

# An examination of brand personality through methodological triangulation

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## Abstract

*Because the brand now occupies a cornerstone position in marketing strategy, the concept of brand personality and its influence on consumer behaviour has emerged as a critically important research topic. Although a few initial explorations in this area document the effects of brand personality, questions about how and why it occurs remain. This paper attempts to replace this void with a cognitive theoretical perspective that borrows from associative memory formulations and anthropomorphism theory. A multi-method qualitative approach is used to triangulate the construct and explore this perspective in the consumer domain. Data provide support for the cognitive account of brand personality and suggest that: (1) brand personality is connected to many other brand associations in consumer memory and accessed through spreading activation; and (2) consumers embrace brands with strong, positive personalities because of a natural human tendency to anthropomorphise nonhuman objects. A discussion describes implications for brand managers generated by this research, and highlights additional complexities of brand personality that warrant further examination.*

'Personality is the glitter that sends your little gleam across the footlights and the orchestra pit into that big black space where the audience is.'

Mae West

Whether the performance arena is a theatre stage or a grocery store shelf, these words highlight the importance of a good personality in appealing to one's audience, and reflect a widely held belief among brand managers that

brands, like humans, have personalities that may set them apart from competitors.<sup>1,2</sup> One need only glance at titles of articles in the trade press — 'Brands, like people, have personalities',<sup>3</sup> 'A brand is like a friend',<sup>4</sup> 'Brand personality must be managed or it will assume a life of its own'<sup>5</sup> — to confirm the enduring interest in brand personality among marketing practitioners. A central theme in these articles is the assertion that consumers

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seem to prefer brands that have strong, favourable brand personalities. Industry experts assert that brand personality helps firms to achieve product differentiation and affects consumer judgments, and may be related to other brand-equity-related benefits.<sup>6,7</sup> Unfortunately, brand personality's popularity among marketing practitioners has galvanised neither extensive scholarly study nor illuminating theoretical accounts of the phenomenon. For the most part, consumer researchers have neglected brand personality, focusing instead on other branding issues such as brand equity and brand extensions (eg see *Journal of Marketing Research* special issue on brand equity, May 1994). In fact, to date only a handful of scholarly studies<sup>8-11</sup> give emphasis to brand personality. These studies are important because they help define brand personality, delineate the construct and establish guidelines for the measurement of brand personality. This prior work also provides limited evidence that brand personality encourages self-expression, builds cognitive associations and enhances brand attitudes, preference, purchase intentions and extendability. However, beyond these fundamental assertions, brand personality remains little-known terrain with limited theoretical or qualitative grounding.

There is still much to learn about how brand personality develops and operates, why it occurs, and the difference brand personality makes in terms of consumer perceptions and preferences. Answers to these questions are important as they provide greater insight into brand personality from both a theoretical and a practical standpoint. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to present theoretical and

empirical evidence in attempts to provide initial answers to these questions. The research is presented as follows. First, the research examines the literature pertaining specifically to brand personality to understand better what is currently known about the phenomenon. Next, two theoretical foundations for an alternative explanation of the primary mechanisms are presented: motivations and consequences characterising brand personality. Using methodological triangulation, a multi-method qualitative study of brand personality then follows. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Marketing practitioners and academics define brand personality as 'the characterisational aspects of the brand';<sup>12</sup> 'the type of human characteristics with which the brand is endowed';<sup>13</sup> 'characteristics associated with nature or with living creatures that are projected onto the brand';<sup>14</sup> 'the way in which a consumer perceives the brand on dimensions that typically capture a person's personality';<sup>15</sup> and 'the set of human characteristics associated with a brand'.<sup>16</sup> While Aaker's definition is the most widely accepted, all of those appearing in the literature exhibit substantial conceptual agreement about the meaning of brand personality; they seem to coalesce around the recognition of the use of human descriptors to portray brands.

Another point of convergence seems to be that brands, like people, can acquire distinctive personalities that differentiate them in the minds of consumers and shape their preferences.

Simply put, brand personality ‘really does make a difference’.<sup>17</sup> For consumers, brand personality makes a difference in terms of the *feelings* it generates, the *self-expression* it allows, the *relationships* it facilitates and the *simplification* of brand choice it enables. In terms of the feelings brand personality evokes, research suggests it summons emotions that act as a reassurance to consumers<sup>18</sup> and instil brand loyalty.<sup>19</sup> Brand personality elicits an ‘emotional rather than an intellectual response’ that arouses passion and incites an ‘affinity without rationale’ for the brand.<sup>20</sup> Such feelings about brand personality may make the brand seem more relevant to consumers.<sup>21</sup>

A brand’s personality may also project the brand’s values<sup>22</sup> and create an image of the brand’s typical user.<sup>23</sup> This brand information may actually encourage the use of a given brand as a self-expressive device by consumers who hold similar positions and wish to present a like image.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, McCracken<sup>25</sup> suggests that consumers look for brands with a personality that corresponds to the person they are or want to become. In this way, consumers may use the brand to construct and sustain their self-concept.

Brand personality may also create a basis for a meaningful relationship between the consumer and the brand. In fact, Meenaghan<sup>26</sup> contends that brand personality establishes an ‘invisible, yet magnetic relationship between the brand and consumer’. More specifically, brand personality may shape consumer perceptions about the brand’s role as a relationship partner<sup>27</sup> and actually encourage the consumer to invest in a relationship with the brand.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, brand personality may provide some utilitarian benefits to the consumer as well, in the way of *simplification*. Researchers believe that when a consumer knows and likes a given brand’s personality, it has the potential to reduce information search and processing,<sup>29</sup> to help consumers make choices, and to simplify complex shopping.<sup>30</sup> Such advantages may occur because the brand’s personality sets the brand apart from other competitors<sup>31,32</sup> and increases the brand’s value to consumers.<sup>33</sup>

The crux of all this theorising is that, for various reasons, consumers seem to prefer brands that possess strong, favourable brand personalities, and brand managers may exploit such preferences to strengthen their brands. The theoretical underpinnings of brand personality, however, remain unstudied, leaving many questions. How does a brand — a nonhuman, inanimate entity — become associated with human characteristics? And, more fundamentally, why do consumers — supposedly rational decision makers — regard brands as entities that are capable of possessing human personality traits? That these questions remain unanswered highlights deficiencies in the received wisdom on brand personality and implies a need to delve deeper into the phenomena so that a better understanding of brand personality may be attained.

## THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Two theories provide a useful foundation for understanding brand personality. The cognitive approach to brand personality addresses the ‘how’ questions — how brand personality is structured in consumers’ associative

memory network, how it is connected to other brand associations and how it operates. Anthropomorphic theory addresses the 'why' questions — why brand personality occurs, why it may be associated with positive outcomes and why consumers humanise their brands.

### **How brand personality works: An associative memory explanation**

Associative memory formulations<sup>34–38</sup> view semantic memory as an interrelated body of knowledge comprised of *nodes* and *links*. A node is a representation in semantic memory that consists of a piece of stored information. A node could be comprised of the brand, the product category in which the brand competes, the specific product attributes of the brand, images from recent advertising for the brand and/or past product experiences with the brand. Related nodes are connected by links, which represent associations of varying strength. This entire collection — nodes connected to other nodes by links — makes up the associative network. In this structure, every node is related to every other node, with the sense that a set of links, however indirect and long, can eventually be traced between any two nodes.

The primary process that operates in this memory structure is *spreading activation*, which is the mental activity of accessing and retrieving information from the network. Spreading activation proceeds from node to node via connecting links and determines the extent of retrieval in memory. The strength of association between the activated node and all linked nodes in the network governs the spreading activation process

and determines the information that can be accessed in memory. If the nodes comprising the network are strongly related, the spreading activation that occurs should be extensive and allow access to much brand information.

Brand personality fits into this conceptualisation of brand knowledge because it is one of potentially many brand associations in consumer memory that contribute to the meaning of the brand for consumers. According to Keller,<sup>39</sup> if the brand personality node has strong associations with the brand node and other brand associations, and a consumer perceives the brand's personality as unique and favourable, it should consistently be accessed anytime the individual considers a purchase in the product category or thinks of the brand. The accessibility of the brand personality node improves when the brand's personality is congruent with other brand associations held in memory. When brand personality associations are strong, unique, favourable and congruent with other brand associations for a given brand, they may help the consumer process specific brand information, and differentiate the brand from other competitors in the consumer's mind while instilling in the consumer positive attitudes and feelings towards the brand.<sup>40</sup>

Information about a brand's personality and many other brand associations exist in consumer memory. The probability that a consumer will recall perceptions about the brand's personality and consider this information when making a purchase decision is largely contingent upon the brand personality's relationships with the main brand node and other brand associations. To be consistently

recalled, brand personality's connection with the brand and other brand associations must be strong, unique, favourable and congruent. In this sense, other brand associations serve as determinants of the nature and strength of the brand's personality.

### **Why brand personality occurs: An anthropomorphic explanation**

Given this conceptualisation of how brand personality relates to the brand and other brand associations in consumer memory, other questions naturally follow. Why does brand personality occur? Why is brand personality associated with positive outcomes? And, more fundamentally, why would a consumer associate human characteristics with a non-human object, such as a brand, in the first place? The explanation may reside in a natural human tendency called *anthropomorphism*, the attribution of human characteristics to non-human things and events.<sup>41</sup> Prior research suggests that anthropomorphism is a phenomenon that pervades the everyday thoughts and actions of most individuals and influences human perceptions and responses throughout life. Common examples of anthropomorphism include the natural urge to speak to plants, cars and computers or the inclination to see faces in the clouds.<sup>42</sup>

A logical extension of this thinking is to view brand personality as an instance of anthropomorphism. In fact, there is a limited body of work that indirectly documents the practice of anthropomorphic thinking in a branding context, demonstrating that consumers attribute human properties to their possessions, goods, products

and services,<sup>43–46</sup> prefer brands with personalities<sup>47,48</sup> and even develop meaningful relationships with the brands they know and use.<sup>49–51</sup>

Interestingly, the anthropic principle, which underlies anthropomorphism theory, suggests that anthropomorphising brands is natural and inevitable as everything people observe can be interpreted only in terms of their own experiences and conceptions.<sup>52,53</sup> Ample support for the anthropic principle can be found in the cognitive psychology literature. Kennedy<sup>54</sup> contends that anthropomorphic thinking about nonhuman things is 'built-in to the human repertoire' and to abandon it would be 'against human nature'. Burghardt<sup>55</sup> maintains that anthropomorphism is an 'inherent human propensity' that cannot be avoided. Others similarly believe that anthropomorphism is an 'unconscious tendency of thought'<sup>56</sup> or a 'teleological imperative',<sup>57–59</sup> meaning that much anthropomorphic thinking occurs without intention or deliberation. This premise, when considered in the context of brand personality, implies that marketers may exploit the human tendency to anthropomorphise and deliberately shape the development of a brand's personality so that it becomes associated with a set of desirable characteristics.

If one accepts these fundamental assertions as valid, then one must ask, 'Why do humans engage in anthropomorphic thinking about brands and come to regard them as entities that possess human characteristics?'. Current anthropomorphic theory suggests that people raise the status of brands beyond mere inanimate objects to personalised entities embodying human qualities, for three primary

reasons: (1) to make that which is nonhuman seem more human (*familiarity*); (2) to gain solace and reassurance about using the brand (*comfort*); and (3) to decrease uncertainty in a complex, ambiguous world (*risk reduction*).<sup>60</sup>

Consumers are likely to perceive a product with a strong, positive brand personality as being *more familiar*, *more comfortable* and *less risky* than a competing product with no distinct brand personality, or a brand personality they perceive as negative. These anthropomorphic motivations also allow the suggestion of important performance outcomes. One might expect, for example, that when a consumer regards a brand's personality as distinctly favourable — and feels more familiar, comfortable and confident using the brand — the brand will be more memorable, elicit more favourable evaluations and instil greater brand loyalty than other brands in the product category that possess no brand personality.

In summary, these two perspectives hold that brand personality is the set of human characteristics associated with a brand that is connected in consumer memory to numerous other brand associations and accessed through a cognitive process called spreading activation. Marketers attempt to infuse their brands with strong, positive brand personalities that will automatically come to mind when consumers consider a purchase in the product category. Consumers willingly accept brands as entities that have personalities — and often prefer brands with strong, positive personalities to those lacking a distinctive personality — because of a natural human tendency to anthropomorphise nonhuman things and events.

## TRIANGULATING BRAND PERSONALITY

### Methodology

Although the cognitive approach to brand personality may be capable of informing research and reflection on brand personality, it remains purely theoretical in that it has not been subjected to empirical scrutiny or validated in the domain of consumer behaviour. Hence, a multi-method qualitative approach is utilised here that includes focus groups, in-depth interviews and document analysis, to explore the cognitive approach to brand personality. The rationale for using this approach is the attainment of methodological triangulation; the 'use of multiple methods to gain the most complete and detailed data possible'.<sup>61</sup> Many contemporary researchers endorse the use of methodological triangulation because it facilitates discovery and deepens one's understanding of an issue,<sup>62</sup> allows one to draw conclusions with strong validity<sup>63</sup> and reveals different aspects of empirical reality.<sup>64</sup>

The document analysis phase of this multi-method approach involved having 50 participants maintain a product/service usage diary for a two-week period and respond to various open-ended questions via a pen-and-pencil questionnaire. These open-ended questions elicited evaluations of each product/service appearing in the diary, including perceptions about the brand personality of each entry. Ten focus groups comprised of 10–12 participants and 25 one-to-one in-depth interviews followed the document analysis. Discussion topics pertained to subjects' product usage experiences and their perceptions

about the brand personalities of products they used — how brand personality is formed, factors affecting the nature of a brand's personality, why brand personality develops and the difference brand personality makes. The focus groups and in-depth interviews adhered to the guidelines put forth by Bellenger *et al.*,<sup>65</sup> that are typically followed in the marketing research field. Participants were recruited from an upper-level marketing course and given extra credit for participation. Although caveats often accompany the use of student subjects in research, it was deemed acceptable here because the students were not asked to make any purchase decisions or judgments, or to speculate about anything other than their own purchase and consumption behaviour.<sup>66</sup>

## ANALYSIS

Written responses from the diaries and questionnaires of the document analysis, combined with verbatim transcriptions of the focus groups and in-depth interviews served as the database. As is usually the case with discovery-oriented qualitative research, no formal hypotheses preceded data collection and results were not numerical in nature, but instead were comprised of observed similarities across cases and methods. The authors attempted to identify meaningful patterns in responses and to apply concepts derived from previously described literature streams to interpret the data and illuminate the brand personality construct.<sup>67</sup> Several themes or key findings emerging from this analysis are described in the ensuing section.

## The scope of brand personality

Brand personality appears to be a very pervasive phenomenon, based on the wide range of goods to which consumers ascribe human characteristics. In support of previous studies documenting the existence of brand personality for tangible products such as apparel, fragrances, shampoo, coffee and beer<sup>68</sup> and carbonated cola beverages, stereos, orange juice, sneakers, refrigerators and cameras,<sup>69</sup> respondents in this research described brand personalities for several product categories, such as automobiles and vehicles, computers and electronic products, snack foods, beverages, personal hygiene products and household cleaning products.

'Chevrolet has a dependable, rugged, masculine personality. I have driven a Chevy truck for years, and it is like my faithful buddy. It gets me to class, work, home, hunting — wherever I need to go — with no problems. Chevrolet is low-maintenance and very predictable, and I like that.'

'When I think of a brand with a strong, positive brand personality, M&Ms come to mind. M&Ms have a really spunky, humorous, irreverent brand personality. They're very colourful and fun, and when I eat them it makes me feel indulgent and rebellious, too.'

However, this investigation expands the extant literature base by demonstrating that the brand personality phenomenon is not limited to tangible products. Indeed, respondents in this research described brand personalities for numerous service-oriented offerings such as fast-food restaurants, retail establishments, delivery services and airlines.

'Nordstrom department store has a very elegant, exclusive, pampered brand per-

sonality — sort of like a classy society woman who plays tennis at the country club every day and entertains guests at her home most evenings. This is a very “old money”, tasteful brand.’

‘Federal Express is a brand with a professional, punctual, precise personality ... kind of like an accountant. I also regard FedEx as uncomplicated and courteous, because they don’t make you stand in line for a long time and fill out a lot of unnecessary paperwork just to mail a package. They provide a very reliable delivery service — you can count on FedEx to get your package there on time.’

### **The valence of brand personality**

Just as separate individuals may have divergent opinions about the personality of a given person, respondents’ perceptions about a given brand’s personality may also deviate. In some cases, in fact, respondents expressed vastly conflicting perceptions about the personality of the same brand. The following comments about Jack in the Box illustrate these disparities.

‘I do not like the brand personality of Jack in the Box. Jack in the Box is dirty, immature, and untrustworthy. It’s sort of a white trash, trailer park brand. Remember when those people got sick and died after eating Jack in the Box? I have not eaten there since then, and I find it very offensive that they put out those commercials with Jack the clown that are supposed to be humorous. I guess death is funny to Jack in the Box.’

‘I think of Jack in the Box as amusing, fun, and sort of sarcastic. I laugh out loud every time I see that ad where Jack rejects the bad advertising featuring the cheesy guys singing and dancing. I like people with a sense of humour, so naturally I like Jack in the Box. I guess their funny commercials, and the fact that their “CEO” is a clown appeals to me.’

Interestingly, the valence of brand personality perceptions may be contingent upon the extent of respondents’ product usage and experience. As espoused by Aaker,<sup>70</sup> nonusers of a particular brand may perceive its brand personality quite differently than users.

‘I think of Marlboro’s personality as being deceptive, unhealthy, and destructive. I don’t like Marlboro’s personality because of the nature of the product they offer. Marlboro tries to glorify cigarettes, when in reality they kill people. The Marlboro brand also seems sort of lonely to me — like an outcast. I don’t see why everyone thinks the Marlboro man is so cool. To me, he’s more like the Unabomber — some weird isolationist who lives in the wilderness away from society. I think that suggests that you have to be a little bit strange and anti-social to smoke Marlboro cigarettes.’

‘Marlboro is a brand with a really macho brand personality — manly, all-American, tough. Marlboro is also a steady brand. Marlboro has been around for as long as I can remember, and it remains unchanged. This may seem ridiculous, since I know smoking cigarettes is bad for me, but Marlboro embodies a lot of qualities that I admire — masculinity, stability, security, independence.’

### **The effects of brand personality**

Consistent with previous research extolling the benefits of brand personality,<sup>71,72</sup> this research suggests that several propitious outcomes accrue to brands with strong, favourable personalities. More specifically, respondents indicated that a strong, favourable brand personality provides emotional fulfilment and may lead to an increased willingness to continue using a given brand, to try a



new brand or brand extension, and to pay premium prices for a brand.

'I regard the personality of Tiffany perfume as prestigious, glamorous, and refined, and as a result I am very loyal to this brand. In fact, I haven't used another perfume for over eight years. You'll probably think this sounds strange, but when I put Tiffany on, it's like I'm spraying some of its glamour and charm onto me. I feel more sophisticated and beautiful, like Holly Golightly in the movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.'

'Aveda is hip, offbeat, up-to-date with fashion trends, and exclusive. If this brand were a person, I think Aveda would wear clothes from the Gap or Banana Republic — stylish without trying too hard. I really like Aveda's personality and feel like I have a tight relationship with the brand, which makes me intensely brand loyal. Aveda's personality also makes me trust the brand. And even though it is one of the most expensive lines of hair care products available, I am willing to pay more for it. I think consumers buy brands that represent how they like to be viewed, and Aveda is one of those brands for me.'

In parallel fashion, respondents indicated that an unpleasant or offensive brand personality has the potential to create negative consequences for the brand, including a reluctance to purchase the brand.

'I think of K-Mart's brand personality as cheap, indifferent, dirty, and shameful. When I was growing up, K-Mart was the brunt of jokes about cut-rate, low quality clothes. It was uncool to have clothes purchased at K-Mart, and if you wore them other kids would make fun of you. Not much has changed — I still wouldn't be caught dead there. I think Dustin Hoffman in the movie *Rainman* says it best — "K-Mart sucks".'

### The motivation for brand personality

Many of the most frequently appearing instances of brand personality in this research were for goods close in proximity to the user. That is, consistent with anthropomorphism theory — which suggests that individuals are more inclined to anthropomorphise objects they frequently encounter in an effort to make them more human-like<sup>73,74</sup> — respondents seemed particularly inclined to regard brands they consume, apply to themselves, wear, or have daily contact with as more human in nature.

'Lubriderm lotion is very protective, nourishing, and feminine. If this brand were a person, it would be a very concerned friend or sister. I feel like Lubriderm relates to me, and understands that I have very dry skin and protects me from the sun, wind, and elements.'

'Nike has an exciting, athletic, intense personality. Nike is also fashionable. It's the only brand of tennis shoe that I will buy, because they look good and motivate me to work out harder so I will look good. When it's time to hit the pavement and go for a run, putting on my Nike's gets me pumped. They help me get through it, even on days when I don't have much energy.'

More explicit empirical support for anthropomorphism theory and meaningful insights for brand managers were derived from questioning respondents about why they regarded some brands as having human characteristics. Responses to sentence completion exercises and follow-up probes on this topic indicate a surprising theoretical and empirical conflux regarding anthropic motivations. Respondents indicated they humanised their brands because using a brand that somehow

seems more human reduces uncertainty and risk involved in using the brand, makes the brand seem more familiar, and gives the consumer a feeling of comfort. The following sentence completion responses reflect these sentiments.

‘A brand with an established brand personality gives me more information about the quality I can expect to receive when I use the brand ... what that brand will look, feel, smell, and taste like ... exactly what feeling the brand will provide. The brand personality should tell me whether I will be satisfied with the brand. I don’t appreciate surprises when it comes to the brands I use.’

‘Knowing more about a brand’s personality tells me something about the brand’s character, and whether or not the company will stand behind the product. I want to know that I can rely on the brand to deliver what it promises. I like to know ahead of time what the brand’s intentions are.’

‘A product with a brand personality I like seems more dependable than other competing products ... and less likely to disappoint me. A brand with a good personality also seems more reputable and accountable, which usually means you can trust the brand to give you what you need, or take responsibility if it doesn’t.’

Responses to more direct inquiries about the motivations underlying brand personality bolster these findings. Respondents indicated a desire to really know the brands they used on a regular basis, and to reduce the uncertainty and anxiety that may accompany trying new brands. Information about a brand’s personality seemed to provide the necessary assurances.

‘My Levi’s have a rugged, sexy, young, outgoing brand personality, and that means

a lot to me. I know that when I wear my Levi’s I will feel more comfortable and happy, because they fit well and flatter my figure. Even when nothing else in my closet seems to work, I can always slip on my Levi’s and feel better and more confident.’

‘Crest is a brand that is highly recommended by dentists, and it’s been on the market forever. I think that gives Crest a respectable, honourable, solid brand personality. I grew up using Crest, so it’s also like a family tradition. I buy my own toiletries now, but I still use Crest. In some sense, I guess Crest provides continuity and stability in my life.’

### **Determinants of brand personality in consumer memory**

In concurrence with extant branding research,<sup>75,76</sup> respondents indicated that a brand’s personality is connected in memory to many other brand associations, and that they draw on those associations to make inferences about a brand’s personality. Many brand associations that shape consumer perceptions of a brand’s personality result from marketing activities initiated by the firm producing the brand.

‘I think of the Gap’s brand personality as being confident, energetic, flexible, stylish, and cool. The Gap’s brand personality has a very broad appeal. The name “the Gap” implies that they are in the centre of the fashion world, bridging the gap between people of different ages, because everyone — teenagers, college kids, twenty-somethings — loves their clothes. Their ads reinforce that, by showing different types of people — cowboys, swing dancers, rappers — dancing and singing while wearing Gap clothes. And the product itself also influences the brand’s personality, because their clothes are comfortable and practical, but also fashionable. Even their logo — white,

capital letters on a navy blue background — fits the Gap's personality, because it's bold, but not overdone.'

'Lots of things make me think of Gatorade's personality as effective, unselfish, refreshing, active, and healthy. It's called "the thirst quencher" in the commercials, and that tells me it will satisfy me when I exercise hard and need to replenish my bodily fluids — and ask for nothing in return. Their commercials also feature Michael Jordan, who is the epitome of athletic excellence and achievement. And that says that Gatorade is a strong, powerful brand. And the name tells me that the brand is so potent that it could even rejuvenate a parched, sluggish reptile!'

Other brand personality associations derive from non-firm-related actions and sources and have the potential to create impressions that are beyond the firm's control, and sometimes contrary to their intentions.

'Campbell's Soup has a personality that is family-oriented, wholesome, sweet, and nostalgic. I think Campbell's does a great job of reinforcing this personality in their advertising, where they show a young mum feeding her kid Campbell's Soup. When you watch those ads, you almost feel the warmth coming off the television screen. It brings back my own memories of eating Campbell's Soup at home as a child. When my mum fixed Campbell's Soup for me, it was like an expression of her love — I felt she really cared about me. These memories are always happy and serene, and I associate them with the brand and its personality. I think Campbell's Soup will always be a family favourite in my house.'

'I think Microsoft's brand personality is very competent, yet overbearing, unfair, and ruthless — and obviously the courts agree with me. Microsoft's business practices have had a huge influence on how I view

their brand personality. They are monopolistic and manipulative, sort of like a bully who takes your lunch money, or a friend who takes credit for your ideas. And even though their Windows wallpaper with the clouds is supposed to make me associate Microsoft with blue skies and sunny days, it just reminds me that they are everywhere, watching me, like Big Brother. I've even heard that they scan your hard drive and store what you have in a database whenever you register Microsoft software. So I'd say their personality is nosy, too.'

## DISCUSSION

This research offers a compelling theoretical account of brand personality that is informed by research in cognitive psychology, and rooted in the realm of consumer experiences and perceptions. The approach to brand personality described here expands the conceptualisation of the brand personality construct by infusing principles from associative memory formulations and anthropomorphism theory to explain how brand personality operates and why it occurs and affects consumer attitudes and behaviour. While the cognitive perspective has not been rigorously tested or critically compared with alternative theoretical accounts, the multi-method qualitative approach used to investigate the model's precepts heightens the reliability and accuracy of findings reported here,<sup>77</sup> thereby increasing the confidence with which supporting evidence may be accepted.

Several actionable implications for brand managers and directions for future research derive from this exploration. Although previous research in this arena<sup>78,79</sup> focuses exclusively on tangible products, this study suggests that service-oriented goods may benefit from the development of a strong,

positive brand personality. Hence, future research should investigate the differential impact of brand personality for products characterised by different types of attributes. A strong, favourable brand personality may have less of an impact on consumer preferences for products predominantly characterised by *search* attributes (which consumers can fully evaluate prior to purchase) and be relatively more important to consumers for products that are predominantly characterised by *experience* or *credence* qualities (which can only be evaluated after the purchase, if at all), when information about a brand's personality may reduce consumers' perceived risk.<sup>80–83</sup>

The present analysis also suggests that consumers' opinions regarding a given brand's personality may differ considerably. This finding enriches existing work by Aaker,<sup>84,85</sup> which suggests that the appeal of particular brand personality traits is contingent upon the user's schematic personality traits that are made salient by the purchase or consumption situation. It also highlights the need to explore the effectiveness of branding strategies that incorporate 'multiple personalities' to appeal to an individual consumer's various identities and to reach different consumer segments.<sup>86</sup>

Beyond its intended theoretical contributions to the developing literature based on brand personality, studying the effects of strong, positive brand personalities has practical implications for improving the effectiveness of brand management. This research makes important progress on that front by contributing to a growing body of evidence<sup>87–89</sup> suggesting that brand personality affects consumers' feelings, perceptions, attitudes

and behaviour. Consumer researchers may shed more light on this issue by investigating the impact of other important brand-equity-related consequences. Determining, for instance, whether brand personality — like human personality — is truly enduring<sup>90</sup> and capable of strengthening the resilience of the brand to the actions of competitors and other marketplace events would enhance the knowledge of brand managers. Likewise, exploring how the personality of a brand evolves over time would have obvious implications for brand managers seeking to reposition their brands.

Another worthwhile research initiative would involve a systematic inquiry into factors that contribute to consumer perceptions about a brand's personality. The current research takes an important first step in that direction by investigating brand associations that shape the nature of a brand's personality. It appears as though everything a company does — or does not do — sends brand messages<sup>91</sup> that form the basis for brand associations and that contribute to consumers' perceptions about the brand's personality. A key ramification of this realisation is that many sources and actions generate brand associations — both deliberate and unintentional from the firm's perspective — which must be carefully managed to establish a clear, firm foundation for the development of the brand's personality.<sup>92</sup> The development of specific guidelines for brand managers seeking to cultivate a particular brand personality is reserved for future research.

Finally, there remains a need to explore the conditions that foster or hinder the development of a

strong, favourable brand personality. Since anthropomorphic theory suggests that people are most likely to anthropomorphise objects that are close in proximity,<sup>93,94</sup> there may be value in examining how factors such as personal involvement and usage frequency affect the tendency to anthropomorphise brands.

These conclusions should be viewed in light of the qualitative study from which they originate. Findings derive from a homogeneous pool of subjects who may possess above-average cognitive capabilities. Further, thoughts offered here, while bolstered by the methodological triangulation that generated them, are inconclusive in nature and subject to different interpretations. Given these limitations, future research employing an experimental design and utilising appropriate methodological tools should attempt to establish the predictive validity and generalisability of results reported here.

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