



Effects of brand personality dimensions on consumers' perceived self-image congruity and functional congruity with hotel brands



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ABSTRACT

Brand personality plays a key role in consumer brand psychology, but researchers and practitioners lack an adequate understanding of the efficacy of individual brand personality dimensions. Drawing on the theory of self-congruity and an analysis of eight U.S. hotel brands, this study revealed the varying roles that brand personality plays in driving brand choice: in particular, consumers tend to express their self-images through the brand personality dimensions known as Excitement and Sincerity, while relying on Sincerity and Competence to evaluate how consistent a hotel's functions are with their own preferences. The study also indicates that business travelers are more likely than leisure travelers to value functional congruity, while self-image congruity is more important to leisure than business travelers. The paper offers hotel practitioners a better understanding of the personality dimensions they should position or strengthen for their hotel brands to deliver to customers based on each dimension's utility.

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1. Introduction

Hotel practitioners must focus not only on service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer relationship management; they must also focus on their hotels' brands to maximize customer value. In the narrowest sense, a brand is a name, logo, term, design, or other feature through which to distinguish one product from another (*American Marketing Association Dictionary*). More broadly, however, through what is known as brand knowledge, a brand represents all the tangible and intangible attributes that consumers associate with the brand that can influence their perceptions of products that carry the brand name (Keller, 1993). Thus, a brand serves potentially as an important form of working capital that can be vital to success in the marketplace (Kim et al., 2003).

To elevate a brand from an element in a superficial transactional relationship to an emotional connection with consumers, brand managers strive to endow their brands with symbolic meanings that represent more than mere functionality (Fournier, 1998). Brand personality, as a component of integrated brand knowledge, carries unique meanings that can influence psychological attitudes toward and understanding of a brand (Phau and Lau, 2000), and has important implications for brand–consumer rela-

tionships (Fournier, 1998). Creating a salient brand personality has become a central focus of businesses seeking to drive both sales and customer loyalty, because a pronounced personality can help a brand stand out and foster a positive brand attitude (Aaker, 1999). For example, a boutique hotel brand can distinguish itself from traditional luxury hotel brands by characterizing itself as fashionable, stylish, contemporary, and so on.

In hospitality and tourism studies, the concept of brand personality has been explored primarily in the context of restaurants and destinations. Many extant studies have focused on adapting Aaker's (1997) brand–personality scale to various destinations (e.g., Las Vegas or Australia) or restaurants (e.g., family restaurants or fine dining restaurants; Ekinci and Hosany, 2006; Musante et al., 2008), or mapping relationships involving brand image, brand personality, tourist perceptions, tourist preferences, satisfaction, and loyalty (Kim et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2009; Murphy et al., 2007). Many questions related to brand personality have yet to be addressed: Which brand personality traits should hotels emphasize? Which brand personality dimensions have the greatest utility for driving hotel brand attitudes? Which dimensions have the lowest utility? Are the effects of brand personality stable or do they vary by travel purpose?

Apropos of these concerns, Keller and Lehmann (2006) identified four priorities regarding brand personality research, the first priority of which is to understand how brand personality influences purchase decisions and brand choice as well as a consumer's

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perceived relationship with a brand. Prior literature offers mixed findings on the mechanisms by which brand personality affects brand choice. Some researchers believe that it is not the personality per se but how salient the personality is that shapes a consumer's brand attitude (Freling and Forbes, 2005). Another stream of research represented by Malär et al. (2011) finds that brand personality helps consumers match a brand with their self-concepts, and thus the brand personality per se matters less than whether a consumer perceives consistency between a brand and her self-image, and whether such consistency, or congruency, generates a positive attitude toward the brand. Nevertheless, the most widely accepted idea is that brand personality dimensions matter in persuading consumers to choose a brand and that their role varies in influencing consumer psychology and behavior (Louis and Lombart, 2010; Ramaseshan and Tsao, 2007).

Drawing on the abovementioned views, a major purpose of this paper is to build a comprehensive framework in which to explain the process by which brand personality influences consumer psychology and behavior toward a brand. Specifically, we aim to address the following questions: 1) Do the roles played by distinct brand personality dimensions vary in shaping brand attitudes? 2) Is the link between brand personality and brand attitude mediated mainly through self-image congruity or functional congruity? 3) Does the mediating effect change with traveling purpose (business or leisure)?

To this end, the paper first reviews the literature on brand personality and multiple views related to it. Then, drawing on Sirgy and Johar's (1999) framework, we develop a set of hypotheses regarding the effects of brand personality on self-image congruity and functional congruity as well as the effects of the latter on brand attitude. The hypotheses are tested with a sample of 420 responses. We then discuss the major findings and implications of the study, and close by acknowledging the paper's limitations and suggesting directions for future related research.

2. Literature review

Brand personality is defined as a set of humanlike features consumers associate with a brand (Aaker, 1997). A brand's personality represents a consumer's integrated knowledge of what a brand is and means to that person (Schmitt, 2012). It is believed that brand personality can guide business practice at either the strategic or tactical level (Plummer, 1985). Strategically, a brand personality can serve as a tool for positioning a brand in the marketplace, helping to differentiate it from its competitors at the symbolic level (Sung and Kim, 2010a,b). Tactically, brand personality profiles can provide brand managers with guidance from many perspectives, such as marketing, advertising, designing, and it also establishes criteria by which to evaluate the corresponding business practices. All these implications of brand personality suggest that brand personality has psychological effects, influencing consumers' feelings and attitudes toward a brand, ultimately shaping brand-related behaviors, such as purchase decisions, brand loyalty, and brand love.

2.1. Views of brand personality

Researchers have long observed that consumers attribute humanlike features to brands, but this behavior was not conceptualized clearly until Aaker (1997) introduced a framework that clarified both the implicit and explicit features of the concept. Although there is general agreement in the literature as to what constitutes brand personality, there exist multiple views regarding why brand personality occurs and what it implies. We introduce four such views below.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Samples.

Demographics	Proportion
Male	55%
Female	45%
12–17 years old	0%
18–24 years old	13%
25–34 years old	47%
35–44 years old	22%
45–54 years old	10%
55–64 years old	6%
65–74 years old	0.4%
75 years or older	0.2%
White and Caucasian	77%
Hispanic or Latino	6.9%
African American	6.2%
Native American	0.9%
Asian/Pacific Islander	7.6%
Other	0.9%
Less than High School	0%
High School	15%
Associate's Degree	15%
Bachelor's Degree	53%
Master's Degree	5%
Doctoral Degree	2%
Single, never married	46%
Married or domestic partnership	45%
Widowed	0.7%
Divorced	7%
Separated	0.7%
Employed	70%
Self-employed	10%
Out of work and looking for work	5%
Out of work but not currently looking for work	0.9%
Homemaker	4.5%
Student	4.2%
Military	0%
Retired	1.6%
Unable to work	1.1%
Other	0.7%
Under \$20,000	17%
\$20,000 to \$39,999	37%
\$40,000 to \$59,999	13%
\$60,000 to \$79,999	11%
\$80,000 to \$99,999	7%
\$100,000 and over	4%

2.1.1. The anthropomorphism view

From a psychological perspective, brand personality is a result of a natural human tendency toward *anthropomorphism*, in virtue of which people attribute human characteristics to nonhuman objects to seek familiarity and reduce risk (Freling and Forbes, 2005; Puzakova et al., 2009). Anthropomorphism is an "inherent human propensity" and an "unconscious tendency of human thought" (Burghardt, 1997; Kennedy, 1992). For example, consider how frequently we speak to our cars or computers when something goes wrong, as if these objects have emotions and minds.

Consumers typically anthropomorphize or personalize a wide range of objects, such as brands, as they contemplate purchase decisions (Aaker, 1999). It is believed that consumers familiarize themselves with a brand by treating it as a person with various emotional states and conscious behaviors (Puzakova et al., 2009). Although this does not mean that consumers think of a brand literally as a human person, anthropomorphism theory currently suggests that brands with strong and salient human-like features are more likely to be perceived as familiar and comfortable, and as less risky, thus implying that in practice brand managers should

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