Does the Devil Really Wear Prada? Social Relations Analysis of Brand and Human Personalities

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Our research draws upon theoretical work on brand personality, self-congruity, symbolic interactionism, and interpersonal perception to further explicate human-brand personality associations. We introduce the Social Relations Model (SRM, Kenny 1988) as a methodology that enables us to consider the social meaning of brands across individuals. We report on studies designed to identity automobile and clothing brands for which consumers have a “consensus” brand personality, and then we use those brands in a round-robin experiment consistent with the SRM. Our work contributes both theoretically and methodologically to the research on understanding social perceptions of brands and their users.

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Nearly a half-century ago, Levy (1959) advanced the idea that brands are reflective symbols of the self. In the ensuing years, marketers and consumer researchers have focused on leveraging and understanding the many facets of brand symbolism. Aaker’s seminal work (1997) linking brand personality characteristics to human personality characteristics is noteworthy, and has served as the bases for others’ investigation of these associations (Caprara, Barbaranelli, and Guido; Johar, Sengupta, and Aaker 2005). This human-brand personality research is directly related to other work that has considered how consumers use brands to communicate something about their own identity (Belk 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Kleine, Kleine and Kerman 1993), as well as to reinforce personality and attitudes toward themselves (Escalas and Bettman 2003; Fennis and Pruyin 2007; McCracken 1988).

Indeed companies expend great efforts to create brand images that are meaningful to consumers (Gobé 2007), and research on self-congruity theory (Sirgy 1982; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler 1992) argues that consumer brand purchasing behavior is determined by the interaction between perceptions of the product and the personality of the consumer; that is, consumers prefer brands with a symbolic function that is congruous with their self-identity. Thus, individuals often engage in selective exposure behaviors that maximize both, consistency and pleasure of self-expression. Fennis, Pruyin and Maasland (2005, 376) found a transfer effect from brand personality to consumer personality and concluded that “brands are capable to ‘make us who we are.’ Not only are brands chosen by consumers because they highlight some aspect of who we are or want to be, they also shape or highlight these aspects.” Aaker (1999) documented that self-schematic traits lead to stronger brand preferences; that is, people prefer brands with which they share personality characteristics.

Another important theoretical aspect of the human-brand personality association is symbolic interactionism (Solomon 1983). Specifically, Solomon (1983, 320) focused on three perspectives: 1) a consumer’s self-concept is based on perceptions of the responses of others, 2) a consumer’s self-concept functions to direct behavior, and 3) a consumer’s perception of the responses of others to some degree reflects those responses. Relatedly, research has demonstrated that consumers evaluate and compare their self-concept with the image of a stereotypic and generalized brand user (Sirgy 1982). Further, some have argued that individuals may have a preference for one brand over the other because they perceive themselves as similar to and identify with people who are generally perceived to use that brand. Further, numerous studies have supported this in-group brand association effect (Ericksen and Sirgy 1992; Heath and Scott 1998; Hong and Zinkhan 1995; Sirgy 1985).

Although there have been many contributions to the human-brand personality association within the past decade, research has not captured the duality of human-brand personality in a social context. The purpose of our research is to draw and build upon theoretical work on brand personality, self-congruity theory, symbolic interactionism, and interpersonal perception, as well as the social relations modeling work (Kenny 1994; Kenny and Albright 1987) to delve into the association of brand and human personality characteristics. We introduce the Social Relations Model (SRM) as a means to consider the social meaning and perception formation as dynamic processes, and where...
the self is both, a perceiver and a target of perception. The SRM model “permits simultaneous estimation of dispositional, situational, and interactional determinants of behavioral phenomena” by employing round-robin experimental design, and recognizes individuals to be both, a target and a perceiver (Malloy and Kenny 1986, 222). Specifically, the social relations modeling approach enables us to assess dyadic data to address the questions such as: If a person is seen to be extravedted, is she also associated with extraverted brands? If a person sees herself to be extraverted and prefers extraverted brands, do others also see her as extraverted and preferring those brands? If a person sees herself using some particular brand, does she see others using the same brand? To further assess the SRM and its contributions related to understanding the human-brand associations, we conducted two studies.

The purpose of study 1 was to identify brands in the automobile and clothing categories that had a “consensus” personality. Study 1 involved two data collections. First, 70 undergraduates at a large northeastern university participated in an online study in which they rated 24 automobiles and 24 clothes brands (34 semantic differential items) to with regard to the Big Five personality characteristics–Agreeableness, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness (Goldberg 1990) and two additional traits, Sophistication and Ruggedness, identified by Aaker (1997). We identified automobile and clothing brands with a high Cronbach’s alphas for the personality scale, high means, and low variances. In the second data collection, 40 MBA students were provided with a definition of the seven personality characteristics and asked via a free association task to name a brand that they associated with each personality characteristic. Based on these data collections, we identified 22 brands, 11 each for automobiles (i.e., extroversion–Volvo; emotional stability–Volvo; ruggedness–Hummer) and clothing (i.e., extroversion–NIKE; emotional stability–Old Navy; ruggedness–Levis). Consistent with the SRM in study 2, we conducted a round-robin experiment, with 25 groups consisting of 3 or 4 members per group. The group participants (who were not previously acquainted with one another) were asked to interact with one another for ten minutes, so that each participant could have an initial understanding of the individual’s personality characteristics. After the introduction period, each participant rated each group member on 25 semantic differential personality items. Next, the participants reported the likelihood (7-point Likert-scale) of brand use for their group members for each of the 22 brands (from study 1), and then reported their own likelihood of use. Finally, group participants were whether they perceived other group members as thinking they would use the brand. Our work contributes by extending the theoretical and empirical work related to human-brand associations, and our findings provide useful insights about the social meanings of brands.

References