

# Do brand personality scales really measure brand personality?

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## Abstract

*Since 1997, literature and research on the concept of brand personality have been flourishing, and specific scales have gone into widespread use in academic circles, unchallenged on their validity.*

*Brand personality is certainly a key facet of a brand identity. As this paper will demonstrate, however, the current scales of brand personality do not in fact measure brand personality, but merge a number of dimensions of brand identity — personality being only one of them — which need to be kept separate both on theoretical grounds and for practical use. Brand research and theorising, as well as managerial practice, have nothing to gain from the present state of unchallenged conceptual confusion.*

## INTRODUCTION

In practice, the personification of brands has happened frequently since celebrities started to endorse brands. The use of famous people and their personalities helps marketers position their brands, and can even seduce consumers who identify themselves with these stars. In other words, consumers could perceive a congruence between their (ideal or actual) perceived selves and that of the star, and hence form an attraction to the brand.<sup>1,2</sup> Or, more simply, this personality endowment may merely give the brand a meaning in the consumers' eyes.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond this specific advertising strategy, it has long been recognised that brands could be said to have a personality, as any person has a personality. In any case, in focus groups or in depth interviewing, con-

sumers have no difficulty answering metaphorical questions such as: 'suppose the brand is a person, what kind of person would he/she be, with what personality?' In fact, consumers do perceive brands as having personality traits. Recent research has even shown that medical doctors (generalists as well as specialists) had no difficulty in attributing personality traits to pharmaceutical brands; moreover, these traits were actually significantly correlated to medical prescription itself.<sup>4</sup> That is why brand personality may have a role to play in the construction and/or management of brands.

Since 1997, and the pioneering scale of brand personality proposed by Aaker,<sup>5</sup> a new stream of research has been born. This renewed interest in a rather old concept (brand personality) signals that the metaphor of brands as people is held as increasingly more

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pertinent at a time when marketing stresses so much the importance of creating relationships with brands. Most of the research papers on brand personality are now based on Aaker's scale. As is frequently the case with pioneer studies, they lead to a bandwagon effect: a first wave of research consists of replication studies in the country of the first study. Then a second wave assesses the external validity of the scale in foreign countries in order to evaluate the robustness of the scale, its ability to support translations and intercultural uses. Meanwhile the scale's use becomes widespread and goes unchallenged. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that the current scale of brand personality, which is gaining popularity in academic marketing circles, does not in fact measure brand personality, but merges a number of dimensions of a brand identity which need to be kept separate both on theoretical grounds and for practical use. Certainly brand personality is a useful concept, but brand identity has more facets than the personality facet alone.

This paper argues that a stricter definition of brand personality is needed to avoid the present state of conceptual confusion in branding research, and to allow brand personality to be a rich and more useful concept with which to understand and manage brands. One should recall that 'personality' and other concepts used in marketing (such as 'self' or values) derive from psychology, and should therefore be defined and strictly described in relation to their definition in psychology, although some adaptations seem necessary.<sup>6</sup>

To better understand what brand personality is, the roots and history

of brand personality are first briefly reviewed. The existing definition and measurements of brand personality and of personality in psychology are then examined for comparison purposes. Finally, it is demonstrated that the existing definition and measurement methodology have led to the construction of scales that do not really measure brand personality, but other unrelated concepts.

### **BRAND PERSONALITY: HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT IN MARKETING**

Advertisers and marketing practitioners have been the first ones to coin the term 'brand personality', well before the academics studied and accepted the concept. As early as 1958, Martineau<sup>7</sup> used the word to refer to the non-material dimensions that make a store special — its character. King<sup>8</sup> writes that 'people choose their brands the same way they choose their friends; in addition to the skills and physical characteristics, they simply like them as people'. He goes on quoting research from the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency indicating that consumers do tend to attribute facets of personality to brands and talk fluently about these facets. Plummer<sup>9</sup> speaks of Orangina soft drink as having a 'sensual' personality.

In addition, motivation research made popular the use of projective techniques to capture these facets. For instance, it has become commonplace to make use of metaphors in focus groups, where consumers are asked to talk about a brand as if it was a person, a movie star, an animal, and so on. As early as 1982, Séguela,<sup>10</sup> creative vice-president of the RSCG advertising agency, introduced the 'star strategy' as

the new mode of brand management for mature markets. In mature markets, non-product-based features of the brand start to have a greater effect on consumers' buying decisions, even though, in focus groups, people speak of the product first for rationalisation motives. Séguela recommended that all brands be described along three facets: the physical one (what does the product do and how well does it perform?), the character (brand personality facet) and the style (executional elements for advertising and communication). Regarding design and corporate identity, in 1978 Olins' book 'Corporate Personality'<sup>11</sup> refers to the fact that design is not here to describe a product, but to endow either its brand or corporation with values and non-material distinguishing attributes.

In practice, these publications expressed a growing dissatisfaction with an enduring tenet of marketing practice equating the product and the brand; that is, defining the brand by a product's performance. A typical example of that was the famous 'unique selling proposition' (USP), the term created by Rosser Reeves,<sup>12</sup> the author of 'Reality in Advertising' (1961), a title which unveiled the vision of a brand as a product with a plus.

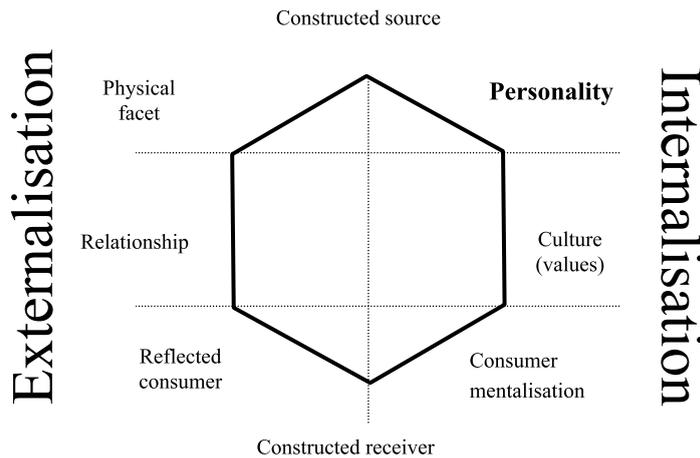
In the late 1980s, realising that, with a growing number of copies and the abundance of similar products, it was more and more difficult to differentiate brands on the basis of performance, Ted Bates — the advertising agency where Rosser Reeves worked — introduced an additional concept: the unique selling personality. As a consequence, in the famous 'copy strategy' — the essential single sheet which summarises the advertising strategy as related to

copy — it became widespread to see a new item to be filled by account executives: brand personality (as a substitute to the former item: tone of advertising). In fact, this meant that tone (an executional constant) would not have to be invented, but derived from the type of brand one wanted to create, to build and to reinforce.

Starting in the 1970s, whatever the client or its advertising agency, all copy strategies included a provision for describing brand personality, after having stated the target, the brand promise and the reason why. From this it can be seen that the use of 'brand personality' originated as a non-product-based definition of the brand: it captured all that was not bound to the product's use, performance, benefits, attributes, and so on. Interestingly, neither was it a description of the target itself, like when one describes a brand by the lifestyle of its target. In copy strategies brand personality was used as a common, practical, but rather loose, word for assessing non-product-based, non-functional dimensions of the brand; it captured the singularity of the source of the product as if it were a person.

Later, on the research side, the brand identity frameworks<sup>13-18</sup> always quoted brand personality as a dimension or a facet of brand identity — namely those traits of human personality that can be attributed to the brand. Among other dimensions are the brand inner values (its cultural facet), the brand relationship facet (its style of behaviour, of conduct), the brand-reflected consumer facet, and the brand physical facet (its material distinguishing traits).<sup>19,20</sup> (See Figure 1).

At odds with this general conceptualisation of personality as one part of



**Figure 1: Brand identity prism**  
Source: Kapferer (1992, 1998)

brand identity — namely referring to the traits of human personality attributed to the brand — Aaker,<sup>21</sup> in the process of building a scale for measurement purposes, defines brand personality not as a part but as the whole: ‘the set of human characteristics associated to a brand’. However, inner values, physical traits and pictures of the typical user are also ‘human characteristics’ that can be associated with a brand. Hence the risk (if one follows this too-global definition) of muddling conceptually and empirically distinct brand identity facets within a single scale of so-called ‘brand personality’.

This recent loose usage of the concept of brand personality for scale measurement purposes is, in fact, going back to the historical early use by pioneer professionals. They rightly felt that the copy strategy did successfully define the product’s compelling competitive advantage (USP), but failed to capture the essence of the source of that product (the brand). They coined the term ‘brand personality’ to capture all the non-product dimensions.

To come back to theoretical unity

and conceptual clarity, one should follow Churchill’s measurement advice to be ‘exacting in delineating what is included in the definition and what is excluded’.<sup>22</sup> The current paper suggests a clear and pure definition of the concept of brand personality, separate from the other human characteristics which can be associated with a brand. This definition should remain close to that used in psychology, where the concept of personality has been analysed for decades, although it should be adapted to brands.

## **PERSONALITY: CONCEPT AND MEASUREMENT**

In order to clarify the issues, the concept of personality in psychology, which is at the very basis of any work on brand personality, will be examined.

### **The human personality concept in psychology**

Without going back to the Latin or theological roots of the word ‘per-

sonality' — the meanings of which are then manifold — the first psychologist who constructed a personality theory was Freud. Most important is that Freud<sup>23</sup> and his disciples considered personality to be something dynamic, cumulative, but, above all, they viewed it as being durable and relatively stable over time. The research of Sullivan<sup>24</sup> follows the same lines, especially concerning the definition of personality. Indeed, Sullivan thought that:

'Personality could be defined only in terms of the reactions ... of an individual towards other people in recurrent interpersonal situations in life. He called the smallest unit of recurrent reactions *dynamism*. He used that word to describe certain patterns of feelings or behaviour ... and also to describe entities or mechanisms that are the components of the personality ... Those *dynamisms* are quite enduring and accumulate throughout life.'

This definition is quite vague, but it gave way to the trait theory. The importance of defining the concept of personality is crucial insofar as it will influence the theory that will ensue. When trying to write a book devoted to explaining what personality really is, Allport<sup>25</sup> wrote an entire chapter entitled 'Defining personality'. In this chapter, he reviewed 49 definitions before giving one of his own. This book is a remarkable effort to define this field of study. The definitions reviewed have common points that can be found in Allport's definition. The 'Dictionnaire Fondamental de la Psychologie'<sup>26</sup> summarises this research and these definitions:

'[Personality is the] set of relatively stable and general dynamic, emotional and affective characteristics of an individual's way of

being, in his/her way to react to the situations in which s/he is.

In most cases, the word does not include the cognitive aspects of the behavior (intelligence, abilities, knowledge). It always deals with the affective, emotional and dynamic aspects. Personality is [more often than not] described in terms of traits.'

Personality is a clear construct different from cognitive aspects of the person, or from his or her skills and abilities. It is described by traits.

The theory of traits is crucial to personality theory insofar as it has enabled the practical application of the theory of personality, the construction of personality scales, and the identification of the corpus of words that define personality. As Allport<sup>27</sup> described it, a trait is 'a generalized and focalized neuropsychic system (peculiar to the individual), with the capacity to render many stimuli functionally equivalent, and to initiate and guide consistent (equivalent) forms of adaptive and expressive behavior'. The researchers in the 1930s to 1950s focused more on the construction of an exhaustive and representative list of all the terms of the language that could possibly describe the personality, than on the search for a perfect definition of the concept. That research (including that of Cattell<sup>28</sup>) is the basis of the current popular personality theories. The study of personality by a lexical approach dates back to the 1920s in Germany and the 1930s in the USA. It has since been developed in various countries, but the US and German studies remain the central ones in the field.

The first exhaustive published list of terms present in the English dictionary related to personality and was prepared by Allport and Odbert<sup>29</sup> in 1936 (they

listed 18,000 terms). Most studies following that of Cattell<sup>30</sup> have converged towards the conclusion that human personality could be 'summarised' by a small number of factors (from two to 16). A large number of studies have reached the number five.<sup>31-40</sup>

The reduction in the number of items has been made on the basis of a relevancy criterion: the terms that have been taken out are those which are judged obscure, ambiguous or colloquial, and those that are judgmental or that introduce a gender distinction. The factors are the result of factor analysis, most of the time with a varimax rotation. As Digman<sup>41</sup> explains in his literature review, Goldberg<sup>42</sup> too has observed the robustness of the five-factor model, independently of the results of Cattell.<sup>43</sup> He even thinks that these five broad factors or dimensions can form a framework within which to organise and structure the personality concept as it has been studied by researchers such as Cattell,<sup>44</sup> Norman,<sup>45</sup> Eysenck,<sup>46</sup> Guilford<sup>47</sup> and Wiggins.<sup>48</sup> The five dimensions reflect an individual's stable and recurrent traits, as opposed to temporary states that are not taken into consideration in the description of an individual personality.

Goldberg's results are supported by another piece of research, which analyses six studies, and shows the robustness of the model unveiled by Tupes and Christal,<sup>49</sup> with five factors labelled the 'Big Five' by Goldberg. The number of dimensions is, however, not confirmed by all researchers. Some of them indeed note that the parsimonious configuration of the Big Five model has weaknesses (see Eysenck<sup>50</sup> for example).

Despite critiques, the Big Five theory or five-factor model is widely

accepted. The five dimensions are often (but not always) labelled OCEAN:

- *Dimension O*: Openness to new experiences, to imagination and intellectual curiosity. This dimension gathers such elements as the intensity, span and complexity of an individual's experiences.
- *Dimension C*: Conscientiousness. This dimension gathers such traits as scrupulousness, orderliness and trustworthiness.
- *Dimension E*: Extraversion. This dimension gathers such traits as openness to others, sociability, impulsivity and likeability to feel positive emotions.
- *Dimension A*: Agreeableness. This dimension includes such traits as kindness, modesty, trust and altruism.
- *Dimension N*: Neuroticism. An individual is said to be neurotic if they are not emotionally stable. This dimension includes such traits as anxiety, instability and nervousness.

Some researchers have shown that each of the five dimensions could be represented by a small number of adjectives that are representative enough of the dimension they load on. In other words, these adjectives have a high loading on one dimension and a low (or close to 0) loading on other dimensions. These adjectives are named 'markers' of the Big Five (Goldberg,<sup>51</sup> Saucier<sup>52</sup>). They have been developed to reduce the length of questionnaires and to avoid respondents' fatigue. This method enables a psychologist to form a quick evaluation of an individual. Saucier's<sup>53</sup> 40 mini-

**Table 1** Aaker's brand personality scale and the psychological five factors model

Authors	Dimensions	Facets (**) or items (***)
Aaker	Sincerity Excitement Competence Sophistication Ruggedness	(**) Down-to-earth, honest, wholesome, cheerful Daring, spirited, imaginative, up-to-date Reliable, intelligent, successful Upper-class, charming Outdoorsy, tough
Saucier's 40 mini-markers	Openness (or intellect) Conscientiousness Extraversion Agreeableness Neuroticism (or Emotional Stability)	(***) Creative, imaginative, intellectual, philosophical, deep, complex, uncreative, unintellectual Efficient, organised, systematic, practical, disorganised, inefficient, sloppy, careless Bold, extraverted, talkative, bashful, quiet, shy, withdrawn, energetic Kind, sympathetic, warm, cooperative, cold, unsympathetic, harsh, rude Unenvious, relaxed, fretful, envious, jealous, moody, touchy, temperamental

markers are presented in Table 1, along with Aaker's five-dimensional scale.<sup>54</sup>

### Psychology applied to the brand personality concept

The methodology that led to the five-factor model has been directly borrowed, and sometimes somehow adapted, by some marketing researchers (Caprara *et al.*,<sup>55</sup> Ferrandi and Valette-Florence<sup>56</sup>). Thus if brands, like individuals, can be described with adjectives, the approach used in psychology can be very interesting and relevant to account for a brand personality as perceived by consumers. Indeed, the personality of individuals is perceived through their behaviour, and, in exactly the same way, consumers can attribute a personality to a brand according to its perceived communication and 'behaviours'. The question is whether the terms that encode personality in language can be applied to brands. The existing literature about the relationship between an

individual and a brand (Plummer,<sup>57</sup> Fournier<sup>58</sup>), about brand attachment or even about the view of a brand as a partner (Aaker *et al.*<sup>59</sup>), enables one to think that, since brands can be personified, human personality descriptors can be used to describe them. In fact, the adjectives used to describe human personality may not all be relevant to brands. This is where an adaptation is required. Some psychological aspects of humans such as neurotic fatigue, for example, may not be applicable to brands. This need for adaptation has also been suggested by Aaker<sup>60</sup> and Caprara *et al.*<sup>61</sup>

### Brand personality measurement

Aaker's<sup>62</sup> work has tried to clarify the concept and build a scale to measure it. To achieve this, she largely followed the psychologists' steps in their study of human personality. She followed more particularly the studies made by researchers who contributed to the identification of five dimensions

subsuming personality (the five-factor model). More specifically, Aaker, and those who replicated or followed her work (Ferrandi *et al.*,<sup>63</sup> Koebel and Ladwein,<sup>64</sup> Aaker *et al.*<sup>65</sup>), are walking in the steps of the US psychologists, Costa and McCrae, who adopted a lexical approach, and whose personality inventory (NEO-PI-R<sup>66,67</sup>) is renowned and has been translated into several languages (see Rolland<sup>68</sup> in French, for example).

Most recent works on brand personality research are based on Aaker's global definition of the concept of brand personality as 'the set of human characteristics associated to a brand'.<sup>69</sup> Aaker explored brand personality on the basis of 114 adjectives (or traits) across 37 brands that cover various product categories. She reached a five-factor solution presented in Table 1. Only three out of those five factors correspond to elements of the five-factor model in psychology.

## ARE CURRENT BRAND PERSONALITY SCALES VALID?

### The issue of concept validity

So far, most of the research on brand personality has focused on external validity: scores of translations have been undertaken by local researchers to assess the ability of the scale to produce its similar five factors in different markets and cultures. The main issue has not yet been addressed. It is not because one calls it a 'brand personality scale' that it does actually measure personality. This issue refers to a critique of construct or concept validity.

As seen above, Aaker defines personality as being 'the set of

human characteristics associated with a brand'.<sup>70</sup> This definition comes directly from practitioners' early use of brand personality as a single all-encompassing convenient item in the advertising copy strategy to define all that is not product related. Thus, from the start, although the word 'personality' has a very specific meaning in psychology, its use in branding has tended to be rather loose — an all-encompassing pot pourri. The problem is that all the work subsequent to Aaker's was based implicitly or explicitly on this definition. Therefore, all these studies share the same flaw in their conceptual basis.

The main problem with the current definition is that it is too wide — it may embrace concepts beyond those of brand personality. Marketing is an applied science that sometimes imports existing concepts from psychology and other areas. The concept of personality has been coined by psychology, and maybe it would be more precise to remain close to the psychological definition of personality. Indeed, by loosely defining 'brand personality', it may mean almost everything related to a human being and applied to brands. Whereas psychologists have worked over the years to *exclude* intellectual abilities, gender and social class from their personality definitions and scales, adopting Aaker's loose definition of brand personality may mean that their results are ignored, and the term 'brand personality' is used to designate 'any non-physical attribute associated with a brand', *including* intellectual abilities, gender or social class.

If Allport<sup>71</sup> dedicated a whole chapter (as in most theoretical handbooks dedicated to the study of personality) to concept definition and to the

problems related to it, it is because the step of definition of the concept is tricky and very long. He examined a large number of definitions and rejected them because he found them too vague or incomplete (hence meaningless). He then proposed a definition of his own.

Without claiming to solve the debate among psychologists concerning the definition of personality, it is possible to delineate quite precisely what is included in, and what is excluded from, the concept of personality in psychology and would be advisable to do this in marketing for the brand personality concept. In order to move forward, one should stick to the commonly agreed definition, summarised in the 'Dictionnaire Fondamental de la Psychologie'.<sup>72</sup> This definition covers what is most widely accepted among researchers, and was presented above. The authors recommend that marketing researchers and practitioners adopt a stricter definition of the concept of brand personality in order to reach a more exact measurement of that concept. The definition proposed is: 'brand personality is the set of *human personality traits* that are both *applicable to* and *relevant for* brands'. A stricter definition means a definition that enables a delineation of what is included in and what is excluded from the concept, as suggested by Churchill.<sup>73</sup>

### **The main problematic items of the scale**

The current scale of so-called 'brand personality' encompasses dimensions conceptually distinct from the pure concept of personality. The items in the scale will now be analysed.

#### *The item 'competence'*

Aaker's scale holds 'competence' as a major factor or trait among the five identified. Competence refers to a know-how (in the case of brands), or to an ability to carry out something properly. The definition of personality in psychology does, however, exclude any item related to abilities or cognitive capacities. Most psychologists exclude intelligence — as a cognitive ability — from their personality tests.

Note that the adjectives 'productive', 'well-organised' and '(intellectually) efficient' are descriptors of personality (McCrae and Costa<sup>74</sup>), but they do not relate to cognitive ability. These items are applicable to brands, but not in the framework of brand personality: they are relevant to fields such as organisation studies, control of organisations or strategy. These items are therefore applicable but not relevant. This point cannot be made if there is no strict prior definition of the brand personality concept as suggested in this paper.

#### *The item 'feminine'*

For the item-generation step, Aaker added some items related to gender, social class and age. She bears out her choice by quoting Levy who wrote: 'researchers argue that brand personality includes demographic characteristics such as gender [which may be all the more true in the languages wherein there is a neutral pronoun to talk about inanimates]..., age..., and class'.<sup>75</sup> By following this advice, one confounds the personality of the brand itself (source of the product) and the personality of the purported receiver or target, as portrayed in the brand's advertising. Another problem is that

the item 'feminine' is a facet of Aaker's model, although gender is absent from psychology scales of personality. In addition, more often than not, 'feminine' is a value judgment. Its meaning is tied to the culture.

#### *The items related to social class*

The authors think that to integrate items related to age and social class is also problematic. Indeed, if Levy<sup>76</sup> talks about age and social class, he never explicitly says that they are relevant to brand personality. He simply explains that those items are part of the imagery associated with typical users of the brand (user imagery). He states that an age and a social status could be imbued to a brand through its typical users. This argument is significant of a conceptual lack of distinction between the personality of the brand (the sender) and the person to whom the brand seems to be speaking, the person who is being addressed (the receiver) (Kapferer<sup>77,78</sup>). Merging both dimensions introduces confusion and hinders proper brand diagnosis and implementation. These arguments support the authors' belief that without a strict definition of the concept, and without the methodological stage of evaluation of items, the measurement of brand personality may become a 'ragbag'.

#### *Some other questionable items*

Some authors (Davies *et al.*<sup>79</sup>) have tried to replicate Aaker's study in the UK. In their replication, they found that the items 'Western', 'small town' and 'feminine' accounted a lot for the low reliability scores of their study. The relevancy of these items in the framework of personality is ques-

tionable. The presence of 'Western' is a typical illustration of ethnocentrism in marketing research. Why are the equivalent terms 'Asian' or 'Latin' absent? Are the brands of the world either Western or not?

Most importantly, the concept refers to the value system underneath the brand — what Kapferer<sup>80,81</sup> calls its 'cultural underpinnings, its cultural facet' in the brand identity prism (see Figure 1). The brand identity prism captures the key facets of a brand's identity: brand personality *stricto sensu*, as defined above, is just one of these.

#### **The flaws of the scale stem from its conceptual definition**

The weaknesses of the current scale of brand personality derive from its construction methodology, itself embedded in the flawed concept definition.

For item generation, in order to be as exhaustive as possible and not to forget any item, Aaker<sup>82</sup> generated 309 items from four sources. The first three were:

- literature review of scales used in psychology to measure personality
- personality scales used by marketers (academicians and practitioners)
- items generated by qualitative studies.

These three sources were then completed by:

- a free association task performed by respondents who were asked to elicit personality traits that they would associate with some brands.

The problem stems from the sources that generated the items. As mentioned

before, early practitioners took the concept of brand personality to have a global, extended meaning. In this way, the concept covers a variety of separate constructs: the personality itself, but also the values, the reflection of the typical or stereotypical buyer, and so on — all different facets of brand identity. As a consequence, many items of the so-called brand personality scale are in fact measuring classical dimensions of product performance. Recent empirical research by Romaniuk and Ehrenberg<sup>83</sup> demonstrates this point: the authors analysed the average trait attributions of Aaker's scale across 12 markets and 118 brands. The brands most associated with the so-called brand personality item 'energetic' are energiser drinks; the item 'sensuous' is most associated with ice cream brands; and 'up to date' is attributed most to computers and electronic equipment.

## CONCLUSION

As demonstrated in this paper, the existing measures for the construct of brand personality do not measure that construct, and introduce conceptual confusion. They measure instead other classical facets of brand identity, even perceived product performance; recent empirical research has reinforced this conclusion. It seems that prior to the construction of a valid measurement of the construct of brand personality, there must be a strict definition of the construct, as well as the clarifying of the conceptual difference between this concept and the closely related ones. As Churchill<sup>84</sup> wrote, one should always be aware that 'the first in the suggested procedure for developing better measures involves specifying the domain of the construct ... what is

included in the definition, and what is excluded ... Researchers should have good reasons for proposing additional *new* measures given the many available for most marketing constructs of interest'. That is why this paper has tried to analyse in detail both the shortcomings of the existing definition and the existing scales' ability to measure the concept of brand personality before proposing a new methodology.

The present so-called brand personality scale merges all the human characteristics applicable to brands under one blanket word — 'personality' — thus losing the distinctiveness of the facets of brand identity; personality being only one of them. It is time to restrict the use of the concept of brand personality to the meaning it should never have lost: 'the unique set of human personality traits both applicable and relevant to brands'.

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