

Sustainable Brand Personality: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: With the emergence of sustainable brands, this study explores the concept of “sustainable brand personality” (SBP) from a consumer perspective. In-depth interviews with consumers using a mood board approach were employed. Upon narrative content analysis, key characteristics of sustainable brands were explored around various issues of human variability: psychological and sociocultural including socioeconomic, physical and behavioral manifestations. On an aggregate level, sustainable brands are perceived as natural, simple, stable, open, social, progressive, intellectual and attractive. The study is advancing BP research in offering a multicomponent view of BP, specifically for sustainable brands.

Key words: sustainable brand personality, brand personality, sustainability, sustainability branding

JEL codes: M3

1. Introduction

Sustainability branding and sustainability communication are challenges for brands today. Increasing sustainability awareness has led to the emergence of sustainable brands. Ethical mission-driven brands have sustainability incorporated in their brand identity, in their products, operations and communication to foster sustainability (Alwi et al., 2017). Consumers are directing towards sustainable brands that exhibit a sense of moral agency just as humans termed as ethicality (Alwi et al., 2017), conscientiousness (Iglesias & Ind, 2016, 2020; Ind & Horlings, 2016), and responsibility (Villagra & Lopéz, 2013) with regards to social, economic and environmental sustainability. However, “sustainable” brands are not yet defined in the literature, nor are their characteristics. As one of the major strategic decisions or challenges of a company is to design and implement a brand personality (Paetz, 2020), discovering the construct of sustainable brand personality (SBP) is crucial.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Brand Personality

Brands are often constructed as having their own personality. BP is defined as “the set of human characteristics associated with the brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). Derived from the Big Five personality traits of human personality (Norman, 1963), which upon a trait-factor approach (Eysenck, 2013) considers personality a combination of different traits or factors (Sweeney & Brandon, 2006), Aaker (1997) conceptualized BP as composed of five dimensions (sincerity, competence, excitement, sophistication, ruggedness) subsuming several

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subdimensions.

BP research is fragmented given different theories, methods, approaches and understandings (Davies et al., 2018; Aaker & Fournier, 1995). Previous BP research is mainly concerned with the theoretical basis, such as measurement scales and BP dimensions or BP effects and brand relationship constructs (e.g., identification) (Calderon-Fajardo et al., 2023). However, there is little research taking a more holistic view beyond trait-level with a qualitative research approach.

2.2 Sustainable Brands

Despite the relevancy of sustainability branding, research in this realm is relatively scarce with regards to BP. The characteristics of sustainable brands viewed by consumers is an open field of investigation.

In the literature, there are three approaches to put BP in the perspective of sustainability and social responsibility: (1) studies based on Aaker's BP dimensions only, (2) studies extending Aaker's BP dimensions by adding a new sustainability/social responsibility facet, (3) studies using or developing different measures of sustainable/responsible BP.

Overall, whilst there are some attempts to approach the concept of SBP, literature lacks in a sound conceptualization and measurement. Studies are limited in their focus on green BP (Acharya & Gupta, 2016), in their methodological approach (Paetz, 2020), a mono-method approach (Acharya & Gupta, 2016), lack in academic rigor (García-Salirrosas & Gordillo, 2021), their focus on one industry (Neto et al., 2020; Paetz, 2020) or limited in other ways such as a non-Western context (Acharya & Gupta, 2016; García-Salirrosas & Gordillo, 2021).

Moreover, it has been suggested that BP encompasses more than psychological characteristics but also sociocultural components (i.e., physical, socioeconomic and lifestyle manifestations) that need to be considered to enlighten the BP in its entirety (Lee, 2014).

3. Method

3.1 Design and Procedure

Semi-structured online in-depth interviews were conducted with 24 German consumers of various ages and occupational backgrounds in end of 2023.

Consumers had to imagine a familiar sustainable brand and describe this as a person in terms of various aspects of life. Beyond voicing their associations, an online mood board allowed participants to also visualize their ideas and images in pictures and write down notes on the single themes such as sociocultural characteristics, appearance, occupation, lifestyle or personality. Such an elicitation method is a particular projective technique often used in BP research to elicit more deeply held associations and motivate participants to more freely voice their subconsciously-held thoughts and perceptions than with direct questioning (Hofstede et al., 2007; Will et al., 1996).

3.2 Analysis

Qualitative interview data were transcribed and were undergone qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Krippendorff, 2004) in the form of narrative analytic coding (Thompson, 1997) in an deductive-inductive manner.

There were two steps of analysis: The first step employed a deductive coding approach. The overarching categories (themes) derived from Lee (2014) that had served as the stimuli categories during the interviews were taken as anchor codes. Within these overarching themes, inductive coding of meaning units was applied. Single meaning units (single words, phrases and sometimes longer sentences that were summarized in single meaning units) were subsumed to more overarching codes and sub themes.

Following the procedure by Lee (2014), the first coding step involved extracting meaning units — the smallest coding nodes—from the excerpts. The extracted meaning units were single words (e.g., adjective or noun) or a word group (i.e., phrases or sentences) each of which reflects a distinct human variability (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Lim, 2014). Based on the similarities and differences, the meaning units were grouped into 80 themes.

In a second step, the elicited distinct meaning units of human variability, which encompassed multiple socio-cultural aspects, were further related to psychological characteristics of BP. Accordingly, the meaning units were categorized into 36 subcomponents, and finally into eight components.

4. Findings

Interviews revealed various characteristics of sustainable brands along five aspects of human variability: *socio-economic, physical, occupation, lifestyle* and *psychological*.

Socio-economic factors. Sustainable brands were often imagined to be female, which was often associated with a caring nature and family-friendliness. Sustainable brands were considered to be in a family relationship. Yet, a sustainable brand was also thought to be widowed transferred from the perception of endurance and perseverance.

Age was often regarded as unspecific to a sustainable brand. However, respondents were often ambiguous with regards to age. On the one hand, younger generations were considered more sustainable in their mindset as older generations. On the other hand, older generations were considered more sustainable for being more mature and more reflective. For the same rationale, a sustainable brand was associated with a *high level of education*, which was seen as a prerequisite to being considerate and reflective about things such as sustainability, and of having a sustainable mindset and being more knowledgeable and critical of sustainability and one's own lifestyle.

Viewed from another perspective, a high level of education also entails a *higher income* and willingness to pay/purchasing power for sustainable products. It was mentioned that sustainable products were generally higher priced and therefore only an option for those people with a higher income that yield a good position and may have some higher education and an academic background.

Physical. Participants imagined a sustainable brand as someone with a natural appearance which means that the person does not exhibit high styling but has a rather minimalistic look. Whilst closeness to the nature may be reflected in the appearance, a strict eco-look was seldomly mentioned and an alternative hippie style would only be shown by some. Many thought of a practical look with functional perhaps sportive clothes that are leger and comfortable. At the same time, the look was imagined good-looking and may be neat or smart or more simply described as attractive. The person may be concerned with their outer appearance, also paying attention to the quality and durability of clothes, valuing repairing over new purchases and often wearing clothes for a long time as possible. The clothing should be classical rather than being trendy, which implies an anti-fast fashion approach.

Occupation. In terms of occupation, associations varied but there were some common themes. The sustainable brand was seen as someone with relation to the nature such as farmer or gardener. However, such a

person may not hold a “hard job”. Some associations related to crafts jobs as these involve some creativity, which was also seen as an underlying characteristic of sustainable brand person imagined as a freelancer. Especially the service sector would be suitable brand person which was believed to exert a position that involved some cognitive work and intellectual capabilities. They might also be working in business, perhaps even in a leading position or as an entrepreneur. Some saw a responsible brand person rather from a social perspective working for example as a salesperson who is in contact with others. Other jobs with a social focus were teaching jobs that involve imparting knowledge, but also jobs in the social or medical care sector.

Lifestyle. A sustainable brand person is thought to practice a sustainable lifestyle that is close to the nature and involves a sustainable consumption style (e.g., recycling). Overall, such a person may consume organic products and practice sustainable activities that do as little harm to the environment as possible, which can be outdoor activities such as hiking, riding the bike, sports or gardening/farming.

A sustainable brand person is depicted as someone who likes cooking but is conscious of sustainable ingredients such as organic and regionally sourced, vegetarian and/or vegan. He also may have a DIY mentality to create or repair things themselves.

The sustainable lifestyle is believed to be mindful such that work-life-balance is being valued and personal health is being taken care of such as by practicing meditation or yoga. A stressful life is being avoided and relaxing and mindfulness and some sort of spirituality is important.

A sustainable brand person is believed to hold intellectual interests such as in literature or fine arts. Often respondents thought of reading books or magazines, but such a person may also be listening to podcast, being curious about gaining new knowledge and insights and generally looking for stimulation. A sustainable person is further believed to pursue artistic or intellectual hobbies such as poetry or music. Activities in arts and culture may be passive such as listening to music/going to concerts or active in producing cultural things like playing music or being creative in painting. They may be creative in experimenting with things such as in crafting. In terms of intellectual stimulation, it was mentioned that a sustainable brand person would yield an open mindset regarding diverse things such as ideas, cultures and hobbies. The person is described as intelligent and informed about things and may be pursuing further education, always looking for self-development.

Apart from that, the lifestyle is believed to be very active with various activities including sports and traveling, which is due to an interest in exploring new cultures. Other respondents imagined individual activity more in terms of social activities with family and peers that the sustainable brand engages in such as dining out, going to concerts, to the cinema or simply meeting with other people.

Concerning mobility, sustainability is considered by taking public transport, bike or e-car. However, many stressed that a sustainable brand person would not completely refrain from going by car or by plane when travelling, as they were rather pragmatic and would not be willing to make compromises by any means for a sustainable lifestyle.

Personality. A sustainable brand person has various characteristics as imagined. It is being described as sociable, empathetic, relationship oriented and having a socializing nature in the personal social context. But the social mindset also extends to the wider society as they may be generous, self-sufficient, and have a communal thinking, caring for others rather than being material. This involves being politically oriented and being politically engaged, e.g. in the green party or going to manifestations. The political and social engagement is rooted in an ambitious and transformative mindset and an optimistic view of things that can be changed. In order to realize their own vision, the person can be persuasive and motivating over others and may appear more or less moralistic.

In contrast, many sustainable brand persons are described as being less outward-going but rather a little silent and introverted.

A sustainable brand person is *reflective and considerate*. They are critical of things, being attentive to their environment. They are mindful and balanced with regards to the environment and to themselves and their personal life such that they are self-aware. In cognitive terms, this requires being analytical, rational, realistic and mature. In contrast, less commonly the sustainable brand person is recognized as having more of a spontaneous and careless nature as it is also quite dynamic and lively in its lifestyle, trying out various things. The person is believed to be intellectual and keen to learn and explore new things and ideas, which can be anything such as concepts, skills, people, activities, arts and cultures as can be found through reading, further education or travelling and getting to know new cultures. Thus, the person has an open and curious mindset and is always looking for self-development.

The working mentality is described as goal-oriented and hard-working, so that the person is successful in business and in life. The person is also structured and persevering and has the discipline to go their way in reaching their aims. The person holds a good image, appears as credible and reputable, thus being respected by others.

Overall, the person is believed to be somewhat hedonistic, yet considerate in choosing their activities and balancing active and passive activities. Some such persons may be more inward-looking and silent, thus practicing more self-focused intellectual activities, others may be seeking stimulation from contact with others and having more of a socializing nature. It is also possible that there are sustainable brand persons that will have a mixed mindset in being both quite open to their environment and love being for themselves, whilst being mindful and self-aware.

5. Discussion

This study sought to explore sustainable brand personality in its various manifestations of human variability (socio-economic, physical appearance, lifestyle, psychological). Interviews with consumers revealed a mixed pattern that suggests different types of sustainable brands as they may lean more or less toward one or the other manifestation.

Bringing together the socio-cultural aspects of human variability with the psychological components, the psychological nature of SBP can be examined in more depth as eight key characteristics become apparent. Overall, a sustainable brand person might appear *natural, simple, stable, open, progressive, social, intellectual* and *attractive* (Table 1).

Table 1 Suggested Dimensions of Sustainable Brand Personality (SBP)

• <i>natural</i> (closeness to the nature, sustainability mindset, environmentally-friendly mindset and lifestyle)
• <i>simplicity</i> (minimalistic, convenient, comfortable, practical, functional)
• <i>stability</i> (reliable, enduring, persevering)
• <i>openness</i> (to new ideas, activities, cultures, people, intellectual and artistic stimulation)
• <i>progressiveness</i> (dynamic, active; transformative, ambitious; creative; persuasive; successful)
• <i>social-orientation</i> (socializing, communicative, empathetic, moral)
• <i>intellectual</i> (considerate, reflective, attentive, analytical, structured, mindful, self-aware, health-conscious)
• <i>attractiveness</i> (good appearance)

Naturalness. The sustainable brand person may appear as *natural* due to their closeness to the nature, a sustainable and environmentally-friendly mindset and a green lifestyle. This dimension is also evidenced by

previous research as it reflects reflects close contact and care toward nature (Sander et al., 2021; Madrigal & Boush, 2008). Unlike Aaker's dimension 'ruggedness,' that also makes some links to nature, the focus here is on harmony with nature and achieving a sustainable balance in the environment.

Simplicity. The person may have a *simple* mindset in being minimalistic but also because they like things that may benefit them for being convenient, comfortable, practical and functional. This dimension has become apparent in this study only but has not been described in previous work directly.

Stability. They are enduring and persevering, thus seem to be as a reliable person with a stable personality. Therefore, they are perceived as trustworthy. Stability and reliability are facets of second order found by Mäder (2005) and Tarabashkida et al. (2021).

Openness. They have an *open* mindset, being open to new ideas, seeking new activities getting to know new cultures and people, and looking for intellectual and artistic stimulation. Openness also involves a visionary thinking. No such dimension has been reported in previous studies on sustainable or responsible brands but is an essential dimension of Aaker's generic BP model.

Progressive. Some may be thus very *active and dynamic* if not adventurous in their everyday life with various proactive activities such as travelling. However, others may be more introverted and seeking rather passive intellectual stimulation as in arts and literature. They are seeking for self-development but also want to make a change for the greater good. In doing so, they are transformative, committed and ambitious to strive for their aims. Moreover, in creating and developing things, they have a sense of creativity. They are also *powerful and persuasive*: they know how to motivate and inspire others. Therefore, they are also successful in work and in life. Whilst the sub-facet of activity is evidenced also by Tarabashkida et al. (2021) (active, dynamic, innovative), the more overarching dimension progressiveness (Sargeant et al., 2008) in its various aspects resembles Aaker's "excitement" dimension including dynamics and creativity.

Intellectual. They are *intellectual* in being mindful about themselves (e.g., being self-aware and health-conscious) and about their environment in being attentive. Generally, they are reflective and considerate about things and of the activities they are choosing but curious about things. They are also analytical and structured in their working. Intellectual can be related to the competence dimension by Aaker (Acharya & Gupta, 2016, Neto et al., 2020) but even goes beyond to capture also mindfulness and critical thinking about important issues.

Social. They love to be with others, like social activities and are very communicative. Moreover, they are caring such as a mother, have a large social network and empathetic. They are also considered to be moral or ethical such as a boss that is taking care of their employees. A social orientation can be found in Aaker's framework in the agreeableness dimension but applied to sustainable brands has been described as benevolence (Sargeant et al., 2008), integrity (altruism, respectfulness) (García-Salirrosas & Gordillo, 2021), or social responsibility (Madrigal & Boush, 2008; Tarabashkida et al., 2021).

Attractiveness. Sustainable brands are said to be concerned with their good (neat) outer appearance so as to make a good impression. This dimension relates to Aaker's sophistication dimension in capturing a sense of aesthetics and an upper-class lifestyle.

Altogether, the revealed eight themes are indicative of SBP dimensions. Overall, there are similarities with those dimensions found in previous studies in the broader context of ethical or responsible brands, which corroborates the findings. Notably, also Aaker's dimensions of BP are to some extent manifest in the revealed dimensions.

Importantly, dimensions are interrelated. Openness and the dynamic facet of progressiveness are closely related as being open to activities and ideas is foundational to pursuing various things in a dynamic way. Thus, it is quite likely that the assumed dimensions of SBP might not appear in the exact factor structure statistically.

5.1 Limitations

This qualitative study is only exploratory to approaching the nature of sustainable brands. As the findings on putative dimensions of SBP can be only indicative, the next step will be a quantitative examination through factor analytic techniques.

Moreover, this study is limited in sample characteristics as findings are derived from German consumers only and thus need to be validated across other cultures/contexts.

5.2 Relevancy and Contribution

This research aimed to explore SBP from a multi-component view according to which brand personality is composed of both psychological and also diverse aspects of human variability, e.g., sociocultural, physical, socioeconomic and lifestyle factors (Lee, 2014). Therefore, a trait-factor view needs to be complemented by a narrative perspective which allows to enlighten the various factors of the concept.

For theory, this study makes an important contribution in first exploring the under-researched construct of SBP. Following the trait-factor approach, it builds upon previous BP models such as that by Aaker (1997). As no previous studies have explored the concept of SBP so far, this study closes an important research gap by investigating what makes up a ‘sustainable brand’ in its various manifestations. Taking the consumer perspective reveals their perceived nature of sustainable brands. With an understanding of the nature of sustainable brands, a model of sustainability communication is to be developed to advance BP literature from a currently effect focus to a branding focus.

For practice, knowing about the different personalities of sustainable brands is crucial for understanding how to best communicate SBP. This will aid brand communication strategists to execute appropriate communication strategies based upon their SBP, which is currently an important research gap (Paetz, 2020).

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