Applicability of Brand Personality Dimensions across Cultures and Product Categories: A Review

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Abstract

In recent years, brand personality as a branding construct has attained significant attention, which has paved the way for personality directed brand management. In this context, development of a brand personality scale by Aaker(1997) has strongly influenced the research on symbolic meanings of brands. Although Aaker’s brand personality scale has been widely approved and used in many brand personality-related studies, yet the generalizability of her framework has been questioned by some researchers. The purpose of this paper is to review the studies related to applicability of brand personality dimensions across cultures and product categories, and to describe the implications of these findings for brand managers.

Keywords: Brands, Brand Personality, Brand Management, Culture

Introduction

Brand personality refers to the human characteristics associated with brand. Since brands are visualized by consumers as human beings, the dimensions of brand personality can be described as an extension of the dimensions of human personality to the domain of brands. Aaker [1] developed a new five dimensional model named ‘Brand Personality Scale’ based on the big five model of human personality. Development of this scale paved the way for the construction of a definite measurement personality model with the perspective of brands.

Prior to Aaker’s [1] brand personality scale, ad-hoc scales or scales deduced from personality psychology were the only available scales for researchers but their application involved problems of validity in the marketing area. Aaker [1] offered a
solution to these problems in the form of a theoretical framework of brand personality. She analyzed the perception of American consumers regarding commercial brands which resulted into the development of a 42-trait scale containing five brand personality dimensions viz. ‘Sincerity’, ‘Excitement’, ‘Competence’, ‘Sophistication’, and ‘Ruggedness’. Each of the five dimensions of the Aaker’s [1] brand personality scale comprises of various matching attributes. For example, ‘Sincerity’ dimension of brand personality incorporates honesty and genuineness attributes while strong and outdoorsy attributes define ‘Ruggedness’ dimension of brand personality [2].

The brand personality scale effectively met various standards such as test-retest reliability, internal reliability and content validity. Moreover, construct validity and nomological validity were also confirmed. Aaker’s [1] brand personality framework has been a subject of study in numerous researches and it has been accepted worldwide. However, the generalizability and validity of Aaker’s framework has also been questioned by some researchers from time to time [3, 4, 5]. In relation to that, many studies focused on the applicability of brand personality dimensions across cultures and across product categories.

The investigation of the applicability of brand personality dimensions across cultures may lead to the identification of needs and values relevant to the consumer’s perception of brands in these cultures. There is also a probability of identifying brand personality dimensions specific to a culture due to difference in needs and values. Similarly, brand personality dimensions may also vary across product categories. In this study, brand personality research has been reviewed and analyzed in order to examine the applicability of brand personality dimensions across cultures and across product categories. According to Batra et al. [6], Plummer [7] and Okazaki [8], both consumer’s perception and company’s efforts are responsible for shaping brand’s personality. Hence the findings of this study will also help brand managers in formulation of branding strategies.

**Brand Personality Dimensions: Applicability Across Cultures**

In her seminal work on brand personality, Aaker [1] refers to the limitation of cultural generalizability. She mentions this limitation because she carried out the studies on American consumers only and thereby she questioned the stability of her described brand personality dimensions across cultures and product categories. In this context, Aaker et al. [9] tested brand personality dimensions in the context of Japan’s and Spain’s culture. McCracken [10] suggests that brands are consumption symbols which express a deeper meaning. This indicates that brands reflect beliefs, values and behavioral patterns of an individual. Also According to Schwartz & Bilsky [11], Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner [12], and Hofstede [13], values and beliefs, being elements of culture, differ across countries. All of the above findings led to Aaker’s assumption that there may be a difference in brand personality dimensions across cultures. As a consequence, Aaker [1] questioned the stability of brand personality dimensions across cultures and investigated whether brand personality dimensions
convey universal meaning or culture specific meaning. In other words, whether brand personality dimensions are identical or different among countries?

In their study, Aaker et al. [9] selected two countries Japan and Spain. Japan represents the culture of East Asia and Spain denotes the Latin culture. Thus, brand personality dimensions were synthesized from the research in both cultures. Though all of the dimensions synthesized did not correspond to the brand personality dimensions identified in American context, four dimensions ‘Excitement’, ‘Competence’, ‘Sincerity’ and ‘Sophistication’ were common between Japan and the USA. The fifth American dimension ‘Ruggedness’ could not be confirmed for the culture of Japan. However, ‘Peacefulness’ in place of ‘Ruggedness’ could be confirmed as brand personality dimension specific to the culture of Japan. Furthermore, ‘Sincerity’, ‘Excitement’, and ‘Sophistication’ are the only dimensions which are shared both by USA and Spain. The fourth and fifth dimensions identified for Spain were ‘Peacefulness’ (similar to Japan) and ‘Passion’ respectively. Table 1 summarizes the studies on the applicability of brand personality dimensions across cultures.

Table 1. Literature related to brand personality dimensions across countries

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ferrandi et al. (2000)</td>
<td>examined brand personality dimensions in a French perspective</td>
<td>Dimensions corresponding with Aaker’s brand personality scale: Sincerity, Sophistication, Excitement, Ruggedness France Specific: Conviviality</td>
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<td>Aaker et al. (2001)</td>
<td>examined the dimensions of brand personality across the cultures of Spain and Japan</td>
<td>Dimensions corresponding with Aaker’s brand personality scale: Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, Japan Specific: Peacefulness Spain Specific: Peacefulness and Passion</td>
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<td>Austin et al. (2003)</td>
<td>measured the personality of US restaurant brands</td>
<td>Brand personality scale of Aaker (1997) does not generalize to individual brands within one product category</td>
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<td>Hieronimus (2003)</td>
<td>examined the dimensions of brand personality in German context</td>
<td>Germany specific: Trust &amp; Security, Temperament &amp; Passion</td>
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<td>Smit et al. (2003)</td>
<td>developed a new brand personality scale for the Netherlands</td>
<td>Dimensions corresponding with Aaker’s brand personality scale: Competence, Excitement, Ruggedness Netherlands specific: Gentle, Annoying and Distinguishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supphellen &amp; Grønhaug (2003)</td>
<td>examined the dimensions of brand personality in Russian context</td>
<td>Russian consumer’s perceptions of brand personality possess similarities as well as differences with regard to western consumer’s perception of brand personality</td>
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<td>Rojas-Meñdez et al. (2004)</td>
<td>measured the personality of Ford brand in Chile</td>
<td>Identified brand personality dimensions: Excitement, Sincerity, Competence and Sophistication</td>
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Sung & Tinkham (2005) examined the dimensions of brand personality across the cultures of USA and Korea

Dimensions corresponding with Aaker’s (1997) Brand Personality Scale: Competence, Sophistication and Ruggedness
Korea Specific: Ascendancy and Passive Likeableness
USA specific: Androgyny and White Collar

Chu & Sung (2011) examined the dimensions of brand personality in the context of China

Dimensions corresponding with Aaker’s (1997) Brand Personality Scale: Competence, Excitement, and Sophistication
China specific: Joyfulness, Traditionalism and Trendiness

Rojas-Méndez et al. (2013) examined perceptions of Chinese consumers about the American brand personality

Three main dimensions of U.S. brand personality viz. Amicableness, Resourcefulness, and Self-centeredness

Source: Author’s research

According to the study of Aaker et al. [9], ‘Sincerity’, ‘Excitement’, and ‘Sophistication’ dimensions of brand personality convey cultural meanings having universal effect while ‘Competence’, ‘Peacefulness’ and ‘Passion’ dimensions of brand personality express quite culture specific meanings. Albeit some dimensions of brand personality can be universally applied, the accurate perceptive or explanation or facets, however, can even differ. For instance, although ‘Sophistication’ dimension can be applied to both United States and Spain, the facets considered for the same dimension in both the countries vary to some extent. Besides the facets shared by both cultures such as good looking, glamorous, smooth, and stylish, Spain also associates confident, persistent and leader traits with ‘Sophistication’ dimension which are rather related with ‘Competence’ dimension of brand personality by Japan or USA.

In addition to Aaker et al.’s [9] research concerning international relevance of brand personality scale, Ferrandi et al. [14] followed a similar approach and appraised Aaker’s [1] brand personality scale in the context of France. Thereby, they synthesized a five-dimensional-structure in which four dimensions of brand personality match with ‘Sincerity’, ‘Excitement’, ‘Sophistication’ and ‘Ruggedness’ dimensions of Aaker’s [1] framework. The ‘Competence’ dimension did not correspond to the culture of France. Moreover, the brand personality scale developed for France comprised ‘Conviviality’ as a novel dimension.

Similarly, Chu & Sung [15] evaluated Aaker’s [1] brand personality scale with Chinese perspective. Thereby, they identified six dimensions of Chinese brand personality viz. ‘Competence’, ‘Excitement’, and ‘Sophistication’ (consistent with Aaker’s [1] brand personality scale), ‘Traditionalism’, ‘Joyfulness’, and Trendiness (specific to Chinese culture). Sung & Tinkham [16] examined the brand personality structures in United States and Korea. The two countries shared six dimensions of brand personality while both cultures were found to have two factors unique to them. Sung & Tinkham [16] identified ‘Ascendancy’ and ‘Passive Likeableness’ specific to

Rojas-Méndez et al. [17] empirically measured the brand personality of Ford in Chile. Thereby, they developed a brand personality scale comprising four dimensions viz. ‘Excitement’, ‘Sincerity’, ‘Competence’, and ‘Sophistication’. Supphellen & Grønhaug [18] examined Aaker’s [1] dimensions of brand personality with Russian perspective. Thereby, they found that consumer perceptions of brand personality in Russia contain both similarities and differences with regard to America. Furthermore, consumer ethnocentrism moderates the brand personality dimensions’ effect on the attitude of western brands.

In contrast to other researchers, Smit et al. [19] developed a brand personality scale, completely different from Aaker’s scale, for the Netherlands. Although they followed a similar approach as of Aaker [1], they drew a somewhat dissimilar conclusion and identified a six-dimensional structure. In the brand personality structure of Smit et al. [19], ‘Excitement’, ‘Competence’, and ‘Ruggedness’ dimensions of brand personality correspond with framework of Aaker [1] while three brand personality dimensions viz. ‘Gentle’, ‘Annoying’ and ‘Distinguishing’ were found to be Netherlands-specific.

In another study related to cross cultural applicability of Aaker’s brand personality dimensions, Austin et al. [4] postulates that the use of aggregate data covering different categories of product can increase successful applicability of brand personality scale. The scale may, however, face major limitations in the examination of aggregate data covering a specific product category. Rojas-Méndez et al. [20] studied the perceptions of Chinese consumers about the American brand personality. Thereby, they identified three main dimensions of US brand personality viz. ‘Amicableness’, ‘Resourcefulness’, and ‘Self-centeredness’. According to their study, the Chinese ascribe a polarized personality to the United States where two dimensions ‘Resourcefulness’ and ‘Amicableness’ apparently withstand ‘Self-centeredness’.

Hieronimus [21] conducted another significant validation study regarding brand personality whereby he reviewed Aaker’s [1] brand personality structure with German perspective. For this purpose, Hieronimus [21] merged dimensions of brand personality identified by Aaker [1] with two additional dimensions of brand personality discovered by Aaker et al. [9] while examining the brand personality dimensions with the perspective of Japan and Spain and finally conducted his research on the basis of a seven-dimensional scale.

In order to better suit the German context, Hieronimus [21] translated Aaker’s dimensions of brand personality by using the German translation as given by Esch [22]. Consequently, he concluded that none of the three brand personality structures identified in the context of USA, Japan and Spain can be applied to Germany which indicates the need to develop a new scale. In this perspective, Hieronimus [21] deduced a two-dimensional brand personality scale applicable to German culture using exploratory factor analysis. Although his brand personality structure deviates

**Brand Personality Dimensions: Applicability Across Product Categories**

Researchers have applied the brand personality scale of Aaker [1] across different product categories. These studies, however, support the five-dimensional structure given by Aaker. For example, Hayes [23] examined Aaker’s dimensions of brand personality in connection with sunglasses and thereby they found that the factor analysis could not reproduce the five-dimensional structure in general. In order to match the results of his research, he consequently decreased the number of items from forty two to fourteen in his brand personality scale. Even though Hayes’ [23] study failed to replicate the brand personality scale of Aaker yet he applied the basic structure of Aaker’s Framework thus could not fully validate Aaker’s brand personality scale but still followed its basic structure all over his study.

Following a similar approach, Wysong [24] tried to authenticate Aaker’s framework with regard to US-American beer brands but could not fully reproduce Aaker’s brand personality scale. Although Wysong [24] conducted his study based on brand personality dimensions developed by Aaker [1] yet he adjusted the scale in four cases so as to fit the research object. Wysong [24] attributes this deviation in results to the choice of product and the specific product category. Similarly, Villegas et al. [25] examined Aaker’s framework in the context of personal computer industry but their research could not replicate Aaker’s brand personality scale. However, they concluded that brand personality scale of Aaker[1] is quite useful to measure the personality of computer brands. Thus the studies conducted by Hayes [23], Wysong [24] and Villegas et al. [25] produce similar results.

Some other researchers also examined the validity of Aaker’s framework in other product categories. For example, Siguaw et al. [26] conducted the validation study for Restaurant brands and Kim [27] examined the Aaker’s scale for Apparel brands. Most of the studies albeit could not fully replicate the brand personality scale of Aaker [1] yet they agree to the use of this framework in further studies of brand personality measurement with minor adjustments.
Conclusion and Managerial Implications
In the studies questioning generalizability of brand personality dimensions across cultures, it is found that all the five dimensions suggested by Aaker are not consistent with countries other than USA but some of the dimensions correspond with each country’s culture (e.g., Japan, Spain, France, Netherlands and China). Therefore, all brand personality dimensions are not stable across cultures. Similarly, in studies related to validation of Aaker’s brand personality scale across product categories, the researchers could not fully replicate the scale but all of them agree on the usefulness of Aaker’s framework in the brand personality measurement studies. Even though researchers have mixed observations about the brand personality scale of Aaker, yet this scale has been widely used in various empirical studies in order to examine the significance of brand personality in consumer purchase intentions. Different validation studies suggest that Aaker’s brand personality scale cannot be applied par for par across countries and product categories. Nevertheless the scale developed by Aaker [1] is a great contribution to the concept of brand personality and proffers a solid foundation for future research.

There are some implications of these findings for brand managers. Firstly, the studies conducted regarding cross-cultural applicability of brand personality dimensions suggest that brand personality together with symbolic meanings embedded in brands can reflect beliefs and values of a culture. Hence, similarities and differences among cultures can be identified by using brand personality dimensions which in turn will be help brand managers in formulating branding strategies. Secondly, brand managers should recognize the role of culture in forming the consumer’s perception of commercial brands. Hence they should develop a well defined brand personality which conveys the beliefs and values of respective cultures.

References


