A Comparison of Brand Personality Perceptions for Utilitarian and Symbolic products: Evidence from Thai consumers

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Abstract

Brand personalities have gained attention from marketing academicians and practitioners over three decades. Several previous studies examined the brand personality traits of utilitarian and symbolic products. In addition, though there have been several brand personality studies in Thailand, little is known about the impact of these two major product categories on brand personality traits. In order to fill this gap, the aim of this exploratory research is to compare Thai consumer perceptions of five brand personality traits for utilitarian products (six brands) and symbolic products (six brands).The quantitative data were gathered with the use of a cross-sectional questionnaire survey. The sample of the study consisted of 420 Thai consumers who live in Bangkok. Proportionate stratified sampling procedures were used in this study to enhance the representativeness of the population. The brand personality measures were based on Aaker's (1997) original brand personality scale. The product category selection followed the symbolic-utilitarian framework from Ratchford (1987) and Romero's (2012) studies. The findings revealed that the personality perceptions for utilitarian and symbolic brands differed to some extent. The study extends the understanding of brand personality traits for utilitarian and symbolic products.

Key words :   Brand Personality, Consumer Perception, Utilitarian Product, Symbolic Product

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Introduction and Problem Statement

The concept of brand personality originally came from advertising and marketing practitioners (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). Brand personality is defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a given brand" (Aaker, 1996, p. 141). The five personality dimensions consist of sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness (Aaker, 1996). For example, Orangina soft drink is perceived to have a "sensuous personality" (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003); McDonald's is perceived to be "a kid-friendly place" (Sophonsiri & Polyorat, 2009), and Apple Macintosh is perceived as "friendly, unpretentious, irreverent" (Aaker, 1996).

Brand personality had many advantages. Astrong brand personality makes the product different from those of competitors (Aaker, 1997; Haigood, 1999) and creates positive consequences (Freiling & Forbes 2005). More significantly, it is crucial in determining the success of a firm (Ahmed & Thyagaraj, 2014). Numerous prior brand personality studies mainly focused on the brand personality traits of utilitarian-symbolic products (Aaker, 1997; Aaker, Garolera &Benet-Martinez, 2001; Bosnjak, Bochmann & Hufschmidt, 2007; Kim, 2000; Park, Jaworskhi & MacInnis, 1986).

From a practical perspective, firms in Thailand have paid more attention to building their brands. For instance, Barbecue Plaza restaurant gives more importance to the brand than to selling the product (Marketeer, 2017) as brand personality is considered essential for the company's success. For instance, recently, Kito has undergone rebranding. The company has shifted from focusing on product attributes to non-product attributes (e.g. coolness) which is expected to be more influential for today's consumers (Brandinside, 2017).

From critical review, the literature indicates that the two product categories namely utilitarian products and symbolic products involve different information processing. A utilitarian product implies cognitive information processing while a symbolic product implies affective information processing (Ratchford, 1987). This research, therefore, argues that brand personality traits vary depending on the product category.

Problem Statement

There is no research that systematically compares the brand personality of these two different product categories, namely utilitarian and symbolic products. Additionally, there has been limited study on brand personality traits for a variety of product categories and brands especially in Thailand. In addition, from an academic perspective, most studies regarding brand personality in Thailand have studied the brand personality traits of one/ a few brand(s) such as a fast food brand (KFC) (Sophonsiri & Polyorat, 2009), milk products (Muensrichai, & Wangsantitam, 2013).In order to fill this gap, this research project aims to serve as an exploratory research to examine and to compare consumer perceptions of five brand personality traits for utilitarian products and symbolic products.In particular, this study attempts to answer two questions.

1. What are the consumer personality perceptions for utilitarian products and symbolic products?

2. Do consumer personality perceptions of utilitarian products differ from consumer perceptions of symbolic products?

Literature Review

Brand Image

It was found that brand personality is a part of brand image (Plummer, 2000). Associative learning is a useful framework for understanding brand image. The conceptualization of associative learning involves various nodes of memory (Anderson, 1976, as cited in Till & Shimp, 1998, p. 68). Specifically, information nodes and brand nodes that the consumers connect in their memory define

brand association (Keller, 1993). Basically, brand image is subject to the creativity of marketers (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986). The image of a brand is formed based on many factors such as product, price, packaging, and advertising (Sirgy, 1982). As a result, brand personality is considered a part of brand associations which are held in the consumer's memory (Freling & Forbes, 2005; Haigood, 1999).

Brand association can be categorized based on product-related attributes (which relate directly to product performance) such as the features of the product, or service and non-product-related attributes (which also relate directly to product performance) such as price, packaging, user (what type of person uses the product), usage (in what type of situation the product is used) and imagery, in which the brand personality attributes emerge (Keller, 1993). Specifically, brand personality serves a symbolic function or self-expressive function by allowing consumers to use/ buy the brands as a vehicle for expressing who they are (actual identity) and who they aspire to be (ideal self) (Aaker, 1996; Aaker, 1997; Keller, 1993; Purkayastha, 2009). However, product-related attributes tend to have some limitations in that they fail to differentiate the brand from others and make it easy to be copied (Aaker, 1996). On the other hand, the non-product related attributes of the product aresaid to be more influential in the consumers' buying decision (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). It can be said that the symbolic function of the brand,i.e. the brand personality, has many advantages. Brand personality makes the product/brand unique and enduring (Aaker, 1996; 1997; Sophonsiri & Polyorat, 2009). It also augments the brand equity (Freling & Forbes, 2005).
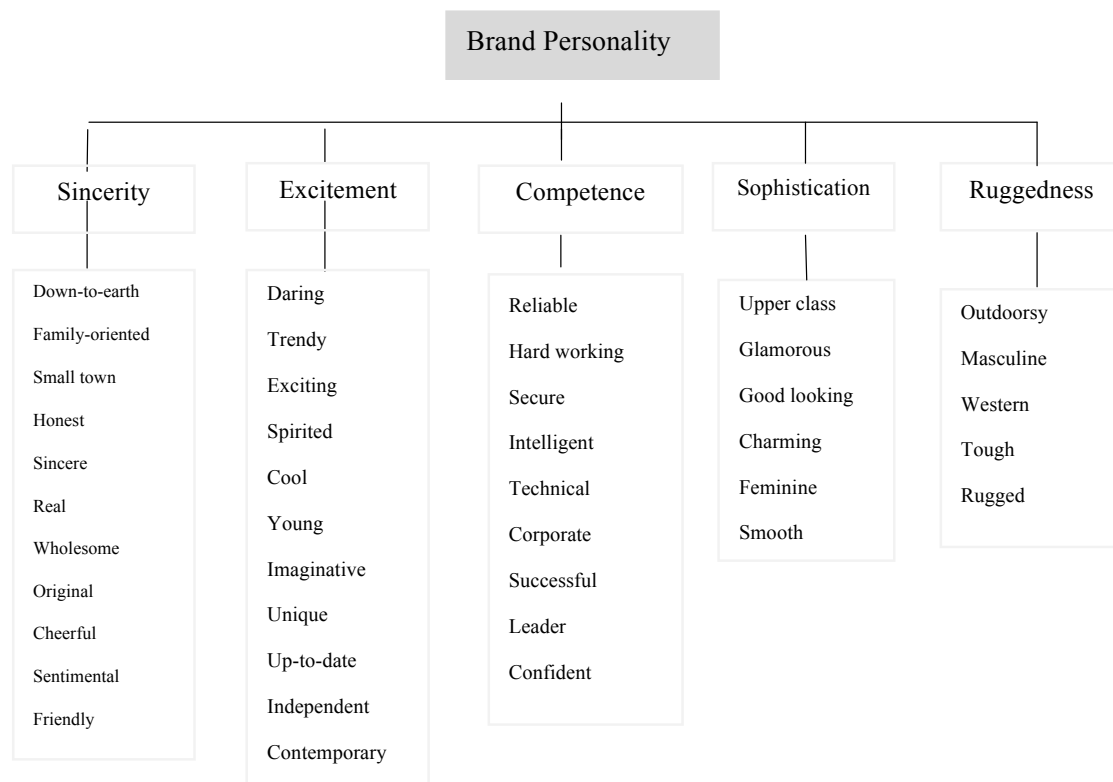
Though brand association consists of many categories, such as product-related attributes and non-product-related attributes e.g. price, package, and brand personality, the current research will exclusively explore the symbolic function of the brand, namely brand personality attributes that, in addition to its physical attributes, can add value to the product (King, 1971). The next section will explain the origin of the brand personality concept and the brand personality scale.

Brand Personality

In 1997, Aaker developed a 'Brand Personality Scale' (BPS) to examine the correlation between brand and human personality (Aaker, 1997; Mishra, 2011). Though there have been some critiques on Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale (called the 'Big five') (see Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003), Aaker (1997) five-dimension measurement has been widely used in academic brand personality studies since 1997 (Azoulay & Kapferer; Romero, 2012). In addition, the brand personality scale developed by Aaker (1997) is considered a major instrument for academics and practitioners to gauge brand personality and in employing strategy accordingly (Mishra, 2011).

In Aaker's (1997) study, the brand personality scale was tested across representative U.S. four subsamples (males, females, younger people, and older people) with different product categories (utilitarian products e.g. computers, electronics and symbolic products e.g. cosmetics, fragrance) and brands (e.g. IBM, Apple, Obsession, Chanel) (Aaker, 1997). The BPS scale consists of five personality dimensions (referred to as the 'Big Five'): Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness. Each trait is divided into facets to provide better explanations in the Big Five framework (Aaker, 1996; 1997).Figure 1 shows the brand personality framework including the five personality dimensions and forty-two traits. In summary, the brand personality scale will be used as the framework of the current research to examine the brand personality of the products.

Figure 1 A Brand Personality Framework

Brand Personality				
Sincerity	Excitement	Competence	Sophistication	Ruggedness
Down-to-earth	Daring	Reliable	Upper class	Outdoorsy
Family-oriented	Trendy	Hard working	Glamorous	Masculine
Small town	Exciting	Secure	Good looking	Western
Honest	Spirited	Intelligent	Charming	Tough
Sincere	Cool	Technical	Feminine	Rugged
Real	Young	Corporate	Smooth	
Wholesome	Imaginative	Successful		
Original	Unique	Leader		
Cheerful	Up-to-date	Confident		
Sentimental	Independent			
Friendly	Contemporary			

Brand Personality Research with Different Product Categories

After the development of Aaker (1997)'s brand personality scale, brand personality research has been conducted in different countries using different samples, products and brands.

Kim (2000) found that consumers perceived U.S. clothes brands such as Liz Claiborne, DKNY, Anne Klein as 'sincere', 'exciting', 'competent', and 'sophisticated.' Other brands (J.C. Penney, Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein) were perceived as rugged by U.S. consumers. For general product brands , it was found that consumers perceived some brands (e.g. Nike, Reebok, Victoria's Secret, Nine West) as being 'sincere,' and 'competent.'

Interestingly, two studies regarding brand personalities in Mexico showed conflicting results. Alvarez-Ortiz & Harris (2002) studied the brand personality of ten global brands and ten local popular Mexican brands and found that five dimensions of brand personalities emerged, which were sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and gender. On the other hand, Romero (2012) studied the brand personality dimensions of two utilitarian products (laptops and shampoo) and two in the symbolic product category (perfume and soft-drink). The findings revealed that seven dimensions of brand personality: success, hipness/vivacity, sophistication, sincerity, domesticity/ emotionally, ruggedness, and professionalism were evident.

Sophonsiri & Polyorat, (2009) studied the brand personality of KFC among Thai college students and found that the competent personality trait had the greatest impact on brand association and brand attractiveness.

Muensrichai, & Wangsantitam (2013) studied how kindergartens and pre-teenagers perceived the brand personality of milk products. The results showed that

children perceived four types of brand personality: sincerity, excitement, ruggedness, and competence. However, the sophisticated personality trait was not found in this research.

Based on previous brand personality studies, the results showed that brand personality tends to differ by product type. In addition,this notion was supported by Purkayastha (2009)who also found that brand personality traits varied by brand.Therefore, this current research proposes the following hypotheses:

H1a: There is a significant difference in consumer perceptions of the sincere personality trait for utilitarian products and symbolic products.

H2a: There is a significant difference in consumer perceptions of the exciting personality trait for utilitarian products and symbolic products.

H3a: There is a significant difference in consumer perceptions of the competent personality trait for utilitarian products and symbolic products.

H4a: There is a significant difference in consumer perceptions of the sophisticated personality trait for utilitarian products and symbolic products.

H5a: There is a significant difference in consumer perceptions of the rugged personality trait for utilitarian products and symbolic products.

Research Methodology

Product and Brand Selection

Product and brand selection consists of a two-step procedure. First is the product category selection followed the symbolic-utilitarian framework (Ratchford, 1987) as used in Aaker's (1997) study.Accordingly, the products were classified into two basic dimensions: involvement and think/feel.A utilitarian (think) product refers to products where the purchase decision is based on rational criteria whereas a symbolic (feel) product refers to a product

purchase decision which is based on affective criteria (Ratchford, 1987). Additionally, for precise product category comparison, this research selected four products following Romero's study (2012) namely 1) laptop computers as a utilitarian product with high involvement; 2) shampoo as a utilitarian product with low involvement; 3) perfume as a symbolic product with high involvement; and 4) soft drinks as a symbolic product with low involvement. Additionally,to ensure the product types vary in terms of the symbolic-utilitarian framework, an independent set of respondents (n= 80, 50%male, 50% female, age=20-59 years) rated the think/feel and involvement dimensions for the four chosen products. Secondly, in order to obtain are presentative set of brands for the study, the respondents were also asked to identify three top-of-the-mind brands for the selected product categories. As a result,the final twelve well-known brands used in the current study were as follows: 1) laptops (Dell, Lenovo, HP), 2) shampoos (Sunsilk,Clear, Dove), 3) perfumes (Chanel, DKNY, CK), and 4) soft drinks (Coke, Fanta, Est).

Respondents and Procedures

The target population of this research is Thai consumers who live in Bangkok in 2017. According to Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board (2013), the number of the population were as follows: 20-29 years old; 1,287,300 (23%), 30-39 years old, 1,679,600 (30%); 40-49 years old; 1,501,000 (27%), and 50-59 years old: 1,126,500 (20%). The sample consisted of 420 Thai consumers who were aware of the selected twelve utilitarian and symbolic product brands. Proportionate stratified sampling procedures were used to recruit the respondents so that they represented the population with respect to age demographic dimensions. Accordingly, the number of respondents were proportionately allocated and presented in Table 1.

Measurement

The original Aaker (1997) brand personality measures were used in this study and include five traits: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. The original Brand Personality Index (BPI) included 42 brand personality traits. The respondents were asked to rate the personality traits for each chosen brand (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree).Additionally, the Cronbach's alphas of the brand personality traits for twelve brands (Sunsilk,Clear, Dove, Coke, Fanta, Est, Chanel, DKNY, CK, Dell, Lenovo, and HP) were as follows: Sincerity (.913), Excitement (.942), Competence (.939), Sophistication (.901), and Ruggedness (.844).

Data Analysis

Using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences),descriptive statistics were employed to describe the consumer perceptions of five brand personality traits for the utilitarian and symbolic products. The Paired-Samples t-test was used to test the differences in the mean scores for the personality perceptions for utilitarian products and the personality perceptions for symbolic products.

Summary of Findings

The 420 completed questionnaires were used for data analysis in the present study. Table 1reveals that there are more female respondents (60.5%) than male respondents (30.5%). The age groups of respondents are proportionate to the age distribution of the Thai Population living in Bangkok, consisting of 20-29 (22.9%), 30-39 (30%), 40-49 (27.1%), and 50-59 (20%). The highest education level is Bachelor's Degree (59.0%). The largest occupation status of the respondents is office worker (35.2%) and the largest monthly disposable income is between 10,001and 20,000 baht (46.7%).

Table 1 Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Demographic	Category	Number	Percent
Gender	Male	166	39.5
	Female	254	60.5
	Total	**420**	**100**
Age	20-29 years	96	22.9
	30-39 years	126	30.0
	40-49 years	114	27.1
	50-59 years	84	20.0
	Total	**420**	**100**
Education	Less than high school or equivalency	1	.2
	High school or equivalency	73	17.4
	Diploma or equivalency	78	18.6
	Bachelor's degree	248	59.0

Demographic	Category	Number	Percent
	Higher than Bachelor's degree	20	4.8
	Total	**420**	**100**
Occupation	Government Officer	52	12.4
	State enterprise employee	90	21.4
	Office worker	148	35.2
	University student	17	4.0
	Employee for wages	31	7.4
	Other such as housewife, merchant	82	19.5
	Total	**420**	**100**
Income	10,000 baht or below	81	19.3
	10,001-20,000 baht	196	46.7
	20,001-30,000 baht	78	18.6
	30,001-40,000 baht	34	8.1
	40,001 baht or higher	31	7.4
	Total	**420**	**100**

Descriptive Test Results

Overall, the mean scores for the personality traits of utilitarian brands and symbolic brands: 'sincere', 'exciting', 'competent', 'sophisticated' and 'rugged' were above 3 (see Tables 2 & 3). The results showed that the utilitarian and symbolic brands were positively perceived by respondents.However, the results also revealed that 'rugged'personality trait had low mean scores for some brands such as Sunsilk (3.45), Dove (3.47) and Chanel (3.62). Additionally, the utilitarian products were rated highest for the 'competent' personality trait (M= 4.31) and lowest for the'rugged'personality trait (M = 3.96). The symbolic products were rated highest for the'exciting' personality trait(M= 4.32) and lowest for the'sincere' personality trait (M = 4.00).

Table 2Mean Scores and Standard deviations for Utilitarian Brands

Brand	Sincere	Exciting	Competent	Sophisticated	Rugged
	M (SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
Sunsilk	4.068(.242)	4.192 (.372)	4.270 (.307)	4.091 (.353)	3.448 (.411)
Clear	4.010 (.290)	4.305 (.271)	4.294 (.307)	3.843 (.340)	4.360 (.342)
Dove	3.998 (.287)	4.243 (.300)	4.258 (.318)	4.185 (.324)	3.471 (.415)
Dell	3.927 (.239)	4.289 (.295)	4.322 (.288)	4.194 (.401)	4.118 (.451)
Lenovo	3.976 (.219)	4.326 (.311)	4.330 (.301)	4.254 (.332)	4.147 (.381)
HP	3.969 (.216)	4.348 (.276)	4.359 (.305)	4.317 (.323)	4.226 (.414)
Mean across brands	3.991	4.284	4.306	4.147	3.962

Table 3 Mean Scores and Standard deviations for Symbolic Brands

Brand	Sincere	Exciting	Competent	Sophisticated	Rugged
	M (SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)
Coke	4.090 (.256)	4.354 (.249)	4.328 (.283)	4.062 (.359)	4.127 (.434)
Fanta	4.128 (.239)	4.303 (.300)	4.296 (.328)	4.050 (.338)	3.924 (.426)
Est	4.077 (.272)	4.226 (.309)	4.223 (.349)	4.943 (.372)	3.942 (.366)
Chanel	3.892 (.215)	4.367 (.228)	4.345 (.293)	4.484 (.300)	3.619 (.481)
DKNY	3.900 (.205)	4.338 (.269)	4.321 (.302)	4.274 (.306)	4.110 (.356)
CK	3.905 (.224)	4.309 (.265)	4.322 (.315)	4.097 (.288)	4.335 (.437)
Mean across brands	3.999	4.316	4.306	4.152	4.010

Hypotheses Test Results

The results from the Paired-Samples t-test indicated that there was a significant difference in the consumer perceptions of the exciting personality trait for utilitarian products and symbolic products, t (df=419)=-5.26, p<.01. The mean values indicated that the mean scores of the exciting personality perceptions for utilitarian products was less (M=4.284) than the exciting personality perceptions for symbolic products (M=4.316). Therefore, hypothesis 2a was accepted.

Hypothesis 5a was also supported. The analysis showed that there was a significant difference in the consumer perceptions of the rugged brand personality trait for utilitarian products and symbolic products, t(df=419)=-4.24, p< .01.The mean values indicated that the mean scores for the rugged personality perceptions for utilitarian products was less (M=3.962) than the rugged personality perceptions for symbolic products (M=4.010).

However, hypotheses H1a, H3a, and H4a were rejected.The Paired- Samples t-test showed that there was no significant difference in consumer perceptions for the sincere personality trait, t(df=419)=-1.19, p>.05, the competent personality trait, t(df=419)=-.07, p>.05, and the sophisticated personality trait, t(df=419)=-.51, p> .05, for utilitarian products and symbolic products (See Table 4).

Table 4 Paired-Samples t-test Results

Brand Personality Traits	Utilitarian Product		Symbolic Product				
	Mean	**S.D.**	**Mean**	**S.D.**	**t**	**p**	**Results**
Sincere	3.991	.191	3.999	.180	-1.185	.237	Rejected
Exciting	4.284	.246	4.316	.224	-5.262	.000***	Supported
Competent	4.306	.249	4.306	.250	-.069	.945	Rejected
Sophisticated	4.147	.256	4.152	.244	-.510	.610	Rejected
Rugged	3.962	.274	4.010	.276	-4.243	.000***	Supported

Remark***Significant at .001 level

Conclusion and Discussion

This study had two research objectives: (a) to examine the consumer personality perceptions for utilitarian products and symbolic products, (b) to compare the personality perceptions for utilitarian products and the consumer perceptions for symbolic products.The results revealed that the five brand personality traits: 'sincerity', 'excitement', 'competence', 'sophistication' and 'ruggedness' were well perceived for both utilitarian products and symbolic products.However, in line with Kim's (2000) brand personality study, the results showed that the rugged personality trait was somewhat inconsistent. Specifically, the rugged personality trait tended to varyby brand. Additionally, the competent personality trait was perceived as being higher for utilitarian products. These results are in line with previous brand personality

studies (Freling &Forbes, 2005; Sophonsiri & Polyorat, 2009). On the other hand,the study revealed that the exciting personality trait was perceived as being higher for symbolic products.Therefore, it can be indicated that consumers tend to have different personality perceptions for different types of products.

Additionally, the analysis showed significant differences in two brand personality perceptions (excitement and ruggedness) for utilitarian products and symbolic products. These findings supported the previous literature that the product type tended to affect the brand personality trait (Sripongpun & Polyorat, 2015; Supphellen & Gronhaug, 2003).However, the study revealed no differences in 'sincere','competent' and 'sophisticated' personality perceptions for both product categories. In other words, these personality traits existed in utilitarian and symbolic brands. These results may be explained by a reason that most brands embed personality traits such as competence, sincerity because they can create positive consequences on consumers (Aaker, 1996; Kim, 2000).

Theoretical Contributions and Recommendations

The current study adds Thai consumer personality perceptions to the literature, which are different for utilitarian and symbolic products. This can be explained by the notion that utilitarian and symbolic products involve different underlying motives and buying decisions (Ratchford, 1987). The results also support Aaker's (1997) study which found that brand personalities are complex. In other words, more than one brand personality trait can be perceived by consumers. The findings may imply to marketers and advertisers that brand personality traits are crucial not only for symbolic products, but also for utilitarian products as it was shown that the five brand personality traits (competence, sincerity, excitement, sophistication, and ruggedness) for both product types are positively perceived by Thai consumers. It also showed that the brand personality perceptions for utilitarian products differ from the brand personality perceptions for symbolic products. Therefore, marketers and advertisers should target different brand personality traits for different product types. For instance, they may stress personality traits other than the dominant competent personality trait for utilitarian products in order to make it different from competitors (Freling &Forbes, 2005).

Limitations and Future Research

Though this study was carefully designed and conducted, it still has some limitations. Firstly, the results must be interpreted with caution given that the research studied twelve brands in four product categories. Consequently, it would be fruitful for future brand personality research to expand the product categories to enhance the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the research was conducted only with Thai consumers living in Bangkok. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to all consumers living in other provinces in Thailand. Future brand personality research should be expanded to other parts of Thailand. As the current research examined the brand personality perceptions of utilitarian and symbolic products at the aggregate level (five dimensions), future research should further analyze the sub brand personality traits (42 traits). Lastly, as the nature of the current study is exploratory, subsequent research should investigate the consequences of the brand personality traits for utilitarian and symbolic products in order to understand their effect on the brand preferences of consumers.

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