



Consumer satisfaction and loyalty: Two main consequences of retailer personality

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the impact of retailer personality on consumers' satisfaction with and loyalty to the retailer, measured through attitude and future behavioral intentions. Data were collected on a convenience sample of 372 customers of a specific retailer. Using partial least squares analysis (PLS), we show that four traits ("congeniality", "originality", "conscientiousness" and "preciousness") have a direct or indirect impact on one of the dependent variables studied. Hence, this article proposes a model of the consequences of retailer personality and suggests that retailer personality is an important concept that practitioners should consider when running their satisfaction and loyalty programs.

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1. Introduction

Faced with a highly competitive environment, retailers are all concerned to build customers' loyalty by establishing a good relationship with them. Given this competitive environment, branding can be especially important in the retailing industry to influence consumers' perceptions and drive store choice and loyalty (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004). After having been almost exclusively used for consumer goods for decades, branding is now regularly discussed with a focus on retailers (Achenbaum and Bogda, 1997; Henderson and Mihas, 2000; Ailawadi and Keller, 2004). According to Zentes et al. (2008), a retail brand is "a group of the retailer's outlets which carry a unique name, symbol, logo or combination thereof". It identifies the products and services of a retailer and differentiates them from those of its competitors (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004).

Studies on retail brand are related to the well-established research on store image. However, most works on store image mainly focused on the functional attributes of a store and thus only captured a small fraction of the comprehensive and total picture that consumers establish about a retailer. These works neglected symbolic attributes of a retailer (i.e., more abstract, intangible attributes), its personality-oriented facets (Morschett et al., 2007; Zentes et al., 2008). In their invited article of the Journal of Retailing, Ailawadi and Keller (2004) identify six dimensions of retailer image: access, price and promotion,

cross-category assortment, within category assortment and store atmosphere. However, these authors consider the study of brand personality applied to the area of retailing as a priority for future retail research.

Past research investigating retailer personality, or the set of human personality traits associated with a retailer, and its consequences studied specific links, such as those between retailer personality and loyalty to the store (Merrilees and Miller, 2001; Morschett et al., 2007; Zentes et al., 2008) and between retailer personality and attitude toward the retailer (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004; Ben Sliman et al., 2005). The main objective of this study is to investigate the influence of retailer personality on two key variables for a retailer, consumers' satisfaction and loyalty (measured through attitude and future behavioral intentions toward the retailer), while examining the link between satisfaction and loyalty. This research is thus not limited to the study of specific links as previous works did. It will offer a model taking into account the links previously suggested by the literature. In addition, it will consider the link between retailer personality and consumer satisfaction which until now, to the best of our knowledge, had not been demonstrated.

Probably the two most directly applicable studies to ours are that of Ekinci and Dawes (2009) and Vazquez-Carrasco and Foxall (2006). In the first, Ekinci and Dawes (2009) investigated the influence of consumer perceptions of frontline service (hotel, airline or hairdresser) employee personality traits on interaction quality and consumer satisfaction. They found that three personality traits (extroversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness) have a statistically significant impact on interaction quality and that interaction quality and frontline employee personality traits are key determinants of consumer satisfaction. However,

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interaction quality, which is a measure of service employee performance from a customer perspective, does not capture the whole complexity of consumer satisfaction. Openness to experience is also an important predictor of consumer satisfaction. In the second, Vazquez-Carrasco and Foxall (2006) examined the influence of consumers' personality traits (need for social affiliation, consumer relationship proneness and need for variety) on their perception of relational benefits, satisfaction with, and active loyalty (i.e., the customer intention to recommend the provider to other customers and to make positive word-of-mouth communications) or passive loyalty (i.e., the customer intention to stay in the relationship established with a provider despite an increase of prices and/or a better alternative offer from a competitor) toward the provision of a service (hair styling). They indicated that the perception of relational benefits leads to a higher satisfaction and passive loyalty and that need for social affiliation is a strong determinant of relational benefits, active loyalty and consumer relationship proneness. This latter trait influences the perception of relational benefits along with passive loyalty. Consumers' need for variety has a direct negative influence on consumer relationship proneness and an indirect effect, through this variable, on satisfaction, relational benefits or passive loyalty.

The subsequent discussion is structured as follows. First, the concepts and measures of brand and retailer personality are presented as well as the consequences of this latter concept. This review of the literature is followed by a description of the conceptual model and the development of hypothesized relationships. The methodology used is then detailed and the study's findings presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for theory and practice. It also notes the limitations to the study and future research directions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Brand personality: concept and measurement

The starting point for research on brand personality is the human personality. The dominant theory at present in the field of psychology is the theory of traits. Costa and McCrae (1998) defined traits as "*tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings and actions*". Personality traits are thus stable psychological characteristics that give meaning to human action and experience. After decades of research on a taxonomy of human personality, consensus rests upon five dimensions (Big Five Theory or Five Factor Model) that provide a complete description of personality: "extraversion" (talkative, assertive, energetic), "agreeableness" (good-natured, cooperative, trustful), "conscientiousness" (orderly, responsible, dependable), "emotional stability" versus "neuroticism" (calm, not neurotic, easily upset) and "openness to experience" or "intellect" (intellectual, imaginative, independent-minded) (John and Srivastava, 1999).

Both practitioners and researchers have long recognized that brands, like humans, have distinct personalities that may differentiate them in the minds of consumers (Plummer, 1984). Brand personality may also influence consumers' preference (Sirgy, 1982), develop emotional ties with the brand (Biel, 1993) and create trust and loyalty (Fournier, 1998). According to Caprara et al. (2001), personality is a valid metaphor for brands. The underlying idea is that consumers develop affinities with brands according to their own personality (Koebel and Ladwein, 1999).

One question remains, however: why do consumers regard non-human objects, such as brands, as entities that are capable of possessing human personality traits? The explanation resides in a natural human tendency called anthropomorphism, the

attribution of human characteristics to non-human things and events (Guthrie, 1997; Epley et al., 2007). Anthropomorphism is a phenomenon that pervades the everyday thoughts and actions of most individuals and influences human perceptions and responses throughout life. Common examples of anthropomorphism include the natural urge to speak to plants, cars and computers. Individuals need to anthropomorphize objects to facilitate and enhance their interactions with the non-material world (Brown, 1991). They thus associate human traits with non-human objects, such as brands, for three primary reasons: to make that which is non-human seem more human (familiarity); to gain solace and reassurance about using the brand (comfort); to decrease uncertainty in a complex ambiguous world (risk reduction) (Freling and Forbes, 2005).

The work of Aaker (1997) inspired most of the research on brand personality to date. Aaker defined brand personality as "*the set of human characteristics associated with a brand*" and showed that consumers experience no problems in assigning human characteristics to brands. She also developed a 42-item Brand Personality Scale (BPS) that encompasses five broad dimensions: "sincerity", "excitement", "competence", "sophistication" and "ruggedness". Only three out of those five factors correspond to dimensions of the Five Factor Model in psychology: "sincerity" (which refers to the "agreeableness" dimension), "excitement" ("extraversion") and "competence" ("conscientiousness"). Two dimensions "sophistication" and "ruggedness" differ from any of the Big Five of human personality.

Aaker's work has been criticized on several grounds (Geuens et al., 2009). A first criticism pertains to the loose definition of brand personality, which embraces several other characteristics besides personality (such as socio-demographic characteristics: age, gender and social class) (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003). Aaker indeed defined brand personality in terms of characteristics instead of traits. As a result, new definitions have been proposed. Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) defined brand personality as "*the unique set of human personality traits both applicable and relevant to brands*". Similarly, Ferrandi and Valette-Florence (2002) defined brand personality as "*the set of human personality traits associated with a brand*". Both definitions have the advantage of describing brand personality solely on the basis of personality traits used to characterize individuals. It enables to consider transfers of meaning between the perceptions that individuals have of their own personality and those of the brands they buy and therefore consume or reject.

Other criticisms pertain to the proposed measurement scale of brand personality. The second criticism concerns the non-generalizability of the factor structure for analyses at the respondent level (Austin et al., 2003). The third criticism relates to the non-replicability of the five factors cross-culturally (Aaker et al., 2001). Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) stressed that the presence of the item "Western" in Aaker's scale (1997) is a typical illustration of ethnocentrism in marketing research and wondered if all the brands of the world are either Western or not. Consequently, new measures of brand personality, based on a rigorous definition of this concept (respectively Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) and Ferrandi and Valette-Florence (2002)) and meticulous procedures (Churchill's (1979) method of scale development and Rossiter's (2002) C-OAR-SE procedure), have been recently proposed (e.g., Geuens et al., 2009; Ambroise and Valette-Florence, 2010).

2.2. Retailer personality: concept and measurement

The concept of brand personality has been applied to many areas such as consumer goods, restaurant chains, non-profit organizations, tourism destinations, websites, banks, TV programs, magazines and retailers (e.g., Aaker, 1997; Sigauw et al.,

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