Sources of Brand Personality: a Survey of Ten Brands

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The personality of brands (their human-like characteristics) may strongly influence brand attitudes and purchase intentions. A number of studies have addressed measurement issues and effects of brand personality. However, there is lack of research on how brand personalities are formed. We hypothesize that brand personality dimensions (Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness) differ in their nature and come from different sources. A survey of ten brands was conducted to test this assumption. The results show strong support for our hypothesis. Moreover, we found systematic differences regarding which sources are relevant for building each dimension.

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stimulus domain, resulting in devaluation of actual experience and over reliance on category knowledge (see Tulving 1972). In contrast, novel experiences exhibit a different hedonic calculus over time. In forming an immediate, global evaluation, people are less able to integrate the moments in a novel, partitioned experience. However, after a delay, they are able to integrate the experience because this greater temporal distance is associated with more holistic processing (Liberman and Trope 1998). Thus, I predict that for novel experiences, gestalt characteristics of the experience become more important in determining remembered utility over time, but for mundane experiences, gestalt characteristics of the experience become less influential over time.

The proposed mechanism has some preliminary support in the literature. Ariely and Carmon (2000), and Ariely (1998) show a muted effect of peak pain on retrospective evaluation when the focal experience is one of many such encounters with the stimulus domain. In their study, participants were long-term patients in a bone marrow transplant unit. These patients were asked to report overall evaluations of the pain experienced during a medical procedure. Long-term patients tended to provide retrospective evaluations that were based less on their online ratings of the focal experience. While these authors did not test the role of stimulus familiarity directly, their results would suggest that new patients in this unit would have a different evaluation process than long-term patients.

I tested the proposed mechanism with a controlled experiment. Participants were asked to listen to five aversive sounds for a total duration of five minutes. While listening to the sounds, participants provided their real-time ratings of the pleasure or displeasure they derived from listening to the sounds. As a between-participants manipulation, some participants listened to a mundane ‘jackhammer’ sound and others listened to a novel ‘electric surge’ sound at the final position of the five-sound sequence. These two sounds were selected to be the most unpleasant sound of each set. These peak sounds were pre-tested and validated with the same participants for perceived familiarity; the jackhammer sound was much more familiar to participants than the electric surge sound, though these two sounds were rated as equally aversive. After listening to all sounds, participants provided a global evaluation of the experience. Two days later, they were e-mailed and asked to provide another retrospective evaluation of the five-sound sequence. The results demonstrated that participants who listened to the mundane jackhammer sound as their peak sound tended to report global evaluations that were heavily determined by this peak. However, after a delay, their retrospective evaluations did not depend on their online evaluations of the peak, as would be predicted by the snapshot model. In contrast, participants who listened to the novel electric surge sound as their peak sound tended to report global evaluations that were not based on online ratings. However, after a delay, their retrospective evaluations were heavily predicted by their online evaluations.

Findings from this first study motivate further work on the role of stimulus novelty in retrospective evaluations of experience. In addition to testing the proposed mechanism for partitioned experiences, this research aims to address more broadly how consumers evaluate experiences they are already familiar with. This issue is relevant to marketers, because consumers regularly encounter the same experiences over and over again. For instance, a consumer may frequent the same restaurant, barber shop, and website. How might such a consumer arrive at a global evaluation of each repeat experience? Would the evaluation process for a familiar experience differ from that for the first encounter, when the experience was fresh, unfamiliar and novel? Further research will tackle these and other questions.

Works Cited

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A brand, like a person, can be characterized as being “dependable”, “lively”, “exotic” or “old fashioned”. Brand personality is defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker 1997). Aaker developed a measurement scale of brand personality consisting of five dimensions and 42 traits. This scale, or parts of it, has been used in a number of studies of consumer behavior (e.g. Okazaki...
2006; Supphellen and Gronhaug 2003; Venable and Rose 2003). The primary focus of these studies has been either on the effects of brand personality or on measurement issues. Less attention has been devoted to the sources of brand personality.

The traditional view is that personality traits become associated with a brand through the people who represent it—such as the typical user of a brand, the company’s employees or CEO, and the brand’s endorsers. This way to form brand personality is described as the direct way, because the personality traits of the people associated with the brand are transferred directly to the brand (McCracken 1989). However, perceptions of brand personality traits have a more diverse origin. They can be formed not only directly but also indirectly through product-related attributes, product category associations, brand name, symbol or logo, advertising style, price, and distribution channel (Batra, Lehmann, and Singh 1993). Thus, there are diverse sources of brand personality and the question is how marketers can understand and use them to develop desired personalities for their brands.

The Aaker scale encompasses five different dimensions: Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness (Aaker 1997). We suggest that these dimensions differ in their nature and are typically formed by different sources. A survey was conducted to test this assumption. A pretest was conducted in order to select appropriate brands for the main study. To qualify for the main study, the selected brands should have high scores on one of the five brand personality dimensions. First, a list of ten well-known brands with presumably high scores on the Sincerity dimension was developed. Ten respondents (undergraduate students) were asked to choose the two brands which in their opinion scored highest on Sincerity. The same procedure was used for brands with presumably high scores on the other four dimensions of brand personality (Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness). As a result of the pre-test, ten brands were chosen for the main study: Lego and Ikea (Sincerity), Apple and MTV (Excitement), Volvo and IBM (Competence), Rolex and Gucci (Sophistication), Jeep and Harley-Davidson (Ruggedness).

For the main study we generated an extensive list of possible sources of brand personality based on the existing literature (McCracken 1989; Batra, Lehmann, and Singh 1993; Aaker 1997) and our own experience from doing research on brand personality. The list included fourteen different sources: company’s employees, company’s managing director, endorser, typical brand user, product attributes, own experience when using the product, product category, brand name, brand logo, advertising style, price, retail stores, country of origin, and company’s moral values.

One hundred thirty-nine undergraduates participated in the main study. First, the concept of brand personality and brand personality scale were explained to the respondents. Then, they were asked to evaluate to what extent the suggested sources of brand personality were relevant for their perception of brand personality characteristics for each brand. A 7-point scale (“7”=“Extremely relevant”; “1”=“Not at all relevant”) was used. After comparing the relevance of different sources of brand personality for every personality dimension we observed the following pattern of results. For Lego and Ikea the most relevant sources of Sincerity were own experience when using the product ($M_{exp}$=5.90), company’s moral values ($M_{mor}$=5.58), and price ($M_{price}$=5.52). For Apple and MTV the most relevant sources of Excitement were endorser ($M_{endor}$=5.71), company’s employees ($M_{emp}$=5.58), and advertising style ($M_{ad}$=5.41). For Volvo and IBM the most relevant sources of Competence were company’s employees ($M_{emp}$=5.80), company’s managing director ($M_{dir}$=5.59), and product attributes ($M_{att}$=5.45). For Rolex and Gucci, the most relevant sources of Sophistication were endorser ($M_{endor}$=6.11), typical brand user ($M_{use}$=5.77), brand name ($M_{name}$=5.75) and logo ($M_{logo}$=5.71). For Jeep and Harley-Davidson, the most relevant sources of Ruggedness were typical brand user ($M_{use}$=5.65), product attributes ($M_{att}$=5.22), endorser ($M_{endor}$=5.21), and logo ($M_{logo}$=5.20). Most of the differences between the relevance of different sources were found statistically significant ($p<0.05$).

The results support our assumption that brand personality dimensions differ in their nature and come from different sources. The most important sources of Competence and Sincerity are company-level sources such as company’s moral values, the CEO and company employees. Also, price (Sincerity) and product experiences play a role.

Sophistication and Ruggedness seem to be formed to a large extent by brand symbols such as endorser, typical brand users, brand name and brand logos. Ruggedness has one more source (product attributes). The rugged nature of brands such as Jeep and Harley-Davidson is partly communicated through their special attributes (high speed, rough design, etc.).

Excitement seems to be formed by a blend of company-level sources (employees), symbols (endorser) and advertising style. It is somewhat surprising that product/service experience is not a more relevant source of Excitement. Apparently, for the two brands included in the study (Apple and MTV) the excitement represented by other people (endorser, employees and people in the ads) is more relevant than our subjects’ own personal experience of excitement.

This study of ten brands demonstrated that brand personality dimensions tend to come from different sources. Moreover, we found systematic differences regarding which sources are relevant for building each dimension. The next step will be to test the generalizability of the results with a larger number of brands and examine the psychological processes behind the observed patterns.

References