IJMR Young Research Writer award 2012

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WINNING ENTRY

'Mirror, mirror on the wall, which brand is like me most of all?'
Integrating consumers into brand personality measurement

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JUDGES' CITATION

In selecting this entry as the 2012 winner, the judges commended the author on submitting a well-written and interesting paper based on empirical data grounded in a review of existing literature in this field of research. The topic was felt to be a timely one given the increasing emphasis on global attitudes to brands, especially in emerging markets, and the paper provides readers with intriguing cross-cultural findings. In arriving at their decision, the judges also recognised the challenge faced by the author in addressing a complex research theme within the word limit imposed on entrants.

THE PAPER

Background and objectives

Brand personality is one of the most frequently used metrics in quantitative market research. Widely adopted, it often used for descriptive purposes to understand, for example, how well a particular advertising campaign is communicating and reflecting the brand's personality, or how well a proposed new product or concept fits in with the current brand proposition. In essence, it is used to measure how congruent something is with a brand.

However, the implicit assumption underlying the importance of brand personality to marketing and market research is that consumers desire and purchase brands that they perceive similar to themselves (e.g. Sirgy 1982; Belk 1988; Aaker 1997; Escalas & Bettman 2003). Despite extensive evidence from academic consumer research over the past three decades on its impact on consumer behaviour (for a review, see Claiborne & Sirgy 1990), self–brand congruency remains virtually unexplored in market research as a measurement tool. Furthermore, brand personality as a concept was originally devised in the western cultural context (Aaker 1997). Recent research in cross-cultural psychology has shown that many psychological theories and concepts

originating in the West do not necessarily function in the same way in other cultural contexts, which suggests that brand personality, too, might function in a different way to that which is currently assumed. With the exponential increase of market research in emerging markets such as India and China, it is important to understand whether the standard tools used in the market research industry are equally powerful ways of measurement in those contexts as well. While other aspects of cross-cultural validity, such as response styles or acquiescence bias, are widely known and controlled for, the basic concepts of what we measure and their underlying psychological mechanisms are less explored.

The purpose of this research was to understand *whether consumers evaluate brands with personality traits congruent with their own more positively than brands with incongruent personality traits*. Additionally, the research sought to understand how this relationship might vary in different cultural contexts. More practically, the research aimed at developing an improved way of using brand personality as a potential predictor of both brand appeal and purchase intent through measurement of consumers' self–brand congruency. To the author's knowledge, this is the first study to explore the use of consumers' self–brand congruency as a market research measurement tool, as well as evaluate it in a range of cultural contexts across Europe, the United States, Asia and Africa.

Theoretical framework

This section presents the theoretical framework of the study. First, before embarking on evaluating brand personality measurement, it is important to understand the background and history of the concept. Second, the concept of self–brand congruency is defined, as well as its psychological underpinnings. Finally, some theories from cross-cultural psychology are presented and it is hypothesised how cultural differences might affect brand personality measurement.

Brand personality is used to refer to human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker 1997, p. 347). Over the years, it has attracted significant attention in consumer research because it is widely seen as an efficient way of differentiating brands (Plummer 1985; Sujan & Bettman 1989; Blackett *et al*. 1999; Ailawadi & Keller 2004) and therefore potentially generating profit. The concept, coined by marketing practitioners in the 1970s, originally signified all attributes or benefits of a brand that were not directly product related. Later on, brand personality came to be seen as a facet of brand identity that represented the traits of human personality that can be attributed to a brand. Other facets of brand identity included the brand's inner values, its style of behaviour or conduct, the type of consumer it reflects and its material distinguishing traits, such as packaging (Azoulay & Kapferer 2003).

In 1997, Jennifer Aaker published a study that attempted to clarify the concept of brand personality and develop a scale to measure it. In the study, she adopted the methodology used by psychology researchers to define the Five Factor Model of personality. Implicit in her work is the assumption that, similarly to people, brands too can be described with adjectives because consumers perceive brands this way; existing research (Plummer 1985; Aaker *et al*. 1995; Fournier 1998) supported this idea

by suggesting that human descriptors can be used to describe brands as personified.

In market research, the ways of measuring brand personality are somewhat simplified compared to both Aaker's original study and subsequent research focusing on the concept. In these studies, researchers often use more than 40 attributes that are loosely based on the original Five Factor model, while in commercial research, brand personality attributes are usually developed on an ad hoc basis by researchers in collaboration with the client as a list of adjectives. In practice, using 40 attributes is unfeasible in commercial market research as brand personality questions are often repeated several times during a survey and would lead to considerable respondent fatigue if adopted. Therefore, in this study a shorter list of brand attributes similar to those commonly used in commercial projects was used to ensure practical applicability of the findings.

Understanding consumers' perceptions of themselves is an important part of consumer psychology because these self-images significantly influence their attitudes and purchase behaviour. Existing consumer psychology research has provided support for the relationship between a consumer's self-concept and brand personality. Self-image congruity has been shown to explain, and even predict, such different aspects of consumer behaviour as product use and ownership, brand attitudes, choice and loyalty, travel behaviour and recently even the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement (Claiborne & Sirgy 1990; Sirgy *et al*. 1991; Sirgy & Su 2000; Kressmann *et al*. 2006; Choi & Rifon 2012).

Specifically, researchers have focused on the extent to which brand imagery is linked with consumers' self-concepts and how brands are used by consumers to create and communicate them (Sirgy 1982; Belk 1988; Aaker 1997; Escalas & Bettman 2003). The underlying hypothesis, often referred to as *self–brand congruity*, is that consumers prefer brands with personalities that are congruent with their perceptions of themselves. In other words, the bigger the perceived overlap between the way a consumer sees himself and the way he perceives a brand, the more he will like the brand.

However, the majority of the empirical research over the past decades has been conducted on consumers in the US, and while there have been some attempts to investigate the impact of culture on the relationship between consumers' self-construals and their evaluations of brands (Aaker & Schmitt 2001; Sung & Choi 2012), more research is needed to explore the self–brand congruity hypothesis in different cultural contexts. The assumption underlying self–brand congruity is that consumers use possessions and brands as symbolic resources to construct and reflect their identities (Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998; Trump & Brucks 2012). While widely accepted, this concept of the extended self has been questioned as a masculine and western metaphor (Belk 1988). Recent research in cross-cultural psychology (Heine *et al*. 2009) has also suggested that the similarity-attraction effect, where we are most attracted to people similar to ourselves, is weaker in non-western cultures; this suggests the appeal of a brand with a personality perceived as similar to ours could also be weaker in non-western cultures.

Additionally, extensive research from cross-cultural psychology suggests that the nature and structure of the self is influenced by cultural contexts (e.g.

Markus & Kitayama 1991) – for example, individuals in a collectivistic culture tend to construct a self that is more interdependent than those individuals from individualistic cultures. In essence, self-construals can be seen as general tendencies of self-concepts, which have been shown to lead to different consequences for a range of cognitive and motivational processes. While those with independent self-construals are more likely to define themselves through internal attributes such as traits, abilities, values and preferences, those with interdependent self-construals tend to do so in terms of their relationships with others. In other words, those with interdependent self-views tend see themselves more in relation to the context, with their view of themselves varying accordingly so that their view of themselves may be different depending on the social situation they are in. Conversely, those with independent self-views tend to see themselves as similar regardless of social context, and place high value on consistency of, for example, stable traits and preferences across different parts of their lives. For us living in the western world, this latter view often seems natural and therefore, by extension, it is also natural for us to define ourselves through personality attributes when, for example, describing ourselves to others. This 'cognitive consistency of the self' is less important in collectivistic cultures (Triandis 2001), which suggests that the effects of self–brand congruity may also be limited in these cultural contexts. Furthermore, some researchers (e.g. Ng & Houston 2006) have suggested that those with independent self-views will find it easier to access abstract brand associations due to emphasising the

'traitedness' of behaviour and seeing the self as separate from context. This is particularly crucial when brand personality (a set of human characteristics associated with a brand) is measured with a set of abstract attributes as developed by Aaker (1997), originally based on the 'Big Five' theory of personality. However, the majority of research on self–brand congruity has been conducted in western cultural contexts, and particularly in the US, with few studies exploring the impact of culture on the relationship between perceptions of the self and perceptions of the brand.

Methods and data

The study was conducted as an online survey in collaboration with global panel provider GMI as a part of an internal research project in May 2012. Data were collected from 11 countries across North America, Europe, Asia and Africa, with nationally representative samples in each country (Table 1).

Each respondent first rated themselves in relation to a list of 12 personality attributes on a 7-point scale ranging from 'Doesn't describe me/[the brand] at all' to 'Describes me/[brand] extremely well'. They then rated two global sports brands (Nike and Adidas, order of presentation randomised for each respondent) on the same attributes. These brands were chosen as they were likely to be well known in each of the countries included in the research. Self-expressive brands such as these were chosen as publicly consumed goods are more likely to be affected by the consumer's desire for congruency of their actual or social self-concept as well as their desire to conform to social standards (Sirgy 1982; Claiborne & Sirgy 1990). This public, and therefore social,

Table 1 Sample sizes per country

Country	n
US	697
Germany	487
China	471
Spain	463
UK	460
Mexico	426
Sweden	395
Brazil	379
Russia	368
SA	349
India	310
TOTAL	**4,805**

aspect of the consumption of these goods also makes it more likely to be affected by cultural differences.

The brand personality ratings were then followed by an evaluation of how much they liked each brand (7-point scale ranging from 'Not appealing at all' to 'Extremely appealing') and how likely they would be to purchase a product by the brand if they were shopping for sports clothing and could reasonably afford any product they wanted to buy (5-point scale ranging from 'Very unlikely' to 'Very likely'). Finally, consumers were administered a widely used scale assessing their self-construal type (Singelis 1994).

At the analysis stage, the brand–self congruence scores were calculated as a statistical variance by taking the difference between rating for self and rating for the brand for each variable, squaring it, adding up the squares and taking the square root of the total. This produced a result between 0 (perfect congruity) and about 21 (completely incongruous). The variables were then entered into a regression model to assess their ability to predict both liking and purchase intent.

Both brands were analysed separately, but – for the purposes of brevity – the analysis for only one brand (Nike) is presented here as the results were not meaningfully different.

Findings

On a total level, the study replicated findings from existing academic literature, the appeal of a brand (overall $r = 0.774$; range for all countries $r = 0.643 – 0.825$) being a good predictor of claimed purchase intent across all countries studied. For this reason, subsequent analysis focused on appeal as the dependent variable. The degree of self–brand congruency was found to be a good predictor of levels of brand appeal across all countries studied (Table 2), which suggests that brands with distinct personality traits congruent with consumers' self-concepts are evaluated more positively than brands with incongruent personality traits across cultures, and particularly in more Westernised and developed countries such as UK, Germany, Spain and US.

However, self–brand congruency effects are considerably less salient in emerging (and less westernised) countries, such as China, Mexico and India. In China and India, levels of self–brand congruency were lower overall than in other countries. Additionally, in these two countries, interdependent self-construals were observed to be more prevalent than independent ones, which supports indications from the existing literature that there might be less emphasised need for self-consistency in these cultural contexts. Overall, higher levels of congruency were found also to be linked with independent self-construals across all countries, which suggests that a more salient self-view is

Table 2 Results from regression model (independent variable: degree of self–brand congruency; dependent variable: brand appeal)

Country	R	R^2	Sig.
UK	0.164	0.027	0.000
Germany	0.153	0.024	0.000
Spain	0.129	0.017	0.005
US	0.102	0.010	0.007
Sweden	0.077	0.006	0.126
Russia	0.075	0.006	0.150
Brazil	0.073	0.005	0.158
China	0.069	0.005	0.135
Mexico	0.053	0.003	0.275
SA	0.049	0.002	0.365
India	0.018	0.000	0.752

beneficial for the self–brand congruency concept.

Conclusions and practical implications for market research

The findings of this research suggest that the predictive ability of commercial brand personality measurement could be considerably improved by incorporating consumers' self-evaluations into the research. By bringing the consumers into the picture, market researchers could potentially gain deeper insights into, for example, drivers of brand appeal and purchase intent, hitherto uncovered by existing methods. Asking consumers to rate their own personalities on the same scale as the researched brands is also a relatively simple change that could potentially add considerably to our understanding of what specific aspects of their brand perceptions a client should focus on communicating, and which ones would be most powerful in driving appeal, trial and loyalty among consumers. Furthermore, this is a technique any

market research company could adopt as it is not based on a proprietary methodology and could therefore prove to be a valuable addition to existing brand research methods across the industry. Nevertheless, while there is ample evidence in the academic literature to suggest the effect of consumers' self–brand congruency on brand evaluations and subsequent behaviour, the practical applications would still need to be explored on live commercial projects and more research is needed to validate the methodology in different product categories.

However, the method is not entirely unproblematic as this type of measurement appears to work better for consumers with independent self-construals (essentially, in more westernised countries) because it is a more natural fit with how they think about themselves in general. From a practical perspective, this means that the underlying of concept of brand personality as well as the way we currently measure it *do not work as well for certain big emerging markets* like India and China. This fundamental issue has potentially significant practical implications for marketers as well as market researchers, and more research is needed to understand the effectiveness and validity of the measure across different cultural contexts and brands.

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