

THE BRAND PERSONALITY EFFECT: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

Traci L. Haigood, Texas A&M University

ABSTRACT

Since its emergence in the 1960s, the concept of brand personality has become an important area of research for marketing management. Despite strong interest in the subject, little is known about what exactly brand personality is, how it operates, or why it occurs in the first place. This manuscript provides clarification about the nature and scope of brand personality and offers a theoretical rationale for why and how brand personality develops. Further, an empirical investigation is conducted to determine if benefits accrue to brands with favorable brand personalities, as is commonly believed.

What is Brand Personality?

The terminology employed in this area of marketing lacks sufficient clarity. As noted by Tauber (1988), "marketers often use the terms brand equity, brand image, and brand personality interchangeably," (p. 26). However, they are distinct constructs. *Brand personality* has been defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker 1997, p. 347). Marguiles (1977) defines *brand identity* as "the sum of all the ways a company chooses to identify itself to all its publics," in contrast to *brand image*, which is described as "the perception of the company by these publics" (p. 66). In light of these definitions, the conceptualization of brand personality as it appears in this manuscript is that it is one of many associations comprising brand image, which is how consumers look upon the brand; in turn, brand image is encompassed by brand identity, which is the set of brand associations the firm aspires to create and project to consumers.

How Brand Personality Operates

This conceptualization of brand personality suggests that brand personality is one type of brand association in consumer memory. Defining brand personality as a memory association allows us to use theories of associative memory formulation (Anderson 1983; Wyer and Srull 1989) to suggest how brand personality may operate. The "associative network memory model" of memory consists of a set of nodes (i.e., stored information) and links away from these nodes. Through a process called "spreading activation" (Collins and Loftus 1975; Raaijmakers and Shiffrin 1981; Ratcliff and McKoon 1988), information flows among the parent node and other nodes in memory via the links. Brand personality,

then, may be conceptualized as one type of brand association in consumer memory (i.e., node) that may be accessed as the need or desire for a particular product arises, and that may influence consumer preferences.

Why Brand Personality is Formed

Given this conceptualization of how brand personality relates to the brand and other associations in consumer memory, a key question is, why would a consumer associate human characteristics with nonhuman objects such as brands in the first place? Research in cognitive psychology suggests that brand personality may be one instance of *anthropomorphism*, "the attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman things and events," (Guthrie 1997, p. 51). Anthropomorphism is thought to be an extremely pervasive phenomenon in the everyday thoughts and actions of most individuals. Common examples of anthropomorphism include speaking to plants, cars, or computers, seeing faces in clouds or knotty wood, or hearing a human presence in unidentified sounds in the night (Guthrie 1993). Various theories attempting to explain *why* humans anthropomorphize suggest that humans are willing to believe that a given product has favorable personality traits so that it will seem more *familiar*, more *comfortable*, and less *risky* than competing products with no distinct personality.

What Difference Does Brand Personality Make?

Despite a considerable amount of conjecture regarding the consequences associated with developing a strong, positive brand personality, there is little empirical evidence to support the premise that brand personality influences business performance or consumer behavior. We suggest that when product attributes are very similar for competing brands, brand personality may create a basis for differentiation. For parity products, then, the presence of claims communicating a strong, positive brand personality should lead to relatively higher product evaluations in comparison to the presence of claims that merely inform consumers about the product's features and benefits.

The results of this study provide support for the hypothesis that stimulus materials containing information about a product's physical attributes *and* its brand personality leads to higher brand attitudes and purchase intentions. This effect (i.e., the BP effect) occurred regardless of which brand personality dimension was

experimentally manipulated, suggesting that (for the stimulus product) *any* brand personality, so long as it is perceived as being strong and favorable, is likely to be associated with positive consequences.

This research has clear implications for practitioners, namely that a product that is largely indistinct (in

terms of its physical attributes) may be set apart from competing brands through the development of a strong, favorable brand personality. Since a brand personality that is perceived in a like manner by a group of target consumers is thought to be difficult to create and relatively enduring, brand personality may offer a distinct form of sustainable competitive advantage.

For further information contact:

Traci Haigood
Marketing Department
217L Wehner Building
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX 77843
Phone: (409) 862-3043
FAX: (409) 862-2811
E-Mail: t-haigood@tamu.edu
