Investigating brand personality perceptions and preferences: The influence of values

Introduction
Marketers have long recognised that consumers often attach human personality characteristics to brands, and a flourishing literature has developed on the subject of brand personality (Aaker, 1997; Aaker, Benet-Martínez, & Garolera, 2001; Caprara, Barbaranellie, & Guido, 2001; Chu & Sung, 2011; Huang, Mitchell, & Rosenaum-Elliott, 2012; Sung & Tinkham, 2005; Supphellen & Grønhaug, 2003; Sweeney & Brandon, 2006). This work has revealed much about the underlying criteria that consumers use to judge brand personalities (Aaker, 1997), and how these can vary across product categories (Austin, Siguaw, & Mattila, 2003) and national boundaries (Chu & Sung, 2011; Sung & Tinkham, 2005; Supphellen & Grønhaug, 2003). However, much less attention has been paid to understanding and explaining which brand personalities consumers prefer and why. This is an important gap to address from both practitioner and academic perspectives. For practitioners, insights into preferences may help marketers better refine and tailor their brands’ personalities to different segments, as intangible attributes of brands, like personality, increasingly are the key points of differentiation compared with functional ones (Arora & Stoner, 2009; Veryzer, 1995). From an academic view, investigation of consumers’ brand personality preferences gives an opportunity to critically examine theories of self-congruence, which are often employed to explain how consumers form relationships with brands, but which have rarely been tested for brand personality perceptions. Therefore, the main aim of this research is to explore the brand personality preferences of consumers, in order to generate practical insights, and to contribute to wider understanding of the meaning and mechanics of human/brand interactions.

In addressing the question of why consumers may have different brand personality preferences, the starting point was the finding that the structures of consumers’ brand personality perceptions are not completely stable across countries (Aaker, et al., 2001; Chu & Sung, 2011; Sung & Tinkham, 2005; Supphellen & Grønhaug, 2003). Although not empirically tested, this variation has been attributed to cultural differences. This leads to the proposal that aspects of culture, specifically consumers’ values, are important in explaining brand personality preferences. Intuitively, this makes sense: consumers who value Power or Achievement will likely be attracted to brands with outgoing, assertive personalities, whereas those who value Tradition or Conformity will be drawn to brands with more reserved, dependable personalities. Values have long been conceptually connected with consumer behaviour (Vinson, Scott, & Lamont, 1977), so it would be logical for them to also play a role in brand personality preferences. Furthermore, psychology researchers, although identifying values and personality as two distinct concepts, have revealed numerous relationships between the two. Hence, a key focus of this research is on investigating consumer values as a potentially powerful means of explaining and predicting brand personality preferences.

The rest of the paper starts with a review of the literatures on brand personality and values, including discussion of previous studies of the values-personality relationship. Next, a conceptual model of the relationship between human values and brand personality is proposed, together with statement of the hypotheses to be tested empirically. Finally, a brief outline is presented of the empirical study design, due to commence in Spring 2013.

Brand Personality
Brand personality may be defined as the set of “human characteristics” (Aaker, 1997), or more specifically “human personality traits” (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003), associated with a brand. The tendency of human beings to attach personality traits to inanimate objects has long been recognised by psychologists, e.g. through the theories of animism and
anthropomorphism. In consumer research, it has been long established that consumers invest products and brands with symbolic meanings (Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1986) which – through various consumption rituals - they employ to express or reinforce their actual or ideal identities. More recently, brands have been conceptualised and empirically demonstrated as active relationship partners (Fournier, 1998), in some circumstances bringing types of emotional connection to consumers that are normally associated with human relationships. The notion that brands may carry human characteristics is, therefore, widely recognised. The process by which consumers engage with such characteristics is commonly explained through self-congruence theory (Sirgy, 1982), which proposes that people seek consistency between their beliefs and their actions in order to avoid unpleasant feelings. In the context of brand relationships, self-congruence theory implies that consumers are drawn to brands that possess meanings according with their own self-concepts. Therefore, they tend to favour brands with characteristics that match their own personalities, which may reflect actual or desired selves or even different roles, depending on the consumption context they are in.

To date, empirical studies have been preoccupied with the definition and measurement of brand personality as a generalizable construct, and in this regard, tend to adopt one of two main approaches. The first is a data-driven approach that holds to the lexical method of cognitive psychology, which proposes that language is the repository of meaning for human beings, hence, to understand how people perceive a concept like personality, one should examine the everyday words and terms they use to describe it. In these studies, researchers typically ask large numbers of respondents to free-associate descriptive terms for the personalities of pre-selected brands across different product categories and they then factor-analyse the results to derive underlying dimensions of the brand personality construct (Aaker, et al., 2001; Chu & Sung, 2011; Sung & Tinkham, 2005; Supphellen & Grønhaug, 2003). Thus Aaker (1997), for example, identifies five dimensions: Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication and Ruggedness. The contribution of these studies has been substantial, as they have been the first to propose the general structure on which consumers make judgements about brands’ personalities. However, they have also been criticised for their lack of theoretical underpinning and weaknesses in empirical methods. For example, by not testing respondents’ own personality traits and levels of familiarity with the brands they evaluated, it is not possible for these studies to engage with self-congruence as a theoretical underpinning. Furthermore, by including non-personality traits such as demographic characteristics in their analyses, doubts have been raised as to how well the constructs derived from these studies indeed reflect brand personality (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003).

In the second approach, researchers hold that the structure of brand personality is essentially similar to that of human personality and apply the human personality constructs and scales derived from the psychology literature to identify and measure brand personality (Bao & Sweeney, 2009; Caprara, et al., 2001; Huang, et al., 2012). Although other constructs have been explored (e.g. the Interpersonal Circumplex by Wiggins (1979)), the model of human personality that dominates the psychology literature is the Five-Factor Model (FFM) (Costa & McCrae, 1985), which proposes that all human personality traits are aligned to one of five dimensions: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness (Table 1). The FFM is the culmination of several decades of empirical study (e.g. Cattell (1946); Norman (1963)). The FFM is remarkably stable across national boundaries and different life stages (Costa & McCrae, 1985, 1992). However, the construct validity of the model has been criticised; for example, Digman (1989) questions the independence of the five factors, and proposes that they can be further clustered into two meta-factors.

In brand personality studies directly employing human personality constructs, the FFM has been the most commonly used model. Huang, et al. (2012) used the FFM to show support for the theory of self-congruence by comparing respondents’ ratings of their own
personality traits with those of their self-nominated favourite brands (the peer-to-peer rating technique). However, others question the extent to which the FFM, in its five factor form, is a valid construct for measuring brand, rather than human, personality. Caprara, et al. (2001) find that brand personality perceptions follow a higher-order two factor structure (echoing Digman (1997)): Factor a (combining traits of Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Neuroticism); and Factor b (combining traits of Extraversion and Openness). Hence, they conclude that a two-factor model may be more applicable for measuring brand personality.

The implications of the above for the current study are three-fold. First, although self-congruence theory is commonly employed to explain how human-brand relationships develop, its validity is under-researched for brand personality, in part because of the preoccupation to date with the identification and measurement of the construct rather than with the investigation of actual preferences. Therefore, it is worthwhile investigating brand personality preferences and the validity of self-congruence theory. Second, the adoption of a human personality construct such as the FFM has advantages when investigating brand personality preferences. However, it should not be assumed that human and brand personality have identical structures. Third, as consumers may be attracted by different brand personalities in different settings to express different self-identities, it is necessary to take this into consideration during the research design process, by pre-defining the context and in particular, the product categories for which preferred brand personalities will be explored.

**Human Values and their Relationship to Personality**

Differences in the structure of consumers’ perceptions of brand personality have been observed by previous studies (Aaker, et al., 2001; Chu & Sung, 2011; Sung & Tinkham, 2005; Supphellen & Gronhaug, 2003) and have been considered to exist due to cultural differences. Values are considered as appropriate constructs to encapsulate culture for a number of reasons. First, values, in contrast to other cultural elements, have been generally considered to influence consumer behaviour to a great extent and, in fact, have been attributed a central role (Gutman, 1982; Luna & Gupta, 2001; Vinson, et al., 1977). Their centrality is highlighted in the Manrai and Manrai (1996) model of culture’s influence on consumer behaviour, which highlights the interconnectedness among values, consumers’ personality, their self- and social-identity, as well as emotional and cognitive processes. Values influence our perceptions of our personality and the personality of others. They have also been found to influence our preferences for brands (Allen, 2001). Therefore, since values play such a significant role in determining our way of thinking and perceiving the world around us, they are also likely to influence our perceptions of the symbolic meaning of brands and, consequently, the brand personality traits we consider as important or desirable.

Rokeach (1973) defines a human value as “an enduring belief that one mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” (p. 5). Values indicate what is good, right and desirable (Hofstede, 2001) and are considered as trans-situational, abstract goals which serve as “the guiding principles in people’s lives” (p. 17) (S. Schwartz, 1992). Many different conceptualisations of values have been proposed (e.g. Hofstede (2001); Rokeach (1973); Sharma (2010)), the most widely recognised of which is probably Schwartz’s Value Theory (SVT) (1992). This proposes that all types of human values can be categorised into ten domains, according to a pair of axes which represent two fundamental problems of human existence: the extent to which one submits one’s own interests over those of others or society in general (i.e. Self-Transcendence vs. Self-Enhancement); and the extent to which one seeks to preserve the status quo over new opportunities or change (Conservation vs. Openness-to-Change). The ten domains, therefore, have a structural inter-relationship in circumplex form, whereby adjacent values correlate positively, whereas those in opposing positions correlate negatively (Figure 1 and Table 2). Although some authors have raised problems with SVT,
with regards to measurement (Renner, 2003), equivalence of item meanings across cultures (Struch, Schwartz, & van der Kloot, 2002) and multicollinearity (Olver & Mooradian, 2003), it has been tested in multiple cultures, and is considered as probably the most valid scale for measuring values (Doran, 2009; S. Schwartz, 1992; S. H. Schwartz, 1990; Solomon, 2006).

In psychology, values and personality traits are recognised as developmentally distinct parts of the human psyche: values are considered desirable end-states or goals learned through experience, whereas traits are considered more biologically based (Herringer, 1998; Olver & Mooradian, 2003). Nevertheless, numerous studies have contributed ideas of how, in theory, they may be related (Parks & Guay, 2009; Rokeach, 1973). Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, and Knafo (2002) observe that values may affect traits “because people try to behave in a way consistent with their values”, but traits may also affect values “because people who consistently exhibit a behavioural trait are likely to increase the degree to which they value the goals that trait serves” (p.791). Moreover, empirical studies (Aluja & García, 2004; Furnham, 1984; Luk & Bond, 1993; Olver & Mooradian, 2003; Roccas, et al., 2002; Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008; Wolfradt & Dalbert, 2003; Yik & Tang, 1996) broadly support the existence of a relationship between the two constructs, and have revealed some consistent results regarding specific value-trait correlations (e.g. Benevolence is found to correlate positively and strongly with Agreeableness). Lack of consensus over other value-trait correlations in existing studies (Higgs & Lichtenstein, 2010) may be due to methodological differences, e.g. in sampling, measurement and analytical techniques. Further exploration would be worthwhile in this context.

Therefore, it is inferred that a relationship exists between human values and human personality. As self-congruence theory implies a relationship between human and brand personality, it is reasonable to propose that human values are related to brand personality. It is this exact relationship, not investigated previously, which is the focus of the current study.

**Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses**

The conceptual framework consists of a set of hypothesised relationships between consumers’ values, consumers’ personality traits and the personality traits of consumers’ preferred or favourite brands (Figure 2). If proven, this framework could provide a model for explaining how different consumers arrive at their brand personality preferences. It also tests for the first time the relationship between consumer values and brand personality preferences. Based on the preceding literature review, the hypotheses are as follows:

**H1:** Consumers’ own personalities correlate significantly with the personalities of their favourite brands.

The possibility of relationships between human and brand personality is well established. However, effective empirical testing requires choice of an appropriate model. The FMM has been proven to be an appropriate means of measuring human personality (Costa & McCrae, 1985) and brand personality (Huang, et al., 2012). However, Caprara, et al. (2001) find that brand personality has a different structure to human personality on that model. Therefore:

**H1a:** In terms of FFM structure, human personality has a five factor structure and brand personality has a two-factor structure.

**H2:** Consumers’ own personalities correlate significantly with their values.

As there is inconsistency over specific correlations between human personality traits and values, based on studies adopting the FFM and SVT to measure personality and values respectively (Aluja & García, 2004; Dollinger, Leong, & Ulicni, 1996; Luk & Bond, 1993; Olver & Mooradian, 2003; Roberts & Robins, 2000; Roccas, et al., 2002; Saroglou & Muñoz-García, 2008; Wolfradt & Dalbert, 2003), it is proposed that (Figure 3):

**H2a:** Agreeableness traits correlate positively with Self-Transcendence and Conservation values, and negatively with Self-Enhancement and Openness-to-Change values.
**H2b:** Conscientiousness traits correlate positively with Self-Enhancement and Conservation value, and negatively with Openness-to-Change and Self-Transcendence values.

**H2c:** Neuroticism traits do not correlate significantly with any of the values.

**H2d:** Extraversion traits correlate positively with Openness-to-Change and Self-Enhancement values and negatively with Self-Transcendence and Conservation values.

**H2e:** Openness traits correlate positively with Self-Transcendence and Openness-to-Change values and negatively with Self-Enhancement and Conservation values.

**H3:** Consumers’ values correlate significantly with their favourite brands’ personalities.

If human and brand personality are related, and human values and human personality are related, human values and brand personality may also logically be related. This has not been tested before. Using the SVT to conceptualise values, and a two-factor model to conceptualise brand personality (where Factor a represents Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Neuroticism traits, and Factor b represents Extraversion and Openness traits), the following hypotheses are proposed (Figure 4):

**H3a:** Consumers who prioritise Self-Transcendence and Conservation values will prefer brands with high Factor a personalities.

**H3b:** Consumers who prioritise Self-Enhancement and Openness-to-Change values will dislike brands with high Factor a personalities.

**H3c:** Consumers who prioritise Openness-to-Change values will prefer brands with high Factor b personalities.

**H3d:** Consumers who prioritise Conservation values will dislike brands with high Factor b personalities.

**Proposed Empirical Research**

A two-phase empirical study is planned in spring 2013. The study population will be undergraduate students in a UK-based Business School. Although the use of student samples in consumer research has been criticised (Lynch Jr., 1982; Peterson, 2001), in this case, a student sample is considered appropriate because, first, the purpose of this study is theory application (Calder, Phillips, & Tybout, 1981), which refers to testing a general theory. In this sense, a student sample is a valid subset of the population for testing the proposed theory, that is, that values are a means of explaining consumers’ preferences for brand personality. Second, a student sample is relatively homogeneous in terms of characteristics such as age group and lifestyle, but relatively heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity, nationality and social background, which gives the opportunity to capture a range of value priorities. Third, students tend to actively experiment with different brands in order to be associated with particular brand images, to reinforce their self-identity and to fit-in with their peers (Moore, Wilkie, & Lutz, 2002). Therefore, the subject matter of the survey will be of interest to them.

First, a series of exploratory depth interviews will be conducted to explore how participants interpret the concept of brand personality, and how it relates to their own brand experiences. The results will help to refine the design of the second phase, a survey, which will ask respondents to rate their own personalities and those of their favourite brands as well as their own values. Factor analysis will be applied to explore the structure of respondents’ ratings, and in particular, to confirm whether brand personality and human personality structures are different (H1a). If they are indeed distinct structures, canonical correlation analysis will be applied to test the significance of the relationships between them (H1). Simple regression will be used to explore the relationships between respondents’ values and their own personalities (H2) and preferred brand personalities (H3) respectively, to identify whether values can explain differences in brand personality preferences. Finally, structural equation modelling will be used to test the overall reliability of the model (Figure 2).
References


Appendix

Table 1: The Five Factor Model of Human Personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>A tendency to seek for stimulation in life and enjoy activities in groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>An interpersonal tendency that describes altruisticity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>A tendency to be self-disciplined (or the control of impulses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>A tendency to be open-minded to new ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>A tendency to be emotionally unstable</td>
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</tbody>
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Figure 1: Schwartz Value Theory (Schwartz, 1992)

Table 2: Schwartz Value Domains (Schwartz, 1992)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>Demonstrating competence in terms of prevailing cultural standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benevolence</td>
<td>Concern for the welfare of close others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conformity</td>
<td>Restraint of actions, inclinations and impulses likely to violate social norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedonism</td>
<td>Pleasure or sensuous gratification for oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Attainment of social status and prestige</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>Safety, harmony and stability of society, of relationships and of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-direction</td>
<td>Independent thought and action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulation</td>
<td>Excitement, novelty and challenge in life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td>Respect, commitment and acceptance of the cultural customs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universalism</td>
<td>Appreciation and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for the Current Study

Figure 3: Hypothesised relationships between human personality and human values (H2a, H2b, H2c, H2d and H2e)

Figure 4: Hypothesised relationships between brand personality and consumers' values (hypotheses H3a, H3b, H3c and H3d)
Conceptual domain: This study investigates the influence of consumers’ values on their perceptions and preferences of brand personality. The study draws from self-congruence theory that proposes that consumers tend to choose brands with personalities that mirror their own personalities. Research in psychology literature has established a link between values and personality. Therefore, it seems logical that consumers’ values correlate with their preferences for specific brand personalities. This study seeks to empirically test this assumption.

Methodological domain: The study will consist of two phases: a. exploratory interviews that seek to shed light on how consumers interpret brand personalities and how they relate them to their own brand experiences; b. a survey, in which respondents will be asked to rate their values (using Schwartz Value Theory scale), their own personalities and those of their favourite brands (using a Five-Factor Model scale), because consumers are more familiar with them than with pre-selected brands.

Substantive domain: The phenomenon under examination is the influence of consumers’ values on their preferences of brand personality, which will be investigated through the perceptions of undergraduate students in a UK-based Business School regarding their values, personalities and the personalities of their favourite brands. The conclusions of the study will also provide practical recommendations for practitioners to refine the personalities of their brands according to consumers’ values.