Forming Brand Personality: Company-Based Vs. Consumer-Based Sources

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Brand personality is a popular topic in the marketing literature. However, there has been little research on how consumers form their perceptions of brand personality. Moreover, the existing literature does not pay enough attention to consumer-based sources of brand personality. We conducted sixty-six interviews in order to find out which sources are relevant for forming the five brand personality dimensions of the Aaker’s scale (1997). The results show that consumer-based sources play an important role for Sincerity and Competence, whereas company-based sources are dominant for creating Sophistication and Ruggedness. Excitement is shaped by a blend of consumer- and company-based sources.

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stressors (e.g., having too many options) and in-store ambient stressors (e.g., music). However, the question of why these factors were perceived as stressors in the first place largely was ignored.

In considering the convergence of these two theories, we note that at least two elaborations are required. First, a greater emphasis is needed on the importance of emotion in studying perceived risk. According to Taylor (1974) “risk is often perceived to be painful in that it may produce anxiety” (Taylor 1974, p.54), yet the role emotion plays in perceived risk has generally been ignored (Chaudhuri 1997). In the second area for elaboration, we recommend greater emphasis on the concept of optimal challenge, and with it potentially positive emotional reactions to risk. Within CAT, emotions associated with challenges include eagerness, excitement and exhilaration. Perceived risk in the consumer behaviour literature focuses almost exclusively on the negative consequence associated with uncertainty. We suggest that both the positive and negative outcomes should be considered in assessing perceived risk (Dholakia 1997). The perceived risk literature highlights the importance of uncertainty as a source of stress, but we believe that both certainty and uncertainty might have positive or negative consequences. For example, uncertainty might be perceived as a welcome challenge to the recreational shopper; product certainty might predispose a reluctant shopper to frustration if unanticipated delays occur.

We used classical grounded theory to inform this perspective. We interviewed 35 men who said they hate shopping. Emerging from this rich data was a complex relationship between stress, ability, and behaviour that we propose is mediated by the men’s level of certainty. For example, in the context of gift shopping, certainty of a negative outcome affected expenditure of effort, one man said:

No matter what you buy it’s the wrong size or it’s the wrong style or it’s I don’t need that. What the hell do you get? I just end up getting something. If she doesn’t like it she will return it.

Uncertainty also affected risk taking, with anticipated time loss outweighing the potential benefits of shopping, as in this excerpt:

I won’t go to a store looking for things that might be there. It’s too chancy. There might be nothing there or a special I don want. I’ve just wasted half an hour.

A focus on positive and negative consequences associated with challenges and uncertainty has the potential to increase our understanding of the differences between enjoyable and stressful shopping situations. By integrating the literature on cognitive appraisal theory and perceived risk, and elaborating on the notion of the emotional processes accompanying challenges and uncertainties, future research can address not only the question of what shopping events are perceived stressful but why they are stressful for one shopper and enjoyable challenges for another.

References
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In the modern consumer society we buy products not only for what they can do but also for what they symbolize. Brands encapsulate social meaning, and that allows us to use them to acquire or reinforce our identities (Johar and Sirgy 1991). Therefore, brand personality (brand’s human-like characteristics) becomes one of the essential features that we consider while choosing a brand.
Not surprisingly, brand personality concept has got a lot of attention in marketing literature. However, the primary focus of previous studies has been either on understanding the effects of brand personality or on measurement issues related to the construct (Aaker 1997; Azoulay and Kapferer 2003; Govers and Schoormans 2005). Although it is also important to understand how consumers form their perceptions of brand personality, there has been little research in this direction (Batra, Lehmann, and Singh 1993). Moreover, the existing literature considers mostly company-based sources of brand personality such as company’s employees, company’s director, brand’s endorsers (McCracken 1989), product-related attributes, product category associations, brand name, symbol or logo, advertising style, price, and distribution channel (Batra et al. 1993). Little, if any, attention has been paid to the possible consumer-based sources.

Nevertheless, consumer’s voice is becoming more and more influential so that companies cannot just ignore it. Consumer based sources are important for forming brand personality both before and after consumer purchases the brands. Before the purchase take place, word-of-mouth effect will be significant in shaping consumers’ understanding of the brand personality proposed by the company through the marketing mix. The formation of numerous discussion groups and brand online communities extend and strengthen the word-of-mouth effect from close others to a much larger group of people connected through a virtual network (McWilliam 2000). Compared to the company based sources, word-of-mouth will be treated as a more reliable information sources by consumers (Keller 2007). After the purchase and consumption, consumers’ first hand experiences with the brands will be critical for them to reject or reinforce the proposed brand personality.

Brand personality encompasses five different dimensions: Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness (Aaker 1997). We expect that consumer-based sources can be relevant for forming at least some of them.

Thus, the purpose of the current study is to find out which sources are relevant for forming different dimensions of brand personality. A set of sixty six semi-structured interviews was conducted to address these issues. Every respondent got questions about two different dimensions of brand personality. So, we got between twenty-five and twenty-seven answers for each dimension.

We started the interviews by explaining the concept of brand personality and the chosen brand personality dimensions in particular. Then we asked respondents to name a couple of brands that they think score high on a particular dimension. Respondents also explained their reasons why they thought so. Finally, respondents were asked to look on the list of possible sources of brand personality and choose five of them which they think are especially relevant for a particular personality dimension. Our final list included thirteen company-based and four consumer-based sources such as company’s employees, company’s managing director, endorser, typical brand user, product attributes, product category, brand name, brand logo, advertising style, price, retail stores, country of origin, company’s moral values, own experience when using the product, on-line consumer community, word-of-mouth, and own value system/own opinions.

Both consumer-based sources and company-based sources were found to be important for forming brand personality. But they contributed differently in different dimensions. The results show that consumer-based sources such as own experience, word-of-mouth, and own value system play an important role for forming Sincerity and Competence dimensions. According to the respondents, “when you experience the brand by your own you can see if the brand is competent or not… you can check it…”, “…It overshadows what I hear from others”. However, “rumours [word-of-mouth] tell how good they [the brand] are” and “rumours influence what I believe”.

On the other hand, company-based sources such as advertising style, brand name, product attributes, and typical brand user are dominant for forming Sophistication and Ruggedness dimensions. “It is all about the brand and its image”, mentions one of the respondents. As for Excitement, it is formed by a blend of consumer- and company-based sources (e.g. advertising style, product attributes, word-of-mouth, own experience, and brand logo).

Thus, consumer-based sources are highly relevant for Sincerity and Competence but at the same time do not almost have any effect on Sophistication and Ruggedness. One of the reasons could be that consumers cannot accurately assess many of the brand’s features related to Competence and Sincerity (e.g. product quality, product performance, product lifetime, value-for-money) before they purchase the brand. These features are the experience qualities which cannot be determined before consumers try the brand themselves (Nelson 1974). At the same time, Sincerity and Competence are vital features for every brand; they represent a kind of hygiene factors (Herzberg 1974) that any brand should have. Consumers being risk averse do not trust only company-based sources when they judge these dimensions; they need to get the confirmation from more credible sources such as their own experience or word-of-mouth (Keller 2007).

Sophistication and Ruggedness are of symbolic and intangible nature. They correspond to intersubjective quality emphasizing accepted cultural norms, often in the form of symbols and images (Pirsig 1999). These features are difficult to judge just from the direct contact with a product itself, and they are mostly based on the images and symbols which companies provide in their promotional campaigns. Excitement is related to both what you feel or think while experiencing a brand (subjective quality) and product characteristics like special technical features or exciting appearance (objective quality). Therefore, both company- and consumer-sources are relevant.

Thus, the current study indicates which sources tend to be more relevant for forming each brand personality dimension. Moreover, we have found out that consumer-based sources are extremely relevant for some dimensions, especially for Sincerity and Competence. However, further research is necessary to get a better understanding of how consumers form their brand personality judgments.

References