

## **Is Brand Personality An Antecedent To Quality Perceptions?**

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### **Abstract**

The specific question that this exploratory paper sought to answer within the globally competitive higher education context was: do the basic brand personality perceptions of sincerity, excitement and competence, once location and aspirational brand personality perceptions of sophistication and ruggedness are controlled for, explain variation in perceptions of quality? The results from this study suggest that quality is influenced by an individual's perceptions of the university's competence. Such initial research as this should be seen as providing early insights that need further replication. For managers responsible for creating university brand images it seems that for postgraduate business students studying in Australia and in the UK, messages of dependability and achievement, that is competence, are more important than those of sophistication.

Keywords: brand personality; brand management; higher education

## Is Brand Personality An Antecedent To Quality Perceptions?

### Literature Review

Brand personality has been described in the literature from either a theoretical or practitioner perspective (see: Aaker and Fournier 1995; Aaker 1997; Aaker, Benet-Martinez et al. 2001; Aaker, Fournier et al. 2004), whereby the theoretical approach focuses on the brand as a tool to meet and fulfil customers' psychological needs, whereas the practitioner perspective resonates around the question: how does brand personality create brand differentiation? (see: Biel 1993; Halliday 1996). The concept of brand personality has been defined as: *...the set of human characteristics associated with a brand* by Aaker (1997, p.347). A commonly cited measure of brand personality was developed by Aaker (1997) which was tested within an American population (see: Austin, Siguaw et al. 2003; Diamantopoulos, Smith et al. 2005; Freling and Forbes 2005; Sung and Tinkham 2005; Ang and Lim 2006). Aaker's (1997) measure identified five dimensions of brand personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness. Sincerity has been described by Aaker (1997) as down-to-earth, real, sincere and honest. The excitement brand personality dimension is represented by attributes like daring, exciting, imaginative and contemporary. Competence is reflected in traits like intelligent, reliable, secure, and confident (Aaker 1997). The sophistication dimension is represented by attributes such as glamorous, upper class, good looking and charming; and the ruggedness dimension is represented by tough, outdoorsy, masculine and western traits (Aaker 1997). These dimensions of brand personality were found to be reliable, valid and generalisable (see: Aaker 1997; Aaker, Benet-Martinez et al. 2001).

Aaker et al. (2001) have argued that sincerity, excitement, and competence cover the relatively basic tendencies that apply to both humans and brands, whereas sophistication and ruggedness capture more aspirational images associated with wealth and status, and a rugged individualism. This study will explore an under researched area: do the basic brand personality perceptions of sincerity, excitement and competence, once location and aspirational brand personality perceptions of sophistication and ruggedness are controlled for, explain variation in perceptions of quality? It is unclear whether in an educational brand context, if basic brand personality tendencies: sincerity, excitement and competence, or aspirational items: sophistication and ruggedness are more important in predicting perceptions of quality. Images that show the sophistication of university buildings and facilities and the ruggedness of sporting programs are often used to promote universities in international marketing initiatives especially within North America (Twitchell 2005).

Even though there is a growing interest in the branding of universities there is no publication in the extant literature that looks at how brand personality may be applicable to the university sector. This research explores whether the measures of brand personality developed by Aaker (1997) for use in a more product based context apply to a more service based context, such as a university. It is unclear if the constructs will remain reliable in this context and if they do act as predictors to other constructs such as quality.

Quality is difficult to define (Garvin 1988), and becomes even more challenging to define in complex service environments like higher education service provision. Quality perceptions within a complex service environment like higher education service provision has been defined as either: subject-centred, teacher-centred or student-centred (see: Pennington and O'Neil 1994; Martens and Prosser 1998). It is acknowledged that perceptions of quality have

close relationships with consumer satisfaction levels and loyalty behaviours; as well as market share and profitability (Llosa, Chandon et al. 1998; Lin, Durden et al. 2000). The concept of quality has been described as a consumer's overall evaluation of a service experience (Aldridge and Rowley 1998). Perceptions of quality are not an objective measure of quality as it captures consumer perceptions and judgements and needs to be defined in accordance with an intended purpose and a set of alternatives (see: Aaker 1991; Sharp, Page et al. 2000). The concept of perceived quality has more recently been defined as: *...the customer's judgement of the overall excellence, esteem, or superiority of a brand (with respect to its intended purposes) relative to alternative brand(s)* (Netemeyer, Krishnan et al. 2004, p. 210), and that the perceived quality is a level of abstraction higher than any single attribute and is an attitudinal assessment of a brand. Within the university context, such brand perceptions of quality may be influenced by aspirational desires.

This research is significant in that it tests the relationship observed in fast moving consumer goods such as apparel, alcohol, fragrances, laundry detergent, medication and toothpaste (Aaker, Benet-Martinez et al. 2001) and see if it can be generalised to the 'slow moving service' industry. This is an important question both academically and for practitioners. It is important academically as it contributes to theory building in the brand personality area. Managerially it is important as it means that insights emerging from brand personality research may have generalisability to the university sector. This research has two related questions: does perception of brand personality aspects predict perception of quality?; and are brand personality aspects commonly associated with universities such as competence stronger predictors than other more aspirational aspects associated with products such as sophistication and ruggedness?

### **This Study**

The total sample consisted of 178 postgraduate business students of which 103 were studying in Australia and 75 studying in the UK. All participants were asked to rate: to what extent did Aaker's (1997) 42 brand personality traits describe their university using a seven point likert scale, where 1 = not at all descriptive to 7 = extremely descriptive; and to rate the items within Netemeyer et al.'s (2004) quality dimension using the seven point likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The Cronbach's alphas for the likert scales ranged from 0.74 to 0.91 (see the diagonal in Table 1). The specific hypotheses examined in this study are:

- H<sub>1</sub>: That university location (Australia or the UK); postgraduate business students' basic brand personality perceptions (sincerity, excitement and competence); and aspirational brand personality perceptions (sophistication and ruggedness) are significantly correlated at the zero-order level with their perceptions of quality.
- H<sub>2</sub>: Postgraduate business students' basic brand personality perceptions (sincerity, excitement and competence) once university location (Australia or the UK) and aspirational brand personality perceptions (sophistication and ruggedness) are controlled for, will each explain unique variation in their perceptions of quality.

### **Results**

The results are presented in two parts to test the hypotheses. Table 1 below presents the correlations testing hypothesis one. As outlined in Table 1 below hypothesis one was partially

supported, as Australian study location was not significant, whilst all the basic and aspirational brand personality perceptions were significant at a zero-order level with quality.

**Table 1: Correlation Matrix**

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Australian Study Location	--						
2. Sincerity (Basic)	-0.071	0.811					
3. Excitement (Basic)	-0.198**	0.623**	0.883				
4. Competence (Basic)	-0.023	0.578**	0.576**	0.877			
5. Sophistication (Aspirational)	-0.309**	0.519**	0.622**	0.477**	0.848		
6. Ruggedness (Aspirational)	-0.355**	0.312**	0.412**	0.273**	0.587**	0.741	
7. Quality	0.102	0.443**	0.404**	0.607**	0.363**	0.158*	0.906

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed);\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Cronbach's alphas are on the diagonal.

The hierarchical regression used to test hypothesis two is presented in Table 2 below. For the first step in the hierarchical regression (model 1), the multiple  $R$  (0.428) was statistically significant,  $R^2 = 0.183$ ,  $F(3, 174) = 12.972$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , for Australian study location and aspirational brand personality perceptions: sophistication and ruggedness. The introduction of the basic brand personality perceptions: sincerity, excitement and competence into the second step (model 2) of the hierarchical regression caused  $R^2$  to change from 0.183 to 0.407. The multiple  $R$  (0.638) was statistically significant,  $R^2 = 0.407$ ,  $F(6, 171) = 21.528$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The R Square Change statistic and Sig. F Change value shows that the basic brand personality perceptions make a significant contribution of 22.4% to the variance of perceptions in quality after Australian study location and aspirational brand personality perceptions are controlled for. As outlined in Table 2 below, the standardised regression coefficient (Beta) for one basic brand personality perception: competence was significant. Even though the five brand personality aspects were significant at the zero-order level, examination of the semi-partials reveals that there is high common variance. Competence contributes 13.4% of the unique variance ( $sr^2 = 0.366^2$ ). Hypothesis two was only partially supported, as the other two basic brand personality perception dimensions: sincerity and excitement were not significant, when Australian study location and the aspirational brand personality perceptions of sophistication and ruggedness were controlled for.

**Table 2: Quality Hierarchical Regression**

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Correlations		
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Zero-order	Partial	Part
Model 1	Constant	1.645	0.451		3.643	0.000			
	Australian Study Location	0.584	0.186	0.232	3.138	0.002	0.102	0.231	0.215
	Sophistication (Aspirational)	0.565	0.108	0.449	5.251	0.000	0.363	0.370	0.360
	Ruggedness (Aspirational)	-0.028	0.104	-0.023	-0.271	0.787	0.158	-0.020	-0.019
Model 2	Constant	-0.808	0.519		-1.557	0.121			
	Australian Study Location	0.382	0.163	0.152	2.349	0.020	0.102	0.177	0.138
	Sophistication (Aspirational)	0.171	0.111	0.136	1.532	0.127	0.363	0.116	0.090
	Ruggedness (Aspirational)	-0.051	0.090	-0.042	-0.564	0.574	0.158	-0.043	-0.033
	Sincerity (Basic)	0.163	0.134	0.099	1.220	0.224	0.443	0.093	0.072
	Excitement (Basic)	0.036	0.122	0.026	0.297	0.767	0.404	0.023	0.018
	Competence (Basic)	0.694	0.093	0.485	6.215	0.000	0.607	0.429	0.366

Dependent Variable: Quality

These results suggest that for this sample of postgraduate business students studying in either Australia or in the UK, the basic brand personality perception of competence explained added variance in perceptions of quality once study location and the aspirational brand personality perceptions were controlled for.

## Discussion

The results from this study are significant as they suggest that quality is influenced by an individual's perceptions of the university's competence within an Australian and British context. The practical implication of this insight is that for managers responsible for the marketing of universities is that understanding what constitutes competence from a student perception is important. Competence is associated with the brand personality elements of intelligent, reliable, sincere and confident and the personality characteristics of dependability and achievement. This research suggests that these brand messages need to anchor university brand exercises. Therefore images that reinforce dependability and achievement may be the most important to focus on. Whether such branding extends to the North American context is unclear. The brand personality dimensions of sophistication and ruggedness did positively correlate to perceptions of quality but did not explain any unique variation in perceptions of quality once the basic brand personality dimensions of sincerity, excitement and competence were controlled for. Australian respondents had a higher perception of quality even when the brand personality dimensions were controlled for the British respondents.

Such initial research as this should be seen as providing early insights that need further replication. For managers responsible for creating university brand images it seems that for this sample, messages of dependability and achievement, that is competence, are more important than those of sophistication. The findings of this study opens another area where the concept of brand personality may be fruitfully used for research. This study's contribution

is that it supports the contention that brand personality can be used as a theoretical approach and from a practitioner perspective within the higher education sector.

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