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A Conceptual Model Of Consumer Personality-Brand Preferences Relationship

Riza Mulyanegara, Monash University
Yelena Tsarenko, Monash University

Abstract

There have been a significant number of studies that investigate the antecedents to customers in forming their brand preferences. However, there is a dearth of research devoted to examining the role of customer personality in marketing. This conceptual paper attempts to cover this gap through examining the relationships between consumer personality and brand preference. We developed a conceptual model which is based on the Big Five theory of personality and show how this could be applied to the marketing context. It is proposed that human personality has a significant relationship with brand preferences.

Keywords: consumer personality, big five, brand preferences, consumer characteristics.

Background

Personality can be defined as the consistency of interaction towards a person's external and internal stimuli (Fiske, 1971). Personality research has been a cornerstone in psychology since the early 20th century and been used across various other disciplines outside psychology (Pervin and John, 1992; Monte, 1999). Despite its growing popularity in other social science disciplines, the number of personality research in marketing is considered very limited (Baumgartner, 2002). It is suggested that marketers often rely to their own personality measurement scales rather than using the existing psychology construct when it comes to personality research (Baumgartner, 2002). On the other hand, management scholars use existing psychology constructs, such as the Big Five, to measure the significance of employees' personality to work behaviour (Heller, Judge, and Watson, 2002). Hence, the number of personality research in management has so far surpassed those in marketing discipline

Although consumer personality research has received marketing scholars' interest since 1960's (Westfall, 1962), there has always been problem in finding the significance of personality to consumer behaviour (Shank and Langemeyer, 1994). It seems that marketers found it difficult to trust personality as a reliable construct to predict behaviour due to the complex nature of human personality (Blackwell, 2001) and the existence of more powerful tools to predict behaviour such as price, values, product usage, and perception (Shank and Langemeyer, 1994). This resulted in the substantial research gap in marketing discipline, particularly in examining the relationship between consumer personality and brand preferences.

Jacoby (1971, 244) argued that the arguments against the significance of personality in predicting behaviour is mostly "without justification". Jacoby (1971) pointed out the fact that most marketing scholars administer a broad-range of personality scales and attempt to correlate response to product preference without any prediction on how specific personality traits might correlate with specific aspect of behaviour. There has also been a problem in applying the research findings on consumer personality, as personality-based segmentation in the past was not proven effective (Blackwell, 2001, p.214).

This paper seeks to integrate the psychological constructs (the Big Five) into the process of forming brand preference. Essentially our research is based on the following premise:

The greater the congruity between the human characteristics that consistently and distinctively describe an individual's actual or ideal self and those that describe a brand, the greater the preference for the brand (Aaker, 1997).

Human personality – The Big Five

The history of Big Five model is long and quite complicated. It was marked by many advances by psychologist before this model was accepted by science as a reliable personality construct.

The quest for a systematic approach began in 1884 when Sir Francis Galton attempted to categorise personality-related words based on a Standard English dictionary. Sir Galton's work was then followed up by Thurstone, who conducted a factor analysis of 60 personality terms and came up with 5 common factors. Cattell followed Thurstone's method but came up with a more complex set of personality variables, now known as 16 Cattell Personality Factors (PF) (Goldberg, 1990). Other researchers, including Fiske and Digman, did a follow up study by analysing Cattell's 16 Factors and found out that only 5 factors are proven to be replicable across different context (Deary, 1996). This argument is also supported by later research, which confirms the birth of 'Big Five' in personality theory. Although many scholars contributed to the development of the Big Five, Fiske is often considered as its founder (Goldberg, 1990) based on his factor analysis of Cattell's personality variables. The Big Five theory has been tested across different cultural contexts (McCrae and Allik, 2002) and considered as one of the most systematic and reliable personality constructs (Goldberg, 1990).

Before Costa & McCrae (1985) proposed their Big Five model, the Big Five did not have any fixed labels. The model was born through inductive process, where the theories are derived from the analysis of data (Monte, 1999). Hence, the labelling of each factor is up to the creativity of each researcher. In fact, Fiske's Big Five was very different compared to Costa and McCrae's in terms of the labelling system (Goldberg, 1990). Each dimension in Big Five has a bipolar scale in which participants have to rank themselves in order to describe their personality. (1) Neuroticism dimension assess an individual's prone to psychological distress, unrealistic ideas, excessive cravings or urges, and maladaptive coping responses. The high scorers tend to be worried, nervous, emotional, and hypochondriacal. (2) Extraversion dimension assesses an individual's quantity and intensity of interpersonal interaction and activity level. The high scorers tend to be sociable, active, talkative, person-oriented, optimistic, fun-loving, and affectionate. (3) Openness dimension assesses an individual's proactive seeking and appreciation of experience for its own sake, toleration for, and exploration of the unfamiliar. The high scorers tend to be curious, creative, original, imaginative, and untraditional. The fourth dimension, (4) agreeableness assesses an individual's quality of interpersonal orientation along a continuum from compassion to antagonism in thoughts, feelings, and actions. The high scorers are likely to be soft-hearted, good-natured, trusting, helpful, forgiving, gullible, and straightforward. Finally, (5) the conscientious dimension assesses one's degree of organization, persistence, and motivation in goal-directed behaviour. The high scorers of this dimension tend to be organised, reliable, and hard working (Costa and McCrae, 1985).

The Big Five Model explains individual differences using a trait analysis approach. Using this framework, a person who has high score in neuroticism dimension is considered unstable and emotional. On the other hand, a person who scores high in extraversion dimension is likely to be adventurous and energetic (Goldberg, 1990). It worth noting that in the realm of psychology studies, the Big Five is regarded as Dimensional/Galilean rather than Categorical/Aristotelian approach (Monte, 1999). The Big Five aims to explain individual differences based on several

dimensions rather than putting people into boxes of personality categories, which enables researchers to examine individual differences based on different trait factors.

Brand Preferences

Blackwell (2001, p.289) defines preferences as “attitudes toward one object in relation to another”. He further comments that consumers’ preference over one brand does not directly translate into buying intention. Hence, there are differences between consumers’ preference and buying intention. It seems that most business organisations are interested to the latter one, neglecting the fact that consumers’ preferences play a role in purchase decision. Many researchers agree that sought benefits and consumer perception are the main antecedents of brand preferences, which is as follows:

$$\mathbf{BP} = \sum \mathbf{PA} + \mathbf{CP}$$

Where:

BP - Brand preferences

PA - Product attributes

CP - Consumer perception

(Adapted from Yang, 2002).

O’Connor and Sulivan (1995) argued for a more complex combination to predict brand preferences which is as follows:

$$\mathbf{BP} = \mathbf{PU} + \mathbf{PP} + \mathbf{A} + \mathbf{B} + \sum \mathbf{R} (\mathbf{MV})$$

Where:

BP - Brand preferences

PU - Product usage

PP - Purchase patterns

A - Attitude

B - Benefits sought

R - Consumer response

MV - Marketing Variables

Although existing literatures on brand preferences mostly exclude personality variables from the model, a number of marketing scholars acknowledge the significance of consumer personality in brand preferences and choice. McEnally and de Chernatony (1999, p.2) argue that “incorporation of personal characteristics into the brand makes it more appealing to consumers who are more likely to affiliate with brands possessing desirable personalities”. Phau and Lau (2001, p.431) note that “a consumer who prefers a certain brand will perceive that its personality is congruent with his/her preferred personality and will project their preferred personality on to the brand”. Recent research by Tsu Wee (2004) also supported both arguments, indicating that personality congruence has significant impact upon brand preferences.

While there is theoretical support to argue for the relationship between personality and brand preferences, there is lack of empirical evidence in examining the preferences of consumers according to their personality type where each type corresponds to one dimension of Big Five. Recent research by Grimm (2005) highlighted the gap in personality research but does not address personality dimensions as the main concern. Grimm (2005) includes personality congruence along with attribute perceptions and affective responses as significant variables affecting preference. The study found that personality congruence has significant impact on brand

preferences. In fact, personality congruence has the greatest direct impact on preferences in choosing banking institutions (Grimm, 2005). The study, however, did not use any psychology constructs in measuring personality variables, hence lacking details in discussing the preference implications of each personality dimension.

Conceptual Model

The notion that consumers express and transfer their personality towards brand (Aaker, 1997; Phau and Lau, 2001) is the fundamental support for our conceptual model

The model (Fig 1) uses the Big Five construct as a starting point, whereas consumers are grouped into 5 dimensions. Scores on NEO PI-R (Neuroticism-Extraversion-Openness Personality Inventory Ratio) or Goldberg's questionnaires determines where each consumer is positioned. It is important to remember that with this Galilean/Dimensional approach, a person can be positioned into more than one dimension. As mentioned earlier, in the questionnaires participants are asked to rank themselves in each dimension and calculate the score for each dimension. In psychology, each dimension is usually analysed in order to give full picture of the participant's personality, particularly when used to analyse personality disorders (Monte, 1999). However, in the marketing context, researchers are often only interested to find out significant dimensions of consumer personality. The way 'significant' is defined in The Big Five as the dimension in which the participants score the highest. There is no rule of thumb concerning the number of dimensions that can be taken into account in marketing, however, for the purpose of this study, 2 dimensions are considered the maximum number to be included in the model in order to classify respondents into specific personality cluster which best describes their personal characteristics.

It can be seen from the discussion above that human personality translates into expected brand characteristics, leading us to the first proposition

Proposition 1

Preferred brand characteristics are strongly related to consumer personality and characteristics

It is important to recognise the fact that not all traits in each dimension are transferable into brand characteristics. Hence, to determine consumers' preferred brand characteristics, each dimension's traits are analysed and only significant personality variables are included in the model. For example, extraversion personality dimension has active and fun characteristics. These characteristics can be applied to brand, thus resulting in preferred brand characteristics. However, other characteristics such as worried and inadequacy from Neuroticism dimension can not be effectively applied to brand personality. Hence, those two variables might not be appropriate as preferred brand characteristics. Based on those assumptions, the preferred brand characteristics of each dimension is as follows:

From the table below it can be seen that some preferred characteristics can be directly applied to brand personality. For instance, a brand such as 3G Mobile has creative and original appeal in the brand itself, hence appeals directly to Openness personality. On the other hand, bank and Insurances Company with trustable and helpful brand personality appeals directly to consumers who are high scorers of Agreeable dimension.

It is important to notice that expected brand characteristics do not always equal perceived brand characteristics. The latter is influenced by marketing variables such as response towards advertising and organisation's image as well as 'created' brand personality enforced by marketers

(Phau and Lau, 2001). The gap between expected brand characteristics and perceived brand characteristics reduces brand preference. This leads us to the main proposition of this paper.

Table 1. Alignment between consumer personality dimension and preferred brand characteristics

Consumer Personality Dimension	Preferred Brand Characteristics
Neuroticism (N)	Emotional, Urgency
Extraversion (E)	Sociable, Active, people-oriented, Optimistic, Affectionate, Fun
Openness (O)	Creative, Original, Imaginative, Untraditional
Agreeableness (A)	Helpful, Straightforward, Trustable
Conscientiousness (C)	Neat, Preserving, Purposeful

Proposition 2

The lower the discrepancy between perceived and preferred brand characteristics, the greater brand preference. Marketing variables play mediating role in either distracting or merging preferred and perceived brand characteristics

$$BP = DBC - PBC + \sum R (MV)$$

Where:

BP - Brand preferences

DBC – Preferred (Desirable) brand characteristics

PBC - Perceived brand characteristics

R (MV) - Response towards marketing variables.

The role of marketing variables in the model is to match the preferred and perceived brand characteristics. However, it must be remembered that consumers’ overall response towards marketing variables can influence perceived brand characteristics in either positive or negative way. Phau and Lau (2001) stress the importance of understanding consumer personality before enforcing ‘created’ brand image through marketing variables because marketing variables can sometimes distract consumers from transferring their own personality into the brand.

Discussion

In this paper it has argued that personality congruence is strongly related to brand preferences. Although the conceptual model and propositions have substantial theoretical support, further empirical research is essential. The next stage is to develop hypotheses based on the propositions and test them through an empirical study. The investigation would aim to measure the strength of association between consumer personality (type) and expected brand characteristics (proposition 1) as well as measuring the strength of marketing variables that influence preferences (proposition 2). It is expected that the research findings could contribute to closing the existing research gap by increasing the understanding of the relationship between consumer personality and formation of consumers’ brand preferences. The study also broadens the scope of personality research in the marketing discipline.

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