

Revisiting the Malleable Self: Brand Effects on Consumer Self-Perceptions of Personality Traits

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ABSTRACT

Four experiments examined the relationships between dimensions of brand personality and consumer self-perceptions of personality traits. We hypothesized and found that when consumers are exposed to brands, brand personality dimensions may affect individual assessments of personality traits. Study 1 found evidence that brand sincerity had an effect on ratings of consumer agreeableness. Study 2 showed that brand excitement affected self-perceptions of hedonism, moderated by brand exposure intensity. In Study 3, brand competence had an impact on self-perceptions of sophistication. Finally, in Study 4 results showed that brand ruggedness had an effect on extroversion, again moderated by brand exposure intensity.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between brands and people has a longstanding history of being a “hotspot” of attention for marketing practitioners and academics alike. Marketing professionals have been interested in the issue in order to “strike the right cord” with the target group (e.g., Ogilvy 1983). Academic interest has evolved around the issue of why people use brands and what role they may play in symbolic and social interaction (Belk 1988). Research efforts have largely focused on the role of brand attributes and their relationship to consumer attitudinal functions (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). More recently, this line of research has culminated in the development and testing of the concept of brand personality (Aaker 1997). Furthermore, research has since examined the role of these brand personality dimensions in consumer brand choice (e.g., Aaker 1999).

What is unclear, thus far, is whether and under what conditions brand personality dimensions may affect consumer self-perceptions of personality traits. Stated differently, are brands capable of affecting the self-concept, when consumers are exposed to them? In this paper, we will argue that they are. More specifically, evidence will be presented to support the notion that brands with different salient personality dimensions have different effects on consumer self-assessments of specific aspects of their self-concept. In short, we propose the existence of a transfer effect of brand personality traits to consumer personality traits.

In the following section, we briefly review the (limited) empirical evidence on the relationship between brand personality and consumer personality, based on the notion of the malleable self (Aaker 1999; Markus and Kunda 1986). Next, we report a pilot study and four experiments that test the potential of brand personality dimensions to affect the self-perception of consumer traits.

HUMAN PERSONALITY AND BRAND PERSONALITY

A longstanding research tradition in personality (and social) psychology has resulted in the identification of a host of traits that encompass the human personality. Within this plethora of traits, research has identified 5 basic traits that are assumed to constitute a stable and robust structure of personality. This “Big-Five” factor structure includes the traits of extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability (or neuroticism) and intellect (Goldberg 1992). In analogy to this factorial composition, Aaker

(1997) has developed and tested a scale to tap dimensions of a brand’s personality. In a series of studies, this author has demonstrated that brands, too, can be imbued with personality traits and that, similar to the Big-Five of human personality, five basic traits can be discerned comprising the personality of a brand, namely sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Can these brand personality dimensions exert an influence on perceptions of the self-concept? Research on the malleable self (Markus and Kunda 1986) suggests that it can. More specifically, Markus and Kunda (1986) have refuted the traditional view of the self as a stable construct that is invariant across situations and have, instead, suggested that the self is ‘impressionable’ and highly susceptible to situational influence. More in particular, these authors argue that the self-concept functions as a cognitive structure (i.e. a self-schema), much like any other cognitive structure, in which information about the self is organized along several dimensions (e.g., introvert-extravert, individualistic-collectivistic, masculine-feminine etc.). This cognitive structure is sensitive to external activation. For instance, self-presentation concerns may shape the self-concept in different social situations. In a consumer context, Aaker (1999) has found evidence for this notion. Especially for high self-monitoring individuals (highly prone to social cues), her results showed that traits that are made accessible by situational cues may affect consumer brand choice and that different traits that are made salient, can have different effects on brand attitudes. Note that in these studies brand choice and brand attitudes constituted the dependent variables. Research thus far has left unaddressed whether brand personality can act as an independent variable and have a direct impact on aspects of the self-concept. The idea of malleability of the self, put forward by Markus and Kunda (1986), certainly doesn’t rule out this possibility. Moreover, recent research (Donahue and Harary 1998) has found more direct evidence for the influence of external factors on the Big-Five personality structure. That is, these authors have shown that the Big-Five factor structure is not invariant across situations, but instead that different social roles for individuals resulted in different self-perceptions on the Big-Five. In addition, research suggests that consumers can make spontaneous inferences about a brand’s personality (e.g., DeRosia 2001), which supports the notion that brands can function as salient social cues. Translated to the present context, this research suggests that brand personality dimensions, to the extent that they are salient to consumers, can act as situational cues and can highlight (or “prime”, see Bargh 2002) different aspects of the self.

In sum, a transfer effect of brand personality traits on the salience of specific consumer personality traits can be expected. This will be the key hypothesis for the present series of studies. In addition, research on the brand personality itself (Aaker 1997) suggests a more fine-grained set of hypotheses based on conceptual similarities between brand personality dimensions and human-related traits. Aaker (1997) has proposed certain direct links between brand personality dimensions and Big-Five personality factors. More specifically, she has argued (but not tested) that brand *sincerity* is related to consumer *agreeableness*, because both pertain to the aspects of warmth and acceptance. Also brand *excitement* has been posited to be related to consumer *extroversion* since both “connote the notions of sociability, energy and activity” (Aaker

1997, p. 353). Furthermore, *competence* and *conscientiousness* are expected to be related because both encompass concepts such as responsibility, dependability and security (Aaker 1997). In addition, when examining the specific items of the brand personality scale and those of personality inventories such as the Big-Five (Goldberg 1992) and Malhotra's (1981) scale to measure self-concepts, person concepts, and product concepts, a relationship between *competence* and *intellect* is expected, since both encompass markers such as 'intelligent', as well as a relationship between a brand's *ruggedness* and *extroversion* since there is an obvious kinship between the ruggedness items of 'outdoorsy' and 'tough' and the extroversion indicators of 'adventurous' and 'bold'. In the present series of studies we will focus on four of the five dimensions of brand personality (for reasons outlined below).

In sum, this leads to the following hypotheses for each study.

- H1: brand sincerity has an effect on self-perceptions of agreeableness. This hypothesis is tested in study 1.
- H2: brand excitement has an effect on self-perceptions of extroversion. This hypothesis is tested in study 2.
- H3: brand competence has an effect on self-perceptions of conscientiousness and intellect. This hypothesis is tested in study 3.
- H4: brand ruggedness has an effect on self-perceptions of extroversion. This hypothesis is tested in study 4.

For each of these hypotheses an additional interaction hypothesis can be formulated. Earlier it was suggested that brands may affect personality traits if they are made salient as a situational cue. This yields the moderation hypothesis that each of the main effects postulated above, will be stronger under conditions of high salience, that is, when the intensity of exposure to these brand personality dimensions is high rather than low. This interaction hypothesis will also be tested in each of the four experiments.

PILOT STUDY

As a first step in examining the causal relationships between brand personality and human personality, a pilot study was conducted to identify brands from different product categories that varied along the 5 dimensions of the Brand Personality scale (Aaker 1997) and could serve as stimulus material in the series of experiments. To this end, a rating study was conducted in which a total of 100 judges (undergraduate students with a mean age of 24.5 years, $SD=3.33$) were asked to rate a total of 125 familiar brands from four product categories (soft drinks, magazines (titles), automobiles, and clothing). The brand personality scale (Aaker 1997) was used to rate each brand. This scale consists of 42 adjectives (on 5-point scales ranging from 'not at all descriptive' to 'highly descriptive'), encompassing the five basic dimensions of the brand personality construct: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness. Sample adjectives include 'down-to-earth' (sincerity), 'daring' (excitement), 'intelligent' (competence), 'charming' (sophistication) and 'outdoorsy' (ruggedness; see Aaker 1997 for a complete listing of the adjectives). With the exception of sophistication, inter-judge reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for these dimensions was sufficiently high to proceed with the analysis (.84, .87, .90, .67, respectively). Because of the failure to obtain a satisfactory reliability for sophistication, this dimension was dropped from further analyses. Hence, in the actual experiments, only the influence of the remaining brand personality dimensions was assessed (i.e., sincerity, excitement, competence, and ruggedness). On each of these dimensions, each of the brands in the pilot study was assigned a score, obtained through summing and averaging the

scores on the adjectives that formed each dimension. The mean scores of all brands for each category were then ranked for each brand personality dimension, which enabled us to select the highest and lowest rated brands for each of the dimensions and across each product category. As a sample of the brands used in the experiments, the results of the pilot test showed that 'Jeep' scored highest and 'Nissan' scored lowest on the brand personality dimension of excitement in the product category of automobiles. For the product category of clothing, 'Pall Mall' clothing scored highest and 'Esprit' lowest on the ruggedness dimension. The selected brands would serve as stimulus material in the series of four experimental studies described next.

STUDY 1

Based on suggestions by Aaker (1997), it was hypothesized that brands that varied in the brand personality dimension of *sincerity* would affect the Big-Five dimension of consumer *agreeableness*. Study 1 was designed to provide a test of this hypothesis. In addition, it was expected that exposure intensity would moderate this effect such that the impact of brand sincerity was larger under high exposure intensity conditions. Moreover, for exploratory reasons, Malhotra's (1981) self-concept scale was included in the current experiment as an auxiliary measure of consumer personality dimensions.

METHOD

Participants and Design

A total of 64 undergraduate students (32 males, 32 females) with an average age of 21.5 years ($SD=2.54$) acted as participants for this study. These individuals were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. Participation was voluntary. No monetary incentive or course credit was provided. The design of the study consisted of a 2 (brand sincerity: high/low) x 2 (exposure intensity: high/low) between-subjects design. Dependent variables included the agreeableness dimension of the Big-Five personality structure and the Malhotra (1981) self-concept scale.

Procedure

All four experiments followed the same procedure. Upon arrival at the lab, subjects were told that they participated in a study on human differences and similarities. As a first stage in the manipulation of the independent variables, participants were offered a soft drink and a magazine, ostensibly to make them feel more comfortable during their wait for the actual study to begin. Next, they were handed a description of a scenario involving the preparation for a weekend trip. In this description, brand names from several product categories, rated in the pilot test figured prominently. Moreover, the brands described in the scenario were also depicted at the bottom of the scenario. Participants were instructed to imagine themselves in the situation that was outlined to them. This combined procedure enabled us to expose participants to brands from the product categories of soft drinks, magazines, clothing and automobiles. Note that participants were simply exposed to the focal brands but were not presented with any other information regarding the brand personality dimensions to rule out the possibility of contingency awareness on the part of the respondents.

After this, they were handed a booklet containing the dependent measures, a question on the true purpose of the experiment (to control for demand characteristics) and several demographic questions. No participant guessed the real objective of the study. Finally, they were thanked for their participation, debriefed and dismissed.

Independent Variables

Brand Sincerity. In the low sincerity condition, the brand of soft drink and the magazine title were both rated as the least sincere brands in these product categories in the pilot test. The high sincerity brands were the most highly rated brands on this dimension in the pilot test. Furthermore, the brands featured in the situation description were also selected on the basis of their ratings in the pilot test.

Exposure Intensity. In the high intensity conditions, participants were handed two sincere or insincere brands of soft drinks (the two top or bottom ranked brands) and two sincere or insincere magazines (also the two top or bottom ranked brands). They were told that they could use both if they wanted to for a prolonged period of time. In the low intensity conditions, they were provided with only one brand of soft drink and one magazine. Furthermore, in the high intensity conditions, the situation description featured two brands from each described product category, whereas the low intensity conditions featured only one brand from each of the product categories involved. Hence, in the low intensity conditions, participants were exposed to four brands, compared to eight brands in the high intensity conditions. Finally, in the low intensity conditions, participants were exposed to all the brands for 5 minutes. In the high intensity conditions we doubled this exposure time to 10 minutes.

Dependent Variables

Agreeableness. This factor in the Big-Five personality structure was measured using seven 5-point semantic differential scales, derived from the 35-item instrument developed by Goldberg (1992) to measure the Big-Five personality structure. These items were: cold-warm, unkind-kind, uncooperative-cooperative, selfish-unselfish, disagreeable-agreeable, distrustful-trustful and stingy-generous. Cronbach's alpha of this instrument indicated a fairly reliable instrument, although less satisfactory than intended (Cronbach's alpha=.52). Items were summed and averaged to form one agreeableness index.

Self-concept. For exploratory reasons, Malhotra's (1981) scale to measure the self-concept was included in the present study, as well as in each of the following three experiments. This scale consists of fifteen 7-point semantic differential scales (rugged-delicate, excitable-calm, uncomfortable-comfortable, dominating-submissive, thrifty-indulgent, pleasant-unpleasant, contemporary-noncontemporary, organized-unorganized, rational-emotional, youthful-mature, formal-informal, orthodox-liberal, complex-simple, colorless-colorful, modest-vain).

Although the original scale was intended as a multidimensional scale and items belonging to specific dimensions were not reported, a factor analysis was performed on the data of all four experiments for data-reduction purposes. This factor analysis resulted in a 5-factor solution accounting for 56% of the variance in the items. Reliability for four of the five factors was generally satisfactory. These five factors were labeled as "hedonism" (pleasant-unpleasant, uncomfortable-comfortable, contemporary-noncontemporary, colorless-colorful, orthodox-liberal, Cronbach's alpha=.62) "assertiveness" (excitable-calm, modest-vain, dominating-submissive, Cronbach's alpha=.54), "maturity" (youthful-mature, organized-unorganized, formal-informal, Cronbach's alpha=.55), "sophistication" (rugged-delicate, rational-emotional, complex-simple, Cronbach's alpha=.64) and "indulgence" (thrifty-indulgent). Based on the questionable reliability of the indulgence dimension, which was indicated by only one item, it was decided to drop this from further analyses, and to retain only the hedonism, assertiveness, maturity and sophistication dimensions in each of the

present four studies. Although not identical to the Big-Five, a comparison between the items of the Malhotra (1981) scale comprising each of the 4 dimensions with the items that comprise the Big-Five personality traits, revealed some kinship between both instruments. More in particular, assertiveness is akin to what Goldberg (1992) termed the introversion-extroversion dimension, and maturity appeared similar to conscientiousness. Finally, sophistication is related to the trait of intelligence from the Big-Five (alternatively termed sophistication as well by Goldberg 1992).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To test the hypothesis that brand sincerity affects the consumer's assessment of his/her own agreeableness, a full factorial ANOVA was conducted on perceptions of agreeableness. This analysis yielded a main effect for brand sincerity ($F(1,60)=5.57, p<.05$), no other main or interaction effect was significant. Inspection of the means revealed that, as expected, exposure to sincere brands resulted in subjects rating themselves as more agreeable ($M=3.9$) than when they had been exposed to less sincere brands ($M=3.6$). On the self-concept dimensions, no significant main or interaction effect emerged.

These findings provide direct evidence corroborating the notion that a brand's salient personality can act as a social cue and can affect perceptions of the self-concept. Contrary to expectations, exposure intensity did not moderate this effect, suggesting that sincerity affects the self-concept regardless of whether the individual is exposed minimally or intensively to the focal brands.

STUDY 2

Previous research (Aaker 1997) has suggested a relationship between the brand personality attribute of excitement and the human (Big-Five) personality trait of extroversion. Hence, the present experiment was designed to assess whether brands that varied in the brand personality dimension of excitement would affect self perceptions of the Big-Five dimension of extroversion. Moreover, and similar to Study 1, we assessed whether exposure intensity would moderate this effect. In addition, based on Malhotra's (1981) self-concept scale, the dimensions of hedonism, assertiveness, maturity, and sophistication were included to examine whether any of these dimensions would be influenced by brand excitement. Since excitement directly pertains to a product's hedonistic value, this would constitute a plausible candidate dimension to be affected by this dimension. Moreover, we expect this effect to be particularly strong under conditions of high exposure intensity.

METHOD

Participants and Design

The sample for this study consisted of 64 undergraduate students (32 males, 32 females; $M_{age}=22.1, SD=2.93$) that participated in a 2 (brand excitement: high/low) x 2 (exposure intensity: high/low) between-subjects design. Dependent variables included the extroversion dimension of the Big-Five personality structure and the dimensions of hedonism, assertiveness and maturity from the Malhotra (1981) self-concept scale.

Procedure

The procedure was similar to Study 1 with participants first being offered a soft drink and a magazine and then asked to imagine oneself in the scenario that was presented to them next. Finally, participants completed the questionnaire containing the dependent measures, a question on the true purpose of the experiment (which no one guessed) and several demographic questions.

Independent Variables

Brand Excitement. Similar to Study 1, the low excitement condition featured brands of the four categories that were rated as the least exciting brands in these product categories during the pilot test and the high excitement brands were the most highly rated brands on this dimension.

Exposure Intensity. Manipulation of this independent variable was identical to the procedure used in Study 1. Hence the number of brands was varied (one vs. two per product category) as well as exposure time (5 vs. 10 minutes) to create conditions of low versus high exposure intensity.

Dependent Variables

Introversion-Extroversion. This Big-Five personality factor was measured using seven 5-point semantic differential scales, derived from the 35-item instrument developed by Goldberg (1992) to measure the full Big-Five personality structure. These items were: introverted-extraverted, unenergetic-energetic, silent-talkative, timid-bold, inactive-active, unassertive-assertive, unadventurous-adventurous. The reliability was highly satisfactory (Cronbach's $\alpha=.79$). Items were summed and averaged to form one agreeableness index.

Self-concept dimensions. In similar vein to the procedure used in Study 1, the present experiment included the four dimensions derived from Malhotra's (1981) self-concept scale: hedonism, assertiveness, maturity, and sophistication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Contrary to expectations, on the Big-Five dimension of introversion-extroversion, no main or interaction effect emerged. However a MANOVA on the four self-concept dimensions yielded a significant multivariate interaction effect between brand excitement and exposure intensity ($F(4,57)=2.47, p<.05$). Additional inspection of the univariate results, revealed that the interaction occurred on the self-concept trait of hedonism ($F(1,60)=6.34, p<.01$). More specifically, especially under conditions of high exposure intensity, the exposure to exciting brands induced higher ratings of one's hedonism ($M_{\text{High excitement brand}}=5.75$) than exposure to less exciting brands ($M_{\text{Low Excitement brand}}=5.36$). This differential impact was less pronounced under conditions of low brand exposure intensity ($M_{\text{High excitement brand}}=5.43$ vs. $M_{\text{Low Excitement brand}}=5.71$). Simple main effect analyses showed that only the first contrast was significant ($F(1,60)=4.18, p<.05$), but the second was not ($F(1,60)=2.30, n.s.$). Hence, we may conclude that brand excitement did not have an impact on extroversion, but only affects ratings of the self-concept dimension of hedonism when individuals are heavily exposed to brands with a salient excitement personality dimension, not when this exposure intensity is low.

STUDY 3

In addition to previous research (Aaker 1997) that has suggested a relationship between a brand's competence and the Big-Five dimension of conscientiousness, an inspection of the markers that make up the competence dimension in the Brand Personality scale, suggests a relationship with the Big-Five dimension of intellect (or sophistication). Hence it is expected that competence affects both conscientiousness and intellect. In addition, based on the analogy of this latter personality dimension to the self-concept dimension of sophistication derived from the Malhotra (1981) scale, an effect on this dimension is also plausible. Similar to Studies 1 and 2, we will assess whether these causal relationships are moderated by the exposure intensity of the brands.

METHOD

Participants and Design

Similar to the previous two studies, 64 undergraduate students (32 males, 32 females) participated voluntarily in the present investigation. The sample had an average age of 22.2 years ($SD=2.99$). These individuals were randomly assigned to the conditions in the 2 (brand competence: high/low) x 2 (exposure intensity: high/low) between-subjects factorial design. Dependent variables included the conscientiousness and intellect dimensions of the Big-Five personality structure and the four dimensions of the Malhotra (1981) self-concept scale (hedonism, assertiveness, maturity and sophistication).

Procedure

The procedure was identical to the procedure in the previous two experiments with participants being asked to imagine a scenario, after offering them a softdrink and magazine. This was followed by completion of the dependent measures and the question checking for demand characteristics and contingency awareness. Similar to the previous studies, no participant guessed the real objective of the study.

Independent Variables

Brand Competence. In line with the previous two experiments, the low and high competence conditions featured brands of the various product categories that were rated as the most and least competent brands in their respective categories.

Exposure Intensity. Manipulation of this independent variable was similar to the previous two experiments by varying both the number of brands (one vs. two per product category) as well as the exposure time of the focal brands (5 vs. 10 minutes).

Dependent Variables

Conscientiousness. In analogy to the procedure used in the previous two studies, this factor in the Big-Five personality structure was assessed using seven 5-point semantic differential scales, derived from the 35-item instrument developed by Goldberg (1992): disorganized-organized, irresponsible-responsible, negligent-conscientious, impractical-practical, careless-thorough, lazy-hardworking, extravagant-thrifty (Cronbach's $\alpha=.87$).

Intellect. This Big-Five trait was also measured using seven 5-point semantic differential scales derived from Goldberg (1992): unintelligent-intelligent, unanalytical-analytical, unreflective-reflective, uninquisitive-curious, unimaginative-imaginative, uncreative-creative, and unsophisticated-sophisticated (Cronbach's $\alpha=.59$).

Self-concept dimensions. In similar vein to the procedure used in the previous studies, the present experiment included the four dimensions derived from Malhotra's (1981) self-concept scale: hedonism, assertiveness, maturity, and sophistication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A MANOVA was performed on both Big-Five dimensions (conscientiousness and intellect) with brand competence and exposure intensity as factors. However, this analysis did not yield any significant main or interaction effect, although the main effect of brand competence on intellect approached significance ($F(1,60)=2.53, p=.11$). However, a second MANOVA on the four self-concept dimensions revealed a significant (univariate) main effect for brand competence on sophistication ($F(1,60)=5.88, p<.05$), although the multivariate effect failed to reach significance ($F(4,47)=1.42, n.s.$). No other main or interaction effects were signifi-

cant on these dimensions. This main effect demonstrated that, regardless of exposure intensity, highly competent brands yielded higher ratings of sophistication ($M=3.63$) than exposure to less competent brands ($M=3.08$).

Again, the present findings, although not entirely unequivocal, indicate that exposure to brand attributes, even symbolic ones like brand personality factors, have an impact on consumer personality trait assessments. However, similar to the findings of experiment 1, the impact of brand personality on consumer personality was not moderated by exposure intensity, suggesting that high exposure intensity is not a 'conditio sine qua non' for the transfer effects of brand personality to occur.

The final brand personality dimension which impact will be examined will be the ruggedness of the brand. Its effect on consumer personality trait assessments will be tested in the next study.

STUDY 4

To examine whether the ruggedness of brands can be transferred to an individual's assessment of his/her own personality traits, we tested the impact of this brand personality dimension on the introversion-extroversion dimension of the Big-Five. In addition, since it was argued that the concept of assertiveness, as derived from the Malhotra (1981) scale, appears related to this Big-Five dimension, there may also be an impact on the self-perception of assertiveness. Finally, and similar to the previous three studies, we expect these effects to be particularly strong under high brand exposure intensity conditions.

METHOD

Participants and Design

Similar to the previous studies, 64 undergraduate students (32 males, 32 females) acted as voluntary participants for the present study. The sample had an average age of 22.6 years ($SD=3.76$). These individuals were randomly assigned to the conditions and participated voluntarily. The design for the present study was in line with the previous three experiments and consisted of a 2 (brand ruggedness: high/low) \times 2 (exposure intensity: high/low) between-subjects factorial design. Dependent variables included the extroversion factor of the Big-Five personality structure and the four dimensions of the Malhotra (1981) self-concept scale (hedonism, assertiveness, maturity and sophistication).

Procedure

The procedure was identical to the previous three studies. Hence, subjects were again told that the objective of the study was to gain insight in human differences and similarities. After being seated, participants were first offered a soft drink and a magazine and then exposed to the same weekend-trip situation description employed in the previous three studies, accompanied by the imagery instruction. Next, participants completed the questionnaire containing the dependent measures, a question on the true purpose of the experiment and the demographic questions. As in the previous three experiments, no subject guessed the true purpose of the study.

Independent Variables

Brand Ruggedness. In line with the previous three experiments, the low-ruggedness condition featured brands of the various product categories that were rated as the least rugged brands in their respective categories (i.e., soft drinks, magazines, automobiles and clothing). Likewise, the high-ruggedness brands were the most highly rated brands on this dimension in the pilot test.

Exposure Intensity. Manipulation of this independent variable was similar to the previous experiments. Hence the number of brands was varied (one vs. two per product category) as well as exposure time (5 vs. 10 minutes) to create conditions of low versus high exposure intensity.

Dependent Variables

Introversion-Extroversion. To measure Introversion-Extroversion, the same instrument and procedure as employed in Study 1 was used.

Self-concept dimensions. In similar vein to the procedure used in the previous studies, the present experiment included the four dimensions derived from Malhotra's (1981) self-concept scale: hedonism, assertiveness, maturity, and sophistication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An ANOVA performed on the Introversion-Extroversion dimension of the Big-Five with brand ruggedness and exposure intensity as factors yielded only a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 60)=5.17, p<.05$). On the self-concept dimensions no main or interaction effects were found. Inspection of the means of the Introversion-Extroversion dimension indicated that, especially under high exposure intensity conditions, exposure to rugged brands yielded higher ratings of consumer extroversion ($M=3.71$) than exposure to less rugged brands ($M=3.30$). Under low exposure intensity this difference was less pronounced ($M_{\text{High brand ruggedness}}=3.42$ vs. $M_{\text{Low brand ruggedness}}=3.59$). Similar to the results of Study 2, simple main effect analyses indicated that the differential impact of brand ruggedness was only significant under conditions of high exposure intensity ($F(1, 60)=5.25, p<.05$) but not under conditions of low exposure intensity conditions ($F<1$).

These findings indicate that exposure to the symbolic brand attribute of ruggedness, may affect a related aspect of the personality structure of the consumer, i.e. that of his/her extroversion. Contrary to expectations, the related aspect of assertiveness was not affected. A rather straightforward reason for this, may be that the reliability of assertiveness was markedly lower (.54) than that of the Big-Five extroversion dimension (.79). The present findings underscore the role of exposure intensity, similar to the results of Study 2. That is, the impact of ruggedness was stronger when subjects were exposed quite intensively with a relatively large number of rugged brands for a prolonged period of time.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In a series of four experiments, the present research extends research on the malleable self in persuasion. More specifically, our findings support the notion that the self is not a static, invariant phenomenon, but instead, is malleable and hence susceptible to situational influence (Markus and Kunda, 1986). The present findings show that brands with certain personality dimensions can perform the role of situational stimuli and as such can have an influence on assessments of different aspects of the self-concept. In sum, we found that there exists a transfer effect from brand personality traits to consumer personality traits. Evidence was reported that the brand personality dimension of sincerity affected self-perceptions of the Big-Five factor of agreeableness, and the brand personality dimension of competence affected the self-concept aspect of sophistication (related to the factor of intellect of the Big-Five). Moreover, in two studies, an interaction effect between brand personality dimensions and brand exposure intensity were observed. That is, a brand's excitement dimension only affected the self-assessment of a consumer's tendency for hedonism when exposure intensity was high. Likewise, the impact of

brand ruggedness on the Big-Five factor of extroversion was especially pronounced under high exposure intensity conditions.

The present set of findings attests to the conceptual viability of the brand personality construct developed by Aaker (1997) in that its domains of operation appear to reach beyond the spheres that this author had designed for the concept. More specifically, Aaker (1997) has argued that brand personality dimensions may affect consumer choice behavior as a result of self-expressive needs (i.e., one chooses the brand that is a logical extension of the actual or ideal self). In Aaker's (1997, 1999) research, a person's self-concept remained in its role of independent variable. In present case, this role was reversed and the human personality structure served as a dependent variable. Thus, the present findings point to the – possibly provocative – possibility that the concept of malleability may stretch even further in that brands may directly affect the personality structure of the consumer.

Although these findings underscore the conceptual value of the malleable self (Markus and Kunda 1986) as well as Aaker's (1997) brand personality construct, a few issues need to be addressed. For one, support for the moderating role of exposure intensity was mixed in the present research, since only in two out of the total of four studies, an interaction effect between the focal brand personality dimension and exposure intensity was observed. In retrospect, the type of personality trait and the product attributes it refers to, might explain why the relationship between brand and consumer personality was sometimes moderated and sometimes more straightforward. Brand ruggedness and brand excitement only affected personality assessments under high intensity conditions, whereas sincerity and competence were effective regardless of intensity. It may well be that traits such as brand ruggedness and excitement refer to product attributes that are imagery provoking (e.g., yielding visualizations of outdoor camping and trekking), whereas sincerity and competence have a more pallid, abstract quality. Cognitive psychological research on visual imagery (e.g., Sternberg 1985) has shown that careful imagery processing requires more time than the processing of more pallid information (e.g., it takes time to mentally "scan" a complex object or a series of concrete events, Sternberg 1985). This may explain why both dimensions only affect personality traits when the time for processing was relatively extended (as in the high intensity conditions). Future research might explore this line of reasoning by directly assessing the extent of vividness that each brand personality dimension evokes. Another issue pertains to the fact that in two studies an effect was observed on dimensions adapted from Goldberg's (1992) Big-Five scale and in two other studies on dimensions derived from Malhotra's (1981) self-concept scale. This might be due to reliability indices on some dimensions being less high than is sometimes observed, which decreased the sensitivity of these measures to detect effects of the brand personality dimensions. Although the alpha levels observed in the present research are not uncommon for personality research (see Nunnally and Bernstein 1994), future research might employ other measurement instruments as well as include plausible mediating concepts such as (positive or negative) affect and mood in order to obtain more insight on the internal validity, mediating constructs and external validity of the present findings. On a more conceptual level, qualitative differences between several of the examined personality traits may account for the fact that some of the expected effects were not observed. More specifically, in a recent study on personality structure and job performance, Licata, Mowen, Harris and Brown (2003) argued for a hierarchical model of personality in which some traits (i.e. 'elemental' or 'compound' traits) are more stable (and hence less susceptible to situational influence) than others (i.e., 'situational' or

'surface' traits, see also Mowen, 2004). Following this reasoning, the Big-5 factors may be considered more elemental, which could account for the fact that some of the hypothesized effects were either not observed (i.e., the effect of brand excitement on self-perceptions of extroversion and the effects of brand competence on self-perceptions of conscientiousness and intellect) or demonstrated only to the extent that exposure intensity was high (i.e. the effect of brand ruggedness on extroversion). Conversely, some of the concepts derived from the Malhotra (1981) scale may be viewed as situational traits, which explains their susceptibility to influence from salient brand personality dimensions regardless of exposure intensity (e.g., the effect of brand competence on sophistication). Disentangling the stability or malleability of these different dimensions constitutes an interesting venue for future research. Finally, with regard to the concept of brand personality, recent studies have not always been able to replicate the 5 factor structure proposed by Aaker (1997) which has given rise to alternative classifications of brand personality dimensions (see Azoulay and Kapferer 2004; Caprara, Barbaranelli, and Guido 2001). These conceptual issues may in part provide an alternative explanation of why some of the proposed relationships could not be established.

A final thought pertains to the practical implications of our findings. First, it remains an open question whether and to what extent the results of the present research can be replicated outside the confines of the experimental lab. However, to the extent that they can, the combined results of the present series of studies suggest that brands are capable to "make us who we are", at least in part. That may be more than marketers have bargained for. That is, not only are brands chosen by us as consumers because they highlight some aspect of who we are or want to be, they also *shape* or *highlight* these aspects. Is that troublesome? Possibly. Although this may seem a harmless observation at first glance, practitioners should be cautious in applying these results to market their brands among populations with "immature", or "vulnerable" personality structures such as children and young adolescents. Future research might therefore explore the effect potential of brand personality dimensions among other (vulnerable) populations than those used in the present studies.

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