

## Brand Personality and The Distribution Trap

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### Abstract

In their provocative and influential book *The Distribution Trap*, Thomas and Wilkinson (2010) contend that firms that develop differentiated products would be better served to avoid what the authors call mega-retailers or Megas: big-box retailers such as Target and Walmart and category killers such as Home Depot, Lowe's and Best Buy. As an alternative, the authors recommend that firms either find retail outlets that are not Megas or pursue direct channels of distribution (Thomas and Wilkinson 2010). At the very least, it appears that differentiated (innovative, in the authors' parlance) brands should not be distributed through outlets for which customers perceive the offerings to be of low quality (Dukes, Geylani, and Liu 2014).

The authors' use of the term innovative raises an important question, however. Which brands are innovative (differentiated) "enough" to be brands that should avoid the Distribution Trap? Such a brand would seem to need to be desirable enough to target customers that customers will forego the convenience (and in some cases the lower price) characteristic of distribution through a mega-retailer. Identifying characteristics that would enable a brand or product to avoid the distribution trap would be a significant benefit to managers seeking a more sustainable distribution strategy for their products.

Determining which brands are sufficiently differentiated to avoid the Distribution Trap is a challenging proposition. The focus of this research centers on the antecedents of brand personality that are most critical in helping with this dilemma. Aaker (1997) noted that brand personality is a set of human characteristics which consumers ascribe to brands. She proposed a five-dimensional model for brand personality which consists of 42 features and five dimensions including sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness. Vahdati and Nejad (2016) stipulated that many factors are effective in the customers' intentions and their moods, however, brand personality is the first factor that should be considered by researchers.

To begin to investigate the prospects for differentiated products to avoid the Distribution Trap, this study investigates whether customers would make the effort to locate given brands even if those brands were not available at a presumably more convenient Mega outlet. Prior research has shown that it is brand personality that makes consumers love specific brands (Ismail & Spinelli, 2012; Mann & Rawatt, 2016), but little research has been conducted to understand the relationship of these brand personality traits to distribution strategies. Determining which antecedent of brand personality will help brands avoid the distribution trap will be a tremendous asset for companies determining their distribution channel strategy.

This study will also uncover some underlying questions surrounding brand recognition, brand loyalty, and consumer perception. Among the key issues to be investigated initially might be the following: Will certain brands induce consumers to make extra search and acquisition effort, and what brand characteristics might be related to greater customer willingness to make greater effort to acquire? The first question might be addressed by investigating customer willingness to make the effort to acquire certain well-known brands even if they were not available via a conveniently located Mega. To address the latter question, one possibility might be found in the enduring/ephemeral dimension of the typology of luxury brands (Berthon, Pitt, Parent, and Berthon 2009). In this framework some brands are seen as having enduring appeal, while the appeal or luxury status of others may be more transient (ephemeral). In the "democratization of luxury," some luxury brands are seen as being at risk of losing their aura of exclusivity, identity, and as having deteriorated in quality (Thomas 2008), possibly as a result of marketers' need to increase volume in order to serve customers who have climbed onto the luxury-products bandwagon (Kastanakis and Balabanis 2012).

## Exploratory Study

Using a quasi-experimental design along the lines suggested by Avery, Steenburg, Deighton, and Caravalla (2012), a convenience sample of consumers will be asked to evaluate the likelihood they would seek brands if they were available only from specialty retail outlets that might require more effort (travel time and distance) and/or that might charge higher prices. A search intention scale will be adapted from Biswas and Burton (1993) to measure customer willingness to make greater acquisition effort, and a new scale seeking to measure a brand drawn on the enduring/ephemeral dimension of Berthon and colleagues' luxury-goods framework (Berthon et al 2009). The questionnaire developed by Aaker (1997) will be used to assess and measure brand personality.

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**Keywords:** *Brands, Brand Personality, Consumers, Distribution Channel, Marketing Strategy*

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:** Understanding the antecedents of brand personality that helps products avoid the distribution trap would be significant for scholars and applicable for practitioners involved in decision making processes for their organization.

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**TRACK: Consumer Behavior/Marketing Research**