

## An analysis of effect of Brand personality on store loyalty in Iran's food industry

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, marketing research has paid considerable attention to the symbolic meaning consumers attribute to brands. Given its highly competitive nature, branding can be especially important in the retailing industry to influence customer perceptions and drive store choice and loyalty. This study focuses on the impact of two antecedents of five personality traits of retailer on trust and attitude toward the private brand, as well as on one major consequence of these three concepts, loyalty to the retailer in Iranian industry of food. Data were collected through a natural experiment on a convenience sample of 226 consumers of an Iranian grocery retailer (Yaran Daryan) with Using partial least squares analysis (PLS). The results indicate that private brand trust has a significant influence on the retailer personality traits “conscientiousness” and “sophistication. trust and attitude toward the private brand have a significant influence loyalty to the retailer while retailer personality traits have no influence on this variable.*

**Keywords:** *Retailer personality, Private brand, Trust Attitude Loyalty*

### INTRODUCTION

There is a tendency today towards an increasing perceived quality level of retail brands in many countries (e.g., Huang and Huddleston, 2009; Kumar and Steenkamp, 2007; Quelch and Harding, 1996). scholars and marketers consider consumer perceptions of brands to be of high importance because they influence preferences for different brands. Brand personality has been a popular topic in the marketing literature for over 50 years (Martineau, 1957; Dolich, 1969; Hamm and Cundiff 1969; Aaker, 1997; Wee, 2004; Freling and Forbes, 2005a, 2005b; Govers and Schoormans, 2005; Ramaseshan and Tsao, 2007). In studying brand perceptions, scholars have examined brand as a personified object, carrying human characteristics (Aaker 1997; Batra et al. 1993). With brands emerging as top management's priority (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004), marketing managers and researchers have shifted their interest towards the symbolic meaning consumers attribute to brands (e.g., Das et al., 2012; Willems et al., 2011). The symbolic meanings refer to the signal effect of using brands, which means what the brands say about the consumer to the consumer and to others (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004). The signal effect of brands may be based on the image of a typical user of the brand and/or the personality of the brand itself (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004, p. 206). Moreover, retailer personality

influences consumers' behavior: trust (Goueron, 2006; Lombart and Louis, 2012b), attachment (Goueron, 2006; Lombart and Louis, 2012b), commitment (Ben Sliman et al., 2005; Lombart and Louis, 2012b), satisfaction (Lombart and Louis, 2012a), attitude (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004; Ben Sliman et al., 2005; Lombart and Louis, 2012b) and loyalty to the retailer (Merrilees and Miller, 2001; Zentes et al., 2008; Das et al., 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Lombart and Louis; 2014).

Although many important branding principles apply, retailer brands are sufficiently different from product brands that the actual application of those branding principles can vary. Retailer brands are typically more

multi-sensory in nature than product brands and can rely on rich consumer experiences to impact their equity. Retailers also create their brand images in different ways, e.g., by attaching unique associations to the quality of their service, their product assortment and merchandising, pricing and credit policy, etc. so, being memorable (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000), meaningful (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2004), emotionally powerful (Upshaw, 1995), long term (Temporal, 2001), and consistent (LePla and Parker, 1999), symbolic brand benefits take pivotal role in influencing several important aspects of consumer behavior like loyalty towards brands (Sirgy et al., 1997). Thus, focusing on symbolic brand benefits, literature reveals two streams of research: brand personality (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004).

However, most of the existing literature has focused on defining the construct (e.g. Aaker, 1997; Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003), developing and refining scales (e.g. Aaker, 1997; Aaker et al., 2001; Austin et al., 2003) and studying the effects of brand personality on other brand-related variables (e.g. Siguaw et al., 1999; Freling and Forbes, 2005a; Govers and Schoormans, 2005; Ramaseshan and Tsao, 2007). Only a few studies explore the nature of brand personality and identify its source. In this regard, marketing researchers argued that “branding and brand management principle can and should be applied to retail brands” (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004, p. 340). As a result, it is now being applied to retail brands also, bringing in a change from the past when it was only applied to product brands (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004; d'Astous and Levesque, 2003). Here retail brand means retailers as brands or retail stores as brands (Das et al., 2012; Zentes et al., 2008). In retail branding context, very few studies explored the link between symbolic brand benefits and store loyalty (e.g., Zentes et al., 2008)

this study examines the influence of trust in the private brand and attitude toward private brand on retailer personality. The influence of these three variables on loyalty to the retailer is also analyzed. This study will thus supplement current works on the antecedents of retailer personality (Merrilees and Miller, 2001; Brengman and

Willems, 2009; Das et al., 2013; Lombart and Louis, 2014). Moreover, by considering retailer as a brand, this research is in line with the widening of the conceptualization of the brand in retail research: from the product as a brand to the store as a brand and most recently to the retailer as a brand (Burt and Davies, 2010). Finally, by focusing on private. Therefore, the current study contributes to the literature on brand personality by exploring the process of brand personality formation on the dimensional level – or specifically, whether and how consumers form assessment of brands that possess the five personality characteristics identified in Aaker's (1997) study.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THE BRAND PERSONALITY CONCEPT**

Brand image is defined as a 'cluster of attributes and associations that consumers connect to the name' (Biel 1993, p. 71). Brand image is also described as brand equity, when brand names are viewed as a financial asset adding value to the product carrying the brand. Usually, brands that are well known or well-regarded serve as a 'halo' to the product carrying the brand name. Strong brand names can often be extended into new product categories, saving companies the expense of establishing a new brand name. Consumer perceptions of a brand stimulate purchase decisions, which in turn have an effect on market share. Thus, brand image is a strategically developed marketing tool, considered a powerful asset, and capable of generating higher profits compared to brands without the recognition or reputation (Kim, 2000, p. 244). Furthermore, several studies assert that consumers find it natural to build relationships with brands (Fournier, 1998) and to imbue them with different personality characteristics, such as 'honest', or 'cheerful' (Aaker, 1997; Malhotra, 1981; Plummer, 1985). Moreover, as is true of personality traits associated with an individual, those associated with brands tend to be relatively enduring and distinct (Aaker, 1997; Wee, 2004) the association of human personality traits with "objects" that are not human refers to the theory of anthropomorphism or "the tendency to imbue the real or imagined behavior of nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions" (Epley et al., 2007). Following their theoretical investigation of social psychology research, Freling and Forbes (2005) assert that anthropomorphism is a natural and inevitable human tendency that infiltrates the daily thoughts and actions of most individuals and influences people's perceptions and responses throughout their lifetime. Humans need to anthropomorphize objects, especially those with which they interact frequently, to give more meaning to the world in which they live and to grasp it more easily (Waytz et al., 2010).

The term 'brand personality' is used to describe those human characteristics which consumers can associate with brands (Aaker 1997). For example, human trait words such as reliable-unreliable, old-young and conforming-rebellious can be used to measure brand personality (Batra et al. 1993). Anthropomorphic research offers several explanations for why people tend to grant human qualities to objects (Guthrie, 1993). First, anthropomorphizing makes non-human objects seem

more human, and thus more familiar. Second, people gain comfort and reassurance when interacting with objects they have anthropomorphized. Finally, by ascribing human characteristics to objects, people decrease their uncertainty in a complex, ambiguous world (Otnes, and Supphellen, 2011). However, for consumers, brand personality performs another highly important function. Specifically, research demonstrates that consumers use products as a sort of language in social groups (Lannon and Cooper, 1983); thus, brands can serve as conduits that communicate about consumers' identities, status and aspirations. This symbolic use of brands is only possibly, however, because consumers imbue brands with human personality traits.

As early as 1958, Pierre Martineau introduced the idea that stores have a personality, which he presented as "the way in which the store is defined in the shopper's mind, partly by its functional qualities and partly by an aura of psychological attributes" (Martineau, 1958, p. 47). He identified the following aspects, which he termed "personality factors", as potential sources of inference for the construction of a store personality: layout and architecture, symbols and colors, advertising, and sales personnel. Although Martineau (1958) used the term *store personality* in his classic article, his discussion was actually centered on the concept of store image, which, as argued here, is a different concept. Whereas store image is a mental representation that encompasses all dimensions that are associated with a store (value for money, product selection, quality of service, etc.; e.g., Marcus, 1972), store personality is restricted to those mental dimensions that correspond to human traits.

Retailer personality may be defined as the set of human personality traits associated with a retailer. Adaptation to retailers of the concepts developed in the field of brands such as personality owes much to Ailawadi and Keller (2004). These authors recommend that marketing researchers apply to retailers the principles related to brands and their management. Brands and retailers indeed share many similarities in terms of signs used to recognize them, functions filled for clients and mix (marketing mix for manufacturers and retailing mix for retailers). Biel (1993) notes that the emotional characteristics of brand image, such as brand personality, are often far more differentiated because they are less constrained by the physical attributes of the products. In relation, brand personality has longevity, possessing more enduring value. He suggests that brand personality requires consumers to process the brand's image more actively in a personally meaningful way. Like brand image, brand personality traits were found to be associated with product-related attributes and product category associations (Batra et al. 1993). In this regard, the concept of brand personality has gained increasing attention in the marketing literature.

Both practitioners and researchers have long recognized that brands, like humans, have distinct personalities that may differentiate them in the minds of consumers (Plummer, 1984). Brand personality may also influence consumers' preference (Sirgy, 1982), develop emotional ties with the brand (Biel, 1993) and create trust and loyalty (Fournier, 1998). According to Caprara et al. (2001), personality is a valid metaphor for brands. The

underlying idea is that consumers develop affinities with brands according to their own personality (Koebel and Ladwein, 1999). At a conceptual level, the face validity of retailer personality has been embraced by several researchers. For instance, Freling and Forbes (2005), through focus groups, in-depth interviews and document analysis (product/service usage diary and respond to various open-ended questions), revealed that “Nordstrom department store chain has a very elegant, exclusive, pampered brand personality”. Zentes et al. (2008), through a quantitative study, showed the “high values in competence, sincerity and ruggedness and low values in excitement and sophistication of the Aldi discount store chain” and that “Douglas, the German market leader in perfumes and beauty care, is especially strong on sophistication”.

Referring to Plummer (1985), perceptions of retailer personality traits can be formed and influenced by any direct or indirect contact that the consumer has with the retailer. Personality traits could be associated with a retailer in a direct way by the people associate with the retailer: the endorsers, the typical or targeted consumers, the retailer’s employees, etc. (Aaker, 1997; Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003; Wentzel, 2009). In this way, the personality traits of the different people (for instance, retailer’s employees) associated with the retailer would be transferred directly to the retailer (McCracken, 1989). Wentzel (2009) showed, however, that the extent to which an employee’s behavior is generalized to a brand (of products or services) depends on the extent to which the employee is subtyped. When the employee is considered primarily as an exemplar of the brand’s workforce, his or her behavior is generalized more strongly to the brand. By contrast, when the employee is judged as a relative unique individual (i.e., when the employee is subtyped), the behavior is not transferred to the brand to the full extent. In addition, personality traits could be associated with a retailer in an indirect way through retailer name, logo or symbol, websites, marketing messages, ads, etc. (Aaker, 1997; Freling and Forbes, 2005; Johar et al., 2005; Zentes et al., 2008).

In this regard, the primary focus of previous studies in the field of retailer personality has been on understanding the effects of this concept. Several authors have thus examined the consequences of retailer personality: trust, attachment, commitment, satisfaction, attitude and loyalty toward the retailer. Only a few empirical studies have actually examined which cues evoke specific store personality traits. Darden and Babin (1994) looked at the relationships between perceptions of tangible, functional quality (i.e. “discount prices”, “store personnel”, “quality”, and “crowding”) and more affective personality traits (i.e. “pleasant”, “unpleasant”, “active” and “sleepy”, cf. Russell and Pratt, 1980). In their exploratory study Merrilees and Miller (2002) have attempted to identify controllable antecedents of brand personality. They focused on relating particular image attributes of discount department stores (merchandise, staffing, store atmosphere, pricing and location – presented in a predetermined list) to two of the five “general” brand personality dimensions identified by Aaker (1997): “sincerity” and “competence”. Finally, Fortin and Clark (2005) focused on one specific source of inference, namely color in the retailer’s web site, while applying the “specific” store personality scale developed

by d’Astous and Le’vesque (2003). By means of an experimental design they found evidence that web site color considerably affects perceptions of store personality of the e-tailer.

Goueron (2006) demonstrated the positive and significant influence of two retailer personality traits (autonomy and sincerity) on credibility and integrity, two facets of consumers’ trust in the retailer. Lombart and Louis (2012b) showed that the personality traits congeniality, originality, preciousness and conscientiousness have a positive and significant impact on three facets of trust in the retailer: integrity, credibility and benevolence. The trait seduction has also a positive and significant influence but only on the benevolence facet. The trait introversion has a negative and significant influence on the three facets of trust. Ben Sliman et al. (2005) found that the reassuring personality trait has a significant positive influence on commitment to the retailer. Lombart and Louis (2012b) demonstrated that the personality trait creativity has a positive and significant influence on affective and continuance commitments while conscientiousness has a positive and significant impact on affective commitment only. Lombart and Louis (2012a) indicated the positive and significant impact of four retailer personality traits (congeniality, originality, conscientiousness and preciousness) on consumers’ satisfaction with the retailer. Researchers have also demonstrated the positive and significant influence of retailer personality on consumers’ attitude toward the retailer. Helgeson and Supphellen (2004) found a positive and significant influence of modern and classic retailer personality traits. Ben Sliman et al. (2005) found an effect of the trait seduction. Lombart and Louis (2012a) noted the positive and significant impact of the traits congeniality and originality on consumers’ attitude toward the retailer. Guzmán et al. (2009) first sought to pinpoint the antecedents of a fashion retailer personality assessed by five personality traits (sophistication, solidity, genuineness, enthusiasm, and unpleasantness) proposed by d’Astous and Lévesque (2003). In an exploratory qualitative study with 70 consumers, they identified five main types of antecedents: (1) the environment of points of sale (i.e., ambiance, design, other customers and salespeople present in stores); (2) merchandise offered (i.e., price, quality, assortment and style); (3) retailer’s reputation (including advertising by the store, Corporate Social Responsibility policy, word-of-mouth from customers and their attitude toward the retailer); (4) services offered; and (5) store’s format and location.

Based on five retailer personality traits (sophistication, enthusiasm, solidity, genuineness and unpleasantness) proposed by d’Astous and Lévesque (2003), Guzmán, Brengman and Willems (2009) first indicated that the merchandise offered by a retailer (i.e., fashion retailer) is a particularly important factor in enhancing its personality. Specifically, Brengman and Willems (2009) pointed out that consumers’ inference that a retailer is ‘upscale’ (pertaining to the sophistication trait) is based on the higher price range and the exclusivity of the brands (e.g., designer brands or haute couture clothing). Consumers consider a retailer as ‘dynamic’ (pertaining to the enthusiasm trait) if this retailer frequently updates its assortment not to be perceived as a static fashion store.



In the same vein, a 'solid' (pertaining to the solidity trait) retailer offers a wide assortment of fashionable quality clothes at fair prices. Consumers recognize a 'reliable' (pertaining to the genuineness trait) retailer on the basis of the quality goods it sells. In the same line, a retailer is perceived by its consumers as 'conscientious' (pertaining to the genuineness trait) if its stores do not sell goods made by manufacturers that violate human rights. Lastly, a 'superficial' (pertaining to the unpleasantness trait) retailer proposes clothing without character.

According to five ad hoc (Das et al., 2012) retailer personality traits) sophistication, empathy, dependability, authenticity and vibrancy), Das et al. (2013) then showed that product style and variety have a positive and significant impact on the sophistication, empathy, vibrancy and authenticity personality traits. Considering this last personality trait, Merrilees and Miller (2001) found that the perceptions of the sincerity personality trait of Aaker (1997) brand personality scale were mainly driven by merchandising and pricing elements of a discount department store. So, the impact of consumers' perceptions of the private brand offered by a retailer on its personality will be grasped by the concepts of consumers' trust in the brand and attitude toward the private brand. Generally, researchers exploring the dimensionality of consumers' perceptions or image of a brand (Lassar et al., 1995; Broyles et al., 2009) or a retailer (Pappu and Quester, 2006; Broyles et al., 2009) or a store (Beristain and Zorrilla, 2011; Gil-Saura et al., 2013) consider the concept of attitude and/or trust. Specifically in the field of retailing, Jara and Cliquet (2012) pointed out that attitude and trust are two dimensions of consumers' image or perceptions of a private brand. While attitude toward a brand corresponds to consumers' evaluation of this brand (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993), trust in a brand reflects a set of cumulative presumptions (Aurier and N'Goala, 2010) regarding the credibility, integrity and benevolence that consumers attribute to this brand (Gurviez and Korchia, 2002). Furthermore, Fournier (1998) first maintained that trust is a determining factor in developing a favorable attitude toward a brand. Lastly, Merrilees and Miller (2001) have shown that the retailer personality trait sincerity has a positive and significant influence on consumers' loyalty to the store. Zentes et al. (2008) demonstrated that the retailer personality traits competence, sincerity, excitement and sophistication have a positive and significant impact on consumers' attitude toward the brand has been then validated in several studies (e.g., Okazaki et al., 2007; Hérault, 2012). Trust is also an antecedent of consumers' loyalty. The positive and significant influence of trust on loyalty (measured by future behavioral intentions) has been demonstrated (e.g., Lin et al., 2011; Stanaland et al., 2011). Store loyalty is an important construct because loyalty links to financial performance of the company (Ittner and Larcker, 1998). In the area of retailing, Merrilees and Miller (2001), Morschett et al. (2007) and Zentes et al. (2008) showed that retailer personality traits have a significant positive influence on loyalty to the store. More precisely, the significant positive influence of retailer personality (or of personality traits) on consumers' attitude toward that retailer (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004; Ben Sliman et al., 2005) and loyalty to the store (Morschett et al., 2007; Zentes et al., 2008), has been

demonstrated. Based on the above studies, we propose the following hypotheses.

*trust in the private brand (H1a) and attitude toward the private brand (H1b) have a positive influence on the retailer personality traits agreeableness, sophistication and conscientiousness, and a negative influence on the traits disingenuousness and introversion. Trust in the private brand has a positive influence on attitude toward the private brand (H2). Trust in the private brand has a positive influence on loyalty to the retailer (H3). Attitude toward the private brand has a positive influence on loyalty to the retailer (H4). The retailer personality traits sophistication and conscientiousness have a positive influence on loyalty to the retailer (H5).*

## Methodology

The retailer chosen was Yaran Daryan. This retailer has a strong presence in Iran. The study was conducted on a convenience sample of 230 individuals, ages 20–35, within in it. With regard to the size of sample, 300 questionnaires were distributed, In total 226 completed. Questionnaire were obtained from Yaran Daryan.

Consumers' trust in the private brand was measured using eight items from the scale developed by Gurviez and Korchia (2002). This trust scale includes three dimensions: credibility (three items), integrity (three items) and benevolence (two items). Consumers' attitude toward the private brand was measured using three items inspired by Spears and Singh (2004). Consumers' perceptions of retailer personality were measured using the 23-item scale developed by Ambroise and Valette-Florence (2010) to measure brand personality. This scale comprises six positive (congeniality, creativity, seduction, preciousness, originality and conscientiousness) and three negative first-order traits (dominance, deceitfulness and introversion). For each item on these measurement scales, consumers were asked to indicate their degree of agreement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "disagree completely" to "agree completely." Consumers' loyalty to the retailer was measured using two dimensions of two items each. Whereas the first focused on future behavioral intentions toward the private brand products (two items on intentions to buy and recommend these products), the second concerned future behavioral intentions towards the retailer's stores (two items on intentions to visit and recommend the stores) (Zeithaml et al., 1996; Soyoung and Byoungho, 2001). For each of the items of these two dimensions, consumers had to indicate a level of probability on a five-point likelihood scale ranging from "very improbable" to "very probable."

In this regard, to assess the reliability of questionnaire, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  value was applied. To examine that, a pre-test was carried out on sample with 65 respondents and 60 practical questionnaires were collected. The conclusion shows that Cranach's value of each variable was more than 0/7. The least significant reliability for research questionnaires is 0/7; thus, this questionnaire was recognized reliable. The hypotheses of this study were reported in the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework of this study basically describes

the multiple dependence–independence relationships. So, instead of running several multiple regression analyses, we used structural equation modeling (SEM), a multivariate technique combining aspects of factor analysis and multiple regression that enables the researcher to simultaneously examine a series of interrelated dependence relationships among the measured variables and latent constructs (variables) as well as between several latent constructs, to test the conceptual framework of this study. confirmatory factor analysis was performed on the data collected using the partial least squares method (PLS) with a bootstrap procedure (200 iterations) (Tenenhaus et al., 2005). Factor loadings above 0.50 and statistically significant at 1% were satisfactory

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The result indicates that trust in the private brand has a positive and significant influence on retailer personality traits studied: agreeableness (path coefficient (PC)= 0.347,  $t=3.878$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) conscientiousness (PC= 0.453,  $t= 7.781$ ,  $P<0.01$ ) and sophistication (PC 0.623,  $t= 9.561$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). In contrast, trust in the private brand has no impact on the personality traits introversion and disingenuousness. Hypothesis H1a is therefore partly supported by our data. Attitude toward the private brand has also a positive and significant influence on the personality trait agreeableness (PC0.286,  $t=3.366$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Hypothesis H1b is therefore partially supported by our data. Our result pointed out that the merchandise offered by a retailer is an important factor in improving its personality (Merrilees and Miller, 2001; Brengman and Willems, 2009 and Das et al. (2013)) Trust in the private brand and attitude toward the private brand explain 44.8% of the variation of the variable agreeableness. Trust in the private brand also explains 32.2% and 28.5% respectively of the variation of the variables conscientiousness and sophistication. These results show that other determinants of retailer personality should be considered to increase the percentage of variance explained for each personality trait. Trust in the private brand (PC= 0.192,  $t=3.675$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and attitude toward the private brand (PC=0.671,  $t= 9.577$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) have a positive and significant influence on loyalty to the retailer (H3, support H4 regarding the influence of attitude toward the private brand on consumers' loyalty to the retailer) Hypothesis H2, addressing the influence of trust in the private brand on attitude toward the private brand is also validated. Trust in the private brand has a positive and significant impact on attitude toward the private brand (PC=0.873,  $t=19.217$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and explains 62.3% of the variation of this variable. Finally, hypothesis H5 which pertains to the influence of retailer personality traits sophistication and conscientiousness on loyalty to the retailer is not supported by our data.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this research is to explore the impact of consumers' perceptions (trust and attitude) of retail brand personality (agreeableness, conscientiousness and sophistication) on consumers' loyalty in department retail store context. Understanding the issues associated with brands and the personality dimensions consumers associate with them not only helps practitioners isolate

the origins of brand personality, but also provides insight into how to develop tailor-made strategies to strengthen (or downplay) particular dimensions. At a managerial level, this study points out that retailer personality is an important concept. Practitioners should consider it when running their satisfaction and loyalty programs. This study shows that the personality traits studied have a different impact according to the dependent variables under consideration—satisfaction, attitude and future behavioral intentions. Considering retailer branding, private brands are a crucial element that retailers should consider and extend in order to create, develop and maintain a relation with their consumers and to build up their loyalty. This result suggests that there may be different steps before the personality built by a retailer, which represents the symbolic aspects of retail branding (Zentes et al., 2008), can influence consumers' loyalty. Future research should consider other food retailers or non-food retailers. or social responsibility versus discount private brand. Furthermore, other antecedents of retailer personality could be considered (e.g., services offered and the environment of the point of sale), to better understand how retailer personality is formed, and thus empirically confirm the results of Brengman and Willems (2009) and Das et al. (2013) issuing from exploratory qualitative studies.

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