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Towards a micro conception of brand personality: An application for print media brands in a French context

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A B S T R A C T

This paper reviews within the marketing field the concept of brand personality, its different available measures and its main limitations. Hence, the study proposes to make a distinction between macro and micro approaches of brand personality. Then a quantitative study in the field of print media brands is performed on 780 respondents and 24 publications. The results show, firstly, the advantages of the micro approach for studying a specific sector. Secondly, the findings indicate the operational validity of the approach pursued in this research, particularly concerning the capacity of the brand personality concept to predict consumers' self-identification to the brands.

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1. Introduction

Ever since Plummer's (1984) original paper, practitioners use the concept of brand personality as a key element in brand positioning and differentiation strategies. Nowadays numerous advertising campaigns throughout the world reflect this managerial emphasis, with advertisers no longer hesitating to personify their brands. Brand anthropomorphism (Keeley, 2004) occupies a prominent position in ads, as M&M's impertinent and funny characters are a revealing example. Thus the brand acquires a position of strength insofar as its personality is a protection against the growing leveling of products by emphasizing its advantages and the consumer benefits deriving from it. The creation of a real brand personality is therefore part of the search for an original and relevant positioning, distinct from close concepts such as brand image or brand identity.

On the academic front, researchers have become interested in the concept of brand personality (Aaker, 1997). Various studies have been carried out around two main themes, one concerned with measurement and the development of measurement scales, the other related to the validity of the construct, with research on the links between brand personality and brand relationships. Nevertheless, some authors emphasize the limitations of such studies, particularly as regards the measurement items, since the methodologies employed yield scales that are either overly "global" – so-called "holistic" scales – or overly "reduced" in terms of the product category being investigated.

Careful examination of the literature reveals that the dimensions for the same scale may vary from one country to another (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001). The same applies to different fields of application, whether they be, for example, tangible goods brands, services brands, country brands or even website brands. Within the field of the study of social values, Reynolds (1988) made the distinction between macro and micro approaches. The former are dealing with universal cross cultural social value inventories, whereas the later deal with specific and more precise value driven behaviors. As for brand personality, and by analogy, on the one hand, one might thus envisage a general purpose macro approach dealing with large cross-categories of products. On the other hand, one could focus on a micro approach, depending on the field of application concerned. Such a position, developed in the first part of this paper, would enable an integrative framework reconciling the two types of perspective to be developed.

These considerations lead on to another question: For a specific brand domain, is the micro approach suitable to uncover specific brand personality traits? The second part of the paper endeavors to answer this question. Firstly, a personality scale in a new marketing field, that of print media brands, is formulated. Print media brands are newspapers, magazines or any publications titles that are so well-known that they may be considered as real brand names and may develop brand extension strategies (e.g. Elle or Vogue). Recent research shows that such brands have personality traits that are distinctively their own (Valette-Florence & De Barnier, 2009). Furthermore, in a highly competitive environment, newspaper and magazine managers constantly try to build links between the reader and the publication concerned. Thus the predictive power of the concept of brand personality on consumer's self-identification to the print

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media brand is examined. Finally, a comparison is made between this new micro measurement scale and other macro scales so as to identify the specific characteristics of each.

2. Theoretical framework

This section develops two points. The first aims to define the concept of brand personality and to analyze the main criticisms that have been leveled at it. The second is to develop the micro vs. macro conception of brand personality.

2.1. The concept of brand personality and its limitations

Aaker (1997, p. 347) defines the concept of brand personality as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand". This definition, although having the advantage of clarifying the concept for the first time, is subject to many criticisms, particularly in regard to its overly vague and "catch-all" character (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). Apart from the problem of formulating a clear and generally agreed definition, "it seems necessary to question the validity of the ontological concept of brand personality" (Ambroise & Valette-Florence, 2010). In this perspective, it is important to revisit the criticisms leveled against the concept of brand personality, in order to have a clear view of it. These criticisms mainly concern the problems related to the generation of the items, semantics, the interpretation of the dimensions, and areas of application.

The first limitation concerns the problem associating with the generation of the items. Wee (2004) points out that most studies of brand personality are based on a transposition of theories of human personality to the area of brands and the use of "crude" measurement tools originally developed to measure human personality. From the outset, Aaker (1997) already emphasizes that not all human personality scales were systematically applicable, and that it was necessary to develop others more adapted to the context of brands. Subsequently, in an Italian context, Caprara, Barbaranelli and Guido (2001), show that a human personality scale could not be directly transposed to brands. In response to this point, various authors (e.g. Ambroise, 2006; Özsomer & Lerzan, 2007) develop scales with measurement items generated from qualitative studies of brands themselves instead of transposing human personality traits directly to brands.

The second limitation concerns the measurement items and the semantic problems they present. Although the scale developed by Aaker was entirely new and receives wide acceptance, the scale nevertheless suffers from certain limitations, particularly from the standpoint of the interpretation of some of the items (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). In this respect, these authors point out that the items of the "Competence" dimension in relation to intelligence and cognitive abilities should be excluded, as too should items relating social class, since these do not concern the personality but other (cognitive or social) areas. Further, they stress that the adjectives should not directly refer to gender, for example, "Masculine" or "Feminine", though this does not exclude measuring a feminine or masculine orientation (as may be suggested by items like "Delicate" and "Sensitive" or "Aggressive" and "Dominating"). In fact such items recur in a recent study by Grohmann (2009), who proposes a scale for specifically measuring feminine or masculine brand personality orientation.

The third limitation concerns problems associated with the structure of the scales and the interpretation of the dimensions. Thus Aaker's original 5-dimensional structure does not always receive empirical support. For example, in a Korean context, Park, Choi, and Kim (2005) create a 4-dimensional scale and in Canada d'Astous and Boujbel (2007) develop a 6-dimensional scale. Next, Aaker's (1997) findings show that while some human personality factors are found in brand personalities, this is not the case for all dimensions. In this respect, Yoon, Gutchess, Feinberg, and Polk (2006) show that the neuronal structures revealed by modern brain imaging techniques which are deployed in the evaluation of brand personality are different from those used in assessing a human personality.

In most studies using Aaker's (1997) original scale, the authors reduce the number of items so as to obtain an acceptable factor structure (e.g. Koebel & Ladwein, 1999; Park & Lee, 2005). This practice, justified on statistical criteria, is nevertheless open to criticism in terms of the stability of Aaker's (1997) original scale. Similarly, some scales seem to be overly restrictive in that they contain too few dimensions and items (e.g. Chang & Chieng, 2006; Geuens, Weijters, & De Wulf, 2009; Sung & Yang, 2008). Finally, the personality traits identified by Aaker (1997) are exclusively positive, whereas other authors such as Ambroise (2006) have included negative elements such as the brand's "Misleading" character. For example, d'Astous (2000) points out that, in the case of retail outlets, social environment, atmosphere and design factors may be negative and annoying. Sweeney and Brandon (2006) also stress the importance of taking negative aspects of brand personality into account.

The fourth limitation, which particularly concerns us here, pertains to the area of application and the intercultural field. Aaker's (1997) original scale uses the same tool for measuring brand personality in different areas. Yet, as d'Astous and Lévesque (2003) show, retail outlets have their own unique specificities, e.g. through having sales personnel, which justifies creating an appropriate scale for this area. Furthermore, in their study, Venable, Rose, Bush, and Gilbert (2005) make clear that the brand personality dimensions vary not only according to the cultural context, but also to the marketing application context. In terms of the creation of scales, there are some items that are specific to the application in question, for example "Compassionate" for charitable associations (Venable et al., 2005), "Chauvinistic", "Snobbish", "Spiritual" and "Religious" for the personality of countries (d'Astous & Boujbel, 2007), or "Flashy" and "Garish" for websites (Chen & Rodgers, 2006).

Finally, for the Aaker's scale, another limitation arises at a semantic level, since some dimensions seem to be associated solely with American culture (e.g. Koebel & Ladwein, 1999; Sung & Tinkham, 2005; Supphellen & Gronhaug, 2003). In this regard, Aaker et al. (2001) reveal the dimensions of specific brand personalities in Japanese and Spanish contexts. Such differences refer to the emic and etic approaches referred to in cross-cultural research. The emic approach stems from the idea that people's attitudes and behaviors can be understood solely within a specific cultural context (Usunier, 1998). The etic approach, developed by Pike (1966), considers that there are universal principles independently of cultural contexts. The emic approach justifies the research position, which involves developing a tool that is specific not only to the French cultural context but also, and especially, to the chosen area of investigation, as the following section makes clear.

2.2. Macro vs. micro approaches to brand personality

The terms macro and micro were first applied to two specific approaches to the study of social values in social psychology (Reynolds, 1988). The first, known as the macro approach, sets out to measure social values through inventories of values that are as exhaustive as possible. The approach developed by Schwartz (1992) is now largely recognized within the academic community. In marketing, however, in the analysis of specific consumption practices, a more detailed approach based on the values sought in the consumption of a specific product class seems to be better (Aurifeille & Valette-Florence, 1994). This conception, termed micro by Reynolds (1988), considers that the specificity of each area of investigation calls for a targeted study and that the use of overly generalized inventories is inappropriate.

This epistemological question also arises in relation to the concept of brand personality. For consumption practices are imprinted with characteristics that are both cultural and linked to product categories,

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