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## **When Opposites Attract: Incorporating Trait Complementarity Into the Measurement of Self-Brand Personality Alignment**

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This study reveals for the first time the existence of a complementarity or ‘opposites attract’ configuration in self-brand alignment. It also devises an original technique for incorporating complementarity configuration into an alignment measure. Tests reveal the measure compares favourably with existing self-congruence measures in terms of predicting behavioural outcomes.

### **[to cite]:**

Maria Karampela, Angela Tregear, and Jake Ansell (2014) , "When Opposites Attract: Incorporating Trait Complementarity Into the Measurement of Self-Brand Personality Alignment", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 42, eds. June Cotte and Stacy Wood, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 539-540.

### **[url]:**

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017377/volumes/v42/NA-42>

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# When Opposites Attract: Incorporating Trait Complementarity into the Measurement of Self-Brand Personality Alignment

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Academics and managers alike continually seek improved explanations of why consumers engage with some brands more than others. Since the seminal works on self-brand congruence (Sirgy, 1982) and brand personality (Aaker, 1997), an enduring explanation has taken hold: consumers invest brands with human personality characteristics and are drawn to brands with characteristics that align with their own traits. Over the years, numerous empirical studies have found support for this (Birdwell, 1968; Dolich, 1969; Sirgy, 1985; Stern, Bush, and Hair, 1977), and for the positive consequences of self-brand congruence on desirable outcomes (Bellenger, Steinberg, and Stanton, 1976; Kressmann et al., 2006). However, an underlying premise in the literature is that trait alignment in self-brand congruence exhibits a similarity configuration, that is, consumers are drawn to brands that essentially mirror their own traits. To date, there has been surprisingly little critical investigation of this premise, neither through examination of trait alignment patterns in self-brand congruence, nor exploration of alternative conceptualisations of alignment. Drawing from interpersonal psychology and the notion that ‘opposites attract’, we investigate the existence of complementarity configurations in self-brand alignment, where consumers are drawn to brands with traits that complement, rather than mirror their own. Specifically, we 1) examine patterns of self-brand trait alignment for evidence of complementarity configuration, 2) derive a measure of alignment that captures complementarity configuration, and 3) test the predictive power of this measure for a range of desirable outcomes.

Self-congruence theory proposes that when judging brands, consumers psychologically compare brand meanings with their own self-concepts, resulting in a perception of congruence (Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982). Brand personality studies have lent weight to this theory, proposing that as human personality traits may be attached to brands (Aaker, 1997), consumer-brand relationships may be conceptualised as configurations of personality traits between both parties, which may be harmonious or discordant depending on their patterns. In the psychology of human interpersonal attraction (Gross, 1987; Martin, Carlson, and Buskist, 2007) two forms of trait configuration are proposed: similarity and complementarity. In similarity configurations, relationship partners’ personal characteristics essentially mirror each other. In complementarity configurations, partners’ characteristics are different but in a complementary way, for example in the attraction between two individuals, one extrovert and one more introspective. Kerckhoff and Davis (1962) argue that complementarity is more critical to attraction in an enduring relationship, as partners’ self-growth can be enhanced by accessing the qualities not held individually. As brands have been demonstrated as active relationship partners (Fournier, 1998), we propose that complementarity trait configurations may exist in consumer-brand relationships (P1), particularly amongst those enduring over a longer timescale (P2).

To measure self-brand personality alignment, a scale of trait items is needed for human and brand personality (HP and BP), along with a technique for measuring the congruence between them. Our chosen scale was the Five-Factor Model (FFM) (Costa and McCrae, 1985), recognised as both a reliable HP measurement instrument, as well appropriate for examining brand personality (BP) (Huang, Mitchell, and Rosenbaum-Elliott, 2012). For a congruence measure,

we followed the discrepancy score approach, which involves recording participants’ perceptions of their own personality and a brand’s personality on a scale of trait items, and then computing a score representing the difference between the ratings. However, as existing formulas allow only similarity configurations to be revealed, we applied a modification: calculation of a predicted score for each BP dimension measured, based on a weighting derived from a canonical correlation analysis of participants’ HP and BP scores, that captured both similarity and complementarity configurations. Our alignment scores were therefore computed as the difference between observed and predicted BP scores. We proposed these scores would have stronger predictive power than measures based on similarity alone (P3).

To test all propositions, we conducted a survey of 206 students at a UK Business School, in which participants rated, respectively, their own personalities and the personalities of their favourite brands, on the same 40-item scale (Saucier (1994) mini-markers of the FFM). They also answered questions on their relationship with their chosen brand (e.g. perceptions of quality, loyalty). These comprised the desirable outcome measures of the analysis.

To investigate P1, we first conducted a principal component analysis of participants’ HP and BP ratings, both of which revealed 5-factor solutions. HP factors loaded exactly as expected for the FFM. Four of the BP factors corresponded broadly with the HP factors, whilst the fifth (Emotional Instability) comprised all the unfavourable items of HP Emotional Stability, plus the negative items from the other HP dimensions (e.g. sloppy, careless, harsh). We then conducted a canonical correlation analysis of participants’ HP and BP factor scores, summed from their raw ratings. The model generated two significant functions, each containing three significant variables (Table 1). In Function 1, these were HP Agreeableness, HP Emotional Stability, and BP Emotional Instability. This striking alignment of traits clearly represented a complementarity configuration, thus supporting P1. In Function 2, the significant variables were HP Openness, HP Extraversion (negatively loaded) and BP Reflectiveness. Function 2 therefore exhibited a similarity configuration. To test P2, we derived our alignment discrepancy scores as described above, split participants into two sub-samples based on the relationship length with their favourite brand, and performed an independent samples t-test. The result was not significant, hence P2 was not supported. Finally, we conducted a series of discriminant analyses to investigate P3, revealing five outcomes for which our alignment measure performed best (perceptions of quality, fit, passion, pleasure, resistance to negative word-of-mouth), three outcomes where it performed comparably to similarity-based measures (future loyalty intentions, brand separation distress, overall love) and three outcomes which were better predicted by similarity-based measures (loyalty, frequent thoughts, contribution to life meaning). Moderately good support was therefore shown for P3. Overall, the study contributes to the branding literature by revealing for the first time the existence of complementarity configurations in self-brand alignment, and by offering an original technique for incorporating such configurations in an alignment measure, which in turn performs well in terms of predictive power.

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