

THE CONGRUENCY EFFECT OF CULTURAL – SPECIFIC BRAND PERSONALITY TRAITS AND NATIONAL CULTURE ON BRAND EVALUATION

Hesham Fazel, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Marketing
University of Bisha

Abstract

Brand personality embodies two cultural dimensions, cultural- specific personality and universal personality. Both serve to represent and institutionalize the values and beliefs of a culture. In this paper I further discuss brand with cultural-specific personality traits. The argument is that the congruency of cultural specific personality traits and national traits should lead to a positive evaluation of the brands. However, the incongruence between cultural-specific personality traits and national culture should lead to different evaluation based on the culture openness to new experience and exclusivity. For collectivist, brands that have cultural-specific personality traits and are congruent (vs. incongruent) with their national culture are more likely to be positively evaluated. For individualists, brands that have cultural-specific personality traits and are incongruent (vs. congruent) with their national culture are more likely to be positively evaluated.

Keywords: Brand, Personality, culture, congruence.

Introduction

Culture norms and values provide confirmative standards that people often use to evaluate others' behavior and to guide their own judgments and behavioral decisions (Briley & Wyer, 2001). Culture-related norms and values can diverge along a number of dimensions (Hofstede, 1991; Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Differences between Western (e.g., North American and Western European) and East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) cultures have most commonly been conceptualized in terms of individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). In individualism culture people are inclined to emphasize autonomy, emotional independence, confidentiality, and individual necessities (Hofstede, 1980; Sung & Tinkham, 2005). They value their own feeling and emotions and seek their individual pleasure as well as looking forward to reach positive outcomes of their actions (Triandis, 1994). In contrast, collectivism cultures tend to emphasize emotional dependence, group harmony, cohesion, and cooperation, and they value the collective over the individual. They support attitudes that reflect interdependence, sociability, and family integrity (Sung & Tinkham, 2005). Culture values and norms have an observable impact on people's decision making process and final decisions (Aaker, 2001). One of the many decisions that people may form is evaluating and choosing among different brands and products. Brand personality and their influence on consumer's brand perception and evaluation have been empirically supported (e.g., Aaker, 1997,1999; Aaker et al., 2001).

Since Aaker's (1997) article, more than 30 studies have empirically explored the effects of brand personality on attitudes towards a brand (e.g. Johar, Sengupta & Aaker 2005; Batra & Miles Homer 2004; Aaker 1999). However, most studies have explored the effects on attitudes that serve social identity functions. In terms of cultural differences, Aaker et al (2001) argue that the meaning embedded in consumption symbols, such as commercial brands, can serve to represent and institutionalize the values and beliefs of a culture. Sung and Tinkham (2005) examined how cultural meaning is embedded in consumers' perceptions of commercial brands. Several brand personality dimensions have similar meaning in both Korea and the United States, whereas other dimensions are culture-specific.

However, the lack of discussing the relationship between brands with culture-specific personality traits and national culture, raise the need to explore such relationship in depth and further discuss its impact on the overall perception and evaluation of brands. Researchers have investigated the impact of culture differences and how culture establishes its own brand personality but the differences among individuals with different culture background in perceiving, evaluating and brands with culture-specific traits that characterize brands have not been adequately investigated.

For instance, when people in East Asia perceive brands, they are more likely than individuals in the North America to place emphasis on the values of interdependency, thus, they look after brands that hold social and interdependency values. However people in North America emphasis on the value of individuality, autonomy and matchlessness and more open to new experience (Briley & Wyer 2001), therefor, they are more likely to evaluate brands that embedded other culture's personality traits such as Japanese peacefulness or Korean Handy more positively as well as preferring brands that may promote individuality. This paper attempts to answer the question of how the congruency between brand culture-specific traits and national culture can affect the overall evaluation and perception of a brand. In another words, to what extent the congruency between culture-specific and consumers' national cultures affect their brand perception and evaluation?

Literature Background

Research in marketing has established that congruency between marketing tactics and cultural orientation results in more-favorable consumer reactions (see Aaker & Williams 1998). For example, Han and Shavitt (1994) find that advertising appeals that focus on individual benefits are more successful among the United States consumers, while collectivistic appeals that focus on group benefits are more effective in Korea. Individuals prefer a brand whose positioning is consistent with their self-construal, and those with a predominant independent (vs. interdependent) self - have more favorable attitudes toward a brand that is positioned as differentiating (Aaker & Schmitt 2001 Past research has shown that people choose and use possessions and brands that reflect their actual and/or desired identities (Sirgy 1982; Dittmar 1992). The self-congruity hypothesis claims that people desire and choose brands that reflect their actual or desired self-concepts and avoid brands which are incongruent with who they are and/or would like to be (Levy 1959; Sirgy 1982). Other studies also demonstrated that congruence may positively affect various kinds of consumer responses such as brand choice, brand impressions, and perceived (product) value (Van & Pruyn 2011). In accounting for effects of various forms of congruence on consumer responses, recent theorizing on processing fluency is insightful. According to such accounts, stimuli that can be easily processed are generally evaluated in positive terms and inspire favorable attitudes (Lee & Labroo, 2004; Van & Pruyn, 2011).

Culture has long been identified as an environmental distinctive that manipulates consumer behavior, and the many characteristics of a culture affect in a different way the needs consumers pleases through the attainment and use of goods and services (Phau & Cheen Lau, 2001; Roth, 1995). In Western cultures, people tend to emphasize autonomy, emotional independence, privacy, and individual need. They prefer to focus on the positive consequences of their actions and on their own feelings and goals, and they believe in self-reliance, hedonism, and competition (Triandis, 1994) Consequently, such self-view gives rise to an emphasis on self-actualization or self-realization and on the expression of one's unique configuration of needs, rights, and capacities (Singelis, 1994). In contrast, East Asian cultures tend to emphasize emotional dependence, group harmony, cohesion, and cooperation, and they value the collective over the individual (Sung & Tinkham, 2005). They favor attitudes that reflect interdependence, sociability, and family integrity. East Asian collectivists also value family security and show a high respect for tradition. In a study based on data from more than 40 countries, Schwartz (1995) found two collectivist clusters of values (conservation and harmony) and two individualist clusters of values (intellectual autonomy and affective autonomy). He also identified and contrasted collectivist values (e.g., family security, social order, respect for tradition, honoring parents and elders, security, and politeness) and individualist values (being curious, broad minded, and creative and having an exciting and varied life, full of pleasure).

In this light, the representation of culture is of an abstract, encompassing structure, one that is often indexed by nationality and examined according to its influence on individuals' behavior. Another perspective is that culture is more disjointed and dynamic, a set of subjective contexts and situations that are constructed and experienced by the individual (Hong et al., 2000. Culture is best conceptualized in the meaning derived from and added to on a daily basis experience, and individuals and culture are inseparable and reciprocally embrace each other (Cross & Markus, 1999; Hong et al., 2000).

Aaker (1991) talked about how to build a strong brand identity by stating that brand identity is a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from organization members. He modeled this association via developing four brand identity perspectives: brand as a product, brand as an organization, brand as a person and brand as a symbol.

Aaker, Benet-Martínez and Garolera, (2001) conducted additional studies to examine how the symbolic and expressive attributes associated with brands are structured and how this structure varies across three cultures: (a) the United States, (b) Japan, and (c) Spain. They identified a set of brand personality dimensions that share similar meaning in Japan and the United States (e.g., excitement) as well as other dimensions (e.g., peacefulness and ruggedness) that carry more specific cultural meaning. This finding of similarities and differences in basic structure was also supported by their other study, which compared Spain and the United States (Aaker et al., 2001). Specifically, they discussed the Culture meaning that commercial brands (brand personality) carry. Commercial brand referred to as “consumption symbols” or cultural image (McCracken, 1986), commercial brands have significance that goes beyond their physical properties, practical characters, and commercial value. This significance relay heavily on their ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning (Douglas & Isherwood, 1978; Richins, 1994).

Culture-specific meaning typically exists in in the more abstract traits of the commercial brand that provide primarily symbolic or value-expressive functions to the individual (Shavitt, 1990), which is the ‘brand personality’ attributes. The symbolic and expressive functions that are provided by a brand (e.g., Levi’s allows for the expression of independence, strength and masculinity; Solomon, 1986) are likely to diverge to a larger extent due to the fact that individuals differ in their needs and self-views (Fiske et al., 1998; Han & Shavitt, 1994; Kim & Markus, 1999). Culture share meaning brand personality are those brands that hold a set of brand personality dimensions that share similar meaning across cultures (Aaker et al., 2001). Thus, examining brand personality dimensions cross-culturally can give insights into cultural differences and give more deep understanding on how consumers from different culture background do perceive and evaluate brands with cultural-specific and sharing brand personality traits.

The role of Congruency

Fleck (2004) defines "congruence between sponsor and sponsored entity as being the degree to which the couple of sponsor/sponsored entity is perceived as fitting together". Speed and Thompson, (2000) have presented the attitude variable and generally define "congruence as being the attitude towards associating the event and the sponsor, and the fact that this association is perceived as fitting or well-adapted". Park et al. (1996) hypothesize that congruence is the complementarity between the brands under three conditions. 1) They have in common a set of attributes that are pertinent but necessarily salient. 2) They differ in terms of attribute salience, what is salient for one is not for the other. The brand for which the attribute is salient is better evaluated than the one for which it is not. 3) The words used are different; they can link to antecedents or to some consequences of congruence. However, they eventually describe the fact that two entities fit together well.

Ample research discusses congruency in the field of marketing. For example, researches discuss congruence in advertising. Congruence in advertising dealt with two fields; publicizing celebrities as spokespersons and advertising executives use a celebrity to benefit from his or her reputation and enhanced memorization of the advertisement. Such congruency may lead to better recognition of the associated brand. In this context, the authors often refer to congruence as a tool of persuasion (Kamins & Gupta, 1994) or to a “match up effect” (Lynch & Schuler, 1994).

Other researchers have conducted studies on the effect of the congruence between brand personality and self-image on the consumer’s satisfaction. Most of these researchers have focused on the post-purchase behavior (e.g., Sirgy, 1986; Graeff, 1997). Jamal and Goode (2001) have investigated the field of tourism services, relying on Sirgy’s (1985) congruence theory. They have studied the direct effect of congruence with self-image on satisfaction. A significant positive relationship seemed to exist between the two concepts. Park and Lee (2005) have brought to the fore this significant positive influence of congruence between brand personality and human personality, when it comes to the consumers’ satisfaction towards the targeted brand.

Propositions Development

It has been hypothesized that different cultures are likely to have somewhat unique associations of brand personality dimensions that are reflective of cultural differences in basic values. On the basis of the interpretation of eastern culture as reflective of collectivism phenomenon and interdependence, sociability, and family orientation, I suggest that brands that hold culture-specific personality will be more evaluated positively by the consumers who are belong to collectivism culture. I predict that the extension of collectivism values into collectivist consumers will be reflected in their perceptions and evaluations of the brand personality traits. Thus, consistent with the explanation of previous cultural characteristics. In addition to that , individualist consumers perceive and evaluate brands that are rugged and unique more positively than brands that are peacefulness or more sociable, which reflects the impact of individualistic culture. I propose the following propositions.

P1a: Brand that holds merely collectivistic culture-specific personality traits are positively perceived and evaluated by collectivists.

P1b: Brand that holds merely individualistic culture-specific Brand personality traits are positively evaluated by individualists.

In the five factor model (FFM) of personality (Big Five), openness to experience refers to people's inclination to make alteration and adjustments to existing attitudes and behaviors once they have been exposed to new ideas or situations (John, 1990). Openness to experience differentiates between people who prefer innovation, diversity, and intense experience and people who favor familiarity and routine (McCrae, 1996; McCrae & Costa, 1997). Those who have high scores on this dimension tend to be more cultured, curious, imaginative, original, intelligent, broad-minded, and artistically sensitive than others (Barrick & Mount, 1991). They tend to be less risk averse and more willing to consider opinions that are different from their own (Lauriola & Levin, 2001).

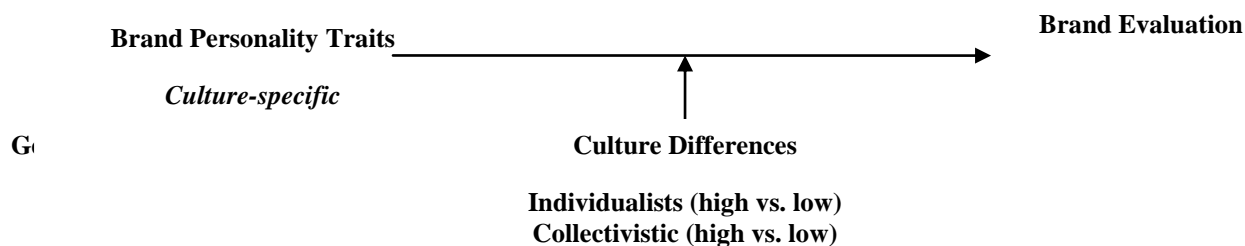
Openness to Experience is closely associated with divergent thinking and creativity (McCrae, 1987). People who are relatively more open appreciate the merits of trying new things and the potential for improving on the past (Costa & McCrae, 1992). In addition to a greater willingness to experiment, more open individuals tend to have a broader range and depth of experience. Their positive reception to things that are novel combined with their greater range of experience enables them to derive novel solutions to problems and creative ideas that challenge the status quo (McCrae, 1987). In contrast, individuals who are low on openness to experience tend to demonstrate lower levels of divergent thinking because they find comfort in things that are routine. They prefer to adopt familiar ways of doing things to reduce uncertainty about the soundness of their decisions (George & Zhou, 2001).

Triandis and Suh (2002) found evidence that individualists and collectivists differ in terms of their cognitions, the motivation for their behavior, emotions, and patterns of social behavior, communication styles and ethical codes. individualism, the more people desire to have many choices and to be unique. Kim & Markus (1999) used several methods to show that in some cultures people are highly motivated to be unique, whereas in others people prefer to be like everyone else. individualists have a greater need for freedom of choice and for being seen as distinctive and they tend to become more motivated with the attainment of success. However, Asians are less motivated when given a personal choice, whereas having choices made for them by trusted authority figures and peers actually produced the highest levels of fundamental motivation and performance. Logically, more motivated people are more willing to be open for new experience which may lead to uniqueness and distinctiveness. Therefore, I propose that

P2-a: Brand that holds merely individualistic culture-specific brand personality traits are negatively evaluated by collectivists.

P2-b: Brand that holds merely collectivistic culture-specific brand personality traits are positively evaluated by individualists.

Figure 1. illustrates the research theoretical model:



Brand personality refers to the emotional side of a brand image. It is created by all experiences of consumers with a brand (Aaker, 1991). It also reflects the relationship between brand and consumers, and shows how consumer in fact relates themselves to brands and willing to go on with such relationship. The goal of this research is to examine how cultural meaning is embedded in consumers' perceptions of brand personality. Several brand personality dimensions have similar meaning in both individualism and collectivism cultures, whereas other dimensions are culture-specific. The congruence between brand personality traits and national culture has not been adequately investigated. Researchers still unanimously condemn the limitation of investigations in this topic from different angles, considering different factors. This article represents dual interest to academic and managerial fields. From an academic standpoint, this research aims at clarifying the concept of congruence between brand personality traits and national culture (individualistic vs. collectivistic) and explaining its effect on the customer's brand evaluation.

The framework of this paper is expected to contribute to academic literature and to the practice of marketing and management. First, the paper supposes that brand personality traits that are congruent with the consumer's national culture may lead to positive evaluation of the brands. However, brand personality traits that are incongruent with the consumer's national culture may lead to negative evaluation of the brands to collectivists. This informs the marketing and consumer behavior literature by explaining the influence of the congruency between brand personality traits and national culture on consumer perception.

In another words, perceiving and evaluating brands with cultural-specific personality traits, both the individualist and collectivist consumers are more likely to have positive perceptions and evaluations toward these type of brands. However, as the level of openness to experience differ between collectivists and individualists, where individualists are more motivated and like to try and taste new experience than their counterpart. individualistic consumer are more likely to seek uniqueness in all matters, therefor, they are more expected to accept and evaluate brands that hold merely collectivistic culture traits on positive manner. In contrast, collectivistic consumers are less motivated and more to be preventive and secure their position in the group. Therefore, they are less likely to positively evaluate brands that hold merely individualistic culture traits.

This paper continues the important work of building theory about congruency effect, consumption, and culture phenomenon. This may help marketing managers to understand the underlying mechanism of people's preferences of brands consumption in different cultures. In addition to that, one of the most important tasks of leaders and managers is to organize work in a manner that produces an optimal or satisfying outcome for the organization and stakeholders. This study suggests that the selection among products be distributed and produced in specific culture is an important step for managers. In particular, I bring attention to the role of collective and individualistic cultures on our decision and the role of brand personality traits as first step to evaluate products before taking the decision to purchase.

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Dr. Hesham Fazal is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. He received his PhD from the University of Manitoba in Canada. His research interests are in branding, Technology innovation, emerging market multinationals and international marketing.