



## Brand personality factor based models: A critical review

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### ABSTRACT

Brand personality has become an increasingly important concept within brand theory and factor based research is the method most widely used in the study of brand personality. There have been critiques of some aspects of early factor models, leading to an evolution and improvement in the methods used in factor model development. However, several problems remain which have yet to be addressed, and these raise questions about what *exactly* the factor models are measuring. This paper introduces and explains the problems of category confusions, domain meaning shifts, and the descriptor selection problem. In doing so, the paper extends existing critiques of the methods in brand personality factor research, and raises questions about the validity of current factor based models. The paper concludes with a recommendation that brand personality researchers re-evaluate their models and the brand personality concept, and that brand personality returns to its roots in qualitative projective methods.

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### 1. Introduction

Brand personality (BP) is defined in Aaker's influential (1997) article as the "set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (p. 347). The first mention of brands in relation to personality was as a novel metaphor for non-functional brand attributes, with foundations for the concept based on research from projective methods (Gardner and Levy, 1955). Much of the early literature on BP continued to be derived from projective research and, in particular, from qualitative projective personification research by practitioners (e.g. Blackston, 1993; King, 1973; Plummer, 1984). The link between human and brand personality was made in two early research studies (Alt and Griggs, 1988; Batra et al., 1993), but the factor approach to the measurement of brand personality became prominent with Aaker's (1997) seminal article.

Since Aaker's (1997) article, BP research has been dominated by Aaker's methodology (Freling et al., 2010), with all but one measurement scale (Sweeney and Brandon, 2006) using factor methods, and new scale development broadly following methods based on those used by Aaker (e.g. Ambroise et al., 2003). In reviewing the BP literature, only two qualitative research projects have been found (Arora and Stoner, 2009; Freling and Forbes, 2005b), and BP research after 1997 almost exclusively uses factor research methods. It would be reasonable to suggest, therefore, that factor research methods are of fundamental importance in BP theory and research.

To date, Aaker's (1997) brand personality five factor model has been the subject of several critiques, including concerns regarding

the exclusion of negative factors in the scale development (Bosnjak et al., 2007), the inclusion of items that are not properly personality traits (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003), as well as questions about whether the scale might be used as a general scale (Austin et al., 2003; also see Milas and Mlacic, 2007). Whilst many of these concerns have been addressed in later factor models, this paper will identify potential problems that extend across all BP factor measures.

The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on some of the existing critiques, and to raise some fundamental concerns about the *input* into factor models, which in turn prompt questions about what *exactly* the models are measuring. In particular, the paper identifies problems of descriptor selection, the alteration of word meanings when scales are applied in different domains, and the potential for 'category personality' to be confused with BP. However, having identified the potential problems, it is apparent that these are contingent upon whether or not consumers ordinarily think of brands as humanlike entities (e.g. see Freling and Forbes, 2005b; Puzakova et al., 2009). The discussion section of the paper considers some possible solutions to the problems identified, but also finds that these present new problems related to the conceptualisation and relevance of BP. The paper concludes by suggesting that further research and clarification of BP theory and conceptualisation are needed.

### 2. The five factor model (FFM) of human personality

BP factor research has drawn heavily on the research methods utilized in the human Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality, and a brief overview of the literature will therefore be useful in

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the consideration of BP factor research methods. A summary of the theory underlying the FFM is that humans traits are rooted in the biology of the individual (Plomin et al., 1994) creating basic tendencies (McCrae et al., 2000), and these tendencies interact with environmental influences to create a disposition for particular behaviour (Bouchard and McGue, 2003).

Researchers believe that personality traits are encoded in human language (McCrae and Costa, 2003, p. 25), and this has led personality researchers to adopt the lexical approach, in which dictionaries have been used to isolate the underlying factors of human personality. The lexical method has seen the development of clear criteria for descriptors that might be excluded, for example the exclusion of evaluative terms such as ‘Nice’ or ‘Capable’ (John et al., 1988). Likewise, criteria for inclusion have been narrowed with De Raad (1995), for example, emphasizing that traits need to be interpersonal, capturing the transactions between one person and another.

Since publication, the FFM has been widely validated, for example, through comparisons of self and observer reports (e.g. Costa and McCrae, 1988), validation through cross sectional and longitudinal studies (e.g. McCrae and Costa, 2003), age stability (e.g. Terracciano et al., 2006), and been examined cross-culturally (e.g. McCrae et al., 2002).

Whilst some elements of the model are still subject to debate, such as the number of factors (e.g. Ashton et al., 2004 propose six factors), the five factors were found within earlier models of personality, thereby offering further support for the underlying structure (Digman and Takemoto-Chock, 1981). Notwithstanding debate about the relative roles of situation and personality in behaviour (e.g. see Digman, 1990), the model is now widely accepted as a valid description of human personality traits.

There are two key points to take forward from the FFM review: one is that the FFM and the traits included are bounded in biology, and the second is that the lexical approach involves a refinement of personality descriptors based upon careful screening of terms developed over time. As such, there is a theoretical and methodological justification for why the FFM might be a valid measure of personality, as well as considerable empirical support.

**3. The brand personality five factor model (BPFMM)**

Aaker’s (1997) paper has become central to development of BP theory and research methods, illustrated by the high number of citations for the paper (at the time of writing, over 1500 citations according to Google Scholar and 554 according to Scopus). Unlike the lexical approach of the FFM, Aaker utilized a range of sources for generation of descriptors, such as the human FFM, focus groups,

individual consumers, other brand measurement scales, and practitioner views. Having generated a considerable number of descriptors, in a careful and well considered process, the items generated were then reduced to a more manageable number by having consumers rate the items on how descriptive they were of brands.

These items were used in the measurement of a range of US brands from different product categories and the results were factor analysed to create the BPFMM, as presented in Fig. 1 (the format for all factor models follows a format of the upper box as the factor, bold text for facets, and items in plain text):

Since the original BPFMM was published, the BPFMM has been examined in different cultures, with the result that different factors have been found (e.g. Successful and Contemporary, Supphellen and Gronhaug, 2003) as well as new facets and items (e.g. see Rojas-Mendez et al., 2004). Of particular interest is the work by Sung and Tinkham (2005), who compared BP in relation to perceptions of brands in the US and Korea, finding differences at the item and facet level, for both their Korean and US study, as well as different factors for Korea.

**4. Other brand personality factor models**

In addition to cross cultural studies, other researchers have sought to develop new factor models of BP, as well as extending the methodology to new areas such as store personality (e.g. Lévesque and d’Astous, 2003). The new BP models sought to remedy perceived problems with the BPFMM, such as the lack of negative factors (Bosnjak et al., 2007; Geuens et al., 2009; Smit et al., 2003), concerns about cultural specificity (Ambroise et al., 2003; Geuens et al., 2009), and the exclusion of items that were not properly human traits (Bosnjak et al., 2007; Geuens et al., 2009).

Examples of the different models can be found in Figs. 2 and 3, and it is notable that there are significant differences between these models, and also between the models and the BPFMM. The variability extends over all of the models that have been reviewed, with substantial differences found in each case. Whilst some of the variability can be explained by the rectification of problems in the BPFMM, it is nevertheless surprising to see the degree of variability amongst the models, when each model was developed with similar methods.

It is also notable that, despite the later BP models being developed in response to critiques of the BPFMM, the BPFMM has continued to be used in research on BP (e.g. Freling et al., 2010; Lin, 2010). This is puzzling as the view of this paper is that the later models have rectified some of the faults in the BPFMM, and might be explicable by what Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) refer to as a ‘bandwagon effect’ (p. 144). However, the argument of this paper is that these later models are also beset by problems, and the

Sincerity	Excitement	Competence	Sophistication	Ruggedness
<p><b>Down-to-Earth:</b> down to earth, family oriented, small town</p> <p><b>Honesty:</b> honest, sincere, real</p> <p><b>Wholesomeness:</b> wholesome, original</p> <p><b>Cheerfulness:</b> cheerful, sentimental, friendly</p>	<p><b>Daring:</b> daring, trendy, exciting</p> <p><b>Spiritedness:</b> spirited, cool, young</p> <p><b>Imagination:</b> imaginative, unique</p> <p><b>Contemporary:</b> up-to-date independent, contemporary</p>	<p><b>Reliability:</b> reliable, hard working, secure</p> <p><b>Intelligence:</b> intelligent, technical, corporate</p> <p><b>Success:</b> successful, leader, confident</p>	<p><b>Class:</b> upper class, good-looking, glamorous</p> <p><b>Charm:</b> charming, feminine, smooth</p>	<p><b>Masculinity:</b> outdoorsy, masculine, western</p> <p><b>Toughness:</b> tough, rugged</p>

Fig. 1. American Brand Personality (based upon Fig. 1, Aaker et al., 2001).

Drive	Conscientiousness	Emotion	Superficiality
Exciting, adventurous, boring	Competent, orderly, reliable	Loving, cordial, sentimental	Selfish, arrogant, hypocritical

Fig. 2. Bosnjak et al. scales (based upon Table 2, Bosnjak et al., 2007).

Responsibility	Activity	Agressiveness	Simplicity	Emotionality
Down to Earth, Stable, Responsible	Active, Dynamic, Innovative	Aggressive, Bold	Ordinary, Simple	Romantic, Sentimental

Fig. 3. Geuens et al. scales (based upon Fig. 1, Geuens et al., 2009).

following section will suggest that there are question marks over what, *exactly*, the models are measuring.

**5. Problems with factor based measures of brand personality**

Despite the ongoing evolution of BP factor models there remain three key problems in the current research: the category confusion problem, the domain adjustment problem, and the descriptor selection problem. Whilst some of these problems have been considered in previous literature, the critique that follows will consolidate and elaborate on these concerns, as well as tie together the relationships between each of the problems. It should be noted, however, that this is not a critique of factor analysis *per se*, but a critique of the *input* into the analysis. It should also be noted that some of the problems that are outlined are contingent upon whether brands are perceived as humanlike.

Animism and anthropomorphism theory were introduced into the branding literature by Aaker (1997) and Fournier (1998) in support of BP and brand relationship theory respectively. Guthrie (1993) defines animism as humans “attributing life to the nonliving” and anthropomorphism as “attributing human characteristics to the nonhuman” (p. 52). Therefore, the implication of the introduction of animism and anthropomorphism into branding is that brands are perceived by consumers as something that at least approximates to living quasi-humanlike entities (hereafter referred to as the *humanlike brand*). However, some theorists have questioned whether brands are perceived as humanlike (e.g. O’Guinn and Muniz, 2009), and the review proceeds on the basis that humanlike brand theory is at least questionable.

**5.1. The category confusion problem**

One of the key concerns about factor based BP measures is the question of whether they are measuring category or brand perceptions, or whether consumer perceptions of both are being measured. For example, Austin et al. (2003), as part of a broad critique of the BFFM, question whether the BPPFM could be used for measurement between brands rather than categories. As a practical illustration of the problem, Levy (1999) identifies whisky as being associated with ‘upper-class’ and ‘sophistication’, both of which are used as descriptors in the BPPFM. Therefore, if considering researching whisky using the BPPFM, it would not be clear how much of the measure of ‘sophistication’ or ‘upper-class’ would be for a particular brand, and how much for the category.

This potential problem was also recognized in early BP literature, with both Batra et al. (1993) and Aaker (1997) noting the possibility of category influences. Batra later investigated category

personality, and found that the category does indeed have a significant impact on consumer brand perceptions (Batra et al., 2010). There is further evidence for the category confusion effect within BP research itself. For example Siguaw et al. (1999) utilized the BPPFM for a study of the BP of restaurants and comment that “although we identified statistically significant differences among the brands, most of those differences are not particularly large” (p. 55). Whilst the category confusion effect does not appear to apply to all categories (for example, Smit et al., 2003 seemed to find significant differences for mail carriers), for many categories there are significant category influences. However, despite researchers identifying the potential problems of category confusion, it is notable that no controls for this phenomenon are built into any of the BP research measures.

This necessity for a control is particularly applicable to the development of the factor models, as these are typically developed across many different categories. Without such a control, scales may include items that might be validated as brand personality, but are actually category associations. In other words, in order to isolate a brand personality item, it is first necessary to exclude category ‘personality’. More broadly, without enacting such a control, the validity/significance of the results of much of the research on BP might be questioned, as it is not apparent whether the research is measuring perceptions of the brand (the intended measure) or the category in which the brand resides.

**5.2. The domain adjustment problem**

The domain adjustment problem might be seen as one of the more challenging problems facing brand personality factor researchers. Essentially, the problem is that the meanings of words, as understood and used by consumers, may be subject to change according to the domain that they refer to. This problem was identified early in the development of self-congruence research, with Landon (1974) offering a clear explanation of the nature of the problem (also see Capelli and Jolibert, 2009 for a brief mention of the problem):

A different set of adjectives may be relevant for measuring each concept may have a very different meaning when measuring self-image than when measuring product-image. [Provides an example] These adjectives are likely to have entirely different meanings in the two contexts. (p. 44)

Although context and word meaning are seen as challenging problems in linguistics (Akman and Bazzanella, 2003), increasing attention is being devoted to theoretical explanations of the influence of context in relation to meaning (e.g. Barsalou, 2003).

Of particular interest is the theory of frame semantics proposed by Fillmore (1976), which proposes that word meaning is interpreted from context, and that words are best understood by referencing conceptual structures from which meaning is derived. For example, Fillmore and Atkins (1992) point out that the meaning of the days of the week require a background understanding of the concept of a calendar cycle of seven days. Langacker (1986) offers a similar perspective in his theory of cognitive grammar, in which he discusses how 'semantic structures' are characterised relative to cognitive domains. As Langacker eloquently describes, "try explaining what an elbow is without referring in any way to an arm!" (p. 4).

Clausner and Croft (1999) examine the emerging theories of context and meaning, and note that, whilst using different terminology, there is an agreement that a semantic unit is a concept and that the concept meaning is derived from the domain in which it is embedded. In a similar vein, Evans (2006) examines the extant theory of context and meaning and develops a theory of lexical concept integration. The work of Evans is highlighted as, within the theory development, Evans provides an account of the importance of 'adjustment' on meaning:

"[...] the interpretation of *good* is adjusted depending on the composite lexical-conceptual structure it is involved in. For instance, a good man might possess attributes such as physical beauty, honour, providing for his family, and so on, depending on context. The sorts of qualities associated with a good meal, however, are more likely to include the size of the portions, how tasty food is, that it consists of wholesome ingredients, and so on." (p. 525)

Evans' account of 'adjustment' on meaning sees the concept meaning as embedded in the domain to which the adjustment is applied. This is precisely the problem that was intuitively identified by Landon, and which will be described hereafter as the '*domain adjustment problem*'.

Within the BP literature it is possible to find examples in which the domain adjustment problem is identified indirectly. For example, Austin et al. (2003) found that the meanings of trait terms for brands shifted across different categories, whilst Caprara et al. (2001) found evidence of concept-scale interaction with the same adjectives locating against different factors both between brands and human personality, and also within descriptions of different brands. Caprara et al. go on to suggest that adjectives to describe brands "convey different meanings as they move from one dimension to another according to the brand they are describing" (p. 392), and later say that "whilst two factors are replicated in brand perceptions the adjective will shift factors according to the brand stimulus type." (p. 393).

As an illustrative example of domain meaning adjustment, Brengman and Willems (2009) examined the determinants of fashion store personality and sought to understand how consumers interpreted the descriptors used in the d'Astous and Lévesque (2003) store personality scale (an adaptation of the BPFM). On reviewing the consumer meanings, it is apparent that many are very specific to the domain, such as the finding that the most frequently mentioned cue for the descriptor 'congenial' was the store having 'wearable clothing' (p. 350). Whilst not all meanings are so closely tied to the domain (e.g. 'upscale' having the most frequent cue of 'expensive'), it is apparent that the domain creates very particular meanings for many descriptors.

The nature of the domain adjustment problem within BP research can be further illustrated in the development of Aaker's scale. For example, within Aaker's (1997) 'brand group one', the brand categories included brands of soup, automobiles and jeans. When considering Aaker's use of the trait 'wholesome' for a soup brand and a jeans brand, in line with Evans (2006), it is very

unlikely that consumers would interpret the words in the same way for the different categories. Similarly, Bosnjak et al.'s (2007) scale includes the trait 'loving', and it is not clear what consumers will understand the word to mean in different category contexts. For example, what might 'loving' mean when applied to their 'group one' of categories, which includes insurance, jeans and beer?

The Bosnjak et al. example illustrates a further problem in using a 'generalized' scale, which is whether a consumer might ordinarily think of a brand of beer as 'loving'. Sirgy (1982) makes this point indirectly in relation to self-congruence research, with his suggestion that researchers should measure "those images which are most related to the products being tested" (p. 296). Low and Lamb (2000) likewise observe that (in relation to brand image) something like a pocket calculator and shampoo would require a different scale. When a consumer is presented with a word which does not appear to be salient to the category in question, it is not clear how they might interpret the word.

A further complication in relation to the domain adjustment problem is the question of what a consumer may be thinking of when presented with the items in the various BP measures. In particular, the factor measures might be seen as providing a prime of personality (e.g. see Bargh and Chartrand, 2000 for a discussion of priming), in particular where personification is used (e.g. see Aaker, 1997), and this may encourage consumers to think of user-imagery (van Hoof et al., 2007).

The perception of user-imagery is a stereotypical user of the brand (J.M. Sirgy et al., 1997), and is therefore an application of the descriptor to the domain of humans, albeit applied to an 'imaginary' person. User-imagery allows for a human to human comparison, but user-imagery and brand personality are viewed as different concepts (e.g. see Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003; Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004; Parker, 2009), and BP must in any case be separated from user-imagery or risk concept redundancy (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004; Singh, 1991).

Another problem arises in the way that BP factor measures have been used, with researchers using the BPFM for measuring aspects of congruity between consumers and brands (e.g. Aaker, 1999; Kressmann et al., 2006). This comparison is exactly the problem outlined by Landon (1974), albeit that he is referring to comparisons of people with product image. For example, returning to Aaker's (1997) example of 'wholesome' applied to a soup brand, the meaning will be very different when applied to humans. This closely mirrors the example quoted by Evans (2006), and the use of the same scale for humans and brands is, *at the very least*, questionable.

Throughout the BP literature, as yet, no theorists have addressed the problem of domain adjustments. Although there have been suggestions to embed behaviour descriptors in sentences to improve clarity (Milas and Mlacic, 2007), this does not ameliorate the problem of the shift in meaning. For example, if 'wholesome' were embedded in a sentence, it is not clear how this would address the problem that wholesome would have a different meaning when applied to soup brands versus a jeans brand or a person.

One particular concern is that it appears that Geuens et al. (2009) were at least partly aware of the problem, saying that "[because] the object of evaluation changes (from human to brand personality), traditional measures and items may not be fully appropriate" (p. 100). This statement appears to be an indirect acknowledgement of the domain adjustment problem, but no further consideration of the problem is forthcoming. The purpose of factor measures is to provide 'generalized' measures for brands across different categories. However, as the meanings of words change in relation to categories, it is not clear that it is possible to develop a generalized scale, as the items in the scale would not be comparable when applied to different product categories.



In summary, the domain adjustment problem has three key elements. The first is the question of whether consumers are thinking of user-imagery when presented with BP descriptors. If they are thinking of user-imagery, then the measures are not actually measuring BP, but are instead measuring a different (but related) concept. The second is that, if they are not thinking of user-imagery, then the meaning of the descriptors will shift according to the category in which the brand is located. If there is a meaning shift, it is not clear what exactly the purpose of the measures might be, or how they might be interpreted. Finally, there is the question of the salience of the descriptors in different categories, with non-salient trait  $x$  having questionable meanings when applied to category  $y$ . Overall, these problems represent a significant question of *exactly* what is being measured in the BP factor based measures.

### 5.3. The descriptor selection problem

It is apparent that, in the many factor models, there are many variations on the factors, facets and items included in the different scales, despite each scale appearing to use similar underlying methodologies. As has been mentioned, there are some differences that might explain some of the variation in the scales, such as the addition of negative measures, and the later restriction of the measures to human personality descriptors. Also, cultural difference may be a further explanation of some of the variation with Goodyear (1996), for example, suggesting that understanding of brands changes with both culture and stage of market development.

Whilst these circumstances might explain some of the variation across the scales or why, for example, the results of Sung and Tinkham (2005) US study diverged from the original BPFM, despite replicating the methodology of the BPFM development. The most likely explanation for the differences can be found in the category confusion problem, with different categories selected in each study creating the variability in the descriptors. In other words, each scale is not a generalized BP scale, but a scale that is skewed to the associations with the categories that are the subject of the scale development.

However, over and above the problem of category influence, there is a more fundamental problem in the item generation, which is the lack of a theoretical foundation that might provide boundaries of what can be included as brand personality. As has been discussed in section two, the FFM has a theoretical basis for why human personality might be bounded within a limited number of descriptors, but there is no underlying theory that might offer a boundary to the scope of brand personality.

Without a solid theoretical foundation for brand personality providing a method of bounding the concept, it is difficult to argue against the inclusion of factors such as social responsibility (Madrigal and Boush, 2008), or facets added based upon focus groups (Ferrandi et al., 1999). Without a theoretical grounding such as that found in human personality research, there are no criteria upon which to found any scales, or restrict the inclusion of any descriptor that might be salient to a brand. A summary of the problem is illustrated by Ambroise et al (2003), who critique the BPFM, saying that the BPFM “includes facets having no equivalent in terms of human personality” (p. 2). However, they include a factor of ‘Natural’, which includes the facet of ‘environmentally friendly’. It is not apparent why such measures might be excluded from BP.

The problem that arises with brand personality is that, unlike human personality (which is bounded by biology), there are no obvious boundaries to BP. If considering the antecedents of brand personality, there are a multitude of elements that contribute to it. For example, Aaker cites the work of Batra et al (1993), and

identifies antecedents to BP of symbol/logo, product attributes, brand name, product category, advertising style, distribution channel, price, as well as celebrity transfer (citing McCracken, 1989) and animism and anthropomorphism. If taking the example of advertising, advertisers might seek to associate any number of descriptors with their brands. It is not entirely clear on what basis one such descriptor might be identified as applicable to BP, whilst another might not.

It might be argued that later research that restricted BP descriptors to human personality terms might resolve the problem, with researchers such as Bosnjak et al (2007) actually limiting their models as such. However, as brands have no underlying biology, it is not clear why human personality descriptors might have any greater salience than any other descriptor in application to a brand, or how the word meaning might be interpreted in relation to brands and between different brand categories.

However, as has been discussed, researchers have introduced anthropomorphism and animism theory (e.g. Freling and Forbes, 2005b; Puzakova et al., 2009), which *might* overcome the domain adjustment problem. The difficulty with such explanations is that the application of a full human FFM measure to brands could not be validated (Caprara et al., 2001; also see Shank and Langmeyer, 1994 for examination of another human measure for brands), and some FFM items were not validated in the development of the BPFM. If brands are indeed perceived as humanlike, the inability to validate human scales for brands still requires explanation. Furthermore, Avis (2011)<sup>1</sup> reviews humanlike brand theory and evidence and finds that the theory appears to be lacking in either theoretical or empirical support.

As a further complication, Bosnjak et al. (2007, p. 304) *appear* to reject the humanlike brand explanation, describing brands as “inanimate objects which obviously do not in themselves ‘behave’ in a consistent manner.” Such a point of view again raises the question of why human descriptors might have any particular relevance or salience and also returns to the domain adjustment problem. If consumers think of brands as ‘objects’, then the meaning of descriptors will change, unless they do indeed think of brands as humanlike entities.

The essence of the problem is that brands are social constructs, rather than being rooted in biology. Selection of descriptors salient to a particular category is more likely to be of utility in developing an understanding of consumer perceptions, rather than picking human traits without any particular salience or underlying justification.

The problem that is confronted by the development of the measures of BP is that there is no basis for why, for example, ‘natural’ might be included or excluded, as any method of item generation has no real theoretical justification. Unlike human personality, it is difficult to see that there might be any justifiable boundaries around the brand personality concept, at least in relation to descriptor selection in BP factor research.

## 6. Discussion

As discussed, some of the problems that have been identified in the previous section are contingent upon whether people perceive brands as humanlike entities. For example, the category confusion problem disappears if brands are perceived as humanlike, as presumably consumers would not confuse a humanlike brand with a category. However, the finding of category personality might be seen as a reason to cast doubt on the idea of humanlike brand perceptions. The findings of category personality mirror those of BP presenting the question of whether a category can also be

<sup>1</sup> Proceedings forthcoming

perceived as a quasi-humanlike. It is also notable that other 'personalities' have been found in research that mirrors BP, including website personality (e.g. Opoku et al., 2006) and even housing estate personality (Ibrahim and Ong, 2004). Are all of these entities perceived as animistic and anthropomorphic?

The domain alteration problem also disappears if humanlike brands are a valid account of consumer perceptions of brands. For example, in the case of self-congruence research, use of the descriptors for brands and humans is unlikely to present problems, as the comparison is between human and human (albeit the brand is possibly quasi-humanlike). Also, regardless of the brand category to which descriptors are applied, if consumers are perceiving brands as humanlike, they are applying the descriptors to the same kind of entity, and therefore there should be no adjustment to descriptor meaning. However, there is a problem with the humanlike brand presenting a solution to the domain adjustment problem. As was discussed, BP research has identified that meanings of descriptors do indeed change over categories, and this implies that consumer *do not* see brands as humanlike (or there would be no reason why the descriptor meanings would change between categories).

Humanlike brand theory also presents some interesting questions in relation to the descriptor selection problem. If brands are seen as humanlike, then it might be that any descriptor that might be applied to humans might also be applied to brands. BP might be conceptualised as human characteristics associated with brands (Aaker, 1997), or human traits applicable to brands (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003), as either might be a valid conceptualisation. However, in relation to the latter, the question that needs an answer is why a human personality trait such as 'loving' might be more salient in brand choice than a characteristic such as 'upper class'. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, the problem that human trait *x* has been validated and trait *y* cannot be validated requires an explanation.

Overall, it appears that humanlike brands might ameliorate some of the problems that were identified in the previous section, but humanlike brand theory presents new problems, including research findings that themselves present questions about the validity of the humanlike brand. If the humanlike brand is not accepted there are further problems, and these might be seen as even more challenging.

For example, one approach that might address the domain adjustment problem is to develop BP models for specific categories, rather than general models. As an exemplar, Low and Lamb (2000) have developed a protocol for building category specific brand image scales, and the protocol might be adapted for BP scales. Category specific scales would also have the additional benefit that researchers and practitioners could use qualitative methods, such as participant interviews, to understand how consumers interpret the meaning of the BP traits when used in relation to the category under study.

Furthermore, the development of category specific BP scales would allow for controls for category 'personality'. For example, researchers might commence their research with examination of category personality, and examine whether there are significant differences between ratings for the category personality item for brands within the category. If there are no significant differences, the item might be excluded, as it ceases to be a point of differentiation. If there are significant differences, this might be an interesting avenue of further study as, for example, it is possible that a high rating on such a salient item for the category may be a predictor of brand preference.

Whilst the recommendations given may work around some of the problems identified in the paper, there are still significant problems to overcome. For example, if different scales are used for different categories, the conceptualisation of BP becomes rather

murky. It is notable that Aaker describes the section on the development of the BPFMM as 'What is Brand Personality?' Although Aaker provides a definition of BP, the implication is that BP is what is measured. The problem with this explanation is that other models have found very different BP (e.g. Smit et al., 2003), and the proposed solution given here would create further models which would be specific to different categories. So many different models would only serve to raise the question of what exactly the BP concept actually is.

A parallel to the problem of conceptualising BP as 'what is measured' can be found in the human personality literature. Epstein (1994) and Bandura (1999) proposed that the FFM was a measure in search of a theory, and that the factors that are found are determined by the measures. In the case of the FFM, the response to the critique was to present a clear theoretical explanation and justification for the model (discussed earlier). In the case of BP, if rejecting humanlike brand theory, theorists are confronted with the task of providing an explanatory theory for BP. Regardless of whether the scales have a broad range of descriptors or are restricted to human traits applied to brands, there needs to be a theoretical explanation of the relevance/salience of the descriptors. If not, BP simply becomes a measure in search of a theory.

Another problem with category specific scales is that they would preclude the development of 'generalizable' scales. Aaker (1997, p. 345) was explicit in stating this as an aim of the BPFMM, and a 'generalized' scale was undoubtedly one of the drivers of interest in the BP concept. As the situation stands, there are already question marks over whether BP scales can be generalized (Austin et al., 2003), and debate over whether categories such as store brands can be measured with BP scales (e.g. see M Avis, 2009 for an overview). However, if category specific scales were developed, the concept of BP as a general brand attribute disappears, along with a probable driver for the interest in the concept.

Finally, there is the problem of using BP scales in self-congruence research. The domain adjustment problem suggests that this is an extremely doubtful research method, and a method that could only be justified if BP is actually user-imagery. However, it is interesting to note that Aaker (1997) included personification of brands in the methodology for the development of the BPFMM (there is no explicit mention of personification in the development of other scales), and van Hoof et al. (2007) suggest that personification uniquely generates user-imagery. Although theorists have sought to delineate BP from user-imagery, the use of personification *might* suggest that BP and user imagery might indeed be the same concept, thereby rendering BP as a redundant concept (Singh, 1991).

Overall, if humanlike brand theory is rejected, it is apparent that there are significant problems in trying to resolve the problems that are identified in factor measures of BP. The problem is that, without humanlike brand theory, the conceptualisation of BP becomes diffuse and unclear, and appears to be confusingly similar to concepts such as brand image, or uses descriptors restricted to human traits with no explanation for the salience of the traits, or how consumers might interpret the traits in different categories. As a result, it appears that BP hinges upon humanlike brand theory, and without this theory, it is difficult to see how general measures of BP might be justified.

In examining factor measures of BP, therefore, a central question is whether consumers do indeed perceive brands as humanlike entities, and some theorists are very doubtful about this idea (e.g. Avis, 2011), and this is the view underpinning this paper. It might be noted that consumers should *ordinarily* think of brands as humanlike, and projective methods such as personification are not ordinary modes of consumer thought (O'Guinn and Muniz, 2009; Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008, p. 37). Also, personification again presents the problem that BP could indeed be user-imagery.

As such, one recommendation of this paper is that BP theorists need to examine whether consumers do indeed *ordinarily* view brands as humanlike, which is a question that might be resolved through further research.

However, if consumers do not ordinarily think of brands as humanlike, the problem is how to untangle BP from concepts such as brand image or user-imagery. Aaker and Fournier (1995) asked the pertinent question “How (or when) is it [brand personality] different from brand and/or user imagery?” (p. 391) Aaker (1997) and Fournier (1998) later appeared to resolve this by introducing theories of brand animism and anthropomorphism as explanations of BP and brand relationships, albeit that Fournier (2009) appears to later retreat from this explanation. The question of how BP might be delineated from other brand concepts such as identity/image/user-imagery is a recurring theme in the BP literature (e.g. Freling and Forbes, 2005a; Hosany et al., 2006; Patterson, 1999; Plummer, 2000; Smit et al., 2003). However, even when theorists propose that they will answer the question, it is surprising to find that they do not appear to do so (e.g. see Aaker and Fournier, 1995).

The final recommendation of this paper is that, where theorists reject humanlike brand theory, there is a necessity to revisit the conceptualisation of BP, and present theory and conceptualisation of BP that delineates BP from other brand concepts. Furthermore, there needs to be an explanation of what the BP traits actually mean to consumers when applied to different categories, and why the traits might be salient for consumers in each category. At present, where humanlike brand theory is not accepted, there is a lack of clarity about exactly what BP actually is. Without this clarity, it is not apparent why BP should be seen as an important or distinct concept that is relevant to practitioners or as a subject of further research.

## 7. Conclusions

The argument of this paper is that there are several significant problems with the factor models used to measure BP: the category confusion problem, the domain adjustment problem, and the descriptor selection problem. When examining each of these problems, it seems that the root cause can be found in the supporting theory for BP and its conceptualisation. In particular, humanlike brand theory appears to be a key support for BP theory, but the validity of this theory is questionable. Although recommendations are given to ameliorate some of the problems identified in the paper, these solutions themselves raise questions regarding the theory and conceptualisation of BP.

In identifying the problems, and the related problems in the theory and conceptualisation of BP, the paper presents some questions that could lead to clarification of the BP concept, including some new directions/avenues of research and theory development. Research and theory development commences with questions, and it is hoped that BP researchers and theorists will find the questions posed in this paper to be a useful stimulus for further development of the understanding of the concept of brand personality.

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