



# How to Measure Alignment in Perceptions of Brand Personality Within Online Communities: Interdisciplinary Insights

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## Abstract

Considerable research has been done on brand personality as a key factor in brand management, focusing mainly on how it is perceived by consumers, but without much attention to the managerial perspective. However, the latter is crucially important to ensure that the brand personality that consumers perceive actually corresponds to what a company intends to communicate. This study offers an innovative methodology to achieve this dual-perspective objective, integrating notions of marketing and linguistics to investigate brand personality alignment as it emerges from authentic and spontaneous digital environments. Textual data were collected from both company and consumer web communications across a sample of 100+ fashion brands, and then processed with software to extract sets of adjectives as the expression of brand personality. The adjectives were interrelated to calculate ratios that measure (a) the degree of alignment between company-defined vs. consumer-perceived brand personality, (b) similarity in personality between brands and (c) consumer perception of similarity in personality between brands. Varying degrees of alignment were identified, suggesting differences in how effectively the companies communicate their brand personality. The combination of the ratios derived from this research process can be utilized to evaluate the strength of brand differentiation and to redefine brand communication strategies. © 2016 Direct Marketing Educational Foundation, Inc., dba Marketing EDGE. All rights reserved.

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## Introduction: Understanding Brand Personality<sup>1</sup>

Today's companies are challenged to successfully define, manage and control their own brand personality in order to achieve a more sustainable advantage over competitors (Hunt 2000). Brand personality can be a powerful tool to evoke emotions (Biel 1993), build trust and loyalty (Fournier 1998), and enhance consumer preference (Aaker 1999). Thus, it increases the uniqueness of brands which, in turn, contributes to brand equity (Biel 1993; Ogilvy 1985). The relational paradigm underlying brand personality is deep, intimate and interpenetrating. In fact, it is seen as a “set of human characteristics associated with a brand”

(Aaker 1997 p 347), which combine physical and functional attributes with inner features of brands expressed as traits of personality (Batra, Lehmann, and Singh 1993; Keller 1993; Plummer 2000). As a consequence, consumers relate to a “brand-persona” (Herskovitz and Crystal 2010 p 21), interacting with the brand through self-expressive language, which facilitates identification processes: consumers see themselves in a brand or, vice-versa, they see a brand in themselves. This leads to increasing emotional connections as consumers interface with brands. The more a brand is seen as an expression of an actual or ideal consumer-self, the stronger the attachment to the brand will be (Malär et al. 2011). Moreover, consumers' perceptions of self in terms of a brand can intensify as they use it. Indeed, brand personality can “rub off” (Park and Roedder John 2010 p 655) on consumers, thus reinforcing their self-image (Sirgy et al. 1997).

Inspired by human personality research (cf. Eysenck 1970; Norman 1963; Pervin 2003), Aaker (1997) identified five major dimensions through which brand personality can be described: *sincerity*, *excitement*, *competence*, *sophistication*

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<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations will be used in this article: CBA = consumer–brand alignment, IBA = interbrand alignment, CIBA = consumer–interbrand alignment, CIBD = consumer–interbrand disalignment.

and *ruggedness*. Each dimension is internally articulated into a large number of different facets or traits, typically expressed by adjectives with positively-charged meanings. For example, sincerity refers to something that is *down-to-earth*, *honest*, *wholesome* or *cheerful*. Excitement is perceived in what is *daring*, *spirited*, *imaginative* or *up-to-date*. Competence includes such personality traits such as *reliable*, *intelligent* or *successful*. Sophistication is described in terms of being *upper-class* or *charming*. Finally, ruggedness means anything that is *outdoorsy* or *tough*. Various facets of these dimensions can converge into the brand personality that a company defines and communicates to consumers.

Brand personality may be considered a subset of brand image (Blackston 1993; McCracken 1989; Ogilvy 1985), which in turn comprises “brand associations” that can be product-related, non-product-related, experiential or attitudinal (Keller 1993 p 2). However, while associations linked to brand image may include such tangible features as color, size or price (Keller 1993), those related to brand personality tend to be more intangible in nature. They reside in the visual and verbal components of brand-related communications and are thus a creation of marketing (Batra, Lehmann, and Singh 1993). In addition, brand personality associations are usually more memorable (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000), meaningful (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy 2004) and consistent (LePla and Parker 2002).

Because company-defined brand personality takes on meanings and subjective interpretations when filtered through the minds of consumers (Ivens and Valta 2012), it is of crucial importance to determine whether the brand personality communicated by a company is aligned with what consumers actually perceive. Self-identification in brand personality which is not based on an aligned perception can generate cognitive discrepancies that negatively impact brand performance (Malär et al. 2011; Whan Park et al. 2010). What companies need to achieve is a self-congruence effect. In other words, there should be a fit between the individual’s self-image and the perceived brand personality, i.e., a converging perspective of brand personality (Aaker 1999; Sirgy 1982). Without such alignment, consumers would identify themselves in something that they construct individually, while the company unwittingly fails to make marketing choices that trigger the desired self-expressive processes among consumers. This could cause a progressive misperception of brand personality: the same brand would take on diverging personality traits in consumers’ minds that could produce an emotional detachment towards the brand (Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006). As a result, brand personality would lose its differentiation power in that it would no longer be a reflection of real or ideal consumer-self.

In light of the potential risks described above, we believe that it is essential to determine how alignment between company-defined and consumer-perceived brand personality can be measured and evaluated. An analysis of the scientific literature on brand personality has revealed a research gap in this area. Most of the studies thus far have dealt with the identification of brand personality dimensions from various perspectives. For example, consumers have been asked to

imagine brands as human beings and describe personality traits associated with those brands (Das, Datta, and Guin 2012). While Aaker (1997), Aaker, Benet-Martinez, and Garolera (2001), Caprara, Barbaranelli, and Guido (2001), Sung and Tinkham (2005) and Geuens, Weijters, and De Wulf (2009) have proposed ad hoc scales to articulate brand personality, other researchers have elaborated idiographic scales (D’Astous and Lévesque 2003; Helgeson and Supphellen 2004). All these studies are based on a combination of qualitative techniques (e.g., in-depth interviews, focus groups) and quantitative research methods. The former distinguish various themes of brand personality and the latter provide statistical analyses to measure and correlate the emerging themes while evaluating their reliability and validity. This line of research constitutes a fundamental conceptual basis upon which to construct further analyses that target other aspects of brand personality. For example, several studies have investigated dimensions of brand personality from the consumer’s perspective by determining what influences their perceptions. Maehle and Supphellen (2011) suggested that company sources (e.g., employees, CEO, product attributes) and symbolic sources (e.g., logo, endorsers and typical users) of brand personality have an impact on how it is perceived. Maehle, Otnes, and Supphellen (2011) found that dimensions of brand personality can be perceived differently, also on the basis of the product categories and brand characteristics to which they are related (e.g., quality, feminine/masculine nature). Ang and Lim (2006) demonstrated that metaphors in advertising may influence the perceived brand personality of utilitarian and symbolic products. In addition, brand personality appears to entail a high degree of perceived subjectivity. In this regard, Ivens and Valta (2012) found variation among the perception of brand personality across brands, but perhaps more interestingly, also within perceptions of individual brands. This strand of research encompasses all those studies that relate the perception of brand personality to consumer self-image.

In sum, all of the studies reviewed above have been useful to clarify the construct of brand personality and the way it relates to consumers. However, they have not tackled the important issue of how to compare the degree of alignment between the brand personality from the perspective of the company vs. the consumer in such a way that it can be measured and evaluated. An attempt in this direction was made by Malär et al. (2012 p 728) who distinguished the factors which transform an “intended brand personality” (how companies want consumers to perceive it) into a “realized brand personality” (how consumers actually perceive it). According to these authors (Malär et al. 2012 p 728), such factors lay in “the singularity of the brand personality profile, the competitive differentiation of the brand, the credibility of brand communication, consumers’ depth of product involvement, and consumers’ prior attitude”. While Malär et al.’s (2012) work has provided key insights into what can generate brand personality alignment, the aim of the present study is instead to show how such alignment can be systematically identified and measured. In this article, we propose a new interdisciplinary methodological approach to measure and evaluate the degree of alignment between

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