Theoretical Foundation of Brand Personality For Postmodern Branding Dynamics: a Critical Review and Research Agenda

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This article attempts to contribute to a solid theoretical base for postmodern branding dynamics with a mediation of a popular market-oriented branding concept: brand personality. While re-illuminating market-oriented functions and common misconceptions about brand personality and discussing the limitation of its prevailing theoretical approach, a new and expansive conceptual ground has been suggested for brand personality upon the theory of consumption symbolism, a rising sub-stream in the consumer research literature, which speculates upon the meaning production and consumption in the postmodern marketplace. Based on its marketing-homegrown and interdisciplinary perspectives, some new research agendas have been suggested for the future academic approaches for deepening the academic understandings of the dynamics of brand personality and of the postmodern branding.

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Abstract
This article attempts to contribute to a solid theoretical base for postmodern branding dynamics with a mediation of a popular market-oriented branding concept: brand personality. While re-illuminating market-oriented functions and common misconceptions about brand personality and discussing the limitation of its prevailing theoretical approach, a new and expansive conceptual ground has been suggested for brand personality upon the theory of consumption symbolism, a rising sub-stream in the consumer research literature, which speculates upon the meaning production and consumption in the postmodern marketplace. Based on its marketing-homegrown and interdisciplinary perspectives, some new research agendas have been suggested for the future academic approaches for deepening the academic understandings of the dynamics of brand personality and of the postmodern branding.

1. Conceptual Foundation
1.1 Brand personality in postmodern branding dynamics
Meanings of products play a critical role in contemporary consumers’ choices. In the postmodern marketplace, commercial goods often perform as social identity markers, as well as carriers of functional qualities (McCracken, 1986). With a myriad of diverse meanings and symbols floating in the marketplace, consumers need heuristics for their decision-making regarding such non-utilitarian product—and brand—attributions. Marketers and managers need to make their branding activities compatible with their customers’ interests (e.g., Solomon, 2003), and they require a systematic and organization-wide management for non-utilitarian facets of a brand. Brand personality has been devised and gradually elaborated upon to fulfill some of those needs in a more structured manner.

Brand personality, generally referring to the human characteristics associated with a brand (e.g., Aaker, 1997), is a branding concept that explains a facet of branding dynamics (e.g., Batra et al., 1993; Carr, 1996; Kapferer, 1998; Upshaw, 1995; Keller, 2001; 2003) which is about (some) non-utilitarian brand attributions (e.g., Keller, 1993). Brand personality is the core of postmodern branding dynamics, which fulfills a multi-faceted function in consumer-organization as well as within-organization communications (Davis, 2000; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Silverstein & Fiske, 2005). Brand personality serves as an effective consumer-organization communication tool. It allows an organization to identify consumers’ brand perceptions—even the hidden ones—by its projection techniques with (human) metaphor (Dent-Read & Szokolszky, 1993; Zaltman, 1997). Marketers can then use consumers’ perceptions to make their marketing strategies become more focused on consumers. It also provides a useful research method for consumer studies. On the other hand, brand personality serves as an organization-wide guide for brand meaning communication. It helps marketers communicate brand meaning which otherwise might not be easy to understand and/or share (among marketers). By adding robust, descriptive, and realistic explanations for core yet abstract brand identity, brand personality makes the brand meaning understandable and contemporary (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000).

The most unique and useful brand personality function comes from a synergy of these two functions above. As a result, it helps marketers to actualize market-oriented and consumer-empowered brand management, which are the most critical in postmodern branding dynamics (Simonson, 2003; Wathieu et al., 2002).

1.2 Trait-based theoretical approach: Limitation
There have been great amounts of practitioners’ efforts expended in identifying “what brand personality is” and “how it works.” The prevailing research stream has been based on the trait-theory of psychology. Almost every brand personality study has adopted the trait theory (recently more focusing on the five factor theory) that was originally devised for human personality in psychology (e.g., Aaker, 1997; Carprara et al., 2001; Sung & Tinkham, 2005).

Having contributed to gaining fundamental understanding into brand personality and boosting academic interests in the subject, however, the trait-based brand personality approaches have been questioned for their incomplete explanation of the whole dynamics of brand personality (Sweeney & Brandon, 2006). For example, the trait-based approach has been examined for its critical limitation in explaining some core functions of brand personality, such as identifying brands with their symbolic attributions within the same product category (e.g., Romaniuk et al., 2003; Austin et al., 2003). As such, brand personality lacks a complete theoretical understanding about its unique functioning, and there has been a conceptual discrepancy between the theoretical and empirical developments of brand personality (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003).

This limitation is caused partly by the intrinsic limitations of traits (e.g., Pervin, 2003; Braun-LaTour et al., 2007), but moreover, it is mainly due to some common misconceptions amongst academics. Previously, academics contended that brand and human personality share the same conceptual framework as well as scales—which is not true. Brand and human personalities are not analogous—brand personality is beyond the lexical scope of human personality (Sung & Tinkham, 2005). As a marketing-homegrown concept, brand personality demands a marketing-homegrown theory (Rook, 2006)—which the prevailing theories are not.

2. The theory of consumption symbolism: A market-oriented approach
2.1 Suggesting a new theoretical base: The theory of consumption symbolism
This article suggests a new and expansive theoretical base for brand personality—theory of consumption symbolism, which is a marketing-homegrown research stream with an interdisciplinary academic basis. With all the diverse approaches and terms, scholars have consistently pursued the same goal—to identify and tabulate symbols beneath the surface of consumer goods (e.g., Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, 1988; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992; Holt, 1997; 2004; Kate, 2002; Mick, 1986). The theory of consumption symbolism refers to a rising research sub-stream in the marketing literature, which aims at identifying the mechanisms of meaning of consumption in the contemporary marketplace and its relation with consumer behavior. To address the market-oriented research topics, the theory of...
consumption symbolism has its roots in diverse basic disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, anthropology, economics, and sociology.

2.2 Application to brand personality studies

In-depth understanding of brand personality and its market-oriented mechanisms can be pursued within the theoretical base of the theory of consumption symbolism. This article presents two major new concepts that are required for the new brand personality studies to actualize market-oriented approaches. With the base of the theory, studies about brand personality can be expected to gain a market-oriented (i.e., context-oriented and consumer-oriented) perspective.

Context-oriented. According to the theory of consumption symbolism, the meaning of brand is established by consumers by being projected the everyday life stories of the consumers, which are inevitably contextual. The meanings of products should be understood and decoded based on “contextual” understandings that are essential in addressing consumption symbolism (Holt, 1997; Kates, 2002)–as should brand personality. However, the previous trait-based approaches considered brand personality with regard to customers’ demands for “traits,” which are inner-related and psychiatric characteristics of a human–therefore it is not apparently related to consumer behaviors in the marketplace. Therefore, the conceptual references of brand personality studies should be interdisciplinary, instead of single-disciplinary (e.g., psychology).

Consumer-oriented. Furthermore, studies about brand personality should maintain consumer-oriented perspectives. According to the theory, meaning of products should be understood from consumers’ perspectives, not from others, since the meaning is generated and interpreted by consumers themselves. What has been largely missed in the trait-based approach is that, with few exceptions, they have tried to build a conceptual framework for brand personality by referring other concepts in other areas. Brand personality is not a concept that has adopted other concepts and theories (e.g., traits) from different disciplinary (e.g., psychology), but rather it is a concept that is developed by customers within a marketplace (e.g., Upshaw, 1995). The consumer-oriented approach can also be actualized with the experimental consumer research methods suggested by scholars in the theory of consumption symbolism, such as hermeneutics (e.g., Thompson, 1997) or narrative approach (e.g., Bruan-LaTour et al., 2007).

3. Discussion and Research agenda

3.1 A new conceptual framework with a multi-method approach

To start up new theoretical approaches for brand personality, brand personality needs a new conceptual framework from the new theoretical base. To be useful in the marketplace, the new conceptual framework should be able to explain the meaning and symbols that are projected to brands (with human metaphor) by the majority of consumers. Based on its common definitions (e.g., Aaker, 1997), the conceptual boundary of brand personality can literally have all the human characteristics that consumers associate with a brand–traits and personality are only part of them. To investigate this, it may require a fundamental literature review regarding a basic question: what the human characteristics are–and this can be narrowed down into actual structural components, based on consumers’ perception about brand personality. This requires exploratory qualitative studies with a ground theory (e.g., Charmaz, 2006).

3.2 A systematic approach on non-utilitarian brand management

On many occasions, management skills regarding brand meaning have largely been left unidentified. Only a few celebrated gurus can figure them out on the basis of their intuitions and instincts. With the elaborated conceptual framework of brand personality, it is expected to reveal and explain some essential functions of brand personality (e.g., non-utilitarian differentiation points among brands) in a more structured manner–which gives useful insight for practitioners as well as academicians.

Useful brand personality measurements can also be identified based on the framework, but it requires in-depth understandings about the social and cultural contexts surrounding the marketplace. Some structural components of brand personality would be highly contextual, and others (e.g., traits) not. Eventually, this also brings us to the idea of multi-level in the structural components of brand personality (e.g., those that are more stable and essential and others that are more contextual).

Moreover, practically useful brand personality measurements should be different according to diverse contexts, and it also derives to studies about cultural difference which can give useful inspiration for global marketing.

3.3 Decoding brand meanings with the mediation of brand personality

Finally, brand personality can be a mediator for understanding brand meanings and the dynamics of postmodern branding. There have been a great contribution for brand meaning with a provocative approaches (e.g., Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000), theoretical explanations about brand meaning and the non-utilitarian characteristics of brands are still in its infancy stage, and the developments have mostly been accomplished only in practical marketing circles. With a well-developed conceptual framework of brand personality, some aspects of the non-functional attributions of brands, or of the brand meaning, or the consumption symbolism, can be decoded.

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