Comparing Brand Personality Measures

1.   Introduction

The idea of associating human or personality characteristics to a brand, as means of differentiation and positioning, is not new (Aaker & Fournier, 1995; de Chernatony, 2001; Freling & Forbes, 2005). Such characteristics are commonly thought to facilitate brand choice, enabling consumers to match the personality of the brands they buy with the personality they wish to project of themselves (Aaker, Bennet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001; Zinkhan, Haytko, & Ward, 1996).

Over the past decade the brand personality scale developed by Aaker (1997) has been the most commonly used measure in both academic and commercial brand personality research (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003; Parker, 2009). Aaker's scale, however, has been criticised on a number of grounds (see next section). Recently, Geuens, Weijters, and De Wulf (2009) developed an alternative brand personality measure, which was shown to overcome the shortcomings of Aaker's scale (see below). However, to the best knowledge of the authors, Geuens *et al.*'s and Aaker's measures have not been directly compared within the same context. Yet, the empirical testing and direct comparison of alternative scales is of high importance to both marketing practice and theory.

This study aims to extend the knowledge about brand personality measures by comparing the responses generated by the two scales, in brand- and respondent-level analyses. Specifically, the scales are compared in terms of their ability to: (i) discriminate between brand users' and nonusers' brand personality ratings; (ii) reduce the number of neutral responses; and (iii) elicit clearer differences between the personalities of competing brands.

2.   Brand personality measures

The brand personality scale most widely used to-date was developed by Jennifer Aaker (1997), who identified five possible dimensions or "*sets of human characteristics associated with a brand*" (p. 347): Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication and Ruggedness. The five dimensions are broadly based on the 'Big Five' human personality structure (Norman, 1963; Tupes & Christal, 1958) and include fifteen 'facets' (see Figure A1, Appendix 1). Aaker's scale has been criticized for being based on a loose definition of personality (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003) and for including characteristics such as 'upper class' which confuse 'brand personality' with 'user profiles' (Geuens *et al*., 2009). This confusion causes a construct validity problem (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). A second criticism of Aaker's scale regards the weak discriminatory power of its factor structure for within-category analysis at the respondent-level as well as at the brand-level (Austin, Siguaw, & Mattila*,* 2003; Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003; Bosnjak, Bochmann, & Hufschmidt*,* 2007), since the scale was developed from data aggregated across respondents for between-brand comparisons only.

In contrast, Geuens *et al.*'s (2009) five-factor, twelve-item measure of brand personality was designed to include only personality items and, as compared to Aaker's measure, showed higher affinity to the 'Big Five' personality model (see Figures A2 and A3, Appendix 1). Geuens *et al.* demonstrated the appropriateness and reliability of their own scale for between-brand and between-respondent within-category comparisons. Therefore they suggested its construct validity, as well as its practical advantage over Aaker's scale, since within-category comparisons of this kind are common in the marketing research practice (Austin *et al.*, 2003).

3.   Aims of Research and Hypotheses

The overall aim of this research is to develop a better understanding of brand personality measures. In particular, the objectives of the study are to: (i) compare responses to Aaker's (1997) brand personality measure with responses to the alternative recently developed by Geuens *et al.* (2009), at the respondent and at the brand level; and (ii) identify which of the

scales results in better discrimination between consumer groups and brands. The pertaining hypotheses are discussed below.

Respondent level: brand user and nonuser associations

Capturing the brand personality beliefs held by user versus nonuser segments is a key aspect in consumer research (Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Guido, 2001; Ambroise *et al.,* 2005). Brand users are found to hold stronger brand knowledge than nonusers (Castleberry and Ehrenberg, 1990), higher advertising awareness (Hofmeyr & Rice, 2000) and are generally satisfied with the brand. Hence they can be expected to hold positive brand personality beliefs. On the contrary, nonusers are likely to demonstrate lower advertising recall and brand knowledge, and express neutral to negative brand associations (Winchester & Romaniuk, 2008). Therefore, for both scales it is hypothesized that:

H1: Brand users will give more positive ratings than nonusers for brand personality traits.

A brand personality measure should be able not only to capture the differences in user versus nonuser perceptions, but also to clearly discriminate between the two groups. Romaniuk (2008), however, observed that Aaker's scale resulted in poor elicitation of nonusers' perceptions, obtaining mostly mid-scale, neutral scores. Consequently, the difference between users and nonusers scores was low. Indeed, as mentioned above, Aaker's scale was criticised for the poor discriminatory power of its factor structure for within-category analysis at the respondent level, as well as for its questionable construct validity. In contrast, Geuens *et al.* showed that their own scale could *"be meaningfully used to differentiate the way individual consumers view a brand's personality"* (p. 106).

Apart from differing in the dimensions of brand personality, Geuens *et al.*'s (2009) measure employs a 7-point Likert scale, instead of a 5-point scale as used by Aaker (1997). Seven point scales have been reported to benefit from higher sensitivity and to offer better discrimination between the respondents (Kent, 2007). According to Dawes (2008), with a 7-point Likert scale respondents are less inclined to tick the middle score as they are given a better variety of answers. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

H2a: Geuens et al.'s brand personality measure will result in fewer neutral responses than Aaker's scale.

H2b: Geuens et al.'s brand personality measure will achieve better discrimination between user and nonuser groups than Aaker's scale.

Brand-level discrimination

For brand-level analysis, it is essential that a scale can elicit differences between personalities of the competing brands. Given the drawbacks of Aaker's measure discussed in Section 2 and considering that Geuens *et al.* employ a more sensitive 7-point Likert scale (as compared to its 5-point alternative), the third hypothesis is as follows:

H3: The variation in personality ratings between the brands will be higher when measured via Geuens et al.'s scale rather than via Aaker's scale.

4.   Research Method

Study setting

The UK premium skincare market was chosen as the setting for this research for a number of reasons. As highlighted by Kumar (2005), cosmetic brands score high on both functional and emotional motivations. The category is also characterised by high levels of consumer involvement (Kumar, 2005; Mintel, 2008), which is an important moderating variable for measuring brand personality (Ambroise *et al.,* 2005). Finally, Guthrie *et al.* (2008) observed that the cosmetics industry, including skincare, is characterised by a large category effect, or 'halo' effect (Romaniuk, 2008), which implies that most attribute associations are held by consumers for the category in general, making it difficult to identify

variations at brand level. Such challenge seems very relevant to the comparative nature of this study, seeking to detect, inter alia, which measure exhibits higher capacity for discriminating between individual brand personality profiles. The premium skincare market in the UK is dominated by the following brands: Estée Lauder, Lancôme and Clinique (Mintel, 2004; Mintel, 2008). As market leaders, these brands can be expected to benefit from high levels of consumer awareness and involvement, positive for effective brand personality measurement (Ambroise *et al.*, 2005). Hence these three brands were used in this study.

Questionnaire design and data collection

Two questionnaires were designed for the data collection, differing in the brand personality measure employed. Questionnaire A used Aaker's (1997) 15 'facets', 5-factor and 5-point scale (1=not at all descriptive, 5=extremely descriptive) to measure brand personality of the three chosen brands (hereafter referred to as *'Measure A'*). Questionnaire G employed Geuens *et al.*'s (2009) 12-item-5-factor and 7-point measure (hereafter *'Measure G'*) (1=not characteristic for the brand at all, 7=very characteristic for the brand). Both questionnaire versions also included a question regarding consumers' purchase frequency of each of the three chosen brands ('buy every time'; 'buy from time to time'; 'never buy') and respondents' age (for quota purposes, see below).

Non probability, convenience sampling was used to collect 75 responses for each questionnaire version, for a total of 150 responses. Respondents were recruited in large department stores and in the streets of Central and Greater London. Once they had agreed to participate in the research, participants were randomly allocated to one of two questionnaires. The following quotas were imposed by the interviewer at data collection stage for both questionnaire versions: similar number of users ('buy every time' or 'buy from time to time') for each of the three brands selected (approximately 25 users per brand, resulting in overall number of 75 responses for either questionnaire version); similar number of users versus nonusers for each brand (roughly 25 nonusers per brand); and similar number of respondents in each of five age groups.

5.   Results

Respondent level: brand user and nonuser associations

In order to test H1, the responses of users and nonusers of each brand were compared for every personality dimension. Brand users consistently rated their brands higher than nonusers, resulting in positive differences between users and nonusers in mean values for all dimensions in both *Measures A and G*. The exception was that Clinique had a negative difference on the 'Ruggedness' dimension in *Measure A*, and on the dimensions of 'Aggressiveness' and 'Simplicity' in *Measure G*. This means that nonusers of Clinique assigned higher rating points than users for these personality dimensions. A similar pattern was identified for both Estee Lauder and Lancôme on the 'Aggressiveness' dimension in *Measure G*. Such results are not surprising, given that these personality dimensions are not typical of brands in the premium skin care market. Thereby, H1 is generally supported.

To test H2a, the total number of neutral responses to all brand personality questions was calculated for each measure. This procedure revealed 898 neutral responses overall for *Measure A* and 438 neutral responses overall for *Measure G*. The shares of neutral responses in both samples are shown in Table 1 below.
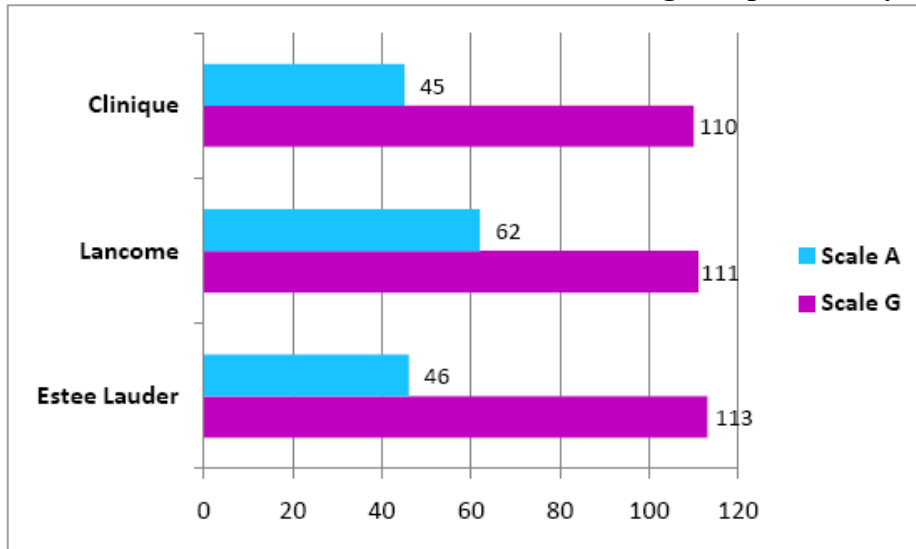
Table 1. Neutral responses to brand personality questions

	Measure A	*Measure G*	*Measure A %*	*Measure G %*
Total responses	3375	2700	100	100
Total neutral responses	898	438	26	16
Total non users neutral	410	254	12	9
Total users neutral	488	184	14	7

As shown in Table 1, *Measure A* elicited almost twice as many neutral responses (26%) as *Measure G* (16%), supporting H2a.

Since the two brand personality measures used in this study vary in the number of scale points, in order to test H2b user and nonuser ratings for each brand and each dimension in either scale were divided by the corresponding number of scale points and then converted into percentages. Thereby the results were standardized, allowing for comparisons across the measures. The summed differences (across personality dimensions) in standardised ratings of users versus nonusers are reported in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Summed difference in user vs. nonuser ratings for personality dimensions*

*Note: The negative differences were excluded from these calculations to obtain overall discrimination levels.

The data in Figure 1 shows that differences between user and nonuser ratings for brands across personality dimensions were consistently higher in *Measure G*. In particular, the summed difference percentage points for *Measures A* and *G* respectively were as follows: 46 versus 113 for Estee Lauder, 62 versus 111 for Lancôme, and 45 versus 110 for Clinique. In general *Measure G* provided a more distinguishable variance in user and nonuser responses to brand personality trait questions, supporting H2b.

Brand-Level Discrimination

To test H3, it was necessary to examine the level of variance between the brands for each personality trait on both measures. For this purpose, the standard deviation across mean brand scores for each trait was calculated. The deviation score was divided by the number of scale points in each measure and converted to standardized percentage points in order to make the magnitude of variation between brands comparable across the measures. The extent to which *Measure A* and *Measure G* discriminated between the brands was assessed by comparing the ratios of total percentage point variation for each scale, divided by the respective number of traits. Therefore, 79 total percentage point variation divided by 15 traits resulted in a ratio of 5.3 for *Measure A*, and 155 total points divided by 12 traits gave the ratio of 12.9 for *Measure G*. These results indicate that Geuens *et al.*'s measure elicited more than twice as much variation between the brands as the Aaker's alternative. The total sum of percentage point variation at the dimensional level equalled 27 for *Measure A* and 71 for *Measure G*, which confirmed the results of trait-level analysis. Hence these results support H3.

6.   Discussion

While both Aaker's and Geuens *et al.*'s measures were based on the 'Big Five' human personality model, the definitions of brand personality that laid the foundations of either framework were very different in their essence (see Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003; Ambroise *et al.*, 2005; Geuens *et al.*, 2009). Eventually, such conceptual differences resulted in two apparently similar, but fundamentally discrepant measures, embracing rather diverse underlying constructs (see Figure A3 in Appendix 1). Although the scope of the present research did not imply testing the construct validity of the two frameworks, our findings are consistent with the main areas of criticism of Aaker's measure and support Geuens *et al.*'s proposition of their measure's superiority over its earlier alternative.

The results of our analysis support the claim of the poor discriminatory power of Aaker's factor structure for within-category analyses at the respondent and brand level.

At the respondent level, both scales captured the tendency of brand users to give more positive evaluations of the brands than nonusers. The magnitude of differences, however, was consistently higher in Geuens *et al.*'s measure. This can be partly explained by the use of a more sensitive 7-point Likert scale, which offered better discrimination between the respondents and resulted in fewer neutral responses. It can also be inferred that since the dimensions and traits which compose Geuens *et al.*'s measure are a closer reflection of 'Big Five' personality traits, they are more generalisable across sectors and markets, including the premium skincare market. The use of more generalisable personality traits resulted in the increased propensity by respondents to express distinguishable opinions about the brands.

Finally, another important finding of this research concerns the higher level of between-brand discrimination demonstrated by Geuens *et al.*'s measure. The ability of this brand personality measure to identify significant variations between the brands is highly valuable, especially given that the product category selected for this research is categorized by a strong 'halo' effect.

7.   Conclusions, Implications and Limitations

By comparing two brand personality scales in their concise and operational versions (15 items versus 12 items for Aaker's and Geuens *et al.*'s scales respectively), this research supports Geuens *et al.*'s contention that their measure is an effective practical instrument for branding research, which could be used for any product category and for analyses on an industry, individual brand and respondent level.

For academics, this study is of value as the first empirical comparative study of Geuens *et al.*'s recent brand personality measure and its well-established alternative by Aaker. The findings indicate clear advantages of the more recent measure for branding research, in the context of cosmetics brands. Moreover, starting from the evaluative assumptions, outlined by Romaniuk (2008), the research further develops the grounds upon which brand personality scales should be compared.

For marketing practitioners, this study substantiates the effectiveness of the new scale in the most frequent types of commercial brand personality research, i.e. the between-brand and between-respondent within-category comparisons (Austin *et al.*, 2003). Thereby, this research suggests that Geuens *et al.*'s measure can be successfully adopted for use in the marketing practice. Furthermore, its application may improve the quality and efficiency of personality research in strategic brand management.

This research, however, has a number of limitations. Firstly, it was conducted on a small sample and focused on only one product category and a limited number of brands. Secondly, only subsets of traits from each scale were used. In future research, brand personalities in several product categories should be compared, and it is advisable to start from the total set of personality items (42 and 40 traits for Aaker's and Geuens *et al.*'s scales respectively).
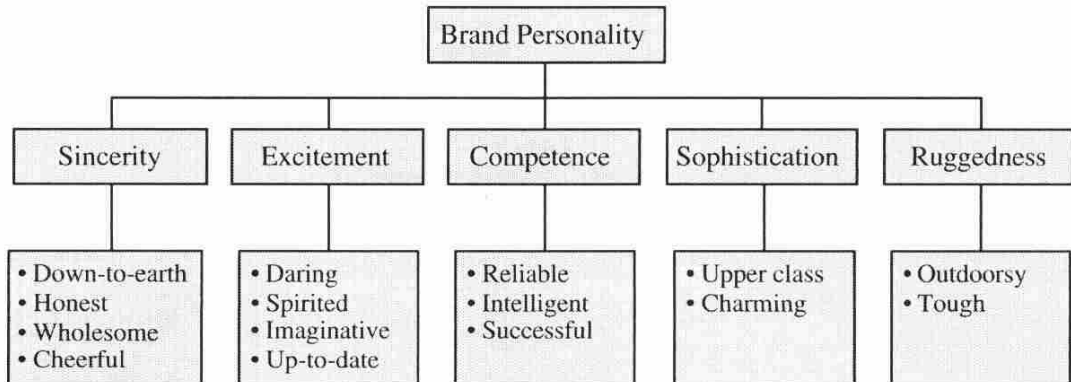
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Appendix 1

Figure A1. Aaker (1997) brand personality model

Source: Aaker (1997)

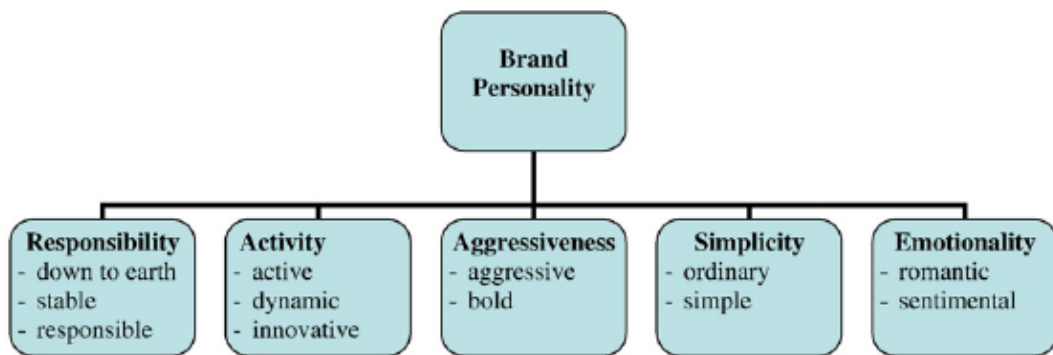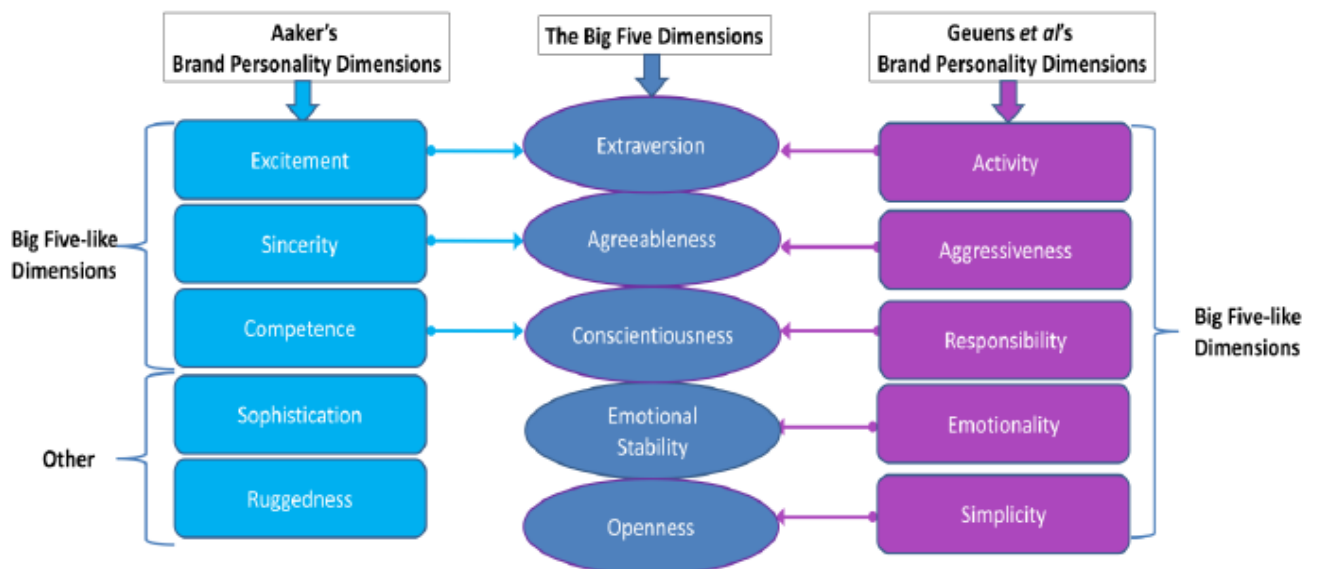## Figure A2. Geuens *et al.* (2009) brand personality measure

Fig. 1. The new brand personality measure.

Source: Geuens *et al.* (2009)

Figure A3. Brand Personality v. The Big Five Dimensions

Source: after Geuens *et al.* (2009)