

# **I'm Attracted by Looks, but Personality Makes Me Stay": An Investigation of the Correlation between Brand Personality Characteristics and Consumer Commitment**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this quantitative research is to determine the (possible) correlation between consumer commitment and brand personality characteristics. This study used the concept of cult brands to measure perceived brand personality characteristics and the consumer's commitment level for the brand.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, differentiation has become a key strategy to the survival of virtually every organization. This is due to overcrowding of industry markets and the overwhelming amount of product, process, and brand imitation within industries (Van Rekom, Jacobs, & Verlegh 2006). With that said, it is essential for a company to differentiate themselves from the competition in as many ways as they can. Companies can differentiate themselves in many ways; one critical method of doing so is by positioning their *brand* apart from their competitors (Keller & Lehmann 2006).

### **WHAT IS BRAND PERSONALITY?**

Brand personality is an essential part of a brand's overall image that can be used to differentiate the brand from the market within which they reside. According to Jennifer Aaker (1997), *brand personality* refers to "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand". A brand's personality can serve as a symbolic interpretation of an organization's values, words, beliefs, and cultures (Keller 2006).

The idea of the brand personality theory was developed in 1993 but Jennifer Aaker further developed the idea in 1997. Aaker used the concepts of animism and anthropomorphism theories to explain the humanlike characteristics that consumers associate with a brand. Essentially, these two theories claim that human characteristics can be attributed to non-human objects or ideas (Avis, Aiten, & Ferguson 2012).

Historically, there has been much debate on whether or not the concept of brand personality characteristics is academically legitimate. Many argue that this concept is not sufficiently supported by research to claim the concept as valid. Many also argue that consumers do not actually view brands to have humanlike personality characteristics (and therefore argue against the theories of animism and anthropomorphism), but instead, that marketers plant those ideas in the minds of consumers'.

Those researchers who embrace the concept of brand personality characteristics claim that the personality characteristics of a brand enables a consumer to self-express through the use of the brand and that the brand serves as a symbolic function of a consumer's personality characteristics.

Some researchers also argue that brand personality characteristics have the ability to rub-off on consumers and essentially have the ability to convince consumers that a brand's personality characteristics are their own personality characteristics. This theory has been proven through some research, as one study (Park & John 2010) showed evidence of consumers feeling more feminine after using "feminine" products such as a Victoria Secret shopping bag and another similar study found consumers reported feeling smarter after using an MIT pen. With that said, there is undoubtedly still some skepticism in the marketing field as to whether these sorts of study results are fabricated by marketers, rather than evidence of the *actual* existence of brand personality characteristics.

The personality characteristics associated with a brand are dependent upon the "primacy of the person" (Atkin 2004, p. 38). Meaning, the personality characteristics associated with a brand by consumers is different for each consumer based on their *perception* of the brand and therefore each consumer would contribute different personality characteristics to each brand.

### **WHAT IS CONSUMER COMMITMENT?**

The concept of brand commitment has evolved quite a bit since the time of its' creation, but the major concepts have always remained the same. Bowen and Chaffee (1974) defined brand commitment as being comprised of five essential "domains": involvement, differentiation, familiarity, commitment, and importance. In

recent years, the definition of *brand commitment* has evolved to “the degree of attachment to a brand that has four emotional and behavioral underlying constructs: (1) brand loyalty is the emotional and behavioral attachment to repurchase or to patronize a preferred brand, (2) the satisfaction construct is the need to reinforce end of consumption pleasurable experience, (3) the involvement construct is the strength of the attachment including the relevance and importance of the brand category, and (4) the attachment to the brand because the other brands are not real alternatives in comparison to the brand used constitutes the performance construct” (Shuv-Ami 2010).

Extreme levels of commitment, for an organization, can mean a reliable amount of stability in the long-run for the organization. As a marketer, it is much easier to make risky decisions of trying new methods when the organization has that committed customer base to rely on. Consumer commitment is an important concept in marketing, as the ultimate goal of most marketers *is* to gain customer loyalty for their brands and as the definitions of consumer commitment state above, loyalty is one of the major pieces of consumer commitment. With that said, consumer commitment can be difficult to obtain but it is quite worth the effort.

### WHAT IS A CULT BRAND?

The idea of cult brands is a relatively new concept for the marketing world. Since the time of marketing creation during the Industrial Revolution, a customer’s view of the “value” of a product offered today by marketers has shifted drastically. During the Industrial Revolution, consumers determined the value of a product by the functionality of the product. Consumers today determine the value of the product by the *experience* associated with buying the product, or being involved with the product’s brand (Rayport 2013).

With this societal shift of the experiential value of products and brands, consumers have become increasingly committed to the brands with which they will interact. Some would even define some consumers as “obsessed” with certain brands, but not all are committed to such an extreme as many would just consider themselves dedicated.

Although, *cult branding* is a relatively new concept to marketing, the idea of cults in general is an age old concept for humankind. Some popular historical cults would include the Mormon and wicken religions, for example. A *cult* is defined as “a group that embraces new or fundamentally different ideas. Its ideology departs significantly from the prevailing beliefs of the surrounding culture. It is therefore *progressive*” (Atkin 2004, p. xvii)

Douglas Atkin argues in his novel, *The Culting of Brands*, that contrary to popular belief, people do not join cults to conform, they join cults to become more individual. He claims that there are four basic steps in the cult paradox dynamic, which defines how people decide to become a part of a cult:

- “1. An individual might have a feeling of *difference*, even *alienation* from the world around them.
2. This leads to *openness* to or *searching* for a more compatible environment.
3. They are likely to feel a sense of *security* or *safety* in a place where one’s difference from the outside world is seen as a virtue, not a handicap.
4. This presents the circumstances for *self-actualization* within a group of like-minded others who celebrate the individual for being himself.”

The author essentially endorses the idea that people look to join a cult because they are feeling alienated from the environment that they are currently in. Once they join a cult, they become completely emerged in the cult culture, completely absorbing the cult’s values and beliefs because finally, the person feels as if they are where they belong and they have “found themselves as individuals”.

With that said, a *cult brand* is defined as, “a brand for which a group of customers exhibit a great devotion or dedication. Its ideology is distinctive and it has a well-defined and committed community. It enjoys exclusive devotion (that is, not shared with another brand in the same category), and its members often become voluntary advocates” (Atkin 2004, p. 38). In much the same way as joining a regular cult, a consumer becomes completely immersed in the norms, values, and beliefs of the cult brand, taking them on as their own.

For a company to become a cult brand, Atkin declares that a brand must target the alienated consumers and simultaneously separate itself from similar brands. In essence, a brand needs to become a “beacon of difference”. By creating a mutual sense of separation for both the brand and the consumer, the consumer will feel more bonded to the brand and will identify more with it. Atkin claims that to be considered a cult brand, a brand must have completed the following tasks:

1. Determine the brand’s sense of difference from other brands in the same industry.
2. Declare their difference with a doctrine and written language.
3. Separate themselves from the outside world.
4. Demonize “the other”.

By separating a brand from the outside world, the brand makes it clear to consumers that the brand is not for every consumer and is exclusive to only consumers who share the same beliefs and values as the brand has established in its' identity. Also, by demonizing "the other", meaning demonizing all similar brands, the brand is also defining themselves as a cult (Atkin 2004, p. 20). The benefit of this in the marketing world is that by defining the brand as different in relation to their competitors, the brand is essentially positioning itself so it cannot even be compared to its competitors and thus increase customer loyalty and commitment.

### **BRAND PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS AND CONSUMER COMMITMENT THEORY**

The first objective of this study is to determine if there is any correlation between brand personality characteristics and consumer commitment. This study proposes that there *is* a correlation between brand personality characteristics and consumer commitment levels. This theory is based on research of cult theory, cult branding, and brand relationship and personality theory.

H1: A correlation exists between brand personality characteristics and consumer commitment.

In addition, this study proposes that not only is there a correlation between the two factors but also that there are some brand personality characteristics that correlate more positively or negatively with consumer commitment levels than others. Therefore, the second objective of this study is if there *is* a correlation, determine if there is a positive correlation between any specific brand personality characteristics and consumer commitment.

H2: There is a positive correlation between more than one of the "Big Five" brand personality characteristics and consumer commitment.

The third objective of this study is if there *is* a correlation, determine if there a negative correlation between any specific brand personality characteristics and consumer commitment.

H3: There is a negative correlation between more than one of the "Big Five" brand personality characteristics and consumer commitment.

## **METHOD**

### *Subjects*

The pool of respondents in the sample frame was generated using the snowball sampling method<sup>1</sup> (Atkinson & Flint, 2004). The survey was sent to respondents through an online program, called Qualtrics. The link to the survey was placed on the researcher's personal Facebook wall and sent to possible surveyors through personal email. A random sample of 800 University of Wisconsin-La Crosse undergraduate student emails was also used to generate responses. Following the completion of the survey, surveyors were asked to pass the survey link along to friends, family, etc. in order to gain additional responses.

A total of 438 surveys were collected via Qualtrics, 308 of them were 90-100% completed and used to calculate the results of this research.

All respondents were over the age of 18 years old, 79% were 19-25 years old, 6% were 26-30 years old, 2% were 31-35 years old, 1% were 36-40 years old, 2% were 41-45 years old, and 9% were ages 46 and older<sup>2</sup>. Approximately 68% of the respondents were female, while 32% were male. A vast majority of the respondents listed their race as white, non-Hispanic (93%), while only 7% identified as something other than white<sup>3</sup>.

### *Data Collection and Procedure*

<sup>1</sup> Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which respondents are asked to refer other potential experiment participants to the researcher in order to generate a larger sample group for the study. This sampling technique is used most often when subjects in the sample population are difficult to locate.

<sup>2</sup> Further detail of survey results can be found in Appendix B-Survey Results.

<sup>3</sup> The 7% of respondents that identified their race as something other than white, non-Hispanic identified as African American [2%], Hispanic [2%], and a mix of Mexican, French, Filipino, Asian-American, and Native American [3%].

A survey was the chosen research tool for this quantitative study. The survey was developed to measure the (possible) correlation between certain brand personality characteristics and consumer commitment.

For the survey, a pool of ten randomly chosen “cult” brands was developed. Each time the survey was opened, the Qualtrics software randomly generated one of the ten chosen “cult” brands from the pool of ten cult brands for the respondent to evaluate. Cult brands were chosen specifically for this study because, unlike other brands, cult brands have a distinct and dedicated following because of their habit of defining themselves as “exclusive” to only a certain group of people. Because of this exclusivity, cult brands essentially draw a clear line of “friends and foes” of the brand and ultimately, force consumers to fully identify themselves with the brand or completely dis-identify with the brand. This creates an excellent dynamic for this particular study, because the surveyors would probably feel stronger emotions (both positive and negative) toward the brands they were asked to evaluate. This ultimately made the results much clearer as to the possible correlations between certain perceived brand personality characteristics and consumer commitment levels.

The ten possible brands in the pool were as follows: Apple, Facebook, Microsoft, Harry Potter, Google, McDonalds, Nike, Coca-Cola, Toyota, and Budweiser. These particular cult brands were chosen based on Forbes list of *The World's Most Popular Brands* (2013). All ten of these cult brands in the brand pool were purposefully chosen from different product categories in order to more vastly generalize the research results. By diversifying the product categories within which the brands fall, the assumption can be made that the results of this study (which define the brand personality characteristics that correlate, either positively or negatively, with a certain level of consumer commitment) are generally applicable to any, and all, product categories.

The survey began by requesting personal information about the surveyor such as age, gender, and race. The survey then attempted to measure the surveyor's brand commitment level based on their randomly assigned cult brand. This was measured using Dr. Avichai Shuv-Ami's Brand Commitment Scale (2010).

#### *Brand Commitment Scale*

Dr. Shuv-Ami's Brand Commitment Scale consists of twelve statements measured using a 10-point “agree to disagree” scale. These twelve statements were taken from the four underlying behavior and emotional constructs he associates with brand commitment, which are: brand loyalty, brand satisfaction, involvement, and brand attachment. The scale was determined reliable using Cronbach's alpha. Each of the twelve statements was used to measure the surveyor's own personal feelings toward the randomly assigned cult brand (Shuv-Ami 2010).

Consumer commitment levels for each respondent were calculated by determining the mean scores of the twelve statements in the scale.

#### *Brand Personality Framework*

Surveyors' perceptions of the brand personality characteristics they associated with their randomly assigned cult brand were then measured using Jennifer Aaker's Brand Personality Framework found in the *Handbook of Marketing Scales* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (Bearden & Netemeyer, 1999).

This framework was developed using personality traits from three different academic sources: personality scales used by psychologists, personality scales used by marketers, and traits determined from original qualitative research. The subjects chosen to complete Aaker's study were chosen to accurately represent the U.S. population on five different dimensions: gender, age, household income, ethnicity, and geographic location. The overall goal of the study was to determine the personality traits that most accurately and comprehensively represented the brand personality as perceived by consumers.

The Brand Personality Framework categorizes brand personality characteristics into the “Big Five”, which are: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. These five “dimensions” are then broken down into 15 “facets”, which are then further broken down into 42 items (see Figure 1 below). The reliability of this framework was determined using test-retest correlations and Cronbach's alpha (Aaker 1997).

For this study, the respondents were asked to rank each of the 42 items using a 5-point Likert-type scale from “not at all descriptive” (1) to “extremely descriptive” (5) based on each surveyor's perception of the relevance of each item to the randomly assigned cult brand. To evaluate this portion of the surveys, the mean score for each of the 42 items was calculated. The means for each of the 42 items were then used to determine the mean score for each of the 15 facets for which the 42 items can be categorized into. Finally, the mean scores for each of the 15 facets were used to calculate the mean score for each of the “Big Five” brand personality characteristics (Bearden, & Netemeyer, 1999).

## RESULTS

In order to determine whether a correlation between consumer commitment and brand personality characteristics exists, the Pearson correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) test was calculated for each of the “Big Five” personality characteristics. An alpha score ( $p$ ) of 0.05 was assumed when calculating the results, as well as, a critical value ( $t$ ) of 1.968<sup>4</sup>. Interestingly, all five brand personality characteristics were determined to have some sort of correlation with consumer commitment levels. Correlation values calculated are shown in Table 1.

A correlation score of 0.5 to 1.0 would indicate a strong correlation between brand personality characteristics and consumer commitment levels. While a score of 0.3 to 0.5 would indicate a medium strength correlation between the two factors. And a correlation score of 0.1 to 0.3 would indicate a weak correlation between the two factors (Cohen 1998). With that said, results showed that the brand personality characteristics of sincerity, excitement, and competence all have a strong, positive correlation with consumer commitment. Sophistication was shown to have a medium strength, positive correlation with consumer commitment and ruggedness was shown to have a weak, positive correlation with consumer commitment.

Based on these results, it can be concluded that hypotheses one and two are confirmed to be true but hypothesis three has been proven to be untrue.

### Further Explanation of Results

Essentially, these results conclude that consumer commitment levels *are* effected by the personality characteristics consumers perceive a brand of possessing. Results also conclude that consumers *do*, in fact, develop higher levels of consumer commitment when they perceive a brand of being sincere, exciting, and competent.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### Significance of the Findings

Professionals in the marketing field can utilize the results of this research when developing a brand and a brand image. Based on the selected consumer market, marketers can better position their brands as being sincere, exciting, and competent as viewed by consumers. By doing so, marketers will be strengthening their brand, as well

Table 1.

Big Five Brand Personality Characteristics	Pearson Correlation Coefficient ( $r$ )	Correlation with Consumer Commitment
Sincerity	0.6134	Strong, Positive
Excitement	0.6092	Strong, Positive
Competence	0.5694	Strong, Positive
Sophistication	0.4872	Medium, Positive
Ruggedness	0.1527	Weak, Positive



<sup>4</sup> A sample size ( $N$ ) of 317 was used to determine both the degrees of freedom ( $N-2$ ) which had a value of 315 and the critical value ( $t$ ).

as, creating the opportunity of gaining a more dedicated and committed following of consumers.

#### *Limitations and Areas of Future Research*

There has not been a sufficient amount of research done on brand personality, mostly because people still do not really understand what brand personality is and/or believe the theory of brand personality to be true (Aaker 1997). A controversial assumption is made when studying brand personality characteristics, which is that consumers actually *do* attribute humanlike characteristics to inanimate brands. A suggestion of future research would be to further study the consumer's subconscious association of humanlike characteristics with brands.

This study was limited by time and sample availability. For future research, a larger and more evenly distributed sample in regards to distribution of age, race, and geographic region is suggested in order to more solidify the results.

#### *Summary of the Research*

The purpose of this research was to determine the (possible) correlation between consumer commitment and brand personality characteristics. A survey was sent to participants through an online program, Qualtrics, and a total of 308 completed surveys were collected. The survey randomly assigned one of ten cult brands for each participant to evaluate.

The survey used Jennifer Aaker's Brand Personality Scale to measure the brand personality characteristics of ten random cult brands as perceived by the participants. The survey also used Dr. Shav-Ami's Brand Consumer Commitment scale to determine each participant's commitment level for the randomly assigned brand.

A Pearson Correlation Coefficient test was used to determine the correlation between consumer commitment levels and each of the "Big Five" brand personality characteristics of: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness<sup>5</sup>

Results showed that all five of the "Big Five" personality characteristics had a positive correlation with consumer commitment. The personality characteristics of sincerity, excitement, and competence possessed the highest, strong, positive correlation with consumer commitment. Sophistication and ruggedness were shown to have rather low, weak, and insignificant positive correlations with consumer commitment.

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<sup>5</sup> The "Big Five" brand personality characteristics used in this study were defined by Jennifer Aaker (1997).

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