

The Alignment of Self and Brand Personality Traits: An Exploratory Analysis

Abstract

In attempting to explain brand preferences, self-brand congruence theory proposes that consumers are drawn to brands with personalities that align with their own traits. Numerous empirical studies have supported this general premise, however the vast majority are based on simple measures of congruence which give no insight into which specific traits are most salient to alignment, and in what ways they are correlated. The present study draws from psychological theories of personality structure and interpersonal attraction to develop propositions about the composition of human and brand personalities (HP and BP, respectively) and possible patterns of alignment, which are then tested via a large-scale survey at a UK Business School. Respondents rated their own personality traits, and those of their favourite brand, on the same 40 item scale. Factor analysis of the ratings revealed a 5-factor structure for both HP and BP, although BP ratings exhibited a different composition of traits to factors from the classic human personality model. Canonical correlation analysis was then conducted to examine the patterns of alignment between respondents' HP and BP ratings. This identified two sets of HP and BP factors which dominated the explanation of alignment in the data. The implications are discussed.

Keywords

Brand preferences, brand personality, human personality, self-brand congruence

Track:

Brand, Identity and Corporate Reputation

The Alignment of Self and Brand Personality Traits: An Exploratory Analysis

Introduction

Academics and managers alike continually seek improved explanations of why consumers prefer some brands over others. Since Sirgy's (1982) seminal work on self-brand congruence, 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. In the burgeoning literature on brand personality, numerous empirical studies have found support for this premise. Nevertheless, almost all studies to date have been conducted using a simple, single measure of self-brand congruence: survey respondents rate on a Likert scale the extent to which they feel a named brand matches their own self-image, and the resulting scores are interpreted as direct indicators of the perceived degree of self-brand congruence. Although offering a basic measure, such approaches provide no insight into what exactly it is that consumers are aligning when they relate brands to their own self-image. Which specific personality traits, or groupings of traits, take precedence? Are some human and brand trait meanings more salient than others in alignment? If so, what forms do the correlations take?

The aim of this study is to examine self-brand personality alignment at the level of individual traits, exploring which human and brand personality traits are meaningful to the alignment process and how they are inter-related. Not only should this approach contribute a more nuanced understanding of the processes of self-brand alignment, it may also help brand managers make more focused decisions. The paper begins by reviewing the literature relating to brand personality, self-brand congruence and trait alignment, and stating the key propositions tested in the fieldwork. The methods and results of the empirical study are then reported and discussed, including the study's implications.

Literature Review

Brand personality: conceptualisation and measurement

Brand personality (BP) has been defined as the set of "human personality traits" (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003) associated with a brand. It is a relatively recent but popular field of research, with much empirical work focused on the definition and measurement of the BP construct. In that regard, studies tend to adopt one of two main approaches. The first is a data-driven or lexical approach (e.g. Aaker (1997)), where researchers ask large numbers of respondents to free-associate descriptive terms for the personalities of pre-selected brands across different product categories, and then factor-analyse the results to derive underlying dimensions (Aaker, Benet-Martínez, & Garolera, 2001; Chu & Sung, 2011; Sung & Tinkham, 2005; Supphellen & Grønhaug, 2003). Although useful, this approach has been criticised for incorporating non-personality traits (e.g. physical appearance) into the resulting dimensions. Hence, critics question how well the constructs capture BP specifically, as opposed to more general aspects of brand image (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003).

In the second approach, researchers take the view that BP structure follows the same blueprint as human personality (HP); hence to measure BP, one may directly apply the scales developed by HP psychologists. The HP construct that has come to dominate the psychology literature is the Five-Factor Model (FFM) (Costa & McCrae, 1985), which proposes that HP traits are organised in five dimensions: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability and Openness. Decades of empirical study confirm that the FFM is remarkably stable across national boundaries and life stages. Amongst the comparatively few studies in BP research that have directly employed HP scales, the FFM has been the most applied. For example, Huang, Mitchell, and Rosenbaum-Elliott (2012) used it to test the structural similarities between HP and BP, concluding that the FFM can indeed be meaningfully applied to explain BP structure, although the degree of direct correlation

between HP and BP dimensions is less clear. Caprara, Barbaranellie, and Guido (2001) also indicate that BP dimensions are not necessarily composed in the same way as the FFM. Hence for the current study, our proposal is that although the FFM and its associated scales are appropriate for gathering data on BP from consumers, the precise structure and composition of BP trait dimensions will differ from that of the FFM.

P1: The FFM trait inventory can be applied to consumers' ratings of brand personality.

P2: The factor structure and composition of BP is different to that of the FFM.

Self-brand congruence and personality trait alignment

As a popular way of explaining brand preferences, self-congruence theory proposes that consumers are drawn to brands that have meanings in accordance with their own self-concepts (Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982). With respect to BP, self-congruence theory implies that consumers are attracted to brands with personality traits aligned to their own, the precise composition being dependent on factors such as the specific consumption context faced by the consumer and/or role being played. Empirical studies have tended to support the general premise of self-brand congruence, and have added insight by revealing, for example, how the degree of congruence is related to whether brands reflect consumers' actual or ideal selves (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011). As indicated earlier however, much of this work is limited by its reliance on single, simple measures of self-brand congruence. The study of Huang, et al. (2012) provides a notable exception: in an original approach, the authors gathered data on consumers' perceptions of their own personalities, and those of their favourite brands (peer rating method), at the level of specific traits. However, as the main focus of this study was to confirm BP structure rather than the intricacies of HP-BP alignment, a gap still remains as to which traits are most salient to self-brand alignment, and which patterns of correlation they exhibit. To obtain further insight into potential mechanisms that may draw consumers to brands in terms of their personality, we draw from theories of interpersonal attraction in the psychology literature.

According to Gross (1987), the main underlying mechanism of interpersonal attraction is expressed in Exchange Theory. This proposes that all relationships need to be rewarding and provide something back to the partners involved. People are attracted to others when they perceive that the relationship with them will be mutually beneficial. In terms of predicting perceptions of reward, an influential factor is the way in which relationship partners' personal characteristics (e.g. opinions, values, personality traits) are matched with each other. Specifically, two types of configuration have been proposed: similarity and complementarity (Gross, 1987; Martin, Carlson, & Buskist, 2007). Similarity refers to the extent to which these personal characteristics are similar and matched ('birds of a feather flock together'). For example, it is supported that the more someone agrees with us (in our opinions, values, personality, etc.), the more we like them. Complementarity refers to the extent to which relationship partners' characteristics are complementary ('opposites attract'). There has been evidence that people tend to become attracted to others that complement them and have characteristics that they do not have themselves, at least not to the desired level; hence, association with someone complementary to us gives us the chance to obtain these characteristics. The stage of evolution of a relationship may have a bearing on which of these configurations is most likely. Thus, during the initial stages of a relationship, similarity of relationship partner characteristics is more important to interpersonal attraction (Klohn & Luo, 2003), as similarity addresses the partners' inner need to feel safe and familiar with each other. On the other hand, complementarity of personal characteristics is more critical to attraction as the relationship holds in time (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962).

These findings have intriguing implications for patterns of self-brand personality alignment. On the one hand, as brands are inanimate objects which in many instances are part of

consumers' lives for only a limited time period, it may be expected that self-brand alignment exhibits similarity, i.e. consumers are drawn to brands that directly mirror, and reinforce, the traits they already have. On the other hand, previous research demonstrates that brands can be active relationship partners over a long timescale (e.g. Fournier (1998)) and that brand meanings can be projections of consumers' ideal, rather than actual, selves (Malär, et al., 2011). In this sense, self-brand alignment may exhibit complementarity, i.e. the brand having traits that the consumer does not have, yet desires (Klohnen & Mendelsohn, 1998). For example, a person that is quiet and shy may be attracted to brands that are perceived as extroverted and bold. Consumers who are drawn to brands that complement their own traits may be expressing an inner need to self-enhance and grow through the development of such brand relationships. For this study, we find the latter arguments most compelling; hence we propose that self-brand personality alignment most likely exhibits complementarity.

P3: Consumers' self-brand alignment follows a pattern of complementarity, i.e. consumers are drawn to brands with traits that complement, rather than mirror, their own traits.

Methods

In order to test the three propositions, a survey was conducted amongst students of a UK Business School. Although the use of student samples in consumer research has been criticised (Lynch Jr., 1982; Peterson, 2001), it was considered appropriate as the purpose of this study is theory application (Calder, Phillips, & Tybout, 1981), hence, students consist a valid subset of the population. Moreover, they tend to actively experiment with brands in order to reinforce their self-identity and to fit-in (Moore, Wilkie, & Lutz, 2002). Therefore, they represented a rich data source. Following a pilot, approximately 1540 students were invited by email to participate in an online survey on the topic of brand preferences. As an incentive, a £1 charitable donation was pledged for each completed questionnaire. After two email reminders, 361 questionnaires were completed (23.5% response rate). Upon deletion of cases with substantial missing data, the final sample was 206. In terms of profile, the sample consisted of: 36% males and 64% females; 57% between 17-22 years old and 43% above 23 years old; 54% were undergraduates and 46% were taught and research postgraduates.

For questionnaire design, we adopted the peer rating method of Huang, et al. (2012). After introductory profile questions, respondents rated on a 7-point Likert scale the extent to which 40 personality traits (Saucier's (1994) mini-markers of the FFM) accurately described themselves. Respondents were then asked to nominate their favourite brand from one of two product categories (clothing and technology, identified as most salient to student population during the exploratory interviews stage preceding the survey), and to give information about the nature of their relationship with that brand (e.g. length, depth of attachment). Finally, they indicated their perceptions of their favourite brand's personality traits on the same 40-item scale. All data were transferred to SPSS Version 20 for analysis. As the process is on-going, it is emphasised that the results reported below are based on a first round of tests.

Results

Structure and composition of human and brand personality

In order to explore P1 and P2, an exploratory factor analysis (Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation) was performed on respondents' ratings of their own personality traits (HP) and those of their favourite brands (BP). In terms of HP, after deletion of 3 items with insignificant loadings onto factors, a 5-factor solution was derived which explained 50.7% of total variance (Appendix 1, Table 1 and Figure 1). Table 1 shows that all items in the solution loaded exactly as expected for the FFM (Saucier (1994)), and Figure 1 gives a descriptive summary of the five dimensions. In terms of the BP ratings, following the deletion of 9 items which did not load significantly or were cross-loading, a 5-factor solution was derived which explained 51.3% of total variance (Appendix 2, Table 2 and Figure 2). The solution,

summarised in Table 2, was validated using ten-fold cross-validation on random subsamples. Figure 2 presents the composition of the factors and the labels applied to them. Although the number of factors extracted for the BP solution was the same as for HP and there are some similarities in the underlying meaning of the dimensions in both constructs, some key differences in trait composition can be observed. In terms of similarities, the BP dimensions labelled Practicality, Friendliness and Dynamism have much in common with the HP factors of Conscientiousness, Agreeableness and Extraversion, respectively, as they are comprised mainly of items from these HP dimensions. The BP factor of Reflectiveness represents a reduced, more cerebral version of HP Openness, being comprised only of the items philosophical and deep. The most striking difference between HP and BP dimensions however relates to the remaining BP factor, which we have labelled Emotional Instability. It is comprised entirely of the unfavourable items of HP Emotional Stability (envious, jealous, moody, temperamental), plus all the negatively inflected items from the other HP dimensions (e.g. sloppy, careless, unsympathetic, harsh). It seems therefore that when respondents considered the personality traits of their favourite brands, they evaluated the unfavourable traits in a way that was exclusive of the other dimensions, rather than associating each negatively inflected trait with its corresponding dimension, as was the case with respondents' own HP ratings. Overall, as the analysis succeeded in deriving a clear BP solution from data gathered via Saucier's FFM trait inventory, we find support for P1. Moreover, as we found some key differences between HP and BP factor solutions, P2 is also supported.

Correlation and alignment of human and brand personality

In order to explore how respondents' ratings of their own personality traits correlated with the ratings of their favourite brands' personalities, a canonical correlation analysis (CCA) was conducted. Although CCA is a lesser used multivariate technique in consumer research (Green, Halbert, & Robinson, 1966; Holbrook & Moore, 1982), it is most appropriate for studies that seek to understand the relationship between two sets of multiple variables [described as the predictor (independent) set and the criterion (dependent) set]. By applying a linear equation to the observed variables in each of the sets, CCA generates a synthetic variable for each set (Sherry & Henson, 2005). The pairs of equations that CCA generates (the canonical functions) are derived so as to yield the maximum possible correlation between the synthetic variables. As successive canonical functions are based on residual variance, all canonical functions are orthogonal to each other (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). For the current study, the unit of analysis was each respondent's HP and BP factor scores, summed from their raw ratings of the original 40 HP and 40 BP items. The factor scores relating to the five HP dimensions constituted the predictor variable set in the analysis, whilst those relating to the five BP dimensions constituted the criterion variable set. Using the MANOVA command in SPSS syntax, the analysis yielded five functions with squared canonical correlations (R_c^2) of .278, .184, .050, .035 and .011 respectively. The full model across all functions was statistically significant using the Wilks's $\lambda = .534$ criterion, $F(25, 729.61) = 5.38, p < .001$. As Wilks's λ represents the variance unexplained by the model, $1 - \lambda (.466)$ indicates that the full model explained a substantial portion, about 46.6%, of the shared variance. As Functions 3 to 5 only explained a small percentage of shared variance, only the first two functions were considered noteworthy for examination (27.8% and 18.4% of shared variance, respectively). Table 3 (Appendix 3) presents the summary statistics for Functions 1 and 2 of the CCA. Variables that contribute significantly to each function are interpreted from the magnitude of their structure coefficients (r_s), highlighted in bold. It can be seen that three variables make a significant contribution to Function 1: HP Agreeableness and HP Emotional Stability (as predictor variables) and BP Emotional Instability (as the only criterion variable). This is a striking result. It indicates that the more respondents rated themselves as warm and emotionally well-balanced, the more they rated their favourite brand

as having markedly opposing traits – capricious and neurotic. Function 1 therefore supports more the complementarity configuration of self-brand personality alignment. For Function 2, again there are three significant variables: HP Openness and HP Extraversion in the predictor set, and BP Reflectiveness in the criterion set. A noteworthy aspect of this function is that HP Extraversion has a negative loading. The result indicates that the more respondents rated themselves as intellectually open, quiet and introverted, the more their favourite brands were rated as philosophical and deep. Function 2 therefore supports more the similarity configuration of self-brand personality alignment and thus overall, the results of the CCA provide partial support for P3.

Discussion, implications & limitations

This study set out to examine consumers' self-brand alignment at the level of individual traits, to identify which traits are most salient to alignment and what patterns of correlation they exhibit. To achieve this, data were collected using the peer rating method (Huang, et al., 2012), which also allowed us to explore the structure and composition of BP itself. The results indicate that at least in a student population, BP follows a 5-factor structure which broadly echoes the composition of HP dimensions, though with some key differences. Most notably, respondents viewed all unfavourable traits as a separate bundle, discrete from other dimensions. This implies that they tend to associate brands either with many negative traits or very few, rather than linking them discretely to the HP dimensions they derive from. This may seem a puzzling result; however, exploratory interviews conducted for this project reveal some supporting evidence, as some interviewees, to convey their dislike of certain brands, expressed a battery of negative terms that covered a very broad range of shortcomings.

In terms of which traits are most salient to self-brand alignment, the CCA results indicate HP traits of Agreeableness, Emotional Stability, Extraversion and Openness predominate, along with BP traits of Emotional Instability and Reflectiveness. This result is significant, as it adds detail and nuance to existing empirical support for the self-brand congruence premise. It is noteworthy that traits relating to HP Conscientiousness and BP Practicality feature very little in the canonical functions: a striking result if we consider that technology was one of the two nominated product categories. The implication for brand managers is that, although brand characteristics of efficiency and practicality may be valued by consumers, this value is unlikely to be based on an alignment process; hence where self-brand matching is the objective, a focus on other dimensions would likely be more effective. Overall, these findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of the mechanics underpinning BP preferences, but more fundamentally to the nature and development of consumer-brand relationships.

Finally, in terms of self-brand alignment, the CCA results, offering the first examination in a branding context of two contrasting theories in interpersonal attraction literature, showed evidence of both similarity and complementarity configurations. The similarity configuration found in the data (between HP Extraversion, HP Openness and BP Reflectiveness) is explicable in a social science student population, where imagination, creativity and depth are important to identity and academic/career progression, and therefore, individuals are drawn to brands which reinforce those qualities. The complementarity configuration (between HP Agreeableness, HP Emotional Stability and BP Emotional Instability), although surprising, is also explicable in a student population, where brands that communicate capriciousness and rebellion may be seen as highly attractive, and a source of playful release, particularly for individuals who are themselves emotionally secure and socially adept. The result does nevertheless pose questions about the meaning of complementarity as developed in the interpersonal psychology literature. As the results are based on a student sample, therefore they cannot be generalised, future research could investigate the patterns of self-brand alignment in different populations.

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Appendix 1

Table 1: Trait-to-factor loadings for Human Personality

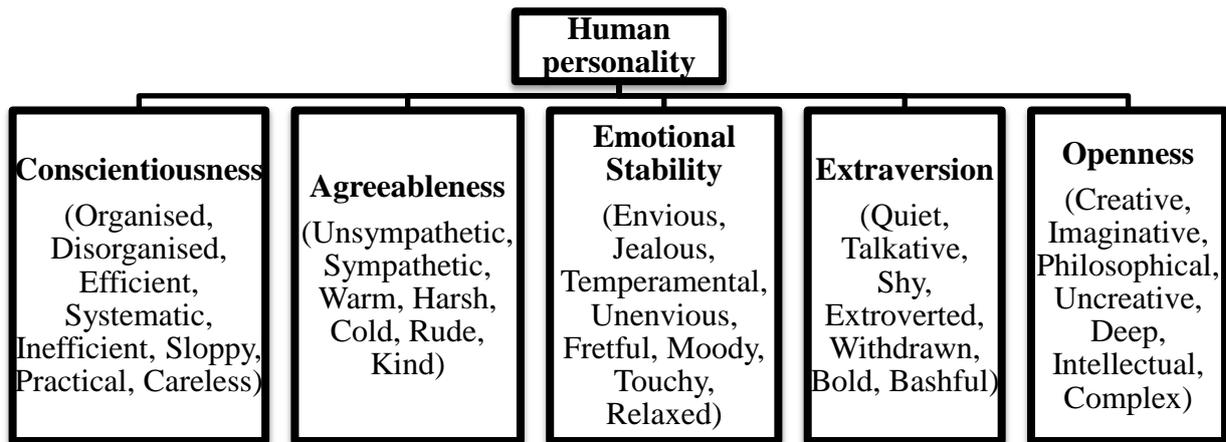
	Rotated Component Matrix				
	Conscientiousness	Agreeableness	Extraversion	Emotional Stability	Openness
Organised	.850				
Disorganised (R)	.840				
Efficient	.774				
Systematic	.729				
Inefficient (R)	.611				
Sloppy (R)	.575				
Practical	.525				
Careless (R)	.404				
Unsympathetic(R)		.766			
Sympathetic		.729			
Warm		.696			
Harsh (R)		.672			
Cold (R)		.598			
Rude (R)		.561			
Kind		.549			
Quiet (R)			.870		
Talkative			.767		
Shy (R)			.759		
Extroverted			.662		
Withdrawn (R)			.622		
Bold			.504		
Bashful (R)			.453		
Envious (R)				.734	
Jealous (R)				.708	
Temperamental(R)				.640	
Unenvious				.619	
Fretful (R)				.605	
Moody (R)				.557	
Touchy (R)				.537	
Relaxed				.495	
Creative					.739
Imaginative					.708
Philosophical					.699
Uncreative (R)					.601
Deep					.600
Intellectual					.477
Complex					.404

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

(R) indicates reversed items.

Figure 1: Descriptive Summary of Human Personality Factors



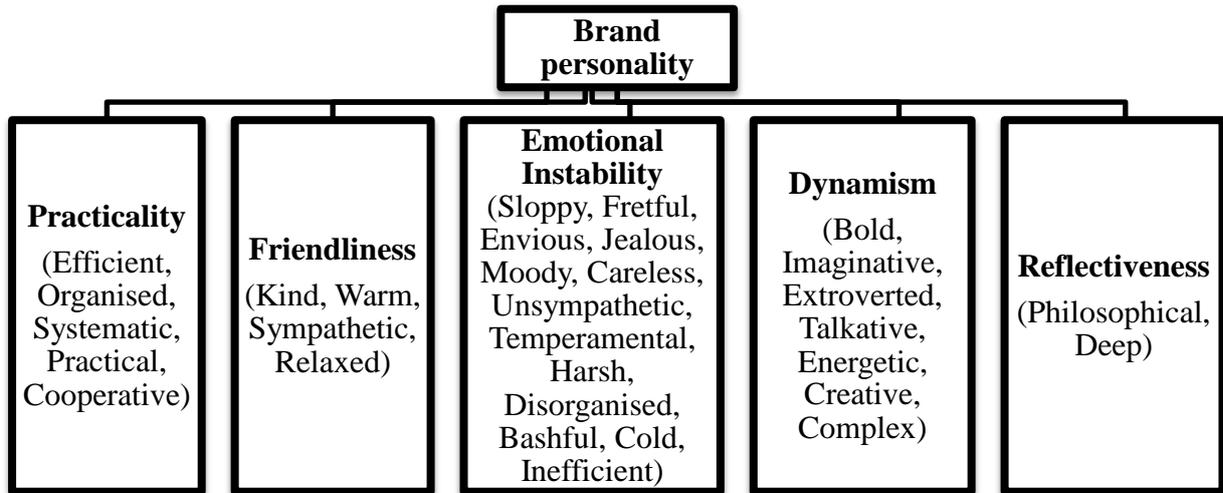
Appendix 2

Table 2: Trait-to-factor loadings for Brand Personality

	Rotated Component Matrix				
	Emotional Instability	Practicality	Dynamism	Friendliness	Reflectiveness
Sloppy (R)	.731				
Fretful (R)	.725				
Envious (R)	.703				
Jealous (R)	.674				
Moody (R)	.670				
Careless (R)	.621				
Unsympathetic (R)	.620				
Temperamental (R)	.615				
Harsh (R)	.599				
Disorganised (R)	.579				
Bashful (R)	.555				
Cold (R)	.533				
Inefficient (R)	.515				
Efficient		.826			
Organised		.797			
Systematic		.773			
Practical		.708			
Cooperative		.611			
Bold			.673		
Imaginative			.666		
Extroverted			.643		
Talkative			.560		
Energetic			.552		
Creative			.495		
Complex			.476		
Kind				.735	
Warm				.719	
Sympathetic				.634	
Relaxed				.474	
Philosophical					.745
Deep					.564

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
 Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
 (R) indicates reversed items.

Figure 2: Descriptive Summary of Brand Personality Factors



Appendix 3

Table 3: Canonical Solution for HP predicting BP for Functions 1 and 2

Variable	Function 1			Function 2		
	Coef	r_s	r_s^2 (%)	Coef	r_s	r_s^2 (%)
BP Emotional Instability	.941	.941	88.55%	-.206	-.206	4.24%
BP Practicality	.199	.199	3.96%	.261	.261	6.81%
BP Dynamism	.014	.014	0.02%	.244	.244	5.95%
BP Friendliness	.269	.269	7.24%	.386	.386	14.90%
BP Reflectiveness	.042	.042	0.18%	.825	.825	68.06%
R_c^2			27.8%			18.4%
HP Conscientiousness	.332	.332	11.02%	-.275	-.275	7.56%
HP Agreeableness	.690	.690	47.61%	.273	.273	7.45%
HP Extraversion	.265	.265	7.02%	-.560	-.560	31.36%
HP Emotional Stability	.585	.585	34.22%	.061	.061	0.37%
HP Openness	.021	.021	0.04%	.730	.730	53.29%