

Self-Congruity: A Determinant of Brand Personality

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Self-congruity and brand personality are important concepts. Self-congruity may be as much a determinant of brand personality as it is a product of brand personality. Two new concepts, false congruity and real-ideal image discrepancy, are introduced as factors that could explain self-congruity's role in perceived brand personality. Before launching a brand, marketers should take steps to ensure probable early adopters of their product are indeed the marketers' target consumers. Existing brands should be monitored for brand personality changes due to false congruity, real-ideal image discrepancy, or innovative or creative consumer behavior. A healthy brand image may depend on it.

SELF-CONGRUITY

The relationship between self-congruity and brand personality is an extensively studied aspect of self-congruity theory and is an important concept for marketers to understand in order to get the most out of their brand. This paper will review the literature on self-congruity theory, include discussion of self-concept and brand personality, and explore how the theory has evolved since its inception in the 1950s. Most of the literature has focused on how brand personality affects self-congruity, but this paper will propose that the reverse can also happen; self-congruity may affect brand personality. Two new concepts, false congruity and real-ideal image discrepancy, will be introduced as factors that could explain self-congruity's role in perceived brand personality.

Self-congruity is the extent brand personality and self-concept are compatible. It is “the match between the product's value-expressive attributes (product-user image) and the audience's self-concept” (Johar & Sirgy, 1991, p. 24). Self-concept, according to self-congruity theory, influences consumer behavior in a way that results in the purchase of a product (Johar & Sirgy, 1989).

A crucial factor in market segmentation, self-congruity provides insight concerning positioning and advertising research for marketing managers (Sirgy, Grewal, Mangleburg, Park, Chon, Claiborne, Johar, Berkman, 1997). With deep psychological knowledge of target consumers rather than surface-based demographics, marketers can more accurately position their products in a way that appeals to their customers. Developing a congruence model for their specific target market enables marketers to choose

the product image attributes (self, ideal, social, or ideal social) that create the greatest level of congruity (Johar & Sirgy, 1989).

SELF-CONCEPT

An understanding of self-congruity theory relies heavily on a grasp of the term *self-concept*, which is considered “a meaningful mode of market segmentation” (Kassarjian, 1971, p. 413). Self-concept refers to the “totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object” (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 7). Or alternatively, self-concept can be thought of as a collection of self-schemas made up of generalizations about the self (Shimp, Barone, & Sprout, 1999). Although self-concept has been consistently defined in the literature, general acceptance in definition does not provide a universal understanding of the relationship between self-concept and consumer behavior, and there were some growing pains in this regard in the process of theory formation. Disagreement about the extent of self-concept, that is, the number of sub-concepts it should be divided into, has historically led to confusion and uncertainty in self-congruity research (Sirgy, 1982).

The main issue was consistency; each researcher came up with his or her own way to define and describe the components of self-concept. Some early researchers broke it down into two components—actual self-concept and ideal self-concept, the former defined as how one believes he or she is in reality, and the latter defined as how one would like to be rather than how one believes he or she actually is (Sirgy, 1982; Dolich, 1969). Self-concept continued to evolve in the literature, and most now treat self-concept as having four components: actual self-image, ideal self-image, social self-image, and ideal social self-image (Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Johar & Sirgy, 1989; Sirgy, 1982). The first two components remain consistent in definition, while social self-image refers to the beliefs one has about how he or she is viewed by others, and ideal social self-image denotes the image one aspires others to have of him or herself (Johar & Sirgy, 1989).

For example, a certain brand of shoe may have a product-user image, here defined as the image associated with the expected user of a product, of the outgoing, youthful, and active user, and potential consumers may think of themselves as having the same qualities—they believe they are also outgoing, youthful, and active. This is a case where there is congruence between the product-user image and the actual self-image of the consumer. Individuals tend to perceive products in terms of symbolic meaning (Dolich, 1969), and the greater the congruence between this symbolic meaning (e.g., a youthful and exciting shoe) and the consumer’s self-concept, the more likely there will be a positive evaluation of, and ultimately purchase of, the product (Kassarjian, 1971). If the consumer wishes he or she is outgoing, youthful, and active, whether in reality he or she is or not, there is congruity between brand image and ideal self-image. Congruence with the consumer’s social self-image occurs when the symbolic qualities of the shoe match up with the consumer’s perception of the qualities others believe he or she has. And finally, ideal social self-image congruity is achieved when the image the consumer wishes to portray to others is in congruence with the brand image. The consumer believes wearing this brand of shoe will encourage others to see him or her the way he or she wants to be seen.

The reason consumers seek out congruity between product-user image and self-concept is fulfillment of certain needs: self-esteem, self-consistency, social consistency, and social approval (Sirgy & Johar, 1992). The self-esteem motive denotes the tendency for individuals to enhance self-concept by being discriminatory in choosing experiences, and the self-consistency motive explains the tendency for behavior consistent with actual self-image (Sirgy, 1982). Social consistency needs are met by congruence between product-user image and the social self-image. Greater degrees of congruity promote more positive attitudes toward the brand or product (Johar & Sirgy, 1991). Likewise, social approval needs are better met the greater the congruence between the product-user image and the ideal social self-image, and this congruence again leads to positive attitudes toward the brand (Johar & Sirgy, 1991).

Epstein (1992) explained the need for self-congruity with just one all-encompassing motive, “maintaining the coherence of a personal conceptual system” (p. 35). Once this belief set is established, individuals strive to maintain it, sometimes in the face of distress or lack of external reinforcement.

Individuals will not only modify their behavior and interpretation of events to confirm their self-concept, but will also encourage behavior in others that will reinforce their beliefs about themselves (Epstein, 1992). Thus, consumers have a tendency to try to preserve their self-concept and will buy products that promote its maintenance.

Sirgy (1982) summed up the importance of self-concept in self-congruity theory like this:

1. Self-concept is of value to the individual, and behavior will be directed toward the protection and enhancement of self-concept.
2. The purchase, display, and use of goods communicate symbolic meaning to the individual and to others.
3. The consuming behavior of an individual will be directed toward enhancing self-concept through the consumption of goods as symbols. (p. 289)

BRAND PERSONALITY

Brand personality is “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347), and is an important aspect of advertising (Plummer, 1984). Consumers think of brands in terms of human personality traits. Use of advertising strategies that utilize this fact, such as anthropomorphization, personification, and creation of user imagery, can give the brand a personality that, like human personalities, is distinct and lasting (Aaker, 1997). A brand’s personality is affected by its user imagery, the “set of human characteristics associated with the typical user of a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 348). User imagery is the image transferred to a brand from the individuals considered to be the typical users of the brand. This is where brand and human personality formation differ. Human personality traits are based on a person’s behavior, physical attributes, attitudes, beliefs, and demographic characteristics (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality traits form through communication of any kind between the brand and the consumer. There is usually nothing intrinsic to a brand that makes it, for example, young, exciting, or traditional; instead these qualities are formed through the direct or indirect contact a consumer has with a brand, including the product-user image (Aaker, 1997; Plummer, 1985).

A distinction to note is the difference between brand personality and product personality. Product personality refers to the image of a specific product within a brand, and is defined as “the set of human personality characteristics used to describe a specific product variant” (Govers & Mugge, 2004). This distinction was important to Govers and Mugge’s (2004) study on product attachment. Product attachment is “the emotional bond a consumer experiences with a product” (Mugge, Schifferstein, & Schoormans, 2008, p. 325). Govers and Mugge (2004) iterated there is an emotional tie between products and their owners, and the product is meaningful to the owner in a deep and important way. When a consumer becomes attached to a product, the product provides additional benefits to him or her that go beyond those of other products in the same product category (Govers & Mugge, 2004).

One reason consumers become attached to their products is self-expression (Govers & Mugge, 2004). When products are seen as self-congruent (i.e., having a similar personality to the consumer’s self-image), their consumption serves the symbolic function of self-expression. Govers and Mugge (2004) contributed to self-congruity research by showing consumers become more attached to their products the greater the congruence they experience with them. Higher congruence increases the product’s symbolic meaning to the owner, and the owner consequentially becomes more attached to the product (Govers & Mugge, 2004).

In addition to brand and product personality, consumers can also experience congruity with store personality (Willems & Swinnen, 2011; d’Astous & Levesque, 2003; Martineau, 1958). Store personality is the way the shopper sees the store in his or her mind, an image that considers the store’s functional qualities as well as its psychological attributes (Willems & Swinnen, 2011). Consumers are able to hold distinct images of stores and the products they carry (Rocereto & Mosca, 2012). In other words, a store’s personality is not automatically derived from the products on its shelves, and marketers of the store must therefore take care to actively position the store to appeal to its target market (Rocereto & Mosca, 2012).

Consumers use store, product, and brand personality to simplify buying decisions. People use symbolic images to “summarize a vast complexity of values and meanings” (Lindquist, 1974-1975, p. 29), which enables individuals to easily comprehend and interact with the object at hand, much like he or she would another person. In situations of uncertainty, these symbolic representations serve as decision heuristics (Stern, Zinkhan, & Jaju, 2001).

SELF-CONGRUITY AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The validity of self-congruity has been tested and retested, and research is still being done to determine self-congruity theory’s reliability and practical applications in marketing (Hughes & Guerrero, 2012; Boksberger, Dolnicar, Laesser, & Randle, 2011; Aaker, 1999; Aaker, 1997; Sirgy, et al., 1997; Sirgy, 1982). An exploration of self-congruity research should provide enough information to draw conclusions necessary for the sake of marketing theory, not to mention curiosity. Where has the research brought us? How can marketers make use of this information?

EVOLUTION OF SELF-CONGRUITY THEORY

The notion of congruity between self-concept and brand image affecting consumer behavior was first sparked by Gardner and Levy (1955) and expanded on by Levy (1959). It was determined that “modern goods are recognized as essentially psychological things which are symbolic of personal attributes and goals and of social patterns and strivings” (Levy, 1959, p. 119). Furthermore, products have a symbolic character and the consumer will choose products that have a symbolic value set consistent with the way he or she thinks about him or herself (Levy, 1959).

Sirgy (1982) agreed with previous research that consumers’ self-images interact with the symbolic images they see in products, but he began to see a problem with self-congruity research methods. Most research was being done with semantic differential scales, which assume equal weighting of image attributes. But, Sirgy claimed, different attributes carry different weights of importance for each consumer. The current testing also did not naturally account for product and user attribute salience across different situations. It is possible that only a few attributes are salient in a given situation, and therefore only the relevant attributes need to be tested. This was the beginning of *situational congruity*, which was introduced by Schenk and Holman (1980), and expanded on by later researchers (Aaker, 1999; Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Shavitt, 1992). Depending on the situation, individuals express a different self in order to “create particular impressions and to obtain positive reactions” (Schenk & Holman, 1980, p. 613). Individuals develop a repertoire of self-images that are called for in different situations (Schenk & Holman, 1980). Thus the consumer’s situational self-image depends on the parameters of the social situation; a consumer may experience congruity with a certain brand in one situation and not another.

Sirgy (1982) hypothesized ways to curb some of these methodological shortcomings, which also included possible halo effect bias, social desirability bias, and self-disclosure problems. His recommended solutions for these problems, respectively, were: protocol procedures and free elicitation procedures; selecting neutral self-image attributes or using both positive and negative dimensions and informing consumers that their responses will remain anonymous; and making the testing environment more conducive to self-disclosure—for example, making the environment a cozy room with pictures on the walls and comfortable furniture or using a non-threatening interviewer.

Further improvements to self-congruity measurement were later suggested with the intention of measuring self-congruity more directly, reducing measurement error, and approaching self-congruity from a holistic standpoint (Sirgy, et al., 1997). The new method measured the self-congruity experience more directly than the old method, which first measured product-user image and self-image separately and then used a difference index to combine them (Sirgy, et al., 1997). This use of discrepancy scores can lead to greater error due to forcing the subject to rate self-congruity on non-salient dimensions (Sirgy, et al., 1997). The new method put less emphasis on the compensatory decision rule, the idea that a good congruity rating on one dimension can make up for a poor rating on another (Sirgy, et al., 1997). This is

done by focusing on global or holistic measures (in tune with how images are processed) instead of analytic or piecemeal measures that must then be integrated using complex decision calculus (Sirgy, et al., 1997). Sirgy, et al.'s (1997) new method addressed some of the measurement challenges regarding issues of salient attributes and situational congruity brought up by Sirgy (1982) and Aaker (1999).

FUNCTIONAL CONGRUITY

Situational congruity was essentially a refinement of self-congruity theory, while functional congruity is in stand-alone contrast to self-congruity. In terms of functional congruity, consumers want products not for the physical products themselves but for the benefits they receive from using the products (Lefkoff-Hagius & Mason, 1993). Functional congruity is “the match between the beliefs of product’s utilitarian attributes (performance-related) and the audience’s referent attributes” (Johar & Sirgy, 1991, p. 26). Referent attributes are the criteria used to evaluate the performance of the product (Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Sirgy & Johar, 1999). They represent the ideal attributes a consumer seeks in a product. Functional congruity is the comparison between these ideal attributes and the product’s actual performance. Like self-congruity, functional congruity is predictive of brand attitude (Sirgy & Johar, 1999). The greater the congruence between the product’s utilitarian and value-expressive attributes, the more positive the evaluation of the product will be (Sirgy & Johar, 1999). Functional congruity answers the questions “How well will this product meet my needs?” or “Will this product do what I want it to do?”

Attitude Functions

Both utilitarian (functional) attributes and value-expressive (symbolic) attributes affect product preference (Sirgy & Johar, 1999; Johar & Sirgy, 1989), and are important concepts to understand in the self-congruity literature. Katz (1960) introduced utilitarianism and value-expressiveness as functions of attitudes, meaning they are reasons for holding or for changing attitudes. Also introduced were the ego-defensive and knowledge functions, the former describing an individual’s need to protect him or herself from harsh realities about him or herself and the latter describing the need to search for meaning, understanding, and clarity (Katz, 1960). Due to theoretical and measurement issues with the ego-defensive and knowledge functions, the utilitarian and value-expressive functions began to monopolize the conversation, and the ego-defensive and knowledge functions began to fade away in the literature (Johar & Sirgy, 1991).

Utilitarian attitudes are based on product attributes and their inherent benefits, and product attitudes that serve a utilitarian function “have the goal of maximizing rewards and minimizing punishments associated with the product” (Shavitt, 1992, p. 47). The utilitarian function deals with the notion of expected reward (Johar & Sirgy, 1991). Consumers buy products for their utilitarian attributes when they expect to reach a certain goal with their purchase.

An attitude about a value-expressive product “allows for a positive demonstration of one’s central values and self-concept” (Johar & Sirgy, 1991, p. 26). In other words, attitudes that serve a value-expressive function are perceived to symbolize one’s own identity and values (Shavitt, 1992). A value-expressive product might be Apple’s iPhone, which has a young, cool brand personality and is consumed for symbolic purposes. This is in contrast Android’s Droid, which is has a more functional (utilitarian) appeal relative to the iPhone (Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak, & Sirgy, 2012).

The success of value-expressive brands is largely determined by the self-congruity effect (Aguirre-Rodriguez, et al., 2012), and functional congruity is the determining factor in the success of utilitarian brands (Shavitt, 1992). Johar & Sirgy (1991) presented value-expressive and utilitarian appeals as two different routes to persuasion. They developed a model that demonstrated a value-expressive appeal will be more persuasive for a product of high rather than low product value-expressiveness, and a utilitarian appeal will be enhanced by a product that is highly utilitarian (Johar & Sirgy, 1991). The self-congruity route to persuasion “can be viewed as a psychological process in which the audience focuses on source cues and matches these cues to their self-concept (actual, ideal, social, and/or ideal social self-image)”

(Johar & Sirgy, 1991, p. 26). And fittingly, the functional congruity route to persuasion relies on utilitarian appeals (Shavitt, 1992).

Johar & Sirgy (1991) referenced Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as support for two persuasive mechanisms, the central and peripheral routes to persuasion, and their close relationship with value-expressive and utilitarian appeals. The central route describes attitude change resulting from a consumer highly involved in the message and who diligently considers the meaning of the message and the product's functional attributes (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 2001). The audience focuses on and processes the quality of the argument (Johar & Sirgy, 1991). The peripheral route to attitude change is a more passive process. Attitude changes caused by the peripheral route occur because of some positive or negative cue associated with the product, not because the consumer has considered the merit of the finer points in the message (Petty, et al., 2001). ELM provides support for the distinction between self-congruity and functional congruity (Johar & Sirgy, 1991). Persuasion via self-congruity can be seen as a form of peripheral processing, and the functional congruity route a form of central processing (Johar & Sirgy, 1991).

Strength of Self-Congruity Theory

Self-congruity has not always been widely accepted, and for a length of time researchers struggled to prove its significance (Hughes & Guerrero, 2012; Boksberger, et al., 2011; Aaker, 1999; Aaker, 1997). The theory has reached a state of general acceptance, however. Self-congruity's significance has been supported in varying venues, including retail store choice (Willems & Swinnen, 2011), sponsorship events (Mozodier & Merunka, 2011), the housing market (Sirgy, Grzeskowiak, & Su, 2005), tourism (Boksberger, Dolnicar, Laesser, & Randle, 2011), and even career choice (Nolan & Harold, 2010). In response to progression in self-congruity research that suggested conflicting conclusions about the theory's validity, Aguirre-Rodriguez, et al. (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of self-congruity and found evidence of a robust self-congruity effect. Their results show that "the self-congruity construct is a valid and robust foundation for current and emerging consumer identity and symbolic consumption research" (Aguirre-Rodriguez, et al., 2012, p. 1184).

SELF-CONGRUITY AND BRAND PERSONALITY

Since the 1950s when self-congruity theory was proposed, there has been an effort on the part of researchers to get self-congruity theory to a place where it is practical for marketers to apply it in a methodical way in everyday situations. Most research focused on moderators of the relationship between self-congruity and consumer choice. The research tested which moderators were significant, the extent of their influence, and the conditions necessary for their relevance. Product conspicuousness (Sirgy, 1982; Dolich, 1969), product personalization (Sirgy, 1979), time (Sirgy, 1982), response mode (Hong & Zinkhan, 1995), and product ownership (Barone, Shimp, & Sprott, 1999), were all shown to moderate the effects of self-congruity.

Research on human personality, another extensively studied ingredient in self-congruity theory, initially produced few results to support self-congruity's significance (Kassarjian, 1971). Aaker (1999) hypothesized this was due to the malleable self-concept, the idea that personality can vary across situations. Traditional measures used the personality model, which assumes personality traits remain consistent under all conditions (Aaker, 1999). The situation model, in contrast, assumes different personality traits become salient in response to different situations (Aaker, 1999). For example, a student may see him or herself as both a good student (smart) and a good athlete (athletic). Though he or she may possess both traits, in a given situation (e.g. a basketball game) one trait may become more salient (athletic) than the other (smart).

Situations activate self-schemas, which are "comprised of cognitive information representing generalizations about one's self" (Barone, Shimp, & Sprott, 1999, p. 77). These self-schemas are what consumers draw on to determine self-congruity, and they are contingent on the brand and its perceived relevance to the self (Barone, Shimp, & Sprott, 1999). Thus situation congruity, the match between salient

personality traits and situation (Aaker, 1999), is an important aspect of self-congruity. Situation congruity was one of the first real attempts at providing theoretical support that brand personality can determine self-congruity (Aaker, 1999).

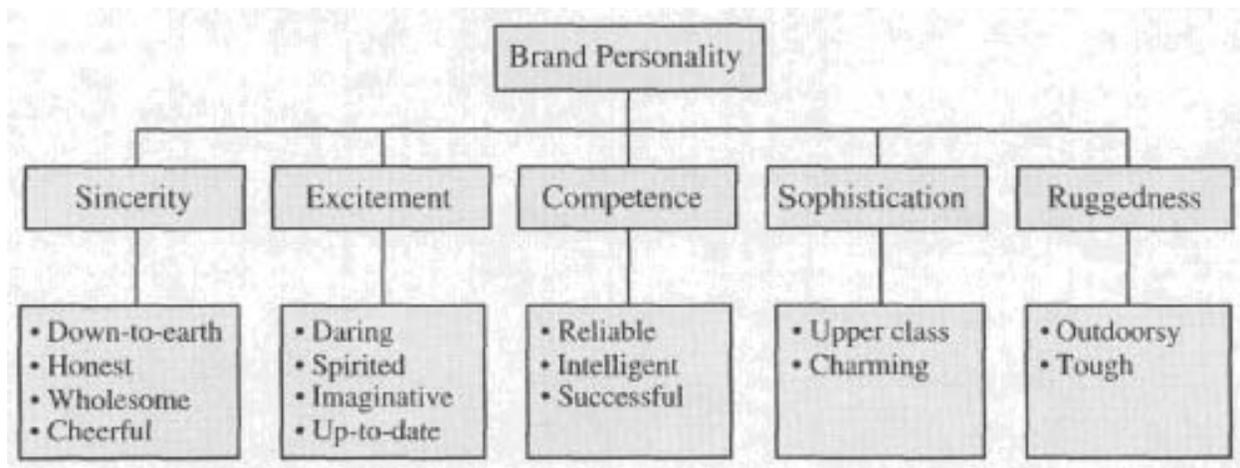
Self-Congruity as a Function of Brand Personality

Brand personality is defined as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). Brands can serve a symbolic or value-expressive function as well as a utilitarian function (Keller, 1993). When the brand is serving a value-expressive function, brand personality becomes the route to self-congruity.

Some researchers indicate there is still little empirical evidence in support of self-congruity theory (Boksberger, Dolnicar, Laesser, & Randle, 2011; Aaker, 1997). The problem may lie in something as simple as measurement of brand personality. Early researchers struggled to find a consistent way to measure brand personality; often they would develop ad hoc scales for their specific study, using only traits that were tailored to the brands being studied (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011). Aaker’s (1997) framework of brand personalities opened the door for future researchers to consistently measure brand personality and its significant role in self-congruity. A mirror to the “Big Five” human personality dimensions (i.e., Extraversion, Emotional Stability, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience; Barrick & Mount, 1991), the brand personality framework is now the standard for brand personality measurement (Willems & Swinnen, 2011). In her research, Aaker (1997) asked 631 subjects to rate a subset of 37 brands based on 114 personality traits. Employing an exploratory principal components factor analysis, Aaker (1997) narrowed these 114 traits to the five personality dimensions seen as most distinct by consumers: Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness.

Aaker then conducted a facet identification study to further enhance the understanding of each dimension (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011). This process identified 15 facets that best describe the five dimensions (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1



(Aaker, 1997, p. 352)

This brand personality framework provided some relief for those disappointed with the “weak empirical support for self-congruity effects” (Aaker, 1997, p. 353). Recognizing the fundamental differences between human personality and brand personality allows researchers to better understand the nature of the match between them. Rather than forcing human personality traits onto brands, researchers can study the relationship between distinct human and brand characteristics. For example, the congruity between a person who possesses the quality “open to experience” and a brand of shoe that has the quality

“rugged” can be examined more effectively using the respective human and brand personality frameworks. The brand is not forced to be rated on the same scale as the person (and thereby take on a trait artificial to the brand, like *open to experience*), but is allowed to take on the trait more naturally associated with brands like it, such as *rugged*.

Measurement challenges may not be exclusive to problems with scale consistency. Socially desirable responding, the tendency respondents have to answer questions in a way that makes them look good, can undermine the reliability of brand personality and self-concept research (Steenkamp, De Jong, & Baumbartner, 2010). Respondents may try to conceal congruity with preferred brands if they are embarrassed about experiencing congruity with the brand (Helgeson & Supphellen, 2004). Socially desirable responding does not, however, have the same effect on brand personality questions because the respondent’s self-concept is not explicitly addressed (Helgeson & Supphellen, 2004). Researchers can reduce the effects of socially desirable responding with appeals to be honest, promising confidentiality, demonstrating anonymity, and careful question wording (Nancarrow, Brace, & Wright, 2001).

Measuring Self-Image and Brand Personality in the Same Associative Network

While Aaker (1997) broke the mold by developing different measurement scales for human personality and brand personality, Branaghan & Hildebrand (2011) revamped the old mold by being the first to measure self-image and brand personality images in the same associative network. The advantage of measuring brand personality images and self-image in the same associative network is comprehensiveness. Marketers can visually see how the self relates to selected brands while simultaneously seeing how these brands relate to each other (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011).

Self-congruity can be measured and represented in networks because “brand personality and self-image are knowledge structures, and facets of brand personality also describe the self” (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011, p. 304). Cognitive psychologists see an associative network as a culmination of organized memory; nodes represent concepts, and links are the connections between concepts (Keller, 1993). Concepts have a better chance of receiving a direct link if they have a higher level of relatedness (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011). The degree of relatedness of concepts (i.e. proximity in the network) determines the amount of spreading activation that occurs when a node is thought of.

When someone thinks about a concept, that concept’s node is activated and the activation spreads to adjacent nodes. The degree to which the activation spreads depends on the semantic distance from the activated node. From the standpoint of cognitive theory, brands, attributes and the associations among them are simply instances of associative networks, and can be represented in this manner. (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011, p. 305)

Self-image can be considered the network representation of one’s personality (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011). The same spreading activation seen in brand associative networks is present in the self-image associative network, and thus is the rationale for measuring both in the same associative network and treating them as interchangeable concepts (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011).

Branaghan and Hildebrand (2011) applied the Pathfinder network scaling algorithm to their data on the perceived relatedness of twelve automobile brands (see Figure 2). The participants of their study rated the brands on Aaker’s (1997) fifteen brand personality facets, and rated their self-image on the very same scale (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011). This made it possible to measure the distance between self-image and the automobile brands in a network (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011).

FIGURE 2

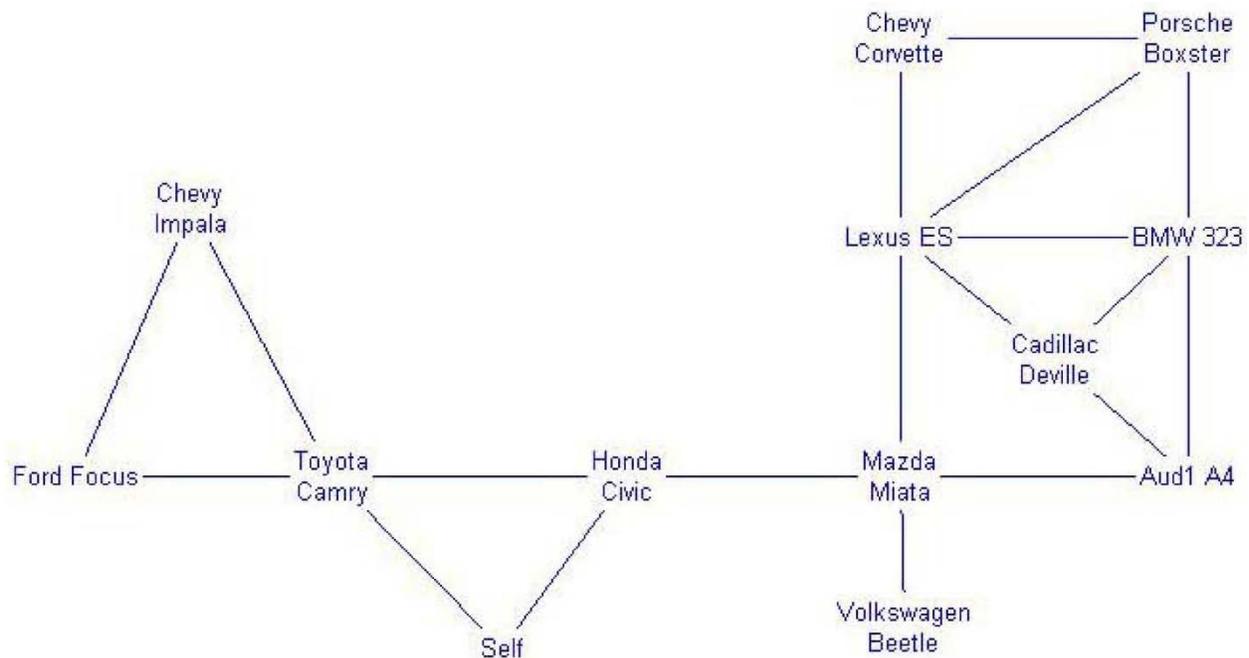


Figure 2 is a network showing the relationship between the average consumer personality of a group of college students and images of various automobile brands (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011, p. 308). The consumer (self) is only one link away from both the Honda Civic and the Toyota Camry, which indicates the consumer shares the same personality attributes, in this case sincerity and competence, with the two brands. The Mazda Miata, Chevy Impala, and Ford Focus are two links away from the self. This representation makes sense because these cars tend to be seen as reliable and moderately priced, certainly vehicles on students' radars. The brands farthest away from the self, and therefore least congruent with the self, are more expensive brands associated with older individuals.

Branaghan and Hildebrand's (2011) research suggested that self-congruity can in fact be measured by geodesic distance, or the number of links between concepts. Their research effectively created the option to transform self-congruity into a tangible map that can be seen and understood by anyone—marketers, managers, CEOs, and customers alike. It is easy to illustrate how brands close to the self will be preferred, while brands farther away in the network will be less desirable. Marketers can use associative networks to gauge a consumer's reaction to the marketing strategy. For example, a marketer might consult an associative network to determine if a certain change in a product's packaging will improve its position in the network or instead increase the number of links between the product and the target consumer's self-image.

Another exciting possible application of this research lies in market segmentation (Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011). Using associative networks, marketers could look deeper than topical demographic segments and segment consumers according to their networks. Consumers could be targeted and consumer preferences could be determined per deep psychological characteristics instead of solely physical, financial, or geographic ones.

Associative networks could be used in market research to determine before launching a product or brand exactly who will be buying the brand. As will be discussed later, early adopters are influential when

it comes to brand image, and using networks to learn about how a brand will be received by consumers can better prepare a brand for launch and alert managers of potential brand image problems.

Self-Congruity's Effect on Brand Personality

Like that of Aaker (1999; 1997), all research consistent with self-congruity theory considers self-congruity to be at least partially a function of brand personality (Govers & Mugge 2004; Sirgy 1982; Sirgy 1979; Dolich 1969; Levy, 1959), and holds that brand choice reveals the personality of the consumer (Sirgy 1979). But researchers have thus far failed to explore the possibility that the reverse is also true; that is, brand personality is a function of self-congruity. In other words, the extent to which consumers see a brand as having a personality congruent with their own self-image can influence the brand's perceived personality. There is room for research considering a dynamic, two-way relationship between brand personality and self-congruity.

Conventional thought is brand personality is determined by factors such as advertising, price, and other marketing associations, all of which are under the control of marketing managers (Sirgy, et al., 1997; Plummer, 1984). This paper proposes to make a contribution to this list of brand personality determinants by suggesting self-congruity is a determining factor of brand personality.

Helgeson and Supphellen (2004) examined the relationship between brand personality and self-congruity, but their research focused mainly on whether the two constructs are empirically discriminant, which they were indeed found to be, and also spoke to the moderating effect of socially desirable responding. It was Phau & Lau (2001) who pioneered the idea that consumers can influence how a brand personality is perceived, rather than the traditional thought that brand personality is solely the creation of marketers and advertisers and is exclusively dependent on their actions and intentions.

When consumers build a trusting relationship with a brand as a result of a favorable perception of the brand, they are likely to form a preference for the brand (Phau & Lau, 2001). This initial favorable perception of a brand could be attributed to self-congruity between the consumer and the brand. Once brand preference is developed, consumers will "reinforce positive attitudes (which include their personality) on to the brand" (Phau & Lau, 2001, p. 429-429). Put another way, high brand preference skews perceived brand personality; consumers will see what they want to see in a brand's personality. Interaction between brand and consumer not only causes the consumer to actively receive the personality projected by the brand, but the consumer's personality can be transmitted to the brand, changing or replacing the existing brand personality (Phau & Lau, 2001).

Past research has shown that individuals can transform the social meanings of objects (Phau & Lau, 2001). Consumers tend to see their own behavior and judgments as normal and alternative behavior as uncommon or inappropriate, a concept known as *egocentric attribution* or *false consensus* (Berkowitz, 1977). The specific image an individual attributes to a brand is affected by his or her egocentricity, a person's tendency to assume that the personality of a product he or she uses must necessarily be similar to his or her own personality (Sirgy, 1982). For example, say a woman sees herself as fashionable and trendy. When she buys a new article of clothing, she will assume that the item she buys will be trendy because she herself is trendy, and the product she buys must possess the same qualities she does. On a macro scale, egocentricity could lead to brand image change. Marketers must be aware of egocentricity and other brand image influencers about to be discussed to prevent unwanted brand image change.

INTRODUCING FALSE CONGRUITY AND REAL-IDEAL IMAGE DISCREPANCY

Brand preference may stem from self-congruity, and Phau and Lau (2001) found that high brand preference affects brand personality. Inversely, self-congruity, according to self-congruity theory, depends on brand personality. And so arises an apparent catch-22; how can self-congruity both shape brand personality and also be, by definition, a product of brand personality?

One possible explanation is *false congruity*, meaning the initial congruity experienced with the brand may be imperfect. Consumers often have imperfect information and their purchases reflect it (Ratchford, 1975). A consumer may come home with a brand that he or she is not congruent with because of a

misunderstanding. Transmissions are very often unclear and ambiguous (Plummer, 1984). Perhaps a potential customer only catches the first half of a TV commercial and does not receive the entire message, or maybe the ad tries to be funny, provocative, or clever and the intended message is misunderstood. Consumers view brands through a number of filters: experience, perceptions, misconceptions, value systems, and noise (Plummer, 1984). These and other factors (e.g. a lack of advertising, faulty word-of-mouth, or selective attention and retention) could be drivers of skewed perceptions of brand image and false congruity.

The key with false congruity is the congruity the consumer experiences is with a brand personality that is not intended by the marketer. If early adopters consume a brand as a result of false congruity with the brand, the consumer's image will still nonetheless be projected onto the brand (Phau & Lau, 2001), and if subsequent consumers are to experience self-congruity with the brand, it must be with the personality given it by early adopters.

Examples of marketers trying to save their brand image from use by untargeted consumers are Dr. Pepper Ten's "it's not for women" plea or Volkswagen's "it's a boy!" campaign for the 2012 relaunch of the Beetle (Avery, 2012, p. 322). Marketers of both brands may be concerned their target market, men, will not consume their brand if its product-user image is feminine. Avoiding unwanted brand associations is vital to brand positioning. Bosnjak and Brand (2008) stressed the need for marketers to "find an optimal strategy which simultaneously maximizes the closeness to desired symbolic meanings and the distance to undesired symbolic associations. That both aspects are clearly *not just two sides of the same coin*, has been demonstrated in this research" (p. 681).

Ideal congruity may have an even stronger effect on brand attitude than actual self-congruity (Helgeson & Supphellen, 2004), and consumers acting on ideal congruity may cause an undesired change in brand personality. *Real-ideal image discrepancy* describes the case where there is no mistake in brand personality and the consumer experiences ideal or ideal social congruity with the brand, but there is a discrepancy between his or her real self-image and his or her ideal or ideal social self-image. The terms *real self-image* and *actual self-image* have been used interchangeably in the literature (Dolich, 1969; Sirgy, 1982). Both terms are used to describe how consumers believe they are in reality, as opposed to how they wish they were (ideal self), how they believe others see them (social self), or how they think they should be (ought self). For the purposes of this paper, actual self-image refers to how consumers believe they are in reality (the traditional definition), and real self-image refers to the image consumers project to others in reality, or how others see them. Real self-image is distinguishable from social self-image in that social self-image refers to the image one *believes* others have of him or her, and real self-image is the image others *actually* have of the individual.

When early adopters acting on ideal congruity consume a brand, they project their real personality—not their ideal one—onto the brand and the brand image may change as a result, as in the case of false congruity. For example, a company may launch a new line of sunglasses aimed at teenagers. But to this company's dismay, the first to pick up their sunglasses (i.e., the early adopters) are middle-aged consumers looking for products that will project a youthful image. When teenagers see their parents' generation wearing the brand, they may form an unfavorable image of the brand. Instead of the sunglasses' image being projected onto the middle-aged consumers, the reverse happens; the sunglasses are seen as having a middle-aged user.

Early adopters may also consume an incongruent brand for reasons other than false congruity and real-ideal image discrepancy. Depending on an individual's personality, incongruity produces different reactions. Early adopters and innovators may see incongruity as a challenge rather than a turn off (Hughes & Guerrero, 1971). They may even be out looking for incongruity due to "boredom with equilibrium, a desire to be different, or the adoption of new aspirations" (Hughes & Guerrero, 1971, p. 126). For other consumers incongruity may only produce frustration and destructive behavior, and they may find it a threat to their psychological equilibrium (Hughes & Guerrero, 1971).

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The majority of this paper was written in the span of one semester, so the relatively short amount of time available did not allow for an actual study to be conducted on how self-congruity affects brand personality. In addition, no funding was available for a formal study. Future research could do what this paper could not and test self-congruity as a determinant of brand personality, and explore further the relationship between self-congruity and brand personality. False congruity and real-ideal image discrepancy could also be the subject of future research. Further research could determine if there is empirical evidence of the existence of false congruity and real-ideal image discrepancy and if their presence is strong enough to affect self-congruity, brand personality, and ultimately consumer choice.

CONCLUSIONS

The relationship between brand personality and self-congruity is anything but static. Self-congruity may be as much a determinant of brand personality as it is a product of brand personality, and marketers must understand this relationship as it applies to their specific brand. Marketers must take care to account for the power consumers have over brand personality. Before launching a brand, marketers should take steps to ensure probable early adopters of their product are indeed the marketers' target consumers. Existing brands should be monitored for brand personality changes due to false congruity, real-ideal image discrepancy, or innovative or creative consumer behavior.

Marketers do need to focus on positioning their brand for the target market, but marketers' attention must not be so narrowly focused as to forget the effect non-targeted users can have on their brand. Brand image is not a *set it and forget it* concept. Brand image should be constantly monitored for undesired change. A healthy brand image may depend on it.

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