | | |
| EWM3 | | 0.792 | | |
| EWM4 | | 0.798 | | |

Source: created by the authors.



Source: created by the authors.

Figure 2. SME Model Outer Loadings (Measurement Model)

The results presented in Table 2 and Figure 2 reveal that the range of all outer loadings is from 0.644 (BL9) to 0.830 (BA3), which indicates that the outer loadings for all items are not less than 0.60. According to Hair *et al.* (2010), outer loadings greater than 0.6 are considered high, indicating that the item is a good measure of the underlying construct. Secondly, the CR results range from 0.827 (VA) to 0.896 (BL), suggesting that all CR values are greater than 0.70 (see Figure 2). The AVE outcomes for all constructs

range from 0.497 (SIV) to 0.649 (BA), indicating that all AVEs are above 0.50 or equal to just under 0.50. According to Hair *et al.* (2014) and Fornell and Larcker (1981), a composite reliability (CR) above 0.7 is considered acceptable, and slightly lower AVE (<0.5) values can still demonstrate convergent validity if CR is sufficiently higher (>0.7). These outcomes confirm that the constructs EC, SIV, VA, IA, BA, BL, and eWOM meet all three adequacy standards, thereby establishing their convergent validity for this study.

3.1.2 Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

Table 3 presents the results of the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), which is used to assess the discriminant validity of the variables. The discriminant validity outcomes in Table 3 indicate that the HTMT ratios for each pair of variables are less than 0.85. Thus, all constructs in this study have successfully undergone discriminant validation.

Table 4. HTMT Ration Matrix: Discriminant Validity

| Construct | BA | BL | EC | EWM | IA | SIV | VA |
|--------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Brand Attachment | 1.000 | | | | | | |
| Brand Love | 0.809 | 1.000 | | | | | |
| Emotional Connection | 0.670 | 0.577 | 1.000 | | | | |
| E-Word-of-Mouth | 0.667 | 0.673 | 0.571 | 1.000 | | | |
| Identity attractiveness | 0.776 | 0.821 | 0.689 | 0.593 | 1.000 | | |
| Social interactive value | 0.680 | 0.543 | 0.842 | 0.640 | 0.654 | 1.000 | |
| Visual Appearance | 0.722 | 0.724 | 0.737 | 0.623 | 0.838 | 0.751 | 1.000 |

Source: created by the authors.

3.2 Assessments of the Structural Model

3.2.1 Model Fitness and Collinearity Results

The results of testing the model's quality are displayed in Table 4. According to the results, the R-squared and adjusted R-squared values indicate that the constructs have moderately good explanatory power, ranging from 0.357 to 0.749. Among these visual appearances, the highest value attained is 0.749, indicating that the constructs explain 75% of the variance. Furthermore, the effect size outcomes (f^2), which are described by tool and data availability, also have significant effects. In contrast, visual appearance has a substantial impact, and eWOM has a minimal effect on brand attachment in the Pakistani confectionery industry. Furthermore, the tested model demonstrates predictive significance, with Q^2 values exceeding zero and ranging from 0.309 to 0.747. Finally, the VIF statistics indicated that there is no multicollinearity, as all VIF values are less than 3 (Ahmed *et al.*, 2024).

Table 5. Model Fitness and Collinearity Results

| Variables | R-square | Adj R-square | Effect Size f^2 | Q^2 predicted | VIF |
|-----------|----------|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------|
| EC | 0.360 | 0.357 | 1.792 | 0.638 | 1.000 |
| SIV | 0.655 | 0.654 | 1.896 | 0.652 | 1.000 |
| VA | 0.749 | 0.749 | 2.991 | 0.747 | 1.000 |
| IA | 0.669 | 0.668 | 2.023 | 0.666 | 1.000 |
| BA | 0.461 | 0.460 | 0.857 | 0.457 | 1.000 |
| BL | 0.582 | 0.460 | 0.125 | 0.432 | 1.857 |
| EWOM | 0.360 | 0.357 | 0.118 | 0.309 | 1.857 |

Source: created by the authors.

3.2.2 Outcomes of Hypothesis Testing

The hypotheses were tested using the bootstrapping technique (Kock, 2016). It highlights both the significant and non-significant relationships among the variables (see *Table 5*). All hypotheses regarding the direct effect of brand anthropomorphism have a significant positive impact on brand attachment and word-of-mouth. All the hypotheses are accepted (p -value < 0.05). The findings also show that all variables have a significant impact on brand love and e-word-of-mouth (eWOM) within the context of this research study. Additionally, the results presented in *Table 6* indicate that brand anthropomorphism (BANT) has a positive and significant indirect effect on both BL and EWM. This supports all hypotheses on indirect effects (p -value < 0.05).

The results indicate that, comparatively, the BA is the strongest predictor for BL ($\beta = 0.516$) than brand anthropomorphism (BANT) ($\beta = 0.312$), while for the outcome variable EWM, BANT ($\beta = 0.375$) is a stronger predictor than BA ($\beta = 0.279$). Moreover, it is also indicated that BANT ($\beta = 0.679$) is a stronger predictor for BA. Thus, all hypothetical results emphasise that all predictors have a positive direct effect on outcome variables, which supports the retention of H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5 hypotheses.

Table 6. Direct Effect Results

| | Beta (β) | T statistics | P-value | LL | UL | Hypothesis | Support yes/No |
|--------------|------------------|--------------|---------|-------|-------|------------|----------------|
| BA -> EWOM | 0.279 | 4.831 | 0.000 | 0.164 | 0.389 | H1 | Yes |
| BANT -> BL | 0.312 | 6.112 | 0.000 | 0.216 | 0.415 | H2 | Yes |
| BANT -> EWOM | 0.375 | 5.955 | 0.000 | 0.254 | 0.498 | H3 | Yes |
| BA -> BL | 0.516 | 9.980 | 0.000 | 0.412 | 0.614 | H4 | Yes |
| BANT -> BA | 0.679 | 20.814 | 0.000 | 0.611 | 0.739 | H5 | Yes |

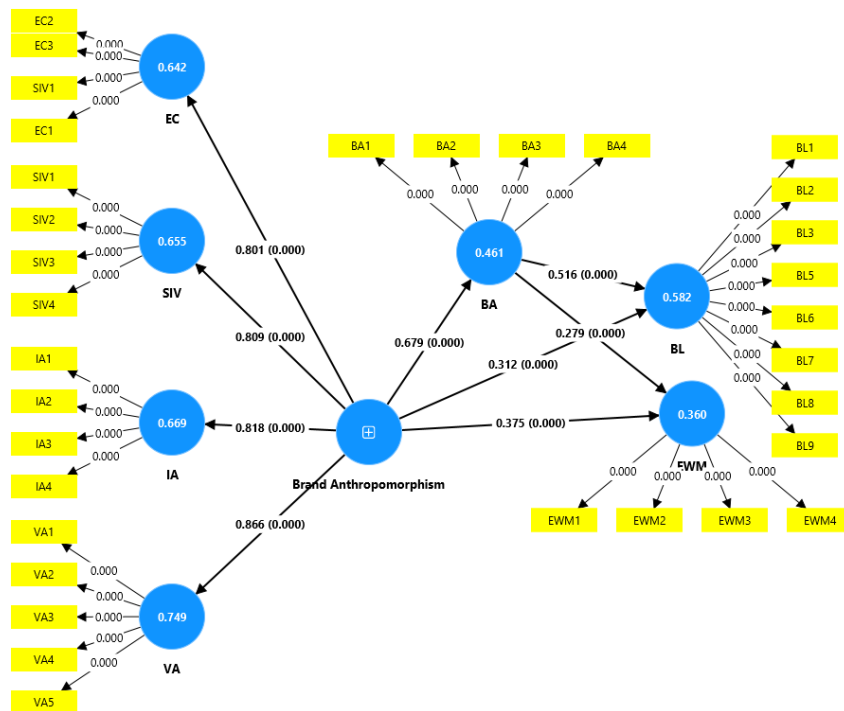
Source: created by the authors.

Additionally, the results for indirect effects (see *Table 6* and *Figure 3*) show that brand anthropomorphism (BANT) has a significant positive impact ($\beta = 0.350$) on BL. It also has a significant positive indirect effect ($\beta = 0.189$) on EWM. Thus, these results also support *H6* and *H7* for the mediating effect. *Figure 3* represents the complete results.

Table 7. The Mediation Effect of Brand Attachment (Indirect Effect)

| | Beta (β) | T statistics | P-value | LL | UL | Hypothesis | Support yes/No |
|-------------------|------------------|--------------|---------|-------|-------|------------|----------------|
| BANT -> BA -> BL | 0.350 | 9.743 | 0.000 | 0.281 | 0.422 | H6 | Yes |
| BANT -> BA -> EWM | 0.189 | 4.639 | 0.000 | 0.112 | 0.270 | H7 | Yes |

Source: created by the authors.



Source: created by the authors.

Figure 3. Hypothesis Test Results (Structural Model)

4. Discussion

The research study proposes a comprehensive model that summarises the antecedents of the anthropomorphic brand, highlighting its direct positive impact on these antecedents in building brand love and a positive eWOM (i.e., visual appearance, social interactive value, emotional connection, and identity attractiveness). Furthermore, brand attachment positively and significantly mediates the association with brand anthropomorphism and brand love in Pakistan’s confectionery market.

Additionally, this study contributes to two distinct fields, brand anthropomorphism and consumer social media presence, offering novel insights into the intersection of branding and digital consumer behaviour. First, the results demonstrate that brand anthropomorphism has a positive impact on brand attachment (*H1*). This result is consistent with the findings of previous literature, such as Ma *et al.* (2023), who emphasised how brand anthropomorphism can strengthen brand attachment by associating a brand with its visual appearance and by endowing it with human-like features, including a nose, eyes, and mouth. However, the research has highlighted the optimistic effect of brand anthropomorphism perception on brand attachment.

According to Ma *et al.* (2023), the research further found that the association of brand anthropomorphism and brand attachment in the social media setting is substantial and constructive. Second, the findings identify that brand anthropomorphism magnifies the positive influence on brand love (*H2*). Specifically, when individuals encounter the brand on social platforms, they tend to perceive it as a non-human entity. However, brand anthropomorphism has a more positive and substantial impact on brand love. Thirdly, the research supports *H3* and *H4* that emphasise the effect of brand attachment mediation, which establishes love for the brand and builds positive eWOM. In this way, consumers view the brand as a trustworthy

“person” who protects their identity (e.g., symbols and shapes) and any other form. Thus, the results reveal an innovative role of brand anthropomorphism as a contextual variable that amends the perception of consumers regarding brand attachment in a social media setting (Wu, Wang, 2011). The supplement provides a human’s need for social interaction. It is strongly advised that businesses employ brand anthropomorphism to encourage brand socialisation, which will create affective and emotional ties between the brand and its consumers.

The results of this study align with the observations of earlier researchers, suggesting that brand anthropomorphism may be an effective strategy for companies to establish connections with online shoppers (Nguyen *et al.*, 2024). Most significantly, given the strength of the evaluated relationship, companies should strongly consider employing brand anthropomorphism strategies to foster stronger brand attachment and affection among their consumers.

The current research findings have several theoretical implications for scholars and future research studies, as well as practical implications for companies. This study empirically tested the anthropomorphism theory about demographic variables, including age, gender, income, and level of education, providing insight into constructs that are often overlooked in empirical studies. The conceptual model also highlighted the credibility of the innovative research formulation. The uniqueness of this research lies in its being one of the first frameworks to shed light on these notions in the context of brand anthropomorphism within the confectionery industry.

The present study contributes to the literature as a more robust model that simultaneously integrates brand anthropomorphism and its antecedents (emotional connection, social interactive value, visual appearance, and identity attractiveness). The practical implications suggest that professionals in the marketing field can gain insights into diverse branding strategies and their foundational concepts. First, the findings indicate that organisations associated with confectionery brands and employing anthropomorphism as their branding strategy are more likely to develop brand love and a positive e-word-of-mouth (eWOM) reputation. First-person communication facilitates this, as exemplified by Lindt chocolates’ packaging, which includes the phrase “Hello, my name is Nougat Crunch”. Additionally, advertisers may use a variety of cues in marketing their products that resemble human characteristics. A relevant example of this strategy is Hilal’s ding-dong bubble, which comprises a human prefix and a spokes character of a cat in a black outfit, giving the character a humanised look.

Conclusions

Research on anthropomorphism represents a relatively recent development within the field of information systems. The research study, which demonstrated a brand in an anthropomorphised manner without altering the product itself, increased consumer attachment by 7%. The modification of the product’s visual display, such as its face and movement, had a bigger effect than altering its aural display, such as by including a voice (e.g., Sharma, Rahman, 2022). The present research explored several theoretical avenues, both non-rational (attachment and emotion) and rational (brand love), through which anthropomorphism might influence purchase intention. The findings suggest that anthropomorphism increases brand attachment.

This research has certain limitations. There were 463 individuals in the sample, four variables in the suggested framework, and only confectionery brands reflecting the whole research model. Future research could explore the impact of various factors, such as brand identification, loyalty, image, and mindfulness, using larger and more diverse sample populations. In addition, this research shows that

visual appearance triggers an emotional connection with anthropomorphic brand features. Future research should focus on the need for both visual and auditory design features. This study demonstrates that a visual appearance package, including arms, legs, and facial characteristics, along with movement, had a more substantial effect than speech.

Lastly, this research holds implications for social media and the dynamics of online relationships. Compared to the same product presented in a non-anthropomorphised format, participants placed higher bids for a product offered in an anthropomorphised manner, even though they claimed it had no added functional value. This demonstrates that human behaviour is a complex system that is not necessarily “rational” to an uninterested observer. To generate further ideas that can more effectively explain the irrational behaviour people display, researchers must transcend the theoretical constraints of rationality.

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PRISIRIŠIMO PRIE PREKĖS ŽENKLO FORMAVIMASIS: PREKĖS ŽENKLO ANTROPOMORFIZMO, MEILĖS PREKĖS ŽENKLUI IR EWOM SAŲVEIKA

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Santrauka. Prekės ženklo antropomorfizmas, apibrėžiamas kaip prekės ženklų personifikavimas, šiuolaikinėje rinkoje sulaukia vis didesnio mokslininkų dėmesio. Šiame tyrime nagrinėjama, kaip prekės ženklo antropomorfizmas kaip prekės ženklo formavimo strategija skatina prisirišimą prie prekės ženklo, ypač konditerijos pramonėje. Tyrimas remiasi prisirišimo ir antropomorfizmo teorijomis. Duomenys buvo surinkti iš 463 socialinių tinklų naudotojų, kurie sąveikavo su antropomorfizuotais konditerijos pramonės prekės ženklais. Kintamųjų tarpusavio ryšiams analizuoti ir prisirišimo prie prekės ženklo mediaciniam vaidmeniui įvertinti taikytas PLS-SEM metodas. Rezultatai parodė, kad antropomorfizuoti prekės ženklai reikšmingai stiprina vartotojų prisirišimą ir skatina meilės prekės ženklui formavimąsi, taip didindami teigiamos elektroninės žodinės komunikacijos (eWOM) sklaidą. Analizė taip pat atskleidė, kad prisirišimas prie prekės ženklo visiškai mediuoja antropomorfizmo poveikį meilei prekės ženklui ir iš dalies mediuoja jo poveikį eWOM. Rezultatai rodo, kad prekės ženklo humanizavimas gali būti veiksminga priemonė emociniams ryšiams kurti, vartotojų įsitraukimui skatinti ir prekės ženklo matomumui didinti per eWOM. Tyrimas suteikia vertingų įžvalgų rinkodaros specialistams, pabrėždamas antropomorfizmo svarbą stiprinant vartotojų ryšius su prekės ženklu ir išnaudojant šiuos ryšius ilgalaikiams santykiams kurti bei teigiamai eWOM plėtrai skatinti.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: prekės ženklo antropomorfizmas; meilė prekės ženklui; prisirišimas prie prekės ženklo; elektroninė žodinė komunikacija (eWOM); konditerijos pramonė; antropomorfizmo teorija; prisirišimo teorija.