

Brand Personality and Consumer Attachment: A Study of Emotional Branding

Ms. Tanya Goswami¹, Priya Kuamri², Priyansh Kumari, Shubham Singh, Shubham Singh

Assistant Professor, NIET Business School, Greater Noida¹

Student, NIET Business School, Greater Noida²

Abstract

In an era characterized by product parity and market saturation, the ability to create deep emotional connections with consumers has become a critical driver of sustainable competitive advantage. This paper aims to explore the related constructs of brand personality and consumer-brand attachment with respect to the larger construct of emotional branding. Using relevant theoretical perspectives from psychology, consumer behavior, and branding, this paper aims to explore how the attribution of personality to brands drives emotional connections, facilitates identity congruence, and ultimately leads to attachment behaviors including brand loyalty and brand advocacy. This paper will explore Aaker's groundbreaking five-factor model of brand personality, the ways through which emotional attachment is formed and strengthened over time, and the strategic role of storytelling, sensory branding, and digital branding with respect to emotional branding. This paper will also explore critical perspectives with respect to measurement and cross-cultural equivalence. Finally, this paper will aim to explore avenues for future research with respect to the construct of emotional branding.

Keywords: Brand Personality, Consumer-Brand Attachment, Emotional Branding, Brand Loyalty, Self-Congruity, Brand Identity, Storytelling

1. Introduction

The relationship between consumer and brand has long been seen as extending beyond the transactional. Consumers don't simply buy products; they invest meaning, identity, and emotion in the brands they select, often developing relationships that rival the strength and longevity of interpersonal relationships (Fournier, 1998). This is at the heart of the concept of emotional branding—a strategic approach that privileges the development of emotional connections between consumers and brands over more rational approaches to communicating products.

The theory of emotional branding is based on two key constructs: brand personality and consumer-brand attachment. Brand personality is defined by Aaker (1997) as the set of personality traits attributed to the brand, effectively the anthropomorphic framework by which consumers can create relational, emotionally nuanced connections with inanimate objects. Consumer-brand attachment is based on attachment theory, developed by psychologists (Bowlby, 1969), which is defined by the strength of the cognitive-emotional bond between the consumer and the brand, characterized by feelings of connection, affection, and anxiety at separation (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005).

The strategic importance of these constructs has increased in the modern marketplace, in which differentiation of products on the basis of functional attributes has become challenging. In the highly developed marketplace, in which product parity has become the norm in various product categories from phones to beverages, the personality of the brand has often become the major differentiating construct for consumers' purchase decisions, premium pricing, and

loyalty. Thus, the ways in which brand personality is developed, in which emotional connections are formed, and in which these processes can be managed have significant implications for both marketing theory and practice.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical basis of brand personality. Section 3 examines the construct of consumer-brand attachment and its antecedents. Section 4 examines the processes of emotional branding. Section 5 examines self-congruity as a mediator. Section 6 examines the influence of digital media. Section 7 examines cross-cultural brand attachment. Section 8 presents the critical perspectives. Section 9 presents managerial implications, and Section 10 presents gaps for research before conclusion.

2. Conceptualising Brand Personality

The idea of brand personality was first systematically operationalized by Jennifer Aaker in her pioneering study (Aaker, 1997). Five robust factors of brand personality were found to apply to different product categories. These factors were Sincerity (Down-to-Earth, Honest, Wholesome, Cheerful), Excitement (Daring, Spirited, Imaginative, Up-to-Date), Competence (Reliable, Intelligent, Successful), Sophistication (Upper Class, Charming), and Ruggedness (Outdoorsy, Tough). These factors have been found to be remarkably consistent in replication research and have been accepted as the standard method for measuring brand personality.

The rationale for the theory of brand personality lies in the anthropomorphism effect. Anthropomorphism refers to the tendency to attribute human characteristics to non-humans (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). Consumers spontaneously and invariably exhibit anthropomorphism in relation to brands. They perceive brands as having character, mood, values, and interpersonal style. This tendency to anthropomorphism is more than just a cognitive bias. Instead, it represents a cognitive process by which consumers seek to understand brands in relational terms. Anthropomorphism thus allows consumers to form emotional bonds with brands, which would otherwise be structurally impossible.

Brands have personality based on different channels, both intentional and emergent. Intentional channels include advertising tone and imagery, spokesperson or celebrity endorsements, visual identity systems, brand language, and product design aesthetics. Emergent channels include imagery of the user, the perceived personality of the typical brand user; origin country associations; and the cultural meanings that accumulate over time through the brand's history of public appearances, scandals, and cultural landmarks (Keller, 2008). Brand personality is thus both managed by the marketer and socially constructed by consumers.

The Aaker model, while dominant, has been criticized on methodological grounds. Azoulay & Kapferer (2003) argued that Aaker's measure of personality is impure because it includes other important dimensions of brand identity, such as competence and status. Further, cross-cultural replication studies have shown that the five-factor structure does not replicate outside of the US; additional factors or different factor structures emerge in other cultures, such as Japan, Spain, and India (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001). These studies highlight the cultural context of brand personality research; they imply that Western measurement instruments must be used cautiously in other cultures.

3. Consumer–Brand Attachment: Theory and Antecedents

Consumer-brand attachment has been described as “the strength of the bond between the self and the brand, which is characterized by representations of the brand that include thoughts and feelings about the self-brand connection or link” (Park et al., 2010, p. 2). This definition places the self-brand connection at the forefront of the construct of attachment. This makes it clear that attachment differs from the more general construct of brand attitude. A consumer may experience a highly positive brand attitude but not necessarily be attached to the brand. The self-brand connection is more personal and emotional in the construct of attachment.

Thomson et al. (2005) presented a tripartite model of consumer-brand attachment consisting of three emotional bonds: affection, which involves warmth and fondness for the brand; passion, which involves desire and excitement for the brand; and connection, which involves the natural fit and deep personal linkage with the brand. These three components work in tandem to produce the construct of attachment. The more the consumer-brand attachment scores on the three components, the more the downstream effects of attachment such as willingness to pay premium, resistance to negative brand information, and willingness to forgive the brand for transgressions.

The antecedents of consumer brand attachment are two-fold: individual and brand. At the individual level, Swaminathan, Stilley, & Ahluwalia (2009) found that attachment anxiety, a personality trait developed out of adult attachment theory, influences consumer attachment propensity. Specifically, individual consumers high on attachment anxiety, as a personality trait, are more prone to forming strong attachment ties to a brand as a way to compensate for poor interpersonal relationships.

At the brand level, the antecedents of consumer attachment are centered on the importance of congruity and authenticity in terms of brand personality expression. Brands that express their personality in a consistent and authentic manner across all consumer touchpoints and over time are more likely to foster a sense of relational stability between consumer and brand, which is necessary for forming a strong attachment. Finally, trust in the brand plays a two-fold role as both an antecedent and a dimension of attachment. Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001) found trust in the brand to be a mediating factor between consumer perceptions of brand personality and attachment.

4. Mechanisms of Emotional Branding

4.1 Storytelling and Narrative Identity

Storytelling has proven to be one of the most potent tools in the brand-building process whereby brands create powerful emotional connections with consumers. Brands that share clear and consistent stories about their origins, purpose, the individuals involved in the brand, or the communities they serve help consumers create frameworks for personal meaning and emotional connection (Escalas, 2004). The power of brand storytelling stems from the fact that it resonates with the human cognitive bias towards consuming stories. Human cognition processes stories more smoothly, retains them more securely in memory, and evaluates them more favorably than the same information presented in an expository format.

The most powerful brand stories allow consumers to become part of a story in which they are the hero and the brand becomes the co-hero or the tool. The “Just Do It” story from Nike, the “Think Different” story from Apple, and the “Real Beauty” story from Dove all feature the consumer as the hero and the brand as the tool for self-transformation. This form of storytelling not only elicits powerful positive emotions but also fosters an unshakeable sense of self-relevance and self-identity.

4.2 Sensory Branding

Emotional branding transcends verbal and visual communication to include all aspects of the consumer's sensory experience of the brand. Sensory branding, or designing multisensory brand experiences incorporating touch, smell, sound, taste, as well as visual elements, has been found to increase emotional attachment and robustness of memory encoding for the brand (Krishna, 2012). The distinct smell of Abercrombie & Fitch store interiors, the distinct sound of a Harley Davidson motor, and the tactile feel of Apple product packaging are all examples of sensory branding elements that play a significant role in shaping personality expressions and emotional attachment development for a brand.

Neuroscientific studies have found that sensory branding experiences activate brain areas responsible for emotional processing, including the amygdala and orbitofrontal cortex, unlike cognitive processing of brand information (Lindstrom, 2005). This has significant implications for effective brand management since emotional attachment appears to be a bodily response to the entirety of the consumer's brand experience, as opposed to a cognitive evaluation of the brand's personality. This suggests that attachment development for a brand requires investment in all aspects of consumer touchpoints, as opposed to communication alone.

4.3 Brand Communities and Co-creation

Brand communities are a structural mechanism for enhancing consumer attachment to a brand, as these are comprised of consumers who are connected on the basis of their appreciation for and identification with a particular brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In a brand community, there are processes of storytelling and meaning-making in which consumers are engaged and which contribute to both consumer attachment to a brand and collective identification among

members of the brand community. Thus, there is a sense in which the brand serves as a social object for members of the brand community to organize their interactions and in which consumer attachment to a brand is transformed into a multidimensional social phenomenon.

The co-production of brand meaning can contribute to consumer attachment to a brand as there is a sense in which the consumer owns or has produced the identity of the brand. When consumers are engaged in processes of co-producing brand meaning, there is a sense in which their identification with the brand is enhanced and in which their self-concept is blurred or merged with the concept of the brand. Similarly, platforms like LEGO Ideas, Starbucks' My Starbucks Idea, and many other crowdsourcing campaigns by various brands have successfully harnessed this phenomenon to build loyal communities of brand enthusiasts (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

5. Self-Congruity as a Mediating Construct

Self-congruity theory was first introduced by Sirgy (1982), which suggested that "consumers prefer brands with personalities that are congruent with their own self-concept, which can be actual (how one sees oneself), ideal (how one wishes to be), social (how one believes others see them), or ideal social (how one wishes to be seen by others)." Self-congruity is seen as playing an intermediary role in the relationship between brand personality perception and brand preference, purchase intention, satisfaction, or loyalty. It is seen as providing theoretical support for the idea that consumers show stronger loyalty towards certain brands compared to others even when the functional product characteristics of the two brands under consideration are similar.

Studies have shown that the self-congruity hypothesis holds true in different product categories in different countries. Consumers who show high congruence between the personality of the brand and their own self-concept show higher levels of satisfaction with the brand, stronger brand attachment, greater willingness to pay a price premium, and lower switching behavior towards competitor brands. The effect is especially strong with products that are publicly consumed and thus have social identity meaning, i.e., automobiles, fashion, technology products, and drinks, where the brand represents a social cue about the consumer's identity and values (Malhotra, 1988).

A major extension and refinement of the self-congruity approach is the differentiation between actual self-congruity, i.e., the congruence with who the consumer is, and ideal self-congruity, i.e., the congruence with who the consumer wants to be. Research has shown that ideal self-congruity is a stronger predictor of brand preference and attachment with hedonic product categories characterized by aspirations and self-transformation, while actual self-congruity is found to be a stronger predictor with utilitarian product categories where self-expression is not an important factor (Kressmann et al., 2006). From a brand strategist's point of view, this means that building an aspirational brand identity may be especially useful with product categories where self-enhancement is an important factor.

6. Digital Media, Social Platforms, and Emotional Brand Attachment

The development of digital media and social media has profoundly changed the emotional branding landscape in terms of personality expression, community development, and attachment strengthening while at the same time raising new challenges for inauthenticity and relational dissolution. Indeed, social media sites allow for personality communication at unprecedented frequency, intimacy, and interactivity, extending beyond traditional forms of advertising communication to relational communication with consumers (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become highly effective media for emotional branding narratives, allowing for the development of complex emotional worlds for storytelling purposes. The casual and intimate nature of social media communication allows for personality expression along various personality dimensions, particularly for those personality facets such as Sincerity and Excitement that are hard to express in formal advertising communication, thereby creating perceptions of authenticity—a vital antecedent to attachment.

Influencer marketing is an important tool in the transfer of brand personality. If a consumer is already attached to an influencer and feels that influencer represents the personality values of a brand, then the emotional attachment to the influencer can be transferred to the brand through a process of associative meaning transfer (McCracken, 1989). This is

especially true with influencer marketing since micro and nano-influencers have smaller but more loyal consumer bases, thus creating an even stronger sense of interpersonal trust and parasocial bond than celebrity endorsers, which will amplify the perceived authenticity of brand personality attributions.

The digital environment, while offering many opportunities and tools to create brand personality, also creates a sense of vulnerability. Consumer-brand attachment developed through social media is easily broken through perceived brand inauthenticity, brand controversies, and the proliferation of negative consumer-generated content. In the digital environment, where brand communication is always on and instantaneous, a single misstep by a brand can reach millions of consumers in a matter of hours, undermining all the relational capital accumulated over years of emotional branding. Brands must therefore manage their digital personality with both strategic intentionality and operational agility.

7. Cross-Cultural Dimensions of Brand Attachment

Consumer-brand attachment is also not a universal phenomenon. Instead, the strength, form, and object of brand attachment vary systematically across cultures. For instance, in collectivist cultures, the object and form of brand attachment are mediated by group membership and social identity. Specifically, consumers in collectivist cultures develop strong brand attachments to those brands endorsed by their family, peer group, or community. Additionally, the social visibility of the object also plays a crucial role in the object and form of brand attachment. However, in individualist cultures, the object and form of brand attachment are mediated by congruence in personal identity and self-expressive value (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

The cultural dimension of Power Distance Index (PDI) also influences the object and form of brand attachment. For instance, in high-PDI cultures such as India and Malaysia, brands associated with prestige, authority, and high social status evoke stronger brand attachment in consumers. Specifically, the possession of such brands by consumers in high-PDI cultures signals a successful negotiation of the social hierarchy. Heritage brands such as Tata in India and Petronas in Malaysia also evoke stronger brand attachment in consumers in high-PDI cultures. This is because high-PDI cultures exhibit cultural values of deference to authority.

These cultural differences highlight the need for cultural adaptation in emotional branding. To build high consumer attachment for a global brand in culturally diverse consumer markets, a global brand cannot afford to express its personality in a standard way but has to undergo localization while maintaining its identity and adapting personality expression according to the cultural values, aspirations, and relational styles of the market.

8. Critical Perspectives

The emotional branding concept has also been the target of intense scrutiny by scholars, both in terms of its theory and its ethics. Bengtsson (2003) has challenged the metaphor of the brand relationship on the basis that a relationship by definition involves mutuality, which in turn is impossible for the entity in the relationship, the brand, to provide because it has no independent consciousness, volition, or capacity for reciprocal affection. The language of relationship in the context of emotional branding, such as trust, love, and the like, therefore, while metaphorically rich, might also be theoretically poor and inaccurate in the context of the inherently asymmetrical and commercially motivated nature of the relationship between the brand and the consumer.

The ethics of emotional branding have also been challenged in the context of the emotional dependency created on brands by the application of emotional branding strategies. For instance, Arvidsson (2006) has pointed out the ethical concern in the application of emotional branding strategies in relation to the exploitation of the attachment psychology of the consumer, particularly in relation to the more vulnerable populations such as children and adolescents and those with high attachment anxiety.

Measurement issues are still an ongoing problem. The scales that have been found to be the most dominant and accepted to measure brand personality (Aaker, 1997) and consumer-brand attachment (Thomson et al., 2005; Park et al., 2010) have been developed and established primarily in a Western context and might not be entirely appropriate to measure personality attributions and attachment constructs in non-Western consumers. Developing culturally appropriate measurement scales is an important research priority.

9. Managerial Implications

The theoretical and empirical insights provided in this paper have several concrete implications for brand managers. Firstly, emotional branding calls for a long-term strategic commitment beyond campaign-level thinking. Consumer-brand attachment is developed on the basis of consistent and coherent personality expression over years and decades, as opposed to campaign-level promotions. Brands that frequently change or have inconsistent expressions of personality will undermine relational stability.

Secondly, self-congruity theory implies that there is a need for deep understanding of consumer self-concepts before developing or clarifying brand personality. Brand personality development should be based on more than just differentiation and memorability considerations. It needs to align with aspirations for self-concepts among the intended audience. This calls for ethnographic studies on consumer self-concepts and ongoing tracking of how personality expressions change across consumer segments.

Finally, digital and social media development needs to be integrated as an emotional branding tool and not just as a conduit for promotions. The intimacy, interactivity, and community-building opportunities provided by social media have unprecedented potential for personality expression and attachment development. However, these opportunities are only leveraged on the basis of strategic intentionality and relational investment. Brands that approach social media as a broadcast medium will fail to leverage these opportunities; brands that invest in authentic dialogue, co-creation, and community stewardship will build the most durable attachments.

Several significant gaps in the literature on brand personality and consumer attachment are worthy of consideration by subsequent researchers. One such gap relates to the nature of attachment formation and dissolution in the digital-native brand scenario, in which the entirety of the consumer-brand relationship happens entirely through the lens of the digital screen. How do consumers attach to brands in the digital-native scenario, in which the entirety of the consumer-brand relationship happens entirely through the lens of the digital screen?

Another gap in the literature relates to the role of brand personality in the formation of attachment in Generation Z consumers. Generation Z consumers tend to be more sensitive to the authenticity of the brand, its social responsibility, and its purpose. The existing literature may not be sufficient in explaining the nature of attachment formation in Generation Z consumers.

Third, longitudinal research on the dynamics of how consumer-brand attachment develops over time, from consumers' first experience of brand awareness through to high levels of attachment, and even to potential detachment as a consequence of brand transgressions, is surprisingly absent from the literature. The dynamics of consumer-brand attachment, including what circumstances allow for its survival and recovery from negative events, is an area with significant practical implications.

11. Conclusion

Brand personality and consumer-brand attachment are two of the basic constructs in the theory and application of emotional branding, and they offer the conceptual framework within which the essentially humanistic nature of the relationship between consumers and brands can be understood and developed. As has been consistently shown in the evidence discussed in this paper, brands that have a personality that is coherent, authentic, and relevant to their identities are associated with stronger levels of consumer-brand attachment, loyalty, and even the ability of the relationship to withstand threats from competitors and reputation.

As markets become more crowded, products more similar in terms of function, and consumers more fragmented in terms of their attention, the extent to which a brand is able to connect with consumers at an emotional level, so that it feels like a friend, an aspiration, a community, or an expression of the best version of themselves, becomes the fundamental basis upon which commercial success is secured. Brand personality and emotional attachment concepts serve as the theoretical language in which this capacity can be understood, measured, and further developed. Research extending these concepts into the digital world and across cultures will be critical in keeping pace with the rapidly changing world of brand-consumer relations

References:

- 1) Aaker, J. L. (1997). Dimensions of brand personality. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34(3), 347–356.
- 2) Aaker, J. L., Benet-Martinez, V., & Garolera, J. (2001). Consumption symbols as carriers of culture: A study of Japanese and Spanish brand personality constructs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81(3), 492–508.
- 3) Arvidsson, A. (2006). Brands: Meaning and value in media culture. *Routledge*.
- 4) Azoulay, A., & Kapferer, J. N. (2003). Do brand personality scales really measure brand personality? *Journal of Brand Management*, 11(2), 143–155.
- 5) Bengtsson, A. (2003). Towards a critique of brand relationships. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 30, 154–158.
- 6) Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss, Vol. 1: Attachment. Basic Books*.
- 7) Chaudhuri, A., & Holbrook, M. B. (2001). The chain of effects from brand trust and brand affect to brand performance: The role of brand loyalty. *Journal of Marketing*, 65(2), 81–93.
- 8) Epley, N., Waytz, A., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2007). On seeing the human: A three-factor theory of anthropomorphism. *Psychological Review*, 114(4), 864–886.
- 9) Escalas, J. E. (2004). Narrative processing: Building consumer connections to brands. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 14(1–2), 168–180.
- 10) Escalas, J. E., & Bettman, J. R. (2005). Self-construal, reference groups, and brand meaning. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32(3), 378–389.
- 11) Fournier, S. (1998). Consumers and their brands: Developing relationship theory in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 24(4), 343–373.
- 12) Fournier, S., & Avery, J. (2011). The uninvited brand. *Business Horizons*, 54(3), 193–207.
- 13) Keller, K. L. (2008). Strategic brand management: Building, measuring, and managing brand equity (3rd ed.). *Pearson Prentice Hall*.
- 14) Kressmann, F., Sirgy, M. J., Herrmann, A., Huber, F., Huber, S., & Lee, D. J. (2006). Direct and indirect effects of self-image congruence on brand loyalty. *Journal of Business Research*, 59(9), 955–964.
- 15) Krishna, A. (2012). An integrative review of sensory marketing: Engaging the senses to affect perception, judgment and behavior. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 22(3), 332–351.
- 16) Lindstrom, M. (2005). Brand sense: Build powerful brands through touch, taste, smell, sight, and sound. Free Press.
- 17) Malhotra, N. K. (1988). Self concept and product choice: An integrated perspective. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 9(1), 1–28.
- 18) McCracken, G. (1989). Who is the celebrity endorser? Cultural foundations of the endorsement process. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(3), 310–321.
- 19) Muniz, A. M., & O’Guinn, T. C. (2001). Brand community. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27(4), 412–432.
- 20) Park, C. W., MacInnis, D. J., Priester, J., Eisingerich, A. B., & Iacobucci, D. (2010). Brand attachment and brand attitude strength: Conceptual and empirical differentiation of two critical brand equity drivers. *Journal of Marketing*, 74(6), 1–17.
- 21) Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2004). Co-creation experiences: The next practice in value creation. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18(3), 5–14.
- 22) Sirgy, M. J. (1982). Self-concept in consumer behavior: A critical review. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9(3), 287–300.
- 23) Swaminathan, V., Stilley, K. M., & Ahluwalia, R. (2009). When brand personality matters: The moderating role of attachment styles. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 35(6), 985–1002.

- 24) Thomson, M., MacInnis, D. J., & Park, C. W. (2005). *The ties that bind: Measuring the strength of consumers' emotional attachments to brands.* *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 15(1), 77–91.