

You are what you wear: Brand personality influences on consumer impression formation

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Abstract

The present study examines the role of brands in the process of impression formation. The article examines the hypothesis that brand personality traits may carry over and affect perceptions of the personality of the brand's owner. Based on the continuum model of impression formation the findings support the expectation that the impact of brand personality is stronger when the situational context embedding brand and owner is consistent with the key association that the brand evokes. Moreover, the amount of attention the perceiver can devote to the judgment task moderates this process, such that the interaction effect between brand personality and situational consistency is more pronounced when consumers are free to use as much time to the impression formation task as deemed necessary. Conversely, when under time pressure, consumers tend to resort only to brand personality as a basis for forming an impression.

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1. Introduction

Imagine a middle-aged man driving a Porsche 911 along The Strip in sunny Las Vegas. Now picture another middle-aged man driving a Ford Pinto along the same road. What do you see? What kind of men are they? Do you think they have a lot in common? Or do you see important differences between them, for instance with regard to their preferences, lifestyles and personalities? To the extent that the latter is the case, your perceptions support the notions outlined and tested in this paper. That is, the current study investigates the relationship between a brand's personality (Aaker, 1997) and the personality of its owner. The present article argues that salient brand personality dimensions may affect consumer perceptions of personality traits of the owner of the brand. An effect exists involving the transfer of brand personality traits to consumer personality traits via a process of impression formation.

The following section reviews the evidence on the concept of brand personality and its relationship with human personality traits, as well as the role salient brand personalities may play in impression formation processes. Section 3 presents an experiment that tests the potential of a brand personality dimension to affect the perception of the personality of the brand owner in the eyes of an external observer.

2. Brand personality and human personality

In analogy to the five factor structure of human personality (i.e., the "Big Five", Goldberg, 1992), Aaker's (1997) scale taps the dimensions of a brand's personality. In a series of studies, Aaker demonstrates that brands can be described in terms of salient personality traits similar to individuals and that, similar to the Big-Five of human personality, five basic brand traits can be discerned, namely sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. In subsequent studies, the concept of brand personality has proven helpful in explaining the relationships between people and their brands. For instance, Aaker (1999) demonstrates that people tend to select and use brands with different salient personality dimensions to "highlight" certain

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aspects of their own personality in various situational contexts. Especially for high self-monitoring individuals (highly prone to social cues), her results show that traits that are made accessible by situational cues may affect consumer's brand choice and that different traits that are made salient, can have different effects on brand attitudes based on the brand's personality. In addition, more recent studies on the relationship between brands and people (Aaker et al., 2004) show that brand personality traits can have a direct influence on the way the relationship between brand and owner is formed and maintained. That is, Aaker et al. (2004) finds that in line with implications of the brand personality concept, relationships with sincere brands deepen over time, whereas consumer–brand relationships for exciting brands show a more short-lived, “fling-like” development over time.

Note that in these studies, brand choice, brand attitudes and consumer–brand relationships constitute the dependent variables, and personality traits of the brand's owner play a role as a causal factor, albeit in interaction with situational factors. This leaves open a rather straightforward, but as yet unaddressed question in the marketing and consumer behavior literature: what happens when roles are reversed and a salient brand personality functions as an independent variable? Can brand personality attributes then affect aspects of the self of the owner, either directly, or in the eyes of an external perceiver? To date, this issue has received no systematic scholarly attention. There is, however, ample reason to assume that they can. For instance, from an interpretative perspective, seminal work on the extended self (Belk, 1988) underscores the notion that people's possessions do not leave their self-concept unaffected. Instead, products and brands are posited to be interwoven with the very fabric of life to such an extent that they continually shape, reinforce and codetermine the individual's sense of who he or she is, and they play an important role in the consumer's progression through various stages in life (Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998). Moreover, Fennis et al. (2005) recently demonstrated that salient brand personality dimensions can directly impact the aspects of the self-concept, based on the notion of the ‘malleable self’: the idea that the self is not invariant across situations, but instead is amenable to situational influences, of which brands are but one example (see Markus and Kunda, 1986). In a series of four experiments, Fennis et al. (2005) find that brand personality dimensions could influence self-perceptions of Big-Five and related factors, even when consumers are not the brand owners, but are only accidentally exposed to these brands. For instance, this research shows that brand sincerity affects self-perceptions of agreeableness and brand ruggedness influences self-ratings of extroversion. Moreover, exposure to exciting brands influences self-perceptions of hedonism, and exposure to competent brands induces higher self-ratings of sophistication. In short, these and earlier studies underscore the notion that “we are what we wear” (cf. Belk, 1988).

2.1. Brand personality and impression formation

Can these results be extended to the realm of consumer impression formation? Stated differently, do consumers use salient brand personality dimensions to infer personality traits of

the owner of the brand? A “classic forerunner” of the present research suggests that they do. In an early discussion on projective techniques in marketing, Haire (1950) argues that attributes of products on a shopping list could influence perceptions of the presumed owner of the list. Contemporary frameworks on impression formation support this notion. More specifically, the continuum model of impression formation (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990; Fiske et al., 1990) states that, as a function of the extent of motivation and/or ability, perceivers may form impressions of a target along a continuum, ranging from quick-snap, instant categorizations of the target, to effortful, piecemeal integration of all available information with regard to the target. As building blocks of this impression formation process, the perceiver will use salient features of a target either as simple category labels or as attribute information.

Importantly, although earlier work focuses on clearly distinctive physical cues such as ethnic background or gender for impression formation (see for example Biernat and Vescio, 1993; Hewstone et al., 1991), the continuum model would hold that *any* salient feature may be used to the extent it is deemed a “valid” and “diagnostic” cue in evaluating the target. Hence, to the extent that brand personality dimensions are salient to perceivers, they may be used as either simple category labels or as attribute information in the process of impression formation. Of the five brand personality traits conceptualized by Aaker (1997), the current study focuses on the role of brand competence. Thus, based on the logic underlying the continuum model, the perception of brand competence will carry over to affect the perception of competence of the brand's owner (hypothesis 1).

2.2. Qualifiers in impression formation

Fiske and others (e.g., Fiske and Neuberg, 1990; Fiske and Leyens, 1996; Levine, Halberstadt and Goldstone, 1996) emphasize that simple and straightforward categorizations are not always the endpoint in the impression formation process, but that the availability of category labels plus category-consistent information sometimes qualifies categorization. Related work in information processing and persuasion (Aaker and Sengupta, 2000; Maheswaran and Chaiken, 1991; Maheswaran et al., 1992) underscores that the perceived validity of category labels or cues is also a function of the information that the surrounding context conveys. More specifically, cues are diagnostic and valid to the extent that their meaning is congruent or consistent with this context (cf. Aaker and Sengupta, 2000). Stated differently, the likelihood that impression formation involves a given label increases to the extent that the key association evoked by the label matches the association evoked by its context. Conversely, labels are less prone to be used in impression formation when there is a mismatch in association between label and context. Given the fact that the setting in which a target is situated carries information that may be relevant for impression formation in addition to a salient brand personality, the present research forwards the hypothesis that situational context moderates the effect of brand personality on perceptions of the personality of its

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