

Brand personality as important element in creating strong brand equity

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Abstract

Today brands play an integral part in marketing strategy. This is because brands have become an important marketing component to the manufacturer and a rich source of information for the consumer. Nowadays, brands are thought of as complex entities and their expression includes the perception of their product characteristics, personality and values

Main mechanism for the personality of the brand lies in anthropomorphism, which means that people have a natural tendency to attribute human attributes and features items, events or everything else. From this viewpoint, a brand can act as a partner, so features like a person, and thus can cause an emotional response from consumers. Brand personality has to do with a set of human characteristics attributed to a brand. In particular, the brand personality concept, as one dimension of brand image has received increasing attention among researchers.

Particular brand personality has a symbolism or own expressive function compared with utilitarian function of other brand image's dimensions. It helps consumers to express themselves or their ideal self and thus the brand personality influences consumer choice. Customers can even create long-term relationships with brands. The strong relationship between customers and brand can influence in creating strong brand equity.

Brand equity is a key factor that can bring to the company: high profits, brand expansion opportunities, protection against competitors, effective communication strength but also leads to the strengthening of preferences consumer purchase intention and customer loyalty.

High brand equity generates a "differential effect", higher "brand knowledge", and a larger "consumer response", which normally leads to better brand performance, both from a financial and a customer perspective.

The paper is part of my PhD thesis and it will be the conceptual based in the conclusion of literature review.

Keywords: *brand, brand personality, customer, brand equity*

1. Introduction

Brands are omnipresent in today's society. They surround us in our everyday life (Kapferer 2007). But what exactly is a brand? According to the American Marketing Association, a brand is a "name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition". From a different angle, brands are defined as intangible assets that are able to produce benefit for both the internal and external stakeholders of the company – such as employees, customers, suppliers or civil society organizations. Again another definition argues that brands are a set of perceptions (Kapferer 2007). These definitions are only a few examples for the manifold angles from which researchers and practitioners approach the brand phenomenon. The diversity of brand definitions also suggests that different perspectives can be taken when exploring the world of brand, such as the legal, the management or the customer perspective.

Today brands play an integral part in marketing strategy. This is because brands have become an important marketing component to the manufacture and a rich source of information for the consumer (Aaker and Biel, 1993). For the manufacturer, brands provide a means of identification for ease of handling and tracing, a means of legal protection of unique features, and of endowing products with unique associations. Furthermore, brands signal quality levels to consumers, and can be effectively used to gain a competitive advantage and secure financial returns. To the consumer, a brand identifies the source of the product, which in turn, assigns responsibility to the product maker, and provides a promise or bond with the maker of the product (Lassar *et al.*, 1995). In addition, brands reduce consumer search costs and the consumer's perceived level of risk, and signals the quality of the product. The brand, therefore, becomes the purveyor of advantages to the consumer, in terms of both economic and symbolic value.

A number of theoretical frameworks have been suggested in an attempt to assist marketers to understand how consumers think about, and respond to brands, therefore enabling them to implement effective consumer-centred marketing activities and gain sustainable differentiation (Kapferer, 1992; Keller, 1993) However, these models have a distinct tendency to conceptualise the brand in terms of physical goods, with only minimal regard, or reference to the branding of services. Some models claim blanket representation of both goods and services branding (Keller, 1993; 1998; de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1996;) but the potential efficiency of these models could well be disputed on the grounds that marketing principles, for both goods and services, deviate due to the inherent differences between the two.

A brand does not exist by merely giving a product a name, a trademarked logo, unique packaging, a recognisable colour and other possible design features. As Holt (2004) explains, the name, logo and design are the material markers of a brand. If a product does not yet have a history, these markers are empty. They have no meaning, so there is no brand. Brand markers are essentially a blank screen on which to project a fantasy. Only over time, as ideas about the brand and experiences with it accumulate and fill the brand markers with meaning, does the

brand come to life.

Achenreiner and John (2003) studied the evolution of a child's understanding of brands and realised that younger children are more attuned to brands on a perceptual level (serving as a cue for products with familiar names and perceptual features), and that only later at some point of their personal development do conceptual meanings become salient (serving to evaluate a brand as such and not as the name of a product, or inferring the personality characteristics of the consumers owning it). The learning process also takes place in adults, however here it is not an adult's conceptualisation that develops, but rather his experience with, and knowledge of, a brand.

Only a decade ago, even brand managers observed brands as symbols and not as carriers of identity, personality and benefits. Brands were primarily seen as one time transaction facilitators, far away from the long-term relationship approach. Brands were also considered as the producers' property. It was implied that the producer is mostly responsible for the communication and the activities developed in the long run of the brand's reputation. This is far from the contemporary view in which brands belong to all the stakeholders, and all the stakeholders contribute to the creation of its identity. Today, brands are thought of as complex entities and their expression includes the perception of their product characteristics, personality and values (Veloutsou 2008).

The shallow view of brands is called a product-plus definition. In contrast, a profound understanding of brands is what they call a holistic definition. According to them, a holistic definition of a brand puts the focus on the brand itself, which encompasses much more than just the product. Such a definition views the brand as "a promise of the bundles of attributes that someone buys and that provides satisfaction".

Given the scientific and managerial need for proper phrasing and consistent terminology (Brown et al. 2006), and despite ongoing discourse on what a brand is and many existing incongruities on how to define it (Stern 2006), it is a fact that brand experts and the broader public have by now accepted the holistic view of branding. Such a view propagates and studies what has over the years been named brand identity.

Aaker (1996), proposed a brand identity system that encompasses the whole complexity surrounding how a brand evolves. His model emphasises the need to consider product-related associations, organization-related associations, personality, and symbolic associations in order to ensure that brand identity has texture and depth. He also differentiates between core and extended brand identity, and later with Joachimsthaler (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2002) adds an even more focussed dimension named "brand essence", which might be useful for brands that possess several compactly summarised core identities.

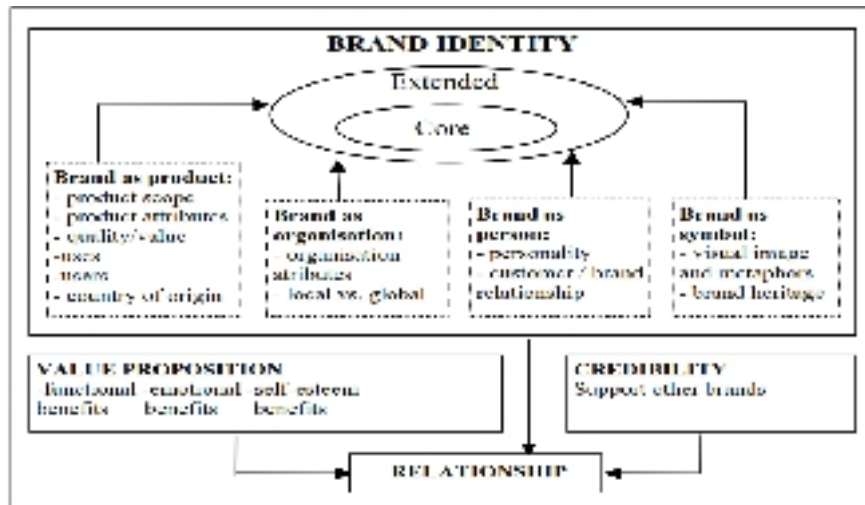


Figure 1. The Brand Identity System Source: Aaker (1996, p. 79)

As brand equity has emerged as a business priority and marketing imperative, so too has the need to understand and manage brand associations. The result has been the development of conceptual models of branding by academics and practitioners. While these models have been beneficial in simplifying brand complexity into a manageable number of components, they are inconsistent in their terminology, brand element segmentation, weighting assigned to specific elements, and relationships between the elements. For example, brand terminology in itself is confusing, with Biel (1992) talking about “brandscapes”, Aaker (1997) “brand personality”, Keller (1998) “brand image”, and Berry (2000) “brand meaning”.

2. Personality in Human Personality Scales

Psychologists define the substance of personality as ‘the systematic description of traits’ (McCrae & Costa, 1987), where traits are ‘relatively enduring styles of thinking, feeling, and acting’ (McCrae & Costa, 1997). After decades of research on a taxonomy of human personality, consensus now rests upon five dimensions that provide a complete description of personality: (1) Extraversion or Surgency (talkative, assertive, energetic), (2) Agreeableness (good-natured, cooperative, trustful), (3) Conscientiousness (orderly, responsible, dependable), (4) Emotional Stability versus Neuroticism (calm, not neurotic, easily upset), and (5) Openness or Intellect (intellectual, imaginative, independent-minded) (John & Srivastava, 1999).

The “Big Five” dimensions are a result of analyses of the natural language terms humans use to describe themselves and others (Goldberg, 1993). Although the development of the Big Five was not theory-driven, most important personality constructs as put forward by

personality theorists as diverse as Jung, Leary, Guilford, and Eysenk, are integrated in the Big Five structure, which increased trust in the Big Five (Sanz, Gil, Garcia-Vera, & Barrasa, 2008).

The idea to start from all personality terms that can be found in a dictionary stems from the assumption that natural language contains all relevant and salient personality traits (Allport, 1937). Starting from different sets of several hundred personality characteristics, a number of researchers found evidence of five recurrent factors (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Goldberg, 1992; Norman, 1967; etc). Although the individual items do not always load on the same factor and the

factors are not always identically labeled (Neuroticism/Emotional).

Stability has appeared as Emotionality and Affect. Openness/Intellect emerged as Imagination, Culture, Rebelliousness, and Unconventionality, and researchers have suggested to relabel Conscientiousness into Responsibility), the general contours of the Big Five appeared in most (cross-national) studies. The evidence is least convincing for the Openness factor, though (John & Srivastava, 1999).

3. Brand personality

With respect to products and brands, humans seem to feel a need to anthropomorphize objects to enhance interactions with the nonmaterial world. Consumers also appear to experience no problems in assigning human characteristics to brands (Aaker, 1997) or to build a relationship with brands (Fournier, 1998). Therefore, it is possible that the Big Five structure also extends to brand personality. In the next section, we review how researchers operationalize personality in current brand personality scales and which factor structures emerged in the past.

A first reason to focus on personality traits only in a brand personality scale is that brand identity frameworks become useless if no appropriate measurement instruments exist for each of its components. Secondly, results are no longer interpretable and become meaningless if, for example, a measurement instrument mingles sender and receiver characteristics. Further, consumers use brands with a strong brand personality to build relations with (Fournier, 1998) and to show their own personality (e.g., Belk, 1988). If a brand personality scale would resemble a human personality scale, it is easier for brand managers to translate consumer research into the most appropriate actions to create the “right” brand personality in view of their target group.

In particular, the brand personality concept, as one dimension of brand image (Plummer 1985), has received increasing attention among researchers (Aaker and Fournier 1995; Aaker 1997; Freling and Forbes 2005). Compared to other dimensions such as brand awareness, brand personality is the most significant antecedent of brand equity. Further studies show that the effect between brand personality and purchase intention is significant. From a managerial vantage point, the brand personality concept represents a strategic tool allowing the establishment of strong brands (Aaker 1996). However, in the marketing literature, disagreement still exists regarding the conceptualization and measurement of brand personality (Azoulay and Kapferer 2003; Austin, Siguaw, and Mattila 2003).

Brand personality represents a strategic tool allowing for the establishment of strong brands (Aaker 1996). The marketing sub-discipline which analyzes customer brand personality perception draws upon psychological research on the personality of human beings. A key outcome of fundamental research in human psychology has been the identification of the “Big Five Personality Factors” of human personality (Goldberg 1992). Marketing research attempts to identify comparable personality structures with regard to brands. The rationale for studying brand personality is that a significant link exists between brand personality and outcome variables such as preference (Aaker 1999), usage (Sirgy 1982), emotions (Biel 1993), trust and loyalty (Fournier 1994).

Moving beyond personality traits Aaker (1997) defined brand personality as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand”. So, in contrast to psychologists, Aaker defines

personality in terms of characteristics instead of traits. To construct a brand personality scale, Aaker (1997) started from Big Five items, but completed them with, amongst other, socio-demographic characteristics. Consequently, whereas Big Five researchers deliberately exclude gender and social class (McCrae & Costa, 1997), Aaker does include feminine, upper class, young, etc. Other researchers adopted Aaker's definition. They admitted that not all of their items are real personality traits, and came up with items such as good-looking, healthy, old, new, heavy, and big (Sung & Tinkham, 2005), or cost-effective and financially stable (Venable, Rose, Bush, & Gilbert, 2005).

By relaxing the definition of brand personality, Aaker's scale mixes up sender and receiver aspects, and embraces a mix of the different identity concepts. For example, 'the brand as a person' from Aaker and Joachimsthaler's model (2000) is mixed up with 'the brand as a product' and the 'brand as a symbol'. Also with respect to Keller's framework (Keller, 2008), 'brand personality' merges with 'user profiles'. Considering Kapferer's identity prism (Kapferer, 2008), Aaker's scale also pertains to inner values (Culture), physical traits (Physique), and typical user characteristics (Reflection) (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003).

Similar to Big Five studies on human personality, items like active, dynamic, adventurous, energetic, and lively loaded high on Extraversion. Unlike Big Five studies, innovative and creative also loaded high on Extraversion. As mentioned before, also for human personality, items sometimes shift from dimension although the main dimensions remain stable. However, the shift from Openness to Extraversion for innovative and creative seems to generalize across brand personality studies. In Aaker (1997; 2000), Aaker et al. (2001), and Milas and Mla i (2007), items like imaginative and creative also loaded exclusively on the Extraversion dimension.

Conscientiousness contained the items that we expected on the basis of the Big Five: consistent, reliable, trustworthy, down to earth, stable, responsible, rational, etc. However, also steady and genuine loaded high on Conscientiousness. Steady was meant to reflect emotional stability, but for brands it seems to capture more the steadiness of brand performance and becomes almost a synonym for stable. Genuine was expected to load on Openness. Its relation to reliable and trustworthy is perhaps responsible for the shift of dimensions.

Emotional Stability reduces to the emotionality part with items like emotional, romantic, and sentimental loading high on it. This is not surprising because most Stability items such as moody, jealous, touchy, and worrying classified as poor indicators of brand personality and did not figure in the 40 initial items. Also, hardly any other brand personality study reports a pure Emotional Stability factor. Moreover, in view of the importance attached to affect in consumer behaviour by many authors (Tsai, 2005, etc.), Emotionality seems a more relevant dimension for brands. This dimension also emerged in the brand personality study by Venable et al. (2005) with Nurturance tapping into aspects such as compassionate, caring, and loving. Furthermore, also in a former human personality study researchers used the label Emotionality for the Emotional Stability dimension (John & Srivastava, 1999).

Agreeableness consists of the items aggressive, bold and pretentious and consequently contains only the negatively phrased items of this Big Five dimension. Surprisingly, the items pleasant, kind, sympathetic, and friendly loaded on multiple dimensions and had stronger loading on Extraversion or Conscientiousness than Agreeableness. Several other researchers studying brand personality also report a negative Agreeableness dimension. d'Astous and

Lévesque (2003), for example, mention the dimension Unpleasantness, Davies et al. (2004) came up with Ruthlessness, and Smit et al. (2002) label one of their dimensions Annoying. Finally, with the items creative and innovative loading high on the Extraversion dimension, the Openness dimension reduces to the items contemporary and simple. This is in line (although negatively phrased) with the few brand personality studies that encountered an Openness factor. For human personality, the Openness dimension has also appeared as Unconventionality before (John & Srivastava, 1999).

The brand personality scale most widely used to-date was developed by Aaker (1997), who identified five possible dimensions or “*sets of human characteristics associated with a brand*” (p. 347): Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication and Ruggedness.

The five dimensions are broadly based on the ‘Big Five’ human personality structure (Norman, 1963; Tupes & Christal, 1958) and include fifteen ‘facets’. Aaker’s scale has been criticized for being based on a loose definition of personality (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003) and for including characteristics such as ‘upper class’ which confuse ‘brand personality’ with ‘user profiles’ (Geuens *et al.*, 2009). This confusion causes a construct validity problem (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). A second criticism of Aaker’s scale regards the weak discriminatory power of its factor structure for within- category analysis at the respondent level as well as at the brand-level (Austin, Siguaw, & Mattila, 2003; Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003; Bosnjak, Bochmann, & Hufschmidt, 2007), since the scale was developed from data aggregated across respondents for between-brand comparisons only.

In contrast, Geuens *et al.*’s (2009) five factor, twelve item measure of brand personality was designed to include only personality items and, as compared to Aaker’s measure, showed higher affinity to the ‘Big Five’ personality model. Geuens *et al.* demonstrated the appropriateness and reliability of their own scale for between brand and between respondent within category comparisons. Therefore they suggested its construct validity, as well as its practical advantage over Aaker’s scale, since within category comparisons of this kind are common in the marketing research practice (Austin *et al.*, 2003).

Aaker (1997) develops the concept of brand personality, or “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand”. She creates a reliable, valid, and generalizable brand personality measurement scale “based on an extensive data collection involving ratings of 114 personality traits on 37 brands in various product categories by over 600 individuals” (Keller 2003a). In her resulting framework, five dimensions are distinguished -the “big five”- that help to explain the symbolic and self-expressive functions of a brand:

4. Brand Equity

The brand equity concept has been mentioned in more than one of the previously analyzed models. But what exactly is brand equity? Brand equity, as first defined by Farquhar (1989), is “the ‘added value’ with which a given brand endows a product” (p.24). Apart from Farquhar’s first definition of brand equity, other definitions have appeared. According to Lassar, Mittal, and Sharma (1995), brand equity has been examined from a financial (Farquhar, Han, and Ijiri 1991; Simon and Sullivan 1993; Kapferer 1997, Doyle 2001b), and a customer-based perspective (Keller 1993; Chen 2001). In other words, financial

meaning from the perspective of the value of the brand to the firm, and customer-based meaning the value of the brand for the customer which comes from a marketing decision-making context (Kim, Kim, and An 2003).

Brand equity has also been defined as “the enhancement in the perceived utility and desirability a brand name confers on a product” (Lassar, Mittal and Sharma 1995). High brand equity is considered to be a competitive advantage since: it implies that firms can charge a premium; there is an increase in customer demand; extending a brand becomes easier; communication campaigns are more effective; there is better trade leverage; margins can be greater; and the company becomes less vulnerable to competition (Bendixen, Bukasa, and Abratt 2003). In other words, high brand equity generates a “differential effect”, higher “brand knowledge”, and a larger “consumer response” (Keller 2003a), which normally leads to better brand performance, both from a financial and a customer perspective.

So seeing literature and studies in the field of building brand equity noticed that there are a variety of definitions of the concept of brand equity. What is evident in all the studies is the fact that brand equity is considered as a key factor that can bring to the company: high profits, brand expansion opportunities, protection against competitors, effective communication strength but also leads to the strengthening of preferences consumer purchase intention and customer loyalty.

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