An Examination of Brand Personality in Economy Hotel Segment: Common and Differentiating Factors

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the applicability of brand personality in the economy hotel segment and whether hotel brand personality could differentiate between similar hotel brands. Courtyard and Hampton Inn are used in this study. The results of this study suggest that brand personality dimensions could be clearly delineated in the economy hotel sector, in consistent with Aaker's dimensions, Ruggedness, Competence, Excitement, Sophistication, and Sincerity. Moreover, similar hotel brands could be perceived differently based on brand personalities. Additionally, although common brand personality factor structure could be used to describe economy hotel brands in general, specific hotel brand does exhibit some unique dimensions.

Keywords: *brand personality, economy hotel, common and unique dimensions, CFA*

INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have seen the number of hotel brands proliferating, thus competition has intensified. Hotel managers have long sought to differentiate their brands from their competitors, thus increasing the likelihood of patronage and level of loyalty. It has long been established in consumer behavior literature that consumer's purchase decision-making process not only involves the evaluation of the functional attributes, but also the value-expressive or symbolic attributes of a product (Levy, 1959). Therefore, it is not enough for brands to differentiate on the basis of functional attributes alone (Siguaw, Mattila, & Austin, 1999), symbolic or value-expressive attributes (often called brand personality) of a brand that can be offered to consumers also serves as a basis for brand differentiation (J. L. Aaker, 1997; Crask & Laskey, 1990). Previous literature suggests that a well-established brand personality can help to differentiate among brands (Brïdson & Evans, 2004; Plummer, 1984), add value, help consumers develop emotional attachment to a brand to enhance brand equity (Keller, 1993; Phau & Lau, 2000),

augment the personal meaning of a brand to the consumer (Gardner & Levy, 1955; Levy, 1959), influence consumer preference and purchase (Malhotra, 1988), build relationship with consumers to increase brand loyalty (D. A. Aaker, 1996; Fournier, 1998), and help consumers to better express their self-concept (Belk, 1988; Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982; Birdwell, 1968; Sirgy, 1982). Therefore, it is important for marketers to create meaningful and distinctive brand personalities for their brands in the minds of their consumers (Siguaw, et al., 1999), and promote their strong brand personalities to better distinguish themselves.

Due to the intrinsic appeals of brand personality, hospitality and tourism fields have made attempts to apply this concept. However, more efforts have been seen in tourism destinations (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Ekinci, Sirakaya-Turk, & Baloglu, 2007; Murphy, Benckendorff, & Moscardo, 2007; Murphy, Moscardo, & Benckendorff, 2007; Prayag, 2007; Yuksel & Bilim, 2009) and restaurants (Austin, Siguaw, & Mattila, 2003; Kim, Magnini, & Singal, 2011; Siguaw, et al., 1999), little research has explored the applicability of brand personality in the lodging industry except Lee and Back (2010). Lee and Back's research was only for upper-upscale hotel brand, and cannot be generalized to other segments of the lodging industry, such as the economy hotel segment (2010). To further the knowledge of brand personality in other segments of the hotel industry, this study tries to explore the applicability of brand personality in the economy hotel segment and whether hotel brand personality could differentiate between similar hotel brands. In this study, Courtyard and Hampton Inn brands are used.

BRAND PERSONALITY

The idea that brands can be described in terms of a set of personality traits can be traced back to 1950s (Gardner & Levy, 1955; Martineau, 1958). Just as David Ogilvy (1983, p. 14) stated: "Products, like people, have personalities...", Plummer (1984) and Sirgy (1985) made the similar claims that any brand can be described not only in terms of their physical attributes or functional characteristics, but also their characterizational aspects or brand personality. Such characteristics are used to form impressions of and preference for a particular brand. Aaker and Fournier (1995) also stated that although brands are not people, they can be personified as well. In Aaker's (1997) seminal work, brand personality is defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand". In addition, Aaker (1997) proposed that brand personality tends to serve a symbolic and/or self-expressive function. Therefore, it is suggested that, in the relationship dyad between consumers and brands, the brand is treated as an active and contributing partner, and brand personality as a set of trait inferences constructed by consumers based on their long-time observation of brand behaviors, which trigger attitudinal, cognitive, and/or behavioral responses on the part of the consumer (Fournier, 1998). In addition, consumers believe that like people, brands can acquire distinctive personalities that differentiate them in the minds of consumers and shape their preference (Haigood, 2001). Therefore, it is contended that brand personality is about perception in the consumer's views, about personality characteristics attributed to brands, about associations and symbolic values and about emotional responses on the brand or emotional relationships with brands (Smit, Berger, & Franzen, 2003).

As stated earlier, researchers in the hospitality and tourism field has made efforts to apply the concept of brand personality. However, only one relevant study was found in the lodging industry by Lee and Back (2010). They sought to investigate the relationship between brand personality and its antecedents (service quality, user imagery, and perceived price) and consequences (trust and brand loyalty) in the upper-upscale business hotel industry. Only two brand personality dimensions, Competence and Sophistication, emerged. They also concluded that user imagery and perceived price affect brand personality significantly, and trust is a significant mediator between brand personality and brand loyalty. Another research that is of relevance to the purpose of this study is by Murphy, Moscardo and Benckendorff (2007). They aimed to determine the applicability of using destination brand personality to differentiate between two tourism destinations, Cairns and the Whitsunday Islands, Australia, from tourists' perspective. Their study provides some empirical evidence that tourists could use personality traits to describe tourism destinations. For example, the Whitsunday Islands were perceived as being upper class, honest, exciting, and tough; while Cairns as being sincere and competence, sophisticated and exciting. In addition, they also suggested that tourists were able to differentiate between destinations on the basis of brand personality, as the Whitsundays was perceived to be more wholesome, cheerful, exciting, imaginative, and upper class than Cairns. However, no research has attempted to use brand personality in the economy hotel sector. To fill this gap, this study makes an effort to answer these two research questions.

1. Is brand personality applicable in the economy hotel segment?
2. Can brand personality be used to differentiate between similar hotel brands?

METHODOLOGY

A survey was distributed to a convenience sample of undergraduate students who enrolled in an online class at a large university located in the Southeastern region of the United States in December 2009, and May 2010. For an exchange for a small amount of extra course credit, 202 out of 235 students returned their questionnaire in 2009; and 385 out of 570 students in 2010, resulting in a response rate of 86.0% and 81.9% in 2009 and 2010 respectively. For both data collections, subjects were asked to respond to questions regarding their perceptions of Courtyard Hotel and Hampton Inn Hotel brands. These two hotel brands were selected because they represent the economy segment of the lodging industry and two of the most known hotel companies, namely Marriott and Hilton, in terms of the number of properties and rooms. In addition, their physical spread throughout the country (USA) and the high frequency of their encounter by travelers, thus high visibility and familiarity to the general public, make it more suitable for the study selection. Both samples were deemed appropriate, as 78.1% and 68.5% of 2009 respondents, and 84.9% and 74.9% of 2010 respondents claimed they had stayed in Courtyard or Hampton Inn before.

The questionnaire first asked the respondents to rate their perceptions of Courtyard brand employing Aaker's 42-item brand personality scale with 5-point Likert scale, with 5 as "strongly

agree". Their patronage history with, familiarity and loyalty towards Courtyard brand was also rated. Second, the same set of questions regarding the Hampton Inn brand was asked. Last section of the questionnaire gathered respondents' demographic information. For this paper, only brand personality section was used for analysis.

RESULTS

Sample Profile

The demographic data revealed that, for both samples, there were slightly more females (51.5% in 2009 and 52.7% in 2010). Majority of them were in their early 20s, with a mean age of 20 for both samples. In terms of their academic standing, both samples exhibited rather similar distribution: 34% sophomores, 29.6 % seniors, 21.1% juniors, and 15.1% freshmen for 2009 respondents, and 31.2% sophomores, 24.6% seniors, 22.8% juniors, and 21.3% freshmen for 2010 respondents. Respondents of both samples were from various departments and colleges.

Data Analysis

Data coding was performed according to a pooled cross-sectional design where dummy variables were used for hotels (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Dielman, 1988). The advantage of a pooled cross-sectional design is that it increases sample size by the number of testing units (hotels). The responses of the pooled data, thus, doubled, because each respondent filled out the questionnaire for both hotel brands. As a result, all the data analyses were performed on the combined data set or pooled data regardless of hotel brands.

In order to examine the factor structure of hotel brand personality and how brand personality differentiates between Courtyard and Hampton Inn brands, first, 2009 pooled data were used for EFA to identify the underlying dimensions of hotel brand personality. Second, paired samples t-tests and discriminant analysis were used to examine how the two hotel brands were perceived differently. Third, 2010 pooled data was used for validation purpose with CFA.

EFA with Varimax rotation was conducted for the 42-item brand personality scale with 2009 pooled data. The latent root criterion (eigenvalue) of 1.0 was used for factor inclusion, and a factor loading of 0.50 was used as the benchmark to include items in each factor. Items that double loaded were excluded (Hair et al., 2006). EFA resulted in five dimensions with 26 items, explaining 59.1% of the total variance (Table 1). The five dimensions with their items are quite consistent with the factor structure obtained by Aaker (1997). Using the labels created by Aaker, the five dimensions were labeled as Ruggedness (5 items), Competence (5 items), Excitement (6 items), Sophistication (4 items), and Sincerity (6 items). Cronbach alpha coefficients were calculated to assess the reliability of the extracted dimensions. The coefficients range from .759 to .859, indicting the measurement scale is rather reliable.

Table 1
Exploratory Factor Analysis (2009 pooled data)

Factors & Indicators	Factor Loadings	Eigenvalue	Variance Explained	Reliability Coefficient
Ruggedness		**7.643**	**29.4%**	**0.859**
Rugged	.842			
Tough	.798			
Outdoorsy	.758			
Western	.750			
Masculine	.671			
Competence		**3.314**	**12.7%**	**0.818**
Reliable	.782			
Secure	.778			
Hard working	.767			
Successful	.661			
Friendly	.533			
Excitement		**1.973**	**7.6%**	**0.808**
Daring	.706			
Young	.646			
Unique	.590			
Sentimental	.582			
Exciting	.530			
Original	.527			
Sophistication		**1.296**	**5.0%**	**0.802**
Upper class	.825			
Glamorous	.758			
Good looking	.603			
Trendy	.579			
Sincerity		**1.152**	**4.4%**	**0.759**
Down-to-earth	.763			
Wholesome	.611			
Sincere	.593			
Small-town	.561			
Family-oriented	.541			
Honest	.531			
Total Variance Explained			**59.1%**	
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy				.884
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity			Chi-Square	4270.590

	Sig.	.000

Average score for each factor then was computed and compared between Courtyard and Hampton Inn using paired samples t tests. Statistically significant differences were observed for all the five dimensions except for Excitement (Table 2). Both hotel brands were perceived low in Ruggedness with Hampton Inn rated lower. Meanwhile, Courtyard was perceived more competent, sophisticated, and sincere than Hampton Inn. To further examine the differences in brand personality perceptions between the two hotels at the multivariate level, discriminant analysis was used by entering the five factors as predictors of hotel group membership. The discriminant function was significant (Wilks' Lambda=.962, p =.008). Specifically, Competence and Sincerity are identified as significant predictors at .05 level, and Sophistication is at .066 level. Both Ruggedness and Excitement cannot differentiate between the two hotel brands.

Table 2

Paired Samples T Tests (2009 pooled data)

	Courtyard	Hampton Inn	Difference	t Value	Sig.
Ruggedness	2.502	2.390	.112	2.220	.028
Competence	4.229	3.995	.235	4.579	.000
Excitement	3.116	3.050	.066	1.220	.224
Sophistication	3.506	3.351	.155	2.290	.023
Sincerity	3.809	3.663	.146	2.562	.011

Next, the model was evaluated with 2010 pooled data. This was accomplished by means of CFA using the LISREL program (Jöreskog, 1993). Because the chi-square test of overall model fit is sensitive to sample size, a finding of good fit has proven to be unrealistic in most structural equation modeling empirical research (Byrne, 2001). Furthermore, there is limited consensus concerning which goodness-of-fit indexes are best, and available interpretive guidelines are inevitably subjective (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Thus, multiple fit indexes were utilized to ensure that multiple aspects of model fit could be captured (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Relying on this method, the fit for a model with five latent components was investigated. First, a confirmatory analysis of the 2010 pooled data, based on the EFA from 2009 data, yielded adequate fit indexes after deleting item of small-town due to low loading and two modifications on correlating measurement errors. Although the chi-square is significant ($x^2 = 1,210.71, df = 263, p = .000$), other fit indexes are acceptable (Table 3). Therefore, overall assessment of fit indexes suggests that the five-component model is stable within the pooled data. Next, the degree to which the five-component model is consistent with observed data between two hotel brands was observed. The descriptive measures of fit indicate that five brand personality dimensions fit Courtyard data ($x^2 = 750.33, df = 263, p = .000$) better than they do

the Hampton Inn data ($x^2 = 809.97, df = 263, p = .000$). These fit indexes are somewhat lower than those for the pooled data, suggesting that the five-dimension model does not exhibit as

Table 3

Fit Indexes (2010 data)

Fit Indexes	Pooled Data (n=770)	Courtyard Hotel (n=385)	Hampton Inn (n=385)	Cutoff Values
Absolute Fit Measure (AFM)				
Chi-square (χ2) statistic with associated p value	χ2=1210.71 (df=263, p=0.000)	χ2=750.33 (df=263 p=0.000)	χ2=809.97 (df=263, p=0.000)	p>.05
Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	0.88	0.86	0.85	>.90 is a good fit
Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)	0.059	0.060	0.068	<.05 is a close fit
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	0.070	0.07	0.075	<=.08 is an acceptable fit
Incremental Fit Measure (IFM)				
Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI)	0.90	0.89	0.89	
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.91	0.91	0.90	>.90 is an acceptable fit
Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	0.91	0.91	0.90	
Parsimonious Fit Measure (PFM)				No accepted cut-off level. When used in comparing models, the one with a higher value is better.
Parsimony Goodness-of-Fit Index (PGFI)	0.72	0.70	0.69	
Parsimony Normed Fit Index (PNFI)	0.78	0.76	0.75	

satisfactory results for Courtyard and Hampton Inn. This indicates that both hotel brands may exhibit some unique dimensions that are different from the factor structure extracted from 2009 pooled data.

To further the inquiry into how different hotel brands yield hotel-specific dimensions, EFA was performed with 2009 Courtyard data and 2009 Hampton Inn data respectively, with the same extraction criteria described in the pooled data EFA analysis. EFA for Courtyard Hotel resulted in five dimensions with 18 items, explaining 64.0% of the total variance; while EFA for Hampton Inn produced a 28-item six-dimension solution, one more dimension than the original brand personality scale, explaining 68.1% of the total variance (Table 4). Dimensions were

named based on the Aaker's labels. The results suggest that factor structure of Courtyard Hotel is simpler, with 18 items and five dimensions explaining comparable amount of variance to the 28-

Table 4

Exploratory Factor Analysis of Courtyard and Hampton Inn Hotel (2009 data)

EFA - Courtyard Hotel				EFA - Hampton Inn			
Factors & Indicators	**Factor Loadings**	**Eigen-value**	**Variance Explained**	**Factors & Indicators**	**Factor Loadings**	**Eigen-value**	**Variance Explained**
Ruggedness		5.116	28.4%	**Competence 1**		10.430	36.0%
Rugged	.830			Successful	.816		
Tough	.773			Reliable	.792		
Western	.751			Friendly	.714		
Outdoorsy	.739			Secure	.672		
Masculine	.666			Family-	.669		
				Hard working	.654		
Excitement		2.248	12.5%	**Ruggedness**		3.771	13.0%
Unique	.777			Rugged	.852		
Imaginative	.745			Tough	.787		
Exciting	.719			Outdoorsy	.768		
Original	.573			Western	.760		
				Masculine	.628		
Sophistication		1.625	9.0%	**Sincerity**		1.871	6.5%
Upper Class	.813			Down-to-earth	.722		
Good Looking	.740			Sincere	.712		
Glamorous	.729			Real	.690		
				Wholesome	.646		
				Honest	.644		
				Small-town	.549		
Competence		1.398	7.8%	**Competence 2**		1.457	5.0%
Intelligent	.796			Intelligent	.799		
Confident	.703			Technical	.698		
Charming	.629			Independent	.667		
Sincerity		1.127	6.3%	**Sophistication**		1.187	4.1%
Sincere	.735			Feminine	.689		
Honest	.727			Glamorous	.671		
Reliable	.711			Upper class	.659		
				Charming	.639		
				Excitement		1.026	3.5%
				Trendy	.707		
				Contemporary	.694		
				Exciting	.552		
				Young	.542		

Total Variance Explained	64.0%	Total Variance Explained	68.1%

item six-dimension factor solution of Hampton Inn's brand personality scale. In comparison with the EFA result of the pooled data, the factor structure of Hampton Inn brand personality seems more similar with that of the pooled data. Specifically, dimension of Ruggedness seems to be very robust across three EFA. However, items loaded under Sincerity and Competence dimensions (Competence 1 of Hampton Inn) are more similar between the pooled data result and Hampton Inn result. On the other hand, items loaded under Excitement dimension are more similar between the pooled data and Courtyard results.

CONCLUSION

The results provide several useful insights in terms of applying brand personality to the economy hotel segment. First, the dimensions of brand personality could be clearly delineated in the sector of economy hotel. Consistent with Aaker's five dimensions, it is found that economy hotel brands can also be described with these five dimensions, namely Ruggedness, Competence, Excitement, Sophistication, and Sincerity. Second, similar hotel brands could be perceived differently based on brand personalities. In this case, Courtyard brand is perceived to be more competent, sophisticated and sincere than Hampton Inn brand. In addition, although common brand personality factor structure could be used to describe economy hotel brands in general, separate analyses suggest that specific hotel brand does exhibit some unique dimensions. Courtyard Hotel can be described with five dimensions, while Hampton Inn brand reveals six dimensions with Competence split into two. More items were loaded under Hampton Inn brand personality scale than those of Courtyard Hotel.

Therefore, in addition to confirming the effectiveness of brand personality scale in economy hotel sector, the research findings also support the idea that each hotel brand does carry a unique brand personality that distinguishes itself from others. This provides important practical implications. As there are various hotel brands available in the market for customer to select, with the uprising competition and limited flexibility on pricing, creating a distinguishable brand personality would be very helpful in attracting new customers and building a base of loyal customers for repeated business. Additionally, it is suggested that hotel companies should continuously examine and solidify their perceived brand personality by customers. For instance, economy hotel business does not merely depend on the comfortableness of guestroom amenities to capture their market share; they also have to create a sense of home away from home and outstanding quality of service to impress their guests. As the research findings from this study suggest, competence and sincerity and the major two dimensions of brand personality that participants recognized. Hence, the major component in that branding strategy to economy hotels is to establish a reliable and responsible service that customer would trust. This would

also require employees to present honest and cheerful attitude to guests throughout the guest cycle – from reservation to check-out. In addition to solidifying these dimensions in brand personality, it is also critical to examine important components that sustaining these dimensions. For instance, adding a self check-in and check-out kiosk and/or other kinds of technology might enhance the perception of efficiency thus improving the perceived personality of competence. If such identification is made, economy hotels could consider what will be the best investment in reaching this goal that leads to create a sustainable competitive advantage among various economy hotel brands.

The study has its limitations as it only used two brands from the economy hotel segment. Other segments and brands could be researched for generalizability. Another limitation is the student sample. Although most of the students have stayed in the hotel brands under research, they are, nevertheless, more homogeneous in terms of their demographics. More representative sample should be employed for future study. In addition, future research could focus on determining whether the differentiation based on hotel brand personality could influence hotel guests' brand preference and choice; the antecedents that help create a strong hotel brand personality; the factors that would moderate the relationship between hotel brand personality and the choice.

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