



## Brand personality factor based models: A critical review

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### ABSTRACT

Brand personality has become an increasingly important concept within brand theory and factor based research is the method most widely used in the study of brand personality. There have been critiques of some aspects of early factor models, leading to an evolution and improvement in the methods used in factor model development. However, several problems remain which have yet to be addressed, and these raise questions about what *exactly* the factor models are measuring. This paper introduces and explains the problems of category confusions, domain meaning shifts, and the descriptor selection problem. In doing so, the paper extends existing critiques of the methods in brand personality factor research, and raises questions about the validity of current factor based models. The paper concludes with a recommendation that brand personality researchers re-evaluate their models and the brand personality concept, and that brand personality returns to its roots in qualitative projective methods.  
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### 1. Introduction

Brand personality (BP) is defined in Aaker's influential (1997) article as the "set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (p. 347). The first mention of brands in relation to personality was as a novel metaphor for non-functional brand attributes, with foundations for the concept based on research from projective methods (Gardner and Levy, 1955). Much of the early literature on BP continued to be derived from projective research and, in particular, from qualitative projective personification research by practitioners (e.g. Blackston, 1993; King, 1973; Plummer, 1984). The link between human and brand personality was made in two early research studies (Alt and Griggs, 1988; Batra et al., 1993), but the factor approach to the measurement of brand personality became prominent with Aaker's (1997) seminal article.

Since Aaker's (1997) article, BP research has been dominated by Aaker's methodology (Freling et al., 2010), with all but one measurement scale (Sweeney and Brandon, 2006) using factor methods, and new scale development broadly following methods based on those used by Aaker (e.g. Ambroise et al., 2003). In reviewing the BP literature, only two qualitative research projects have been found (Arora and Stoner, 2009; Freling and Forbes, 2005b), and BP research after 1997 almost exclusively uses factor research methods. It would be reasonable to suggest, therefore, that factor research methods are of fundamental importance in BP theory and research.

To date, Aaker's (1997) brand personality five factor model has been the subject of several critiques, including concerns regarding

the exclusion of negative factors in the scale development (Bosnjak et al., 2007), the inclusion of items that are not properly personality traits (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003), as well as questions about whether the scale might be used as a general scale (Austin et al., 2003; also see Milas and Mlacic, 2007). Whilst many of these concerns have been addressed in later factor models, this paper will identify potential problems that extend across all BP factor measures.

The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on some of the existing critiques, and to raise some fundamental concerns about the *input* into factor models, which in turn prompt questions about what *exactly* the models are measuring. In particular, the paper identifies problems of descriptor selection, the alteration of word meanings when scales are applied in different domains, and the potential for 'category personality' to be confused with BP. However, having identified the potential problems, it is apparent that these are contingent upon whether or not consumers ordinarily think of brands as humanlike entities (e.g. see Freling and Forbes, 2005b; Puzakova et al., 2009). The discussion section of the paper considers some possible solutions to the problems identified, but also finds that these present new problems related to the conceptualisation and relevance of BP. The paper concludes by suggesting that further research and clarification of BP theory and conceptualisation are needed.

### 2. The five factor model (FFM) of human personality

BP factor research has drawn heavily on the research methods utilized in the human Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality, and a brief overview of the literature will therefore be useful in

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the consideration of BP factor research methods. A summary of the theory underlying the FFM is that humans traits are rooted in the biology of the individual (Plomin et al., 1994) creating basic tendencies (McCrae et al., 2000), and these tendencies interact with environmental influences to create a disposition for particular behaviour (Bouchard and McGue, 2003).

Researchers believe that personality traits are encoded in human language (McCrae and Costa, 2003, p. 25), and this has led personality researchers to adopt the lexical approach, in which dictionaries have been used to isolate the underlying factors of human personality. The lexical method has seen the development of clear criteria for descriptors that might be excluded, for example the exclusion of evaluative terms such as ‘Nice’ or ‘Capable’ (John et al., 1988). Likewise, criteria for inclusion have been narrowed with De Raad (1995), for example, emphasizing that traits need to be interpersonal, capturing the transactions between one person and another.

Since publication, the FFM has been widely validated, for example, through comparisons of self and observer reports (e.g. Costa and McCrae, 1988), validation through cross sectional and longitudinal studies (e.g. McCrae and Costa, 2003), age stability (e.g. Terracciano et al., 2006), and been examined cross-culturally (e.g. McCrae et al., 2002).

Whilst some elements of the model are still subject to debate, such as the number of factors (e.g. Ashton et al., 2004 propose six factors), the five factors were found within earlier models of personality, thereby offering further support for the underlying structure (Digman and Takemoto-Chock, 1981). Notwithstanding debate about the relative roles of situation and personality in behaviour (e.g. see Digman, 1990), the model is now widely accepted as a valid description of human personality traits.

There are two key points to take forward from the FFM review: one is that the FFM and the traits included are bounded in biology, and the second is that the lexical approach involves a refinement of personality descriptors based upon careful screening of terms developed over time. As such, there is a theoretical and methodological justification for why the FFM might be a valid measure of personality, as well as considerable empirical support.

**3. The brand personality five factor model (BPFMM)**

Aaker’s (1997) paper has become central to development of BP theory and research methods, illustrated by the high number of citations for the paper (at the time of writing, over 1500 citations according to Google Scholar and 554 according to Scopus). Unlike the lexical approach of the FFM, Aaker utilized a range of sources for generation of descriptors, such as the human FFM, focus groups,

individual consumers, other brand measurement scales, and practitioner views. Having generated a considerable number of descriptors, in a careful and well considered process, the items generated were then reduced to a more manageable number by having consumers rate the items on how descriptive they were of brands.

These items were used in the measurement of a range of US brands from different product categories and the results were factor analysed to create the BPFMM, as presented in Fig. 1 (the format for all factor models follows a format of the upper box as the factor, bold text for facets, and items in plain text):

Since the original BPFMM was published, the BPFMM has been examined in different cultures, with the result that different factors have been found (e.g. Successful and Contemporary, Supphellen and Gronhaug, 2003) as well as new facets and items (e.g. see Rojas-Mendez et al., 2004). Of particular interest is the work by Sung and Tinkham (2005), who compared BP in relation to perceptions of brands in the US and Korea, finding differences at the item and facet level, for both their Korean and US study, as well as different factors for Korea.

**4. Other brand personality factor models**

In addition to cross cultural studies, other researchers have sought to develop new factor models of BP, as well as extending the methodology to new areas such as store personality (e.g. Lévesque and d’Astous, 2003). The new BP models sought to remedy perceived problems with the BPFMM, such as the lack of negative factors (Bosnjak et al., 2007; Geuens et al., 2009; Smit et al., 2003), concerns about cultural specificity (Ambroise et al., 2003; Geuens et al., 2009), and the exclusion of items that were not properly human traits (Bosnjak et al., 2007; Geuens et al., 2009).

Examples of the different models can be found in Figs. 2 and 3, and it is notable that there are significant differences between these models, and also between the models and the BPFMM. The variability extends over all of the models that have been reviewed, with substantial differences found in each case. Whilst some of the variability can be explained by the rectification of problems in the BPFMM, it is nevertheless surprising to see the degree of variability amongst the models, when each model was developed with similar methods.

It is also notable that, despite the later BP models being developed in response to critiques of the BPFMM, the BPFMM has continued to be used in research on BP (e.g. Freling et al., 2010; Lin, 2010). This is puzzling as the view of this paper is that the later models have rectified some of the faults in the BPFMM, and might be explicable by what Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) refer to as a ‘bandwagon effect’ (p. 144). However, the argument of this paper is that these later models are also beset by problems, and the

Sincerity	Excitement	Competence	Sophistication	Ruggedness
<p><b>Down-to-Earth:</b> down to earth, family oriented, small town</p> <p><b>Honesty:</b> honest, sincere, real</p> <p><b>Wholesomeness:</b> wholesome, original</p> <p><b>Cheerfulness:</b> cheerful, sentimental, friendly</p>	<p><b>Daring:</b> daring, trendy, exciting</p> <p><b>Spiritedness:</b> spirited, cool, young</p> <p><b>Imagination:</b> imaginative, unique</p> <p><b>Contemporary:</b> up-to-date independent, contemporary</p>	<p><b>Reliability:</b> reliable, hard working, secure</p> <p><b>Intelligence:</b> intelligent, technical, corporate</p> <p><b>Success:</b> successful, leader, confident</p>	<p><b>Class:</b> upper class, good-looking, glamorous</p> <p><b>Charm:</b> charming, feminine, smooth</p>	<p><b>Masculinity:</b> outdoorsy, masculine, western</p> <p><b>Toughness:</b> tough, rugged</p>

Fig. 1. American Brand Personality (based upon Fig. 1, Aaker et al., 2001).

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