We Are What We Drive: a Srm Analysis of Human-Brand Personality Associations

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We draw upon self-congruity, symbolic interactionism, and interpersonal perception theories to model brand/human personality interdependence. We identified ten automobile brands for which consumers have some shared agreement about brand personality, and conducted a round-robin experiment with twenty three/four person limited acquaintance groups. Group members rated themselves and each other on seven personality characteristics, and answered: “How likely do you see yourself driving [brand]?” “How likely do you see [group member] driving [brand]?” and “How likely do you think that [group member] sees you driving [brand]?” Using the Social Relations Model, we assess the extent to which consumers perceive brands and consumers as sharing personality characteristics.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We draw upon self-congruity, symbolic interactionism, and interpersonal perception theories to model brand/human personality interdependence. We identified ten automobile brands for which consumers have some shared agreement about brand personality, and conducted a round-robin experiment with twenty three/four person limited acquaintance groups. Group members rated themselves and each other on seven personality characteristics, and answered: “How likely do you see yourself driving [brand]?” “How likely do you see [group member] driving [brand]?” and “How likely do you think that [group member] sees you driving [brand]?” Using the Social Relations Model, we assess the extent to which consumers perceive brands and consumers as sharing personality characteristics.

Nearly a half-century ago, Levy (1959) advanced the idea that brands are reflective symbols of the self. More recent work has considered how consumers use brands to create and communicate identity (Belk 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Kleine, Kleine, and Kerrman 1993; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995; Sirgy 1982; Solomon 1983), as well as to reinforce attitudes toward self (Escalas and Bettman 2003; McCracken 1988). Aaker’s seminal work (1997) on the association of human personality characteristics to brands has been extremely influential in spurring the dialogue about how companies and customers anthropomorphize their brands. In the ensuing years, marketers and consumer researchers have focused on leveraging and understanding brand personality, that is, the set of human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker 1999; Aaker, Benet-Martinez, and Garolera 2001; Johar, Sengupta, Aaker 2005). As a consequence, we are lead to contemplate questions about consumers’ brands and their personality characteristics, such as: “Do you infer an individual’s personality based on his/her ownership of specific brands? Similarly, when you observe an individual’s personality, do you associate that individual with a specific brand? Finally, are your opinions unique, or are they shared by others?

Several theories of the self, individually and in a social context, are important to contemplate in the context of human-brand personality work. Briefly, self-congruity theory argues that consumers prefer brands with a symbolic function that is congruous with their self-identity (Sirgy 1982; Swann et al. 1992); symbolic interaction theory focuses on an individual’s beliefs about how he is perceived by others (Cooley 1902, Mead, 1934; Solomon 1983); and interpersonal perception theory suggests that person perception consists of interdependent levels, but can be decomposed to understand an individual’s perceptions of self, of another individual, and perceptions of how others see him (Malloy and Kenny 1986; Kenny 1994). In this paper, we draw upon these three theoretical perspectives, as well as the Social Relations Model (SRM: Kenny 1993, 1994; Kenny and Albright 1987; Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006) to further explicate and model brand and human personality interdependence. The SRM approach, using dyadic data, enables us to address questions such as: If Jane is seen to be extraverted, is she also associated with an extraverted brand? If Jane sees herself as being extraverted and prefers extraverted brands, do others also see her as extraverted and preferring those brands? If Jane sees herself using extraverted brands, does she see others using those brands?

Our research involved three data collections. As a basis for our experiment which focuses on the intersection of human and brand personalities, we engaged in two preliminary studies to understand consumers’ associations with automobile brands and personality characteristics. Our work focuses on the automobile product category because research in marketing and consumer behavior has documented that this product category includes brands that are associated with personality characteristics by groups of consumers (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). We identified 23 brands and had 70 undergraduate students evaluate the brands on 34 semantic differential items with regard to the Big Five personality characteristics—Agreeableness, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness (Goldberg 1990) and two additional brand personality characteristics, Sophistication and Ruggedness (Aaker 1997). Additionally, we provided 40 MBA students with a definition of the seven personality characteristics and via a free association task asked participants to name one automobile brand that they associated with each personality characteristic. Based on these data collections, we identified ten brands (Jeep, Volvo, Toyota, Hummer, Jaguar, Mercedes, BMW, Audi, Honda, and VW) which had shared meaning for our main experiment.

Our focal study employs a round-robin experiment using 20 three or four person limited acquaintance groups, that is, groups in which the members were unfamiliar with one another. After a short (seven minute) introduction period, group members rated themselves and each group member on seven human-brand personality characteristics, including conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, emotional stability, openness to experience, sophistication, and ruggedness (Aaker 1997). Then, participants answered the following brand use questions: 1) “How likely do you see yourself using brand X?” 2) “How likely do you see [group member] using the brand X?” and 3) “How likely do you think that [group member] sees you using brand X?” These data were analyzed using the Social Relations Model (Kenny 1988; Kenny et al. 2006) to assess the extent to which consumers perceive individual brands and consumers as sharing personality characteristics, and to determine if the Devil really wears Prada.

Our work demonstrates that even short interaction encounters enable participants to come to consensus conclusions regarding individual traits associated with specific brands. Moreover, for some brands we found perceiver-target accuracy so the ratings of participants correlated with target self-ratings. Both, consensus and accuracy speak to the existence of the socially shared meanings among individuals, as well as between personality traits and brands. Meta-accuracy further validates the symbolic-interactionism perspective: an individual thinking that others see her driving a Jaguar and being accurate in her perceptions indicates that a person is capable of understanding how others perceive her (table 3). The symbolic-interactionism perspective posits that people perceive and internalize others’ attitudes to form the concept of self (Depaulo et al. 1987). Solomon (1983, 320) argued that people define themselves and social reality via product symbolism, relying “upon the social information inherent in products to shape self-image and to maximize the quality of role performance.”

Our research on brands and their personalities provides evidence of symbolic interactionism in the context of consumption. We illustrate how the Social Relations Model decomposes the multiple levels of social interaction as related to brands, their users, and observers. In conclusion, our work demonstrates that consumer
and brand personalities are interdependent and points to a shared meaning system that is used to make inferences about individuals and products. Shared assumptions about physical appearance and shared interpretations of behaviors enable perceivers to come to consensual judgments about targets’ personalities and brand use after seven-minute interaction periods. Moreover, such judgments can be accurate, reflecting targets’ self-views.

**KEY REFERENCES**


