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Negative Dimensions of Brand Personality

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This research investigates negative dimensions of brand personality which prior work on brand personality has overlooked. We define negative brand personality and present studies that outline the number and nature of negative personality dimensions. Future research examining the independent influence of positive and negative brand personalities on choice is proposed.

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Extended Abstract

Brand personality is the set of human characteristics or traits that consumers attribute to a brand (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality is of great importance to both consumers and marketers. Among other outcomes, research demonstrates that the brand personality construct helps consumers to: evaluate brands and build relationships (Fournier, 1998); develop emotional attachments to brands (Landon, 1974); differentiate brands (Crask & Laskey, 1990) and increase brand preference and usage (Sirgy, 1982).

This research seeks to extend our understanding of the brand personality construct by focusing specifically on the *negative* dimensions of a brand's personality. We define negative brand personality as the set of *negative* human characteristics or traits that consumers attribute to a brand. For example, some consumers might associate Paris Hilton perfume with the human personality traits of "fickle" and "naïve." We believe prior work has overlooked the negative dimensions of brand personality.

The study design in Aaker's (1997) seminal paper on brand personality promoted the generation of predominantly positive personality dimensions. First, the process likely led to the complete omission of some negative traits. Participants were asked to assess the descriptiveness of an initial pool of traits by imagining how descriptive the trait was when thinking about *positive, liked* brands such as Wrangler jeans. It is likely that many initial negative traits were not considered descriptive of such positive brands and thus omitted from the subsequent generation of dimensions.

Second, participants were presented with the positively valenced end-point of any particular trait pair (e.g. "exciting" not "boring"). This was purposeful, because "the ultimate use of the scale is to determine the extent to which brand personality affects the probability that consumers approach (versus avoid) products (Aaker, 1997, p 350)." However research in many different domains such as attitudes (Thompson & Zanna, 1995), emotions (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), decision making (Park, Jun, & Macinnis, 2000; Shafir, 1993; Tversky & Kahneman, 1986) and motivation (Higgins, 1997) suggests that approach and avoid processes are independent and not mirror images of one another. In a similar manner, consumers may associate brands with both negative and positive personality traits simultaneously. Examining the negatively valenced end-point therefore may lead to a richer conceptualization of the brand personality construct.

Indeed, while many brands are positively viewed, by no means are all of them (Winchester, Romaniuk, & Bogomolova, 2008). Oftentimes we believe that brands are avoided because consumers dislike aspects of the brand's personality, not because of defective functional performance. For example, previous research suggests that consumers boycott brands they view as "egregious," "unintelligent" or "foolish" (Kleine & Hubbert, 1993; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). In some extreme cases, we believe this can even lead consumers to avoid brands whose performance they enjoy but whose personality they do not. For example, the lead author likes the smell of Paris Hilton perfume but will never use it because she dislikes the negative personality traits associated with it.

Finally, noteworthy that while Aaker's dimensions map closely to three of the original "Big Five" human personality factors (Briggs, 1992), there is no equivalent for the most negative of the human dimensions—neuroticism. The equivalent brand traits that this dimension captures—"disturbing," "irritating," "fickle"—are thus missing from current brand personality construct.

In these studies we seek to understand the number and nature of negative brand personality. Planned research that examines the interaction between negative and positive personality dimensions on decision making is also outlined.

Personality Trait Generation

We began by collecting negative personality traits from academic literature and original qualitative studies.

First, 281 non-redundant personality traits were collected from literature, including Big Five, International Personality Item Pool, Traits of Human Consciousness, 16 Personality Factors (Cattell 1946, 1947). Second, we took the antonyms of the positive traits in Aaker's (1997) study to add a further 202 traits. We also collected 219 unique negative traits from five focus group studies. In total, 530 non-redundant negative personality traits were generated.

Next, we reduced these 530 traits to a more manageable number by asking 93 participants to rate how descriptive of brands they considered the traits. Similar to Aaker (1997) we wanted participants at this stage to think about lots of different brands, not one in particular. Unlike Aaker however, the brand examples we gave, as well as the personality traits, were more negative (e.g. State Farm—boring, old-fashioned, and slow). Participants rated how descriptive the 530 traits were of brands in general on a 7-point scale (1=Not at all descriptive to 7=Extremely descriptive.) The ratings ranged from 2.25 to 5.35. We set the cut off at one standard deviation (0.55) above the mean (3.37) for each trait leaving 158 personality traits for the next stage.

Stimuli Selection

Drawing from extant research (Aaker, 1997; Batra and Ahtola, 1991; Subodh & Srinivas, 1998) sixty representative brands were selected from twenty product categories. Each product category included hedonic (e.g., Cardiac Car), utilitarian (e.g., Ford Car) and both hedonic & utilitarian (e.g., Toyota) brands, as determined by a pre-test.

Negative Brand Personality Dimensions

We are currently in the process of asking participants to rate the extent to which the 158 negative personality traits describe each of the sixty specific brands. (To eliminate, participants only rate a subset of the brands, with one brand being rated by all to ensure inter-rater agreement. Procedures mimic Aaker (1997) and are omitted for brevity's sake). These ratings will be subjected to factor analysis to identify the underlying negative brand personality dimensions. Finally, facet analysis will be conducted to identify the three traits that best represent each dimension. *The results from these two stages will be available by the conference.*

Future research will investigate how the positive and negative dimensions of a brand's personality interact. For example, if consumers are *uncertain* about the options in a choice set, we hypothesize they will focus more on negative personality traits. We also believe that negative personality traits may help to find stronger support for brand-self congruity effects. This study fills up the gap between brand personality and brand avoidance, by demonstrating that a brand not only has positive personality traits but also negative brand personality traits. This study contributes to the anti-consumption and consumer-avoidance research by exploring the phenomenon of negative brand personality and brand avoidance, this study also contributes to the measurement research by building the first measurement for negative brand personality.

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Is Abercrombie Making Me Arrogant? The Impact of Brand Personality Traits on Post-Consumption Behavior

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Research has documented that consumers are influenced by brands that they encounter (Ferraro et al. 2009). In general, brand influence on behavior has been explained through a motivational account in which the brand's traits activate an underlying goal, which subsequently elicits goal-directed consumer behavior (Fitzsimons et al. 2008). This is possible when the brand is associated with a goal that represents a desirable end-state (Sela & Shiv 2009). Although extant literature documents robust findings across positive traits, the influence of negative brand traits has yet to be explored. Furthermore, the potential effect on downstream behavioral intentions has not been addressed. We explore these two important areas of interest in our research.

Brands may have positive trait associations (e.g. upper-class: Calvin Klein) or negative trait associations (e.g. arrogance: Abercrombie). Although consumers may be influenced by brands through goal-activation, this account is limited to desirable outcomes and does not explain the influence of brands with negative trait associations. A possible explanation is semantic priming, in which exposure to a brand subsequently elicits congruent behavior which is not restricted to desirable outcomes (Sela & Shiv 2009).

Beyond the immediate effect of brand exposure, the downstream effect on behavioral intentions is not well understood (Chartrand et al. 2008). In the current research, we propose that brands may influence consumers even when the end-state is not desirable. Importantly, we suggest that brand exposure may influence consumer perceptions of their own traits. In three studies using real brands, we suggest that brands may influence consumers through trait priming, and show that this influence may impact downstream behavior.