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Sources of retailer personality: Private brand perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the impact of two antecedents of retailer personality (grasped by five personality traits: introversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, sophistication and disingenuousness), on trust and attitude toward the private brand, as well as on one major consequence of these three concepts, loyalty to the retailer. Data were collected through a natural experiment on a convenience sample of 226 consumers of a French grocery retailer. Using partial least squares analysis (PLS), our results mainly indicated that (1) private brand trust has a positive and significant influence on the retailer personality traits “conscientiousness” and “sophistication” (2) private brand trust and private brand attitude have a positive and significant influence on the retailer personality trait “agreeableness” (3) trust and attitude toward the private brand have a positive and significant influence loyalty to the retailer while retailer personality traits have no influence on this variable. This research fills a gap in the literature since few studies have looked at the antecedents of retailer personality. Moreover, it reinforces the strategic importance of private brands for retailers since they have the potential to improve retailer personality and loyalty to the retailer.

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1. Introduction

To date, the importance of the concept of retailer personality is undeniable. Both practitioners and researchers recognize that retailers, like humans and brands, have distinct personalities that may differentiate them in the minds of consumers (Ambroise et al., 2003; Zentes et al., 2008). Moreover, retailer personality influences consumers' behavior: trust (Gousteron, 2006; Lombart and Louis, 2012b), attachment (Gousteron, 2006; Lombart and Louis, 2012b), commitment (Ben Sliman et al., 2005; Lombart and Louis, 2012b), satisfaction (Lombart and Louis, 2012a), attitude (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004; Ben Sliman et al., 2005; Lombart and Louis, 2012b) and loyalty to the retailer (Merrilees and Miller, 2001; Zentes et al., 2008; Das et al., 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Lombart and Louis, 2014).

If the consequences of retailer personality have been demonstrated in several studies, it is not quite clear what determines a retailer's personality and how retailers should build it. According to Maehle and Supphellen (2011), the different marketing activities in which retailers engage in may be considered as a set of characteristics from which consumers may infer personality traits. Nevertheless, few studies have looked at the antecedents of

retailer personality. Notable exceptions however are the studies of Merrilees and Miller (2001), Brengman and Willems (2009), Das et al. (2013) and Lombart and Louis (2014) who sought to identify through qualitative and/or empirical studies determinants of retailer personality.

To fill this gap, this study examines the influence of trust in the private brand and attitude toward private brand on retailer personality. The influence of these three variables on loyalty to the retailer is also analyzed. This study will thus supplement current works on the antecedents of retailer personality (Merrilees and Miller, 2001; Brengman and Willems, 2009; Das et al., 2013; Lombart and Louis, 2014). Moreover, by considering retailer as a brand, this research is in line with the widening of the conceptualization of the brand in retail research: from the product as a brand to the store as a brand and most recently to the retailer as a brand (Burt and Davies, 2010). Finally, by focusing on private brand, this research is in line with the several works stressing the strategic importance and value of private brands for retailers (Hoch and Banerji, 1993; Scott-Morton and Zettelmeyer, 2004; Sudhir and Talukdar, 2004; Anselmsson and Johansson, 2007; Binninger, 2008).

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The first section discusses retailer personality, the definition of this concept as well as its consequences and determinants, and presents the model and hypotheses. The methodology used is then detailed and the study's findings presented. The paper concludes with a

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discussion of the implications for theory and practice. It also notes the limitations to the study and future research directions.

2. Retailer personality

2.1. Definition of retailer personality

The association of human personality traits with “objects” that are not human refers to the theory of anthropomorphism or “*the tendency to imbue the real or imagined behavior of nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions*” (Epley et al., 2007). Following their theoretical investigation of social psychology research, Freling and Forbes (2005) assert that anthropomorphism is a natural and inevitable human tendency that infiltrates the daily thoughts and actions of most individuals and influences people's perceptions and responses throughout their lifetime. Humans need to anthropomorphize objects, especially those with which they interact frequently, to give more meaning to the world in which they live and to grasp it more easily (Waytz et al., 2010).

Aaker (1997) was the first author to conceptualize brand personality as “*the set of human characteristics associated with a brand*”. This seminal definition nonetheless includes other characteristics (e.g., sociodemographic, such as age, gender and social class) in addition to personality. Consequently, new definitions of brand personality have been proposed. Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) conceptualize brand personality as “*the unique set of human personality traits both applicable and relevant to brands*”. Similarly, Ferrandi and Valette-Florence (2002) define brand personality as “*the set of human personality traits associated with a brand*”.

In line with these definitions of brand personality, *retailer personality may be defined as the set of human personality traits associated with a retailer*. Adaptation to retailers of the concepts developed in the field of brands such as personality owes much to Ailawadi and Keller (2004). These authors recommend that marketing researchers apply to retailers the principles related to brands and their management. Brands and retailers indeed share many similarities in terms of signs used to recognize them, functions filled for clients and mix (marketing mix for manufacturers and retailing mix for retailers).

2.2. Consequences and determinants of retailer personality

The primary focus of previous studies in the field of retailer personality has been on understanding the effects of this concept. Several authors have thus examined the consequences of retailer personality: trust, attachment, commitment, satisfaction, attitude and loyalty toward the retailer.

Goueron (2006) demonstrated the positive and significant influence of two retailer personality traits (autonomy and sincerity) on credibility and integrity, two facets of consumers' trust in the retailer. Lombart and Louis (2012b) showed that the personality traits congeniality, originality, preciousness and conscientiousness have a positive and significant impact on three facets of trust in the retailer: integrity, credibility and benevolence. The trait seduction has also a positive and significant influence but only on the benevolence facet. The trait introversion has a negative and significant influence on the three facets of trust.

Goueron (2006) highlighted the positive and significant influence of three retailer personality traits (autonomy, excitation and sincerity) on attachment to the retailer. Lombart and Louis (2012b) showed that the personality traits congeniality, creativity and conscientiousness have a positive and significant impact on this variable.

Ben Sliman et al. (2005) found that the reassuring personality

trait has a significant positive influence on commitment to the retailer. Lombart and Louis (2012b) demonstrated that the personality trait creativity has a positive and significant influence on affective and continuance commitments while conscientiousness has a positive and significant impact on affective commitment only.

Lombart and Louis (2012a) indicated the positive and significant impact of four retailer personality traits (congeniality, originality, conscientiousness and preciousness) on consumers' satisfaction with the retailer.

Researchers have also demonstrated the positive and significant influence of retailer personality on consumers' attitude toward the retailer. Helgeson and Supphellen (2004) found a positive and significant influence of modern and classic retailer personality traits. Ben Sliman et al. (2005) found an effect of the trait seduction. Lombart and Louis (2012a) noted the positive and significant impact of the traits congeniality and originality on consumers' attitude toward the retailer.

Finally, the positive and significant influence of retailer personality (at the level of the personality traits or at an aggregate level) on consumers' loyalty toward the retailer has been showed by Merrilees and Miller (2001), Zentes et al. (2008), Das et al. (2012), Das (2014a, 2014b) and Lombart and Louis (2014).

By contrast, there is little research on how retailer personality is formed which nevertheless is a fundamental issue for retailers. Few studies have looked at the determinants of retailer personality (Merrilees and Miller, 2001; Brengman and Willems, 2009; Das et al., 2013; Lombart and Louis, 2014).

In their seminal work, Maehle and Supphellen (2011) suggested that brand personality is formed by a direct and an indirect way. In the direct way, the personality traits of the people associated to the brand (typical user of the brand, the company's employees or CEO, and the brand's endorsers) are transferred directly to the brand personality. In the indirect way, brand personality is formed by considering all marketing mix activities and brand management decisions (product category, price, advertising style ...). Considering this last way, Merrilees and Miller (2001) highlighted that store atmosphere has a positive and significant influence on the competency personality trait of Aaker (1997) brand personality scale while merchandising and pricing elements have a positive and significant influence on the sincerity trait.

Brengman and Willems (2009) first sought to pinpoint the antecedents of a fashion retailer personality assessed by five personality traits (sophistication, solidity, genuineness, enthusiasm, and unpleasantness) proposed by d'Astous and Lévesque (2003). In an exploratory qualitative study with 70 consumers, they identified five main types of antecedents: (1) the environment of points of sale (i.e., ambiance, design, other customers and salespeople present in stores); (2) merchandise offered (i.e., price, quality, assortment and style); (3) retailer's reputation (including advertising by the store, Corporate Social Responsibility policy, word-of-mouth from customers and their attitude toward the retailer); (4) services offered; and (5) store's format and location.

Das et al. (2013) then confirmed this pioneering research by conducting an exploratory qualitative study with five shoppers but also five marketing professors and five managers. They validated the sources of inferences used by consumers to attribute personality traits to a retailer (department store format) first proposed by Brengman and Willems (2009): (1) store ambiance, sales persons and other customers in the store; (2) product style and variety and product price; (3) store name and carried brand name; advertisement; word-of-mouth; general attitudes toward retailer; (4) service quality of the store. They also empirically investigated the impact of these determinants on five ad hoc (Das et al., 2012) retailer personality traits (sophistication, empathy, dependability, authenticity and vibrancy).

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