The effects of customers' perceptions of brand personality in casual theme restaurants

Dohee Kim [a,1], Vincent P. Magnini [b,*], Manisha Singal [c,2]

[a] Pamplin College of Business, Virginia Tech, 362 Wallace Hall, Blacksburg, VA 24061, United States
[b] Pamplin College of Business, Virginia Tech, 355 Wallace Hall, Blacksburg, VA 24061, United States
[c] Pamplin College of Business, Virginia Tech, 363 Wallace Hall, Blacksburg, VA 24061, United States

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ABSTRACT

Although existing studies recommend that restaurant chains develop and communicate salient brand personalities, no research to date provides empirical evidence that perceptions of unique brand personality by consumers lead to positive outcomes in the restaurant business. Therefore, using a sample of 336 adults, this research models the causal relationships between brand personality perceptions, brand preference, attitudinal loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth (W-O-M) behavior for the Olive Garden and Chili's restaurant chains. It was found that for both chains, brand personality perceptions have a positive effect on brand preference and attitudinal loyalty, brand preference has a positive impact on attitudinal loyalty, and attitudinal loyalty has a positive influence on positive word-of-mouth (W-O-M) communication. In addition, for the Olive Garden and Chili's brands, it was also found that there is a direct link between brand preference and word-of-mouth behavior.

1. Introduction

In the restaurant business there is little margin for error. Even before the recent global economic crisis, it was estimated that one-quarter of restaurants failed during their first year of operation, with the three year cumulative failure rate approaching 60 percent (Parsa et al., 2005). Creating further challenges for restaurateurs, the recent global economic recession has restricted consumer spending and the availability of funding sources.

How do some restaurants survive and (in some cases) even thrive in this harsh environment? While cost containment is a natural and often essential tactic, deriving strategies to entice consumers to regularly patronize a brand is even more critical. Generally speaking, a clearly communicated position in the marketplace significantly enhances restaurant customer patronage (Parsa et al., 2005). In other words, consumers that clearly understand a restaurant's concept and branding are more likely to visit for a dining experience than ones who do not. Thus, research conducted by Siguaw et al. (1999) and Murase and

Bojanic (2004) suggests that restaurant chains should actively develop, communicate, and manage their brands' personalities in the marketplace as a means of strategically positioning their concepts. Since brand personality is subtle, a personal perception, and more difficult to imitate than product attributes (Ang and Lim, 2006), this appears to be sage advice for restaurateurs.

Despite the recommendation that restaurant chains develop and manage their brand's personalities, no research to date has empirically demonstrated the link between consumers' perceptions of restaurant chains' brand personalities and the resulting brand preference, attitudinal loyalty, and word-of-mouth (W-O-M) behavior. Hence, the purpose of this research is to begin filling this gap by modeling the relationships between these constructs for the U.S.-based Olive Garden and Chili's restaurant chains. Olive Garden and Chili's brands were chosen based on scores from the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ASCI). Olive Garden (OG) had the highest ASCI scores for the last three years, while Chili's had the lowest scores in the full-service restaurant category. Further details are given in the methodology section.

This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, while prior research has examined the antecedents and moderators of W-O-M communication (Brown et al., 2005; Matos and Rossi, 2009), no study specifically examines the process variables that connect brand personality perception to the ultimate W-O-M communication by the consumer. Given that W-O-M is an important element of persuasion for the consumer to increase awareness,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 540 231 8425.
  E-mail addresses: dkim2@vt.edu (D. Kim), magnini@vt.edu (V.P. Magnini), msingal@vt.edu (M. Singal).
  [1] Tel.: +1 540 250 0786.
  [2] Tel.: +1 540 231 4569.

induce trial, and develop consumer insights (Herr et al., 1991), it is important both for academics and practitioners to understand how and why a clear conception and communication of brand personality will affect voluntary W-O-M behavior on the part of the consumer. Second, by studying two popular brands that have vastly different American Consumer Satisfaction Index (ASCI) scores, we demonstrate that despite variations in consumer satisfaction scores, the paths via which brand personality affects W-O-M behavior are largely similar. Hence, the models developed in this study can be tested and extended not only to other restaurant brands, but also to other services where brand personality may be a salient precursor to desirable outcomes like customer loyalty and satisfaction. Third, while the literature has recently converged on the idea that the constructs of brand preference and attitudinal loyalty need to be parsed out (Baloglu, 2002; Dick and Basu, 1994; Mattila, 2001), this study is the first to model the antecedents and consequences of brand preference and attitudinal loyalty in the context of the restaurant industry.

The rest of the paper is organized such that the next section derives theoretical-based logic for the causal linkages between brand personality perceptions, brand preference, attitudinal loyalty, and positive W-O-M behavior. In doing so, specific hypotheses concerning the causal relationships among the constructs are developed. Next, the details of the methodological procedures are offered along with the results for both the Olive Garden and Chili's chains. Finally, this article concludes with a presentation of the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings.

2. Literature review

2.1. The influence of brand personality on brand preference

Inquiry into the concept of brand personality has its roots in personality psychology (Norman, 1963; Kassarjian, 1971; Oliver, 1990) and can be defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). The notion that brands can possess human characteristics is consistent with the tendency to assign human traits to inanimate objects (anthropomorphism) (Zentes et al., 2008). Further, the branding literature associates particular anthropomorphic traits to commercial brands (Sung and Tinkham, 2005). A body of studies provides robust empirical evidence that brands are associated with human characteristics (Aaker, 1997; Brakus et al., 2009; Ogilvy, 1985; Plummer, 1985; Siguaw et al., 1999).

In terms of operationalizing the brand personality construct, Aaker's (1997) research empirically identified five dimensions of brand personality: competence, sincerity, excitement, sophistication, and ruggedness. In her study, Aaker first generated a list of brand personality traits through qualitative research. She then collected data from across the United States by asking subjects to rate how well the traits described each of 59 brands that were carefully selected to represent a vast spectrum of product and service categories. The fact that the Google scholar search engine (www.scholar.google.com) reports that Aaker's (1997) research has been cited more than one thousand times in peer-reviewed research is evidence that her operationalization of the brand personality construct appears to be the dominant conceptualization used in extant literature. An individual's psychological interpretation about a brand consists of both functional and symbolic facets (Kressmann et al., 2006; Mittal et al., 1990). Functional benefits entail the problem-solving capability of the brand (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004). For example, an individual eats at a restaurant when s/he is hungry. On the other hand, brands also possess abstract qualities that provide symbolic benefits to individuals

(Aaker et al., 2001). These symbolic benefits contain an explanation as to why some consumers are willing to pay considerably more for a similar menu offering at a particular restaurant brand than at a competing brand. Thus, developing a salient brand personality can be a meaningful way to establish a lasting bond with customers.

In terms of correlations and consequences, past research has found that the use of a brand with a well-developed brand personality allows a consumer the ability to express his/herself (Belk, 1988), an ideal self (Malhotra, 1988), or specific characteristics of self (Kleine et al., 1993). In other words, the concept of self-congruence contends that consumers prefer brands known for personality traits in tandem with their own (Aaker, 1999; Kassarjian, 1971; Sirgy, 1982). Consequently, brand personality can serve as a mechanism to differentiate brands (Halliday, 1996) and may function as a key determinant of consumer preference and usage (Biel, 1993; Ogilvy, 1985).

Other than the self-congruence theory described above, two other streams of logic also support the link between brand personality and brand preference. First, the dimensions of Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale are all positively constructed, and while this could be viewed as a weakness of the scale because it is not reasonable to assume that human personality characteristics are all manifested in a positive manner (Davies et al., 2001), a brand's positive attributes are likely to be perceived favorably by consumers even when they are not congruent with their self-concepts. For instance, even individuals who may not consider themselves overtly friendly or extremely honest, may still value in dining with a brand that portrays those traits (Zentes et al., 2008). Thus, according to this logic, in a situation in which self-congruence is not evident, a well-defined brand personality can still result in increased brand preference.

Second, another reason why it seems plausible that brand personality be correlated with preference is functional benefit representation (Aaker, 1996). According to this logic, brand personality perceptions aid the consumer in structuring and organizing brand knowledge. Hence, salient brand personality perceptions can enhance a consumer's recall of functional brand information and functional brand benefits (Hieronimus, 2003; Zentes et al., 2008). Therefore, the concept of functional benefit representation also supports the notion that brand personality is positively correlated with brand preference due to the benefit of enhanced recall. In sum, based on the logic above, it is hypothesized that:

H1. A consumer's perception of brand personality perception for a casual restaurant is positively associated with brand preference.

2.2. The influence of brand personality on attitudinal brand loyalty

The brand loyalty body of literature provides some of the most quintessentially important insights into the relationships between individuals and brands (Fournier, 1998). In a broad sense, loyalty can be described as "a feeling of commitment on the part of the consumer to a product, brand, marketer, or outlet which results in repeat purchase" (Berkman et al., 1996, p. 131). With specific regard to the attitudes of the consumer, attitudinal loyalty can be defined as the extent of dispositional commitment in regard to some unique value associated with a brand (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Meanwhile, customer loyalty can be viewed as the relationship between relative attitude and repeat patronage and based on the combination of two the constructs' strength (high vs. low). The concept of relative attitude combined with repeat patronage is distinguished by four specific kinds of loyalty: no loyalty, spurious loyalty, latent loyalty, and loyalty (Dick and Basu, 1994).

While brand preference (addressed in the previous section) and attitudinal loyalty are highly correlated, they are, in fact, dis-