"How brand personality can assist in achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in developing countries"

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Abstract

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in a nation's economy, particularly in developing countries. Brand personality has been studied extensively in the literature and adopted almost exclusively by major global brands of large corporations in developed countries. A well-established brand personality allows firms to gain a sustainable competitive advantage. However, brand personality is not widely used across SME product categories, partially because investment in brand personality requires a long-term commitment. Drawing upon anthropomorphization theory and customer-brand relationship theory, this paper proposes two major ways that brand personality plays a key role in fulfilling the SDGs, including 1) building customer-brand relationships and 2) developing competitive advantage for SMEs in developing countries. Implications for future research and managerial practice are provided.

Introduction

In an ever-changing world economy, businesses struggle to gain an advantage over the competition. To help maintain economic stability, the United Nations included two specific goals in the 2030 plan for Sustainable Development (UNSDGs, 2019a). Goal 8 promotes work and economic growth (sustainable competitive advantage), to achieve higher levels of economic productivity (higher company/brand performance) through diversification (differentiation) that focuses on a high value-added activity (creating brand personality). Goal 9 aims to increase the access of small-scale industrial and other enterprises, especially in developing countries, to fundamental factors affecting capability and sustainability. Given that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) account for more than 70 percent of total manufacturing establishments in much of the developing world (Chittithaworn, Islam, Keawchana, and Yusuf, 2011; Jenkins, 2009; Krake, 2005), these entities are vital to a nation's economy (Arbor and Quartey, 2010; Bakiewicz, 2005; Jenkins, 2009; Poole, 2018; Sakolnakorn, 2010). If the world economy is disrupted, the nation's economy would be disrupted as well. Therefore, the high failure rate among well-established small businesses and enterprises is a matter of major concern (Bekele and Worku, 2008). SMEs' competitive advantages are often promoted in marketing strategies such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Jenkins, 2009) and brand equity (Selase Asamoah, 2014). However, discussion of how brand personality may enhance competitive advantages for SMEs is very limited.

Brand personality is a marketing strategy to humanize a brand (Aaker, 1997; Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003; Geuens, Weijters, and Wulf, 2009). When consumers attribute human characteristics to a brand, they bond and connect better with the brand; and thus, tend to favor the brand more (Fournier, 1998; Khan and Ahmed, 2018). In turn, consumers develop and establish a stronger relationship with brands (Caprara, Barbaranelli, and Guido, 2001; Chaplin and Roedder, 2005; Fournier, 1998). A well-established brand personality allows firms to sustain a competitive advantage by providing a means of

differentiation in the midst of tough competition ever as products are increasingly indistinguishable in terms of their attributes and functions (Aaker 1996; Chu and Sung, 2011; Crask and Laskey, 1990; Kim, Han, and Park, 2001; Rutter, Chalvatzis, Roper, and Lettice, 2018). Brand personality has been well-adopted and implemented by large enterprises and major global brands, but not by their smaller-sized counterparts. This is partly because investment in brand personality requires a long-term commitment (Agostini, Filippini, and Nosella, 2015; Odoom, Narteh and Boateng, 2017; Ogilvy, 1986). Consequently, brand personality is not widely used across SME product categories. The aim of this paper is to study how the adoption of brand personality - specifically related to building customer-brand relationships and developing competitive advantages - strongly assists in achieving SDGs 8 and 9, particularly for SMEs in developing countries.
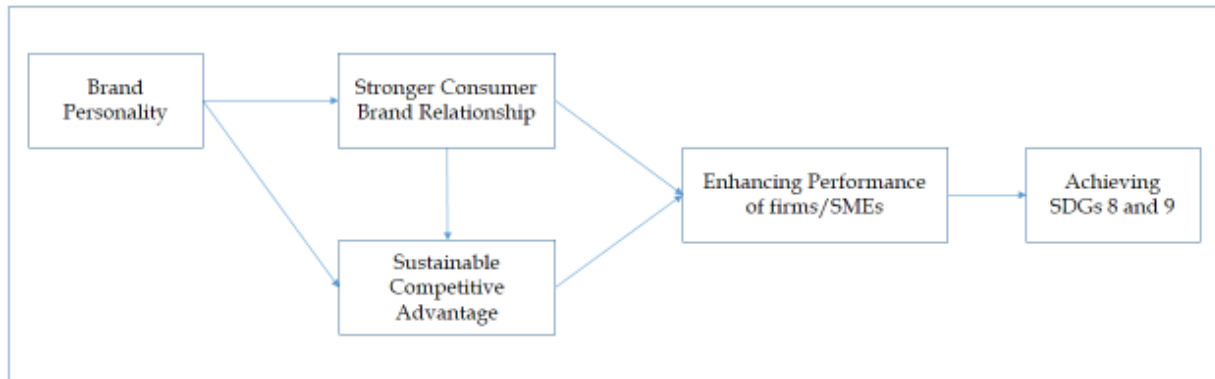
Picture 1. Conceptual Framework of achieving SDGs 8 and 9.

Literature Review
Brand Personality

Advertising experts (e.g., creative and copywriter) and marketing practitioners were the first groups to devise the term 'brand personality' (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003). Over the years, research scholars who are interested in brand personality, have been trying to conceptualize what brand personality is actually referring to. While Plummer (1985) suggested that the characterizational aspects of the brand, such as lively/exotic or modern/old-fashioned, are what we call brand personality; the most widely agreed-upon definition of brand personality was proposed by Aaker (1997, p. 347). She defined brand personality as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand." In a slightly different vein, Fournier (1998) stated that brand personality can be thought of as a set of trait inferences that cohere into a role perception of the brand as a partner in the relationship dyad (Fournier, 1998).

Brand personality can be based on the brand-as-person perspective (Aaker, 1996). According to King (1970), people choose brands the same way they choose their friends. Through interactions with market offerings and marketing communications, customers have come to personify brands as having personality traits (Rutter et al., 2018). Animism, anthropomorphization, and personification are concepts and terms that potentially explain and clarify how a brand can resemble human personality (e.g., Aaker, 1997; Clancy and O'Loughlin, 2002; Davies, Chun, Silva, and Roper, 2004; Gilmore, 1919; Ogilvy, 1983; Plummer, 1985). Hence, the symbolic use of brands is possible because customers often imbue brands with human characteristics or personality traits (Aaker, 1997).

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly established the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Also known as the Global Goals, the SDGs are a universal call to action by all countries (developed and developing) to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity (UNSDGs, 2019a). The goals and targets took effect on 1 January 2016 and would guide the UN decisions for the next 15 years (UNSDGs, 2019b). The SDGs consist of 17 global goals and 169 targets that are interconnected and attest that sustainable development in a country requires multifaceted

policy developments (Tangcharoensathien, Mills, and Palu, 2015). In addition, achieving the SDGs requires collaboration of the public and private sectors, including large and small enterprises (ISO, 2019; UNDP, 2019).

Proposed Methodology
Search process
This study systematically reviewed brand personality scales and factors that impact the SDGs that were published in databases, including Science Direct, Springer link, Emerald Management, Web of Science, ACM Digital Library, Scopus, JSTOR, SJR (Scimago Journal and Country Rank), and Business Source Ultimate. To identify brand personality dimensions, the author gathered key studies about brand personality scales published between 1997 and 2019, as described below.

Study criteria
The articles included in this study focused on the following topics:
- Empirical research articles published in academic journals.
- Empirical research articles that developed brand personality scales in and across product categories and countries.

The articles excluded in this study focused on the following topics:
- Empirical research articles published in non-international journals.
- Empirical research articles that included brand personality scales as independent variables.

Data selection
The data obtained from the selected articles focused on brand personality scale, which vary widely across product categories in developed and developing countries. The data can be observed in Table 1.

Propositions
The aim of this article is to research brand personality that impacts the SDGs; particularly Goals 8 and 9. To that end, the researcher developed two propositions, as follows:

Proposition 1: Developing brand personality through customer-brand relationship will enhance sustainable competitive advantages for a firm.

Proposition 2: Brand personality, as an innovative marketing tool, will enhance SMEs' performance in developing countries.

Analysis and Findings
In this section, the researcher analyzes and describes how brand personality can assist in achieving SDG 8 by building customer-brand relationship.

The Role of Brand Personality toward Sustainable Competitive Advantage
As products are increasingly indistinguishable (Kim, et al., 2001; Rutter et al., 2018), a well-established brand personality allows firms to gain a sustainable competitive advantage by providing a means to differentiate a brand in a product category (Aaker 1996; Chu and Sung, 2011; Crask and Laskey, 1990; Kim et al., 2001). More importantly, it is suggested that when customers identify brands with human characteristics, they can bond and connect better with the brand; and thus, tend to favor the brand more (Khan and Ahmed, 2018). Improved customer-brand connections result because anthropomorphizing brands, in general, aids customers' emotional engagement, which in turn can help create and cultivate a stronger relationship between customers and brands. Numerous research finds that customers are enthusiastic to recognize brands as relationship partners (Aaker, 1996; Blackston, 1993; Hayes, Alford, Silver, and York, 2006; Fournier, 1998). Thus, a well-established brand personality allows firms to gain a sustainable competitive advantage by providing a means to differentiate in a tough competitive environment where product attributes and functions are increasingly indistinguishable (Aaker 1996; Chu and Sung, 2011; Crask and Laskey, 1990; Kim et al., 2001; Rutter et al., 2018).

Proposition 1: Developing brand personality through customer-brand relationship will enhance sustainable competitive advantages for a firm.

The Role of Brand Personality can assist in achieving the SDGs goal

Proposition 1 involves SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth (sustainable competitive advantage), specifically with the aim of achieving higher levels of economic productivity (higher company/brand performance) through diversification (differentiation) that focuses on a high value-added activity (creating brand personality). Thus, the symbolic use of brand personality is considered a high value-added marketing activity that allows a company/brand to gain a sustainable competitive advantage by providing an additional means to differentiate a company/brand in the market.

The Study of Brand Personality as An Innovative Tool

Aaker's research was the first that attempted to develop a theoretical framework of the brand personality construct within the U.S. population (Aaker, 1997). The results showed that there are five factors or dimensions of brand personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Subsequently, several studies have attempted to develop, replicate, and further extend brand personality scales in various categories. These categories include products (e.g., Aaker, Benet-Martinez, and Garolera, 2001; Ferrandi, Valette-Florence, and Fince-Falcy, 2000; Smit, van den Berge, and Franzen, 2002), services (e.g., Esmaeilpour and Hoseini, 2017; Rauschnabel, Krey, Babin, and Ivens, 2016; Schade, Piehler, and Burmann, 2014), and products & services (e.g., Aaker, 1997; Álvarez-Ortiz, and Harris, 2002; Sung, Ahn, and Song, 2015). It should be noted that the study of brand personality scales was mainly conducted in different product and service categories (See Table 1).

Over the past decades, scholars have used the scales to measure brand personality in other categories, including stores (e.g., d'Astous and Levesque, 2003; Das, 2014), corporations (e.g., Davies et al., 2004), non-profit organizations (e.g., Venable, Rose, and Gilbert, 2003; Venable, Rose, Bush, and Gillbert, 2005), industries (e.g., Ha and Janda, 2014; Herbst and Merz, 2011), destinations/cities (e.g., Crockett and Wood, 2002; Glinska and Kilon, 2014; Hosany, Ekinci, and Uysal, 2006; Pereira, Correia, and Schutz, 2015), countries (e.g., d'Astous, and Boujbel, 2007; d'Astous and Li, 2009), online/websites (e.g., Okazaki, 2006; Poddar, Donthu, and Wei, 2009), media (Kim, 2017), and sports teams (Mitsis and Leckie, 2016).

Moreover, the author found that brand personality research has been conducted in many countries (see Table 1), including both developed nations such as Australia (e.g., Crockett and Wood, 2002), Belgium (e.g., Geuens, et al., 2009), and Netherland (e.g., Smit et al., 2002) and developing countries such as China (e.g., d'Astous and Li, 2009), India (e.g., Khandai, Agrawal, and Gulla, 2015), and Mexico (e.g., Romero and de la Paz, 2012). The researcher concluded that several studies have examined brand personality of major global brands in developed countries, but considerably less attention has been given to investigate brand personality of small local brands in developing countries (World Population Review, 2019a, 2019b).

The table is a matrix chart with author/year columns and category rows marked with filled cells.

Column headers (left to right):
1. Aaker, 1997
2. Ferrandi, Valette-Florence, & Fine-Falcy, 2000
3. Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001
4. Alvarez-Ortiz & Harris, 2002
5. Crockett & Wood, 2002
6. Smit, van den Berge, & Franzen, 2002
7. d'Astous & Levesque, 2003
8. Venable, Rose, & Gilbert, 2003
9. Davies, Chun, Vinhas da Silva, & Roper, 2004
10. Sung & Tinkham, 2005
11. Venable, Rose, Bush, & Gilbert, 2005
12. Ambroise, 2006
13. Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006
14. Okazaki, 2006
15. Bosnjak, Bochmann, & Hufschmidt, 2007
16. d'Astous, & Boujbel, 2007
17. Ekinci, Sirakaya-Turk, & Baloglu, 2007
18. Milas & Mlacic, 2007
19. Murphy, Moscardo, & Benckendorff, 2007
20. Lee & Rhee, 2008
21. d'Astous & Li, 2009
22. Geuens, Weijters, & Wulf, 2009
23. Poddar, Donthu, & Wei, 2009
24. Kaplan, Yurt, Guneri, & Kurtulus, 2010
25. Chu & Sung, 2011
26. Herbst & Merz, 2011
27. Usakli & Baloglu, 2011
28. Romero & de la Paz, 2012
29. Das, 2014
30. Glinska & Kilon, 2014
31. Ha & Janda, 2014
32. Pereira, Correia, & Schutz, 2015
33. Schade, Pichler, & Burmann, 2014
34. Tong & Su, 2014
35. Khandai, Agrawal, & Gulla, 2015
36. Sung, Ahn, & Song, 2015
37. Mitsis & Leckie, 2016
38. Rauschnabel, Krey, Babin, & Ivens, 2016
39. Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2017
40. Esmaeilpour & Hosini, 2017
41. Kim, 2017
42. Khan & Ahmed, 2018

Row labels:

Type of Category
- Products
- Services
- Stores
- Corporations
- NPOs
- Industries
- Cities/Destinations
- Countries
- Online
- Web sites
- Media
- Sport team

Developed Countries
- Australia
- Belgium
- Canada
- Croatia
- France
- Germany
- Japan
- Korea
- Netherland
- Poland
- Portugal
- Spain
- Turkey
- UK
- USA

Developing Countries
- China
- India
- Mexico
- Saudi Arabia

Table-1 Summary of Brand Personality Studies

Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs)

Evidence suggests that SMEs play a vital role in a nation's economy, particularly in developing countries (Arbor and Quartey, 2010; Bakiewicz, 2005; Jenkins, 2009; Poole, 2018; Sakolnakorn, 2010). Consequently, the performance of SMEs in various sectors is carefully observed by the government and related departments. The SME sector is often perceived as homogeneous, with size as its defining behavioral characteristic (Jenkins, 2009; Wilkinson 1999). The most common form of SMEs is the owner-managed firm where ownership and control lie with the same person or by family members who may be responsible for several business tasks (Jenkins, 2009; Okello-Obura and Matovu, 2011; Okello-Obura, Minishi-Majanja, Cloete, and Ikoja-Odongo, 2009; Spence, 1999).

Although the SMEs sector contributes significantly to a nation's economy, their high failure rate is a major concern (Bekele and Worku, 2008). Studies conducted on small enterprises in various parts of the world show that the most commonly cited problems of small enterprises were related to marketing, managerial skills, and business knowledge. These three factors are critical to business survival and remaining competitive in the global market economy (Ayandibu and Houghton, 2017; Bekele and Worku, 2008; Cohen and Stretch, 1989; Huang and Brown, 1999; Kraft and Goodell, 1989; Krake, 2005; Poonpatpibul and Limthammahisorn, 2005; Sakolnakorn, 2010).

In this section, the researcher evaluates how brand personality assists in achieving the SDGs for SMEs in developing countries through developing competitive advantage.

Proposition 2: Brand personality, as an innovative marketing tool, will enhance SMEs' performance in developing countries.

The Role of Brand Personality toward SMEs

Proposition 2 involves SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure, to increase the access of small-scale industrial and other enterprises, in particular in developing countries, to fundamental factors affecting capability and sustainability. SMEs, entrepreneurs, and start-ups are uniquely suited to drive innovation in marketing programs and activities because they can be highly adaptive, swiftly adjust their capacities and resources, and respond quickly to dynamic competitive environments (Goffee and Scase, 1995; Jenkins, 2006). However, these enterprises were created via traditional methods that lack the willingness to look for innovation from non-traditional areas such as brand personality, which has symbolic values (i.e. personalities) that provide psychological benefits to and facilitate relationships with customers. Brand personality could be a way to transform traditional enterprises and/or small local brands into innovation-driven and high-value-added companies/brands by eliciting deeper customer emotional engagement and creating a unique personalized experience as symbolic value.

Conclusions and Discussions

By analyzing the literature of brand personality research, the author found that 42 studies have attempted to develop brand personality scales in various categories and in many countries (see Table 1). The research findings of these studies strongly suggest that brands have symbolic values (i.e., personalities) that provide psychological benefits to and facilitate relationships with customers. However, brand personality has been studied extensively in the context of major global brands of well-known corporations in developed countries.

While the SMEs sector contributes significantly to a nation's economy, the high failure rate among small businesses and enterprises is a matter of major concern. Research on small enterprises in various parts of the world showed that the most commonly cited problems of small enterprises are related to marketing, management, and business knowledge and skills. Brand personality can be regarded as a creative and innovative marketing initiative for SMEs to compete more effectively with larger, more established firms. Thus, building brand personality can help achieve SDGs 8 and 9 by enhancing sustainability and lessening inequality among small, medium, and large-sized enterprises, which will ultimately be beneficial to economic productivity and growth in developing countries.

Brand personality provides important implications for SMEs in developing countries to develop effective marketing strategies for their products and services in terms of segmenting, targeting, and positioning. For example, small local brands can be positioned using brand personality dimensions that

match the personality characteristics of their target customers in accordance with national or country-specific circumstances. In addition, brand personality dimensions can help develop impactful communication campaigns that can increase sales and profits by creating unique brand image perceptions.

Limitations and Direction for Future Research

Readers of this paper should interpret brand personality scale considering the following limitations. First, brand personality scales vary across countries and cultures. Brand personality scales that are measured in each country may be influenced by cultural beliefs, values, rituals and traditions, and therefore affect the interpretation of brand personality. Second, SMEs' products may not have been validated in the context of brand personality and culture-specific yet. As a result, future research should include empirical studies to develop the brand personality scale of SMEs' products/brands and to measure their reliability and validity of the dimensions/constructs. Tests should also be conducted to further investigate whether SMEs' products/brands have a culture-specific characteristic, particularly in large countries such as India and China, which are regarded as culturally heterogeneous. Last, SMEs' products should be categorized—for example, into apparel and textile, food and beverages, and metals and wood products—before being utilized for further study in order for SMEs to develop brand personalities that are relevant to their industries A strong SME brand personality is indispensable to building brand equity, which can lead to significant improvement of performance for SMEs to effectively compete with mega brands in the global market.

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