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# The influence of brand morality and competence on consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions

The mediating role of brand trust

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### **Abstract**

Understanding how consumers perceive brand traits may help organizations enhance their positioning strategy and marketing. Previous research shows that personality traits are important in predicting social perception and behavior. This study ( $n = 216$ ) aims to better understand the effect of brand morality and competence on brand attitude and purchase intentions, using an online survey with an experimental design. The findings showed that brand morality has a stronger effect than brand competence on brand attitude and purchase intentions. Previous research also shows the importance of brand trust in predicting consumers' perceptions. Therefore, the mediation of trust in the relation between the traits and brand attitude and purchase intentions is investigated. The results show that trust is related to brand attitude and purchase intentions. Also, brand trust mediates the relationship between morality and brand attitude and purchase intentions, as well as the relationship between competence and brand attitude and purchase intentions.

*Keywords:* competence, morality, brand attitude, purchase intentions, and brand trust

### **The influence of brand morality and competence on consumers' brand attitude and purchase intentions and the mediating role of brand trust**

Success is a concept that every organization strives for on a daily basis. What makes a certain brand so successful and other brands not? For every brand, it is essential to understand what factors influence their performances in order to improve their success. Forming strong connections with consumers appears to be important for brands since these connections lead to more investment intentions of the consumer and more actual purchase behavior (Park et al., 2010). One way to assess those connections is to look at consumers' responses to a brand (De Chematony et al., 1998). This consumer-based measure is based on criteria such as perceived brand personality (De Chematony et al., 1998). So, it appears to be important for a brand to take perceptions of the consumer into account and to investigate what perceptions make consumers prefer their brand over the others.

One way in which consumers form those perceptions is by anthropomorphizing the brand, which can be described as perceiving brands as human beings (Puzakova et al., 2009). Consumers perceive brands as part of themselves or as having a relationship with themselves (MacInnis & Folks, 2017) by attributing humanlike forms, minds, and personality characteristics to brands (MacInnis & Folks, 2017). Therefore, it is interesting for a company to know which personality characteristics are important in shaping consumers' perceptions of the brand in order to determine when consumers prefer their brand. There are several ways of measuring consumer preferences for certain brands. In this research, purchase intentions and brand attitude are used to measure this because most research shows a significant positive relationship between purchase intentions and actual behavior (Morwitz et al., 2007) and brand attitude can be described as the general liking or disliking of a brand (Foroudi, 2019).

Consumer brand perceptions are formed as a result of any direct or indirect contact between a consumer and a brand, and these perceptions shape and affect a brand's personality

## EFFECT OF BRAND PERSONALITY ON CONSUMERS' PREFERENCES

(Plummer, 2000). Brand personality is a set of human characteristics or personality traits given to a brand by consumers (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality shows similar functionality as human personality and like human personality, brand personality also appears to be stable over time (Wee, 2004). Since people look similarly at brands as they look at people (Kervyn et al., 2012), consumers judge brands based on their personalities in the same way they assess other people's personalities. This implies that consumers are likely to form attitudes toward brands in the same way they do toward other individuals. In short, brand personality is important for brand perception, and because there is little research on the influence of brand personality on brand attitudes and purchase intentions, this study will investigate this.

What are those specific traits that are so important for brand perception? Research has shown that two global personality trait dimensions are most important in brand personality, namely warmth and competence (Hack et al., 2013; Kervyn et al., 2012; Kolbl et al., 2019). Warmth and competence dimensions affect the way people perceive and feel about a brand and how they perceive the social world around them (Kervyn et al., 2012). Furthermore, warmth and competence influence people's behavior because they guide people's interactions with the people around them (Kervyn et al., 2012). As brand perception works similarly as social perception (Kervyn et al., 2012), the traits warmth and competence are important in predicting consumers' perceptions of a brand. However, in this research, the warmth dimension is replaced by morality. This is because it can be argued that there are three important trait dimensions in predicting consumers' responses: sociability, morality, and competence (Leach et al., 2007). Warmth can be divided into two of those traits: sociability and morality (Brambilla & Leach, 2014). Morality has a more dominating role than sociability when it comes to impressions and evaluations we form of other people (Brambilla & Leach, 2014). So, this makes morality a more specific trait than warmth. Therefore, this

study will focus on morality instead of warmth in examining the influence of personality traits on consumers' preferences.

Another interesting factor that influences purchase intentions and brand attitude is brand trust (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013; Bhandari & Rogers, 2018; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Yasin, 2013). Since research shows that brand personality has an effect on brand trust (Tong et al., 2018), and since little research has been done about the role brand trust plays in competent and moral brands, this study will examine whether brand trust could be a possible explanation for the influence of morality and competence on brand attitude and purchase intentions. Therefore, the mediating role of brand trust is examined.

In short, this study will investigate the effect of brand morality and brand competence on purchase intentions and brand attitude. This study will also look at the mediating role brand trust plays in the relationship between the two personality dimensions and consumers' purchase intentions and brand attitude. As a result, companies might be able to better understand the process in which their customers form their brand attitude and purchase intentions, so that they can understand when they would choose their brand above other brands. In practice, this could mean that companies should invest in their service and customer friendliness to increase their perceived morality, or hire experts for marketing campaigns to increase their perceived competence, depending on which trait is more important for their customers' purchase intentions and brand attitudes.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As previously mentioned, brand personality is an important factor in the way consumers perceive brands. This is due to the fact that people form relationships with brands (MacInnis & Folks, 2017) and perceive brands similarly as they perceive people (Kervyn et al., 2012). They do this by ascribing human-like traits to brands (MacInnis & Folks, 2017) and as a result, consumers think about brands as if they were famous people (Rook, 1985) and

view those brands as part of their own self (Bruhn et al., 2012). Research shows that competence and warmth are two of those trait dimensions that people find important in a brand (Hack et al., 2013; Kervyn et al., 2012; Kolbl et al., 2019). The warmth dimension includes traits like helpfulness and sincerity and the competence dimension includes traits like efficacy and intelligence (Kervyn et al., 2012).

However, in the current study, the focus is on the trait dimension morality instead of the trait dimension of warmth because warmth has numerous meanings and is difficult to convert into specific characteristics (Hess & Melnyk, 2016). Also, the warmth dimension can be distinguished in sociability and morality (Brambilla & Leach, 2014). Since morality is more important than sociability in explaining how people judge other individuals and groups (Brambilla & Leach, 2014) and since people are more interested in learning about morality than sociability (Brambilla et al., 2011), this study will concentrate on morality instead of sociability or warmth. Leach et al. (2007) also focused on morality and showed that this trait dimension is more important than competence and sociability when it comes to positive evaluation of in-groups. Landy et al. (2016) found that, while others' morality is unconditionally positive, their sociability is dependent on their morality. Therefore, morality and sociability differ in the way they are processed. When it comes to person perception, morality is more dominant than sociability (Landy et al., 2016). Since people perceive brands similarly as they perceive people (Kervyn et al., 2012), this indicates that morality is a better dimension to study. Furthermore, morality is more dominant than warmth and sociability for impression formation, which is a process through which people integrate information they observe in order to build perceptions of others (Landy et al., 2016). Morality helps individuals generate more reliable global perceptions of others (Landy et al., 2016). Again, because brand perception works similarly as social perception (Kervyn et al., 2012), this research will be investigating the influence of morality instead of warmth or sociability.

Competence is simply the ability to perform well, and morality is the involvement in ethical behavior (Van Prooijen & Ellemers, 2015). Competent brands are associated with a brands' expertise and quality (Maehle et al., 2011). Traits to define this competence dimension are efficacy, creativity, intelligence, confidence, and skill (Cuddy et al., 2008). Traits as honesty, sincerity, and trustworthiness are used to describe morality (Brambilla et al., 2021; Leach et al., 2007). Morality can also be described as individuals' intentions and competence is the individuals' ability to accomplish those intentions (Landy et al., 2016). It is important for a brand to score high on both competence and morality because failing to do so can lead to negative perceptions. In social perception, high morality but low competence elicits pity, while high competence but low morality elicits envy (Cuddy et al., 2008). Morality and competence appear to be difficult to combine in some scenarios. For example, if a company invests in its manufacturing to improve the quality of its products in order to create competent products, producing a large number of products may increase carbon dioxide emissions, harming the company's moral image. However, failing to improve production in order to reduce CO2 emissions could cause the company's product quality to lag. This makes it challenging for a brand to score high on both trait dimensions. Hence, it is interesting in investigating which of the two dimensions is more important.

In certain cases, social perception studies suggest that morality is more important than competence. First of all, morality is a trait dimension that individuals find the most important trait that an ingroup must possess (Leach et al., 2007). Also, morality is much more important than competence in predicting the evaluations people make about other individuals and groups (Brambilla et al., 2021). Lastly, morality is more important than competence when it comes to the attractiveness of a team or organization to individuals (Van Prooijen & Ellemers, 2015). Because previous research shows that consumers look at brands in an identical way as they look at other people (Kervyn et al., 2012), it seems likely that the importance of the

morality also applies to brand perception. Nevertheless, competence is also essential to a brand, as it refers to performing well. When it comes to purchase intentions, for example, Aaker et al. (2004) argue that competence is more essential than morality in consumer-company relations. Thus, research shows that competence is also an important trait dimension for a brand, and therefore, this paper will focus on the effect of both morality and competence. Since Aaker (1997), Fournier and Alvarez (2012), and Kervyn et al. (2012) argue that brand personality functions similarly to human personality, for example, in terms of stability over time (Wee, 2004), it is important to consider how competence and morality affect brand success.

In this study, the success of a brand will be measured using consumers' purchase intentions and brand attitude as the two outcome variables. These two outcome variables and the personality trait dimensions form the hypotheses we test in this study. When it comes to those purchase intentions and brand attitudes, this study will look at whether consumers value competence or morality more. As mentioned before, morality seems more important than competence when it comes to consumer brand evaluation. Leach et al. (2007) showed that people find morality most important in ingroups and Brambilla et al. (2021) found that morality is more important than competence when people evaluate interpersonal and ingroup relations. People assess brands in the same way they assess other people, thus it is possible that they create attitudes toward brands in the same way they create attitudes about other people. As a result, the expectation is that morality is more important than competence for a consumer's brand attitude, leading to the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Brand morality has a stronger effect on brand attitude than brand competence.

When it comes to purchase intentions, however, competence trumps morality in relationships between the consumer and the company (Aaker et al., 2004). Consumers place a higher value on product quality than morality traits when buying products (Hess & Melnyk, 2016). Also, missing competent signals is more salient than missing moral signals, according to Hess and Melnyk (2016). They discovered that organizations are more inclined to promote their competence by emphasizing the quality of their product, which leads to increased purchase intentions among customers. In addition, Aaker et al. (2012) found a significant main effect of competence on purchase intentions. Therefore, the expectation is that competence is more important than morality in determining a consumer's purchase intentions, leading to the following hypothesis:

**H2:** Brand competence has a stronger effect on purchase intentions than brand morality.

The inclusion of brand trust in this study is due to the expectation that brand trust is a possible underlying mechanism or process for the effects of morality and competence. Morgan and Hunt (1994) defined brand trust as the degree to which consumers rely on a brand's ability to function as consumers expect it to function. First of all, research shows that trust is influenced by personality traits (Tong et al., 2018). In turn, purchase intentions and positive referrals are influenced by brand trust (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). Yasin (2013) showed the positive influence of brand trust on purchase intentions as well. Furthermore, brand trust mediates the influence of positive eWOM on purchase intentions (Bhandari & Rodgers, 2018), and brand trust is a predictor of positive brand attitudes (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Thus, when it comes to purchase intentions and brand attitude, research shows the importance of brand trust. The question here is whether brand trust is a possible explanation for the effect of the two trait dimensions on brand attitude and purchase

intentions. Therefore, this study investigates the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between the two trait dimensions and brand attitude and purchase intentions.

It seems likely that morality is related to trust because honesty and trustworthiness are two words by which morality is defined. Possibly, consumers trust a moral brand more because of its perceived honesty and trustworthiness. This suggests that trust could be the underlying mechanism in the relationship between morality and brand attitude. However, in this study, it is important to distinguish between trust and trustworthiness, which is used to describe morality. Trustworthiness can be defined as a formed expectancy about a person (Neuman, 2016). In this study, it is about whether a brand you may not know appears credible or believable to you, which is an unstable trait. Of course, trustworthiness plays an important role in forming a relationship based on trust (Neuman, 2016), but trust is a more stable belief. Brand trust is about the actual trust or confidence you have in a brand that you already know. This trust is not about having a trustworthy appearance; it is about having a genuine sense of faith in a brand with which the consumer has previous experience.

According to research, perceived ethicality (Singh et al., 2012) and brand competence (Afzal et al., 2010) both have a positive relationship with brand trust. Consumers may have a higher level of trust in a competent brand as a result of positive experiences with high-quality products or good service. This suggests that in the relationship between competence and brand attitude and purchase intentions, trust may be the underlying mechanism.

Sung and Kim (2010) examined the influence of personality traits on brand trust. They found that both sincerity, which can be considered as a feature of morality, and competence positively influenced brand trust. However, the effect of perceived sincerity appeared to have a stronger relation with brand trust than competence. This could indicate that honest and fair brands are more easily trusted by consumers than skilled and efficient brands. However, they did not directly examine the effects of morality and competence on brand attitude and

purchase intentions via brand trust. As a result, the question remains whether the different effects of competence and morality on brand attitude and purchase intentions can be explained by the underlying mechanism of brand trust. To clarify the role brand trust plays in competent and moral brands, this paper will investigate if brand trust mediates the relationship between moral and competent brands and consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions.

Since brand trust has a positive influence on brand attitude and purchase intentions (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013; Bhandari & Rodgers, 2018; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Yasin, 2013), the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H3a:** Brand trust has a positive relation with brand attitude.

**H3b:** Brand trust has a positive relation with purchase intentions.

Because of the abovementioned expectations, as well as the expected effect of morality on brand attitude and the expected effect of competence on purchase intentions, brand trust is expected to be an underlying mechanism. It is therefore hypothesized that trust is the mediating variable through which the traits dimensions have an indirect influence on brand attitude and purchase intentions. The following hypotheses are proposed:

**H4a:** Brand trust mediates the relationship between brand morality and brand attitude.

**H4b:** Brand trust mediates the relationship between brand morality and purchase intentions.

**H5a:** Brand trust mediates the relationship between brand competence and brand attitude.

**H5b:** Brand trust mediates the relationship between brand competence and purchase intentions.

An experiment was conducted to test these hypotheses, with participants filling out a questionnaire.

### **Method**

#### **Participants and Design**

To determine the number of participants who are needed for the study, a G\*power analysis was conducted with a 95% confidence interval,  $F(1,202) = 3.89$ ,  $p = .05$ . The analysis revealed that 206 participants had to be gathered in the sample size to gain enough statistical power,  $1 - \beta = .95$ . A higher number of participants was aimed for, in case participants dropped out. Participants who did not complete the questionnaire were removed from the data set. Finally, a sample size of 216 participants was collected and used for the data analyses. The sample consisted of 159 women (73.6%) and 57 men (26.4%). The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 73 years old, with an average age of 35.30 and a standard deviation of 16.33. Most participants had a university master's diploma (33.3%), followed by an HBO bachelor's diploma (23.6%) and a university bachelor's diploma (23.1%). The rest of the participants had an HBO bachelor's, an HBO master's, or a high school diploma.

All the participants were recruited through several social media platforms, oral communication, and Sona Systems Leiden, which is an online program through which first-year psychology students can earn credits by participating in several studies. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions of a 2 (level: high vs. low) x 2 (dimension: competence vs. morality) between-subjects design. This design had to be chosen rather than a 2 (morality: high vs. low) x 2 (competence: high vs. low) design because this study was part of a larger study. Three filler brands were included in the experiment, but because their only purpose was to divert attention away from the true purpose of the study, they were not included in any data analyses.

### **Procedure**

This study was conducted after it was approved by the Psychological Research Ethics Committee of Leiden University. It was part of a larger study that also manipulated logo colors in relation to competent and moral brands. The variables of the larger study were also included in the questionnaire, but the data from those variables were excluded from this study.

Participants read and signed an informed consent form before filling in the online questionnaire. Next, they were shown a brief introduction to the study's ostensible goal, which explained that the study's goal was to investigate consumer reactions to new product brands. This text was intended to conceal the true purpose of the study, which has yet to be stated.

They were each given descriptions of four different brands in random order, of which the target brand scored high or low on competence or morality. The other three brands were filler brands and for every participant the same. The four brands were part of the four product categories, namely jeans, fast food, sports shoes, and orange juice. The target brand, which was manipulated in terms of competence (high or low) or morality (high or low), was about the 'jeans' product category. The filler brands were about the other three product categories (fast food, sports shoes, and orange juice) and were for each participant the same. These filler brands were added in order to cover the actual goal of the study. The order of the target and filler brands was chosen at random for each participant.

The participants were asked to read the brand descriptions as attentively as possible. After reading each short story about the four presented brands, the participants evaluated them on perceived trust, purchase intentions, and brand attitude. Finally, the participants were asked about their gender and age, and a brief description of the study's actual goal was given.

### **Materials**

For this study, four fictive brands were created in the categories jeans, fast food, sports shoes, and orange juice based on Aaker (1997) and Bennett and Hill (2012). The reason for

## EFFECT OF BRAND PERSONALITY ON CONSUMERS' PREFERENCES

this was because these categories were seen as neutral since they vary equally in competence and morality. In other words, depending on their description, these categories can all score high or low on competence or morality; for example, due to aircraft emissions, an airline company may be automatically perceived as immoral and thus is not a neutral category. The target brand was based on the jeans product category. Four fictive descriptions and taglines were created about the brand scoring either high on competence, low on competence, high on morality, or low on morality. These descriptions and taglines are an effective way to manipulate personality traits, according to Aaker et al. (2004).

The description of the competence of a brand was reflected in the ability to do well or not for the customer. In other words, the competent description was mainly focused on the quality of the jeans and the success of the brand (Cuddy et al., 2008; Maehle et al., 2011). The competent brand was described as “good quality”, “successful”, “fast-growing”, “intelligent”, “prestigious”, and “skilled”. The incompetent brand was described as “quantity over quality”, “growing slower than expected”, “unintelligent”, “infamous”, and “clumsy”.

The description of how moral a brand is was about the intention of wanting to do well for the customer. This was reflected in the brands' honesty, sustainability, sincerity, and kindness towards its customers and the environment (Brambilla et al., 2021; Leach et al., 2007). The moral brand was described as “honest”, “helpful”, “sincere”, and as “paying a lot of attention towards the environment and the well-being of farmers”. The immoral brand was described as “dishonest”, “unhelpful”, “insincere”, and as “paying little attention towards the environment and the well-being of its employees”.

In short, the taglines to show a brands' competence are about the (dis)ability to do well and the taglines to show a brands' morality are about being (dis)honest. The three other brands were based on the other three product categories (fast food, sports shoes, and orange juice). The descriptions and taglines of these brands were more neutral because they

functioned as control brands in order to hide the goal of the study. Words to describe these brands were “practical”, “standard”, “pure”, “qualitative”, “ambitious”, and “small-scaled”.

### Measures

The first dependent variable, purchase intention, was measured with five items derived from Spears and Singh (2004). Participants were asked if they would purchase a product from the brand. Next, the participants could answer on the following five 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*definitely*); 1 (*definitely not intend to buy*) to 7 (*definitely intend to buy*); 1 (*very low purchase interest*) to 7 (*very high purchase interest*); 1 (*definitely not buy it*) to 7 (*definitely buy it*); 1 (*probably not buy it*) to 7 (*probably buy it*). The scale had a Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha = .93$ , showing the scale is reliable.

The second dependent variable, brand attitude, was also measured with five items from the study of Spears and Singh (2004). The participants were asked to describe their overall feelings about the described brand in terms of attractiveness, pleasantness, favourability, sympathy and to what extent they found the brand good or bad. They could answer on the following five 7-point Likert scales ranging from: 1 (*unappealing*) to 7 (*appealing*); 1 (*bad*) to 7 (*good*); 1 (*unpleasant*) to 7 (*pleasant*); 1 (*unfavourable*) to 7 (*favourable*); 1 (*unlikeable*) to 7 (*likeable*). The scale had a Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha = .94$ , showing the scale is reliable.

Brand trust was measured by four items based on the study of Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001). First, the respondents were instructed to believe that they were already familiar with the brand. Next, the items were “I trust this brand”, “This brand is safe”, “This is an honest brand”, and “I rely on this brand” were given. The participants could answer on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*). The items had a Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha = .95$ , showing the scale is reliable.

**Manipulation check.** In order to check the manipulation of competence and morality, the participants were asked two questions about how (im)moral and (in)competent they found the brand. They could answer the two items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very immoral*) to 5 (*very moral*) and from 1 (*very incompetent*) to 5 (*very competent*).

### Statistical Analyses

First, the manipulation is checked by investigating the questions about how (im)moral and (in)competent the participants found the brands. To test this, an ANOVA is conducted.

An ANOVA is also conducted to test H1 and H2. The expectation is that morality is more important for brand attitude and that competence is more important for purchase intentions.

To test whether H3a and H3b can be accepted, the influence of brand trust on brand attitude and purchase intentions is tested using Hayes Process Model 4. The expectation is that brand trust leads to significantly higher scores of brand attitude and purchase intentions.

To test whether H4a, H4b, H5a, and H5b can be accepted, the mediating role of brand trust is tested by using Hayes' Process Model 4 as well. The expectation of the results is that for both dimensions, brand trust is a significant mediator in the relation between the dimensions and purchase intentions and brand attitude.

## Results

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to perform all the analyses.

### Manipulation Check

An ANOVA was performed to test whether the manipulation of competence and morality was successful. To start, the question of how competent the respondents found the target brand was tested. A significant effect for level (high vs. low) was found,  $F(1, 214) = 112.05, p < .001$ . This indicates there is a significant difference between the levels high and

low. The effect of dimension was not significant,  $F(1, 214) = 0.03, p = .868$ . However, the interaction effect of dimension and level was significant,  $F(1, 214) = 6.05, p = .015$ , indicating that the effect of level is different for both dimensions. When looking at where those differences exactly are, participants in the high competence condition ( $M = 3.22, SD = 0.86$ ) found the brand more competent than in the low competence condition ( $M = 2.23, SD = 0.87$ ). However, this difference is smaller than the difference between the high morality condition ( $M = 3.50, SD = 0.91$ ) and the low morality condition ( $M = 1.91, SD = 0.94$ ), meaning the manipulation of competence is only partially succeeded. It suggests that high morality brands were thought to be more competent than high competence brands, whereas low morality brands were thought to be less competent than low competence brands. This was not the goal of the manipulation and should be taken into consideration while interpreting the results.

Secondly, the question of how moral the respondents found the brand was tested. Again, a significant effect for level (high vs. low) was found,  $F(1, 214) = 218.19, p < .001$ . This indicates there is a significant difference between the levels high and low. The effect of dimension was again not significant,  $F(1, 214) = 0.02, p = .892$ . However, the interaction effect of dimension and level was significant,  $F(1, 214) = 82.25, p < .001$ , indicating that the effect of level is different for both dimensions. When looking at where those differences exactly are, participants in the high morality condition ( $M = 4.06, SD = 0.79$ ) found the brand more moral than in the low morality condition ( $M = 1.41, SD = 0.74$ ). This difference is greater than the difference between the high competence condition ( $M = 3.14, SD = 0.67$ ) and the low competence condition ( $M = 2.35, SD = 0.79$ ), meaning the manipulation of morality succeeded. This suggests that high morality brands were thought to be more moral than high competence brands, whereas low morality brands were thought to be less moral than low competence brands, which was indeed the intention of the manipulation.

## EFFECT OF BRAND PERSONALITY ON CONSUMERS' PREFERENCES

In short, only the manipulation of the morality dimension was successful because moral brands scored higher on morality than competent brands and immoral brands scored lower on morality than incompetent brands. The manipulation for competence only partially succeeded because high competent brands were seen as more competent than low competent brands, but competent brands were seen as less competent than moral brands, and incompetent brands were seen as less incompetent than immoral brands. It is critical to consider this when interpreting the following results, as it can lead to inaccurate conclusions.

### **Assumptions**

Certain assumptions had to be met for the ANOVA and Multiple Hierarchical Analyses. The plots for normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity are shown in Appendix A. As can be seen, the assumptions for linearity and homoscedasticity are met. However, the assumption for normality is violated, which should be taken into account when interpreting the results of the analyses. Lastly, the independent variables (purchase intentions, brand attitude, and brand trust) have VIF scores  $< 1$ , demonstrating that there is no multicollinearity.

### **Correlations**

A correlation analysis was performed on all of the dependent variables to get a first look at the relationships between them. The results are shown in Table 1. Age did not correlate with one of the variables, meaning that age does not have to be included in the analyses as a covariate. The three dependent variables (brand attitude, purchase intentions, and brand trust) all correlated significantly with each other, meaning that a higher score on one of the variable goes together with higher scores on the other two variables.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix

	Brand Attitude	Purchase Intentions	Brand Trust	Age
Brand Attitude				
Purchase Intentions	.83**			
Brand Trust	.74**	.70**		
Age	.05	.01	.07	

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

### Brand Attitude

It was predicted that brand morality has a stronger effect on brand attitude than brand competence (H1). There are two ways to determine whether or not this is the case. To begin, the results should show greater differences between morality levels than between competence levels to confirm this prediction. Another way to confirm this prediction is results that show that high morality leads to higher brand attitude scores than high competence and that low morality leads to lower brand attitude scores than low competence. An ANOVA was conducted to test this hypothesis.

Results of the ANOVA showed significant main effects of dimension,  $F(1, 215) = 5.61, p = .019, \eta_p^2 = .026$ ; and level,  $F(1, 215) = 176.11, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .454$ . As expected, the interaction between dimension and level was also significant,  $F(1, 215) = 20.53, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .088$ . Simple main effects analyses were conducted to compare the two levels within each dimension and to compare the two dimensions within each level. First of all, the results show that high morality ( $M = 4.80, SD = 1.16$ ) scores significantly higher on brand attitude than low morality ( $M = 2.06, SD = 1.10$ ),  $F(1, 215) = 158.69, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .428$ . High competence ( $M = 4.47, SD = 1.13$ ) also scores significantly higher on brand attitude than low competence ( $M = 3.12, SD = 1.14$ ),  $F(1, 215) = 38.13, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .152$ . When looking at the mean differences, the difference between high and low morality ( $I - J = 2.74$ ) is greater than the difference between high and low competence ( $I - J = 1.35$ ) which is in line with our

## EFFECT OF BRAND PERSONALITY ON CONSUMERS' PREFERENCES

expectation of H1. This indicates that differences in morality lead to greater brand attitude differences than differences in competence. Additionally, the difference between high morality ( $M = 4.80$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) and high competence ( $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) is not significant,  $F(1, 215) = 2.27$ ,  $p = .122$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .011$ . There was a significant effect in the low condition, showing that low competence ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) scores higher than low morality ( $M = 2.06$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ),  $F(1, 215) = 24.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .104$ . This means that low morality leads to more negative brand attitudes than low competence.

In short, these findings indicate that H1 can be confirmed. Because the difference in brand attitudes between low and high morality was greater than the difference between low and high competence, and because low morality causes more negative brand attitudes than low competence, morality has a stronger effect on brand attitude than competence.

### Consumers' Purchase Intentions

It was predicted that brand competence has a stronger effect on purchase intentions than brand morality (H2). The two methods used to determine whether H1 was true are also used to determine whether H2 is true. An ANOVA was conducted to test this hypothesis.

Results of the ANOVA showed no significant main effect of dimension,  $F(1, 215) = 2.71$ ,  $p = .142$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .010$ . The main effect of level was significant,  $F(1, 215) = 117.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .356$ . As expected, the interaction between dimension and level was also significant,  $F(1, 215) = 10.40$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .047$ . Simple main effects analyses were conducted to compare the two levels within each dimension and to compare the two dimensions within each level. First of all, the results show that high morality ( $M = 4.43$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ) scores significantly higher on purchase intentions than low morality ( $M = 2.04$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ),  $F(1, 215) = 98.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .318$ . High competence ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) also scores significantly higher on purchase intentions than low competence ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ),  $F(1, 215) = 28.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .120$ . When looking at the mean differences, the

## EFFECT OF BRAND PERSONALITY ON CONSUMERS' PREFERENCES

difference between high and low morality ( $I - J = 2.39$ ) is greater than the difference between high and low competence ( $I - J = 1.30$ ), which is against our expectation of H2. It indicates that differences in morality lead to greater purchase intentions differences than differences in competence. Additionally, when looking at the differences between the two dimensions, the results are also in contrast to our prediction of H2. The difference between high competence ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) and high morality ( $M = 4.43$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ) was not significant,  $F(1, 215) = 1.49$ ,  $p = .224$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .007$ . There was a significant effect between low competence ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) and low morality ( $M = 2.04$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ),  $F(1, 215) = 11.36$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .051$ , indicating that low morality leads to more negative purchase intentions than low competence, also contradicting H2.

Thus, H2 is not confirmed, but the contrary of the expected result is demonstrated. Because the difference in purchase intentions between low and high morality was greater than the difference between low and high competence, and because low morality causes more negative purchase intentions than low competence, morality has a stronger effect on purchase intentions than competence.

### **The Role of Brand Trust**

To test the mediating effect of brand trust, a Multiple Hierarchical Regression using Hayes' Process v3.3 Macro model was conducted. It was predicted that brand trust positively relates to brand attitude (H3a) and purchase intentions (H3b). Also, the expectation was that brand trust mediates the relationship between morality and brand attitude (H4a) and the relationship between competence and brand attitude (H5a). Lastly, expected was that brand trust mediates the relationship between morality and purchase intentions (H4b) and the relationship between competence and purchase intentions (H5b).

### ***Morality and Brand Attitude***

Process Model 4 was used to investigate the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between morality and brand attitude (H4a). Morality was created as a new variable (high vs. low). The results show that morality has a significant positive relationship with brand trust,  $b = 2.75$ ,  $t(106) = 12.76$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that high morality leads to higher brand trust than low morality. Next, the results show that brand trust has a significant positive relationship with brand attitude,  $b = 0.57$ ,  $t(105) = 7.07$ ,  $p < .001$ . This means that increased brand trust positively relates to brand attitude, confirming H3a. When brand trust is included as a mediator in the relationship between morality and brand attitude, the direct effect of morality on brand attitude is significant,  $b = 1.17$ ,  $t(106) = 4.08$ ,  $p < .001$ . The indirect effect of morality on brand attitude through brand trust is also significant,  $b = 1.58$ , 95% *CI* [1.10, 2.08]. Thus, brand trust partially mediates the relationship between morality and brand attitude, confirming H4a.

### ***Morality and Purchase Intentions***

Process Model 4 was used to investigate the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between morality and purchase intentions (H4b). The results show that brand trust has a significant positive relationship with purchase intentions,  $b = 0.62$ ,  $t(105) = 6.81$ ,  $p < .001$ . This means that increased brand trust positively relates to purchase intentions, confirming H3b. When brand trust is included as a mediator in the relationship between morality and purchase intentions, the direct effect of morality on purchase intentions becomes weaker but is still significant,  $b = 0.70$ ,  $t(106) = 2.17$ ,  $p = .032$ . The indirect effect of morality on purchase intentions through brand is also significant,  $b = 1.70$ , 95% *CI* [0.68, 2.32]. Thus, brand trust partially mediates the relationship between morality and purchase intentions, confirming H4b.

### ***Competence and Brand Attitude***

Process Model 4 was used to investigate the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between competence and brand attitude (H5a). Competence was created as a new variable (high vs. low). The results show that competence has a significant positive relationship with brand trust,  $b = 1.51$ ,  $t(106) = 7.90$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that high competence leads to higher brand trust than low competence. Next, the results show that brand trust has a significant positive relationship with brand attitude,  $b = 0.43$ ,  $t(105) = 4.16$ ,  $p < .001$ . This means that increased brand trust positively relates to brand attitude, again confirming H3a. When brand trust is included as a mediator in the relationship between competence and brand attitude, the direct effect of competence on brand attitude is significant,  $b = 0.69$ ,  $t(106) = 2.72$ ,  $p = .008$ . The indirect effect of competence on brand attitude through brand trust is also significant,  $b = 0.65$ , 95% *CI* [0.22, 1.14]. Thus, brand trust partially mediates the relationship between competence and brand attitude, confirming H5a.

### ***Competence and Purchase Intentions***

Process Model 4 was used to investigate the mediating role of brand trust in the relationship between competence and purchase intentions (H5b). The results show that brand trust has a significant positive relationship with purchase intentions,  $b = 0.49$ ,  $t(105) = 4.31$ ,  $p < .001$ . This means that increased brand trust positively relates to purchase intentions, again confirming H3b. When brand trust is included as a mediator in the relationship between competence and purchase intentions, the direct effect of competence on brand attitude is not significant,  $b = 0.55$ ,  $t(106) = 1.97$ ,  $p = .052$ , indicating that there is no direct effect of competence on purchase intentions. The indirect effect of competence on purchase intentions through brand trust is significant,  $b = 0.74$ , 95% *CI* [0.25, 1.25]. Thus, there is no direct effect of competence on purchase intentions, but there is an indirect effect of competence on

purchase intentions via brand trust, and therefore brand trust mediates the relationship between competence and purchase intentions, confirming H5b.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to discover if brand morality and brand competence had different effects on consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Another goal of this study was to investigate if brand trust could be the underlying mechanism in the relationship between the two dimensions and brand attitudes and purchase intentions. The findings of this study support most of the hypotheses, as well as provide relevant insights into consumer perceptions and preferences.

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

To start, based on previous literature (Brambilla et al., 2021; Leach et al., 2007; Van Prooijen & Ellemers, 2015), it was predicted that morality has a stronger effect than competence in predicting consumers' brand attitudes. Confirming the hypothesis, the results showed that brand morality is more important than competence when it comes to brand attitude. With this, this study extends the literature on the effect of brand personality traits on consumers' brand attitudes. Also based on previous literature (Aaker et al., 2010; Aaker et al., 2012; Hess & Melnyk., 2016), it was predicted that competence has a stronger effect than morality in predicting consumers' purchase intentions. Contrary to the expected effect, the results show that morality is also more important than competence when it comes to purchase intentions. Therefore, this study contradicts and thereby contributes to previous research on the effect of personality traits on purchase intentions. These results suggest that morality is more important than competence to consumers. The stronger effect of morality seems to be caused by the negative effect of immorality, however, there is no specific benchmark to determine this. An explanation for the stronger effect of morality could be the rising awareness of certain global problems, such as environmental pollution, which makes people

more concerned about sustainability (Galbreth & Ghosh, 2013). With these findings, this study also contributes to existing literature by examining brand morality as a relatively new brand personality trait. This provides relevant support for the effect of brand morality on consumers' preferences. To conclude, the findings of this study contribute to the existing literature by showing the importance of the influence of morality on consumers. In practice, these results may be useful for organizations as they determine their strategy to position their brand on the market. This brand positioning is the conceptual position of the brand in the minds of consumers (Kotler, 2003). As morality has the strongest effect on purchase intentions and brand attitude, organizations should highlight moral features in their positioning strategy. As a result, consumers create moral associations with the brand, which affect how consumers view the brand (Kotler, 2003). So, organizations can make their brand to be perceived as moral to create more positive purchase intentions and brand attitudes among consumers.

Second, this research shows that consumers' trust in brands is positively related to consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions, confirming previous research (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013; Bhandari & Rodgers, 2018; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Yasin, 2013). This demonstrates the relevance of investing in customers to earn their trust. The results show that brand morality and competence are important in achieving this trust. Also, this study provides new insights into the role of brand trust in the relationship between a brand's personality traits and consumer preferences. To begin with, brand trust serves as a bridge between morality and a consumers' brand attitude and purchase intentions. The more moral a brand is, the more trust consumers have in that brand, and the more they like the brand and the more likely they are to purchase a product from that brand. Secondly, brand trust also acts as a link between competence and a consumers' brand attitude and purchase intentions. Competence has an influence both directly and indirectly via brand trust on brand attitude. Purchase intentions, on

the other hand, are only indirectly influenced by competence via brand trust. These findings contribute to existing literature by showing the influence of a new underlying mechanism in the relationship between brand personality and consumer behavior, namely brand trust. A theoretical implication for future research could be comparing morality and competence directly in the effect they have on brand trust. In practice, it is important for organizations to understand that morality and competence are both essential for consumer trust in their brand since this trust leads to intentions to purchase and liking the brand. This could mean that companies should focus on highlighting these two traits in brand positioning and marketing strategies, but before that, research should focus on directly comparing the effects of different brand personality traits on brand trust.

In short, morality is more important than competence in predicting consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions. An example where this effect could have occurred was when Ikea France was in the news in June 2021 for spying on its employees. It was probably worse for their customers' brand attitude and purchase intentions than if Ikea's closets would have a manufacturing flaw because this unethical situation could lead to a decrease in trust and thereby attribute an immoral character or immoral traits to Ikea, which is more damaging than a lack of competence.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are some limitations to this research. First of all, the data for this study were collected online. This can have several disadvantages such as the uncontrolled setting. As a result, some participants may have been extremely focused, while others may have been easily distracted, resulting in inaccurate answers to the questions. Furthermore, some participants may have been less motivated to respond to the questions or misinterpret the questions, resulting in inaccurate answers as well (Ryan et al., 2009). In the future, a solution

could be to conduct an experimental study in which the environment is controlled in terms of location and time, for example.

Secondly, this study assumes that intention is a good predictor of actual behavior, which is not always the case. One-half of the time, people do not do what they intend to do, known as the intention-behavior gap (Sheeran & Webb, 2016). Therefore, these findings are not always translatable to practice when it comes to actual purchase behavior. In future research, a solution could be to give participants fictitious but tangible money from which they must spend a certain amount of money on a specific brand in a controlled setting. In this way, the results could be more accurately translated into actual purchase behavior.

Lastly, another limitation of this research was the unsuccessful manipulation of competence. As a consequence, participants thought the high morality brands to be more competent than the high competence brands and the low morality brands to be less competent than the low competence brands. As the manipulation of morality succeeded, participants found the high morality brands to be both more moral and more competent and the low morality brands to be both less moral and less competent. This may have affected the results. It could be the explanation that the high morality brand (versus the high competence brand) scored higher on both brand attitude and purchase intentions and the low morality brand (versus the low competence brand) scored lower on both brand attitude and purchase intentions. It is crucial to consider brands that better represent levels of competence and morality in future research, for example, by using real brands known for their high or low morality or high or low competence based on past events. An example could be to use an Apple smartphone as a high-competence item due to its quality, and a Kogan Agora smartphone as a low-competence item because its production was not feasible and it never even made it to market.

### **Conclusion**

When it comes to the factors that determine whether a brand is successful or not, it is important for organizations to understand the risks and opportunities. According to this study, morality is more important than competence for consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions. The importance of brand trust is also demonstrated because the higher a consumer's trust in a brand, the more they like the brand and the more likely they are to buy products from that brand. Brand trust has a mediating function as well. Investing in morality leads directly and indirectly via brand trust to more positive purchase intentions and brand attitudes. Brands can respond to this by emphasizing moral highlights such as donating money to charities, becoming carbon neutral, or improving customer experience by focusing on customer friendliness and service. Investing in competence leads directly and indirectly via brand trust to more positive brand attitudes and indirectly via brand trust to more positive purchase intentions. Brands can respond to this by highlighting competent features, such as improving product quality, or by using an expert in their commercials to communicate their message or promote their product. With these findings, this study contributes to the body of knowledge about brand personality traits and brand trust. Lastly, what this study did not investigate but might be interesting to look into are the different effects of competence and morality on the preferences of different generations. Perhaps, people prefer one personality trait over another based on their age due to different generational values and so, this could be an interesting research topic for the future.

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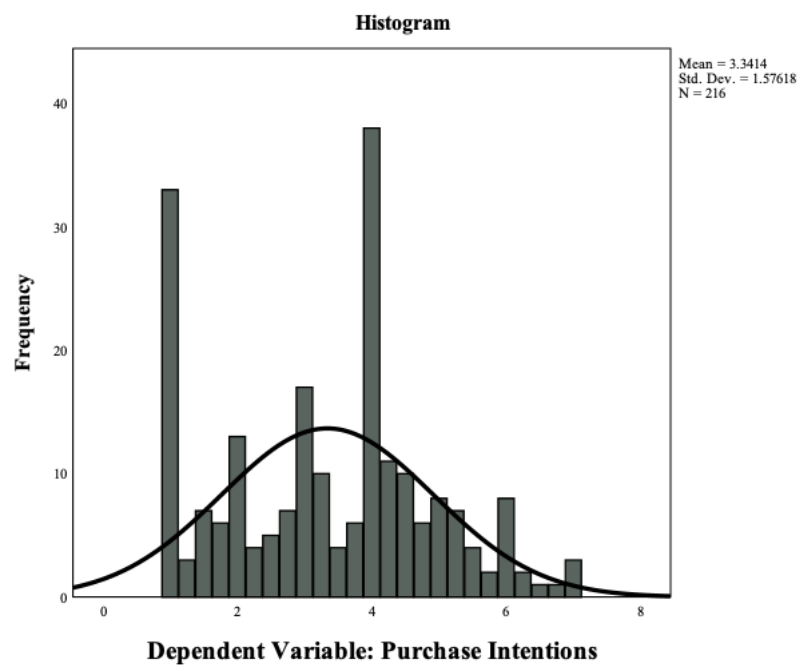
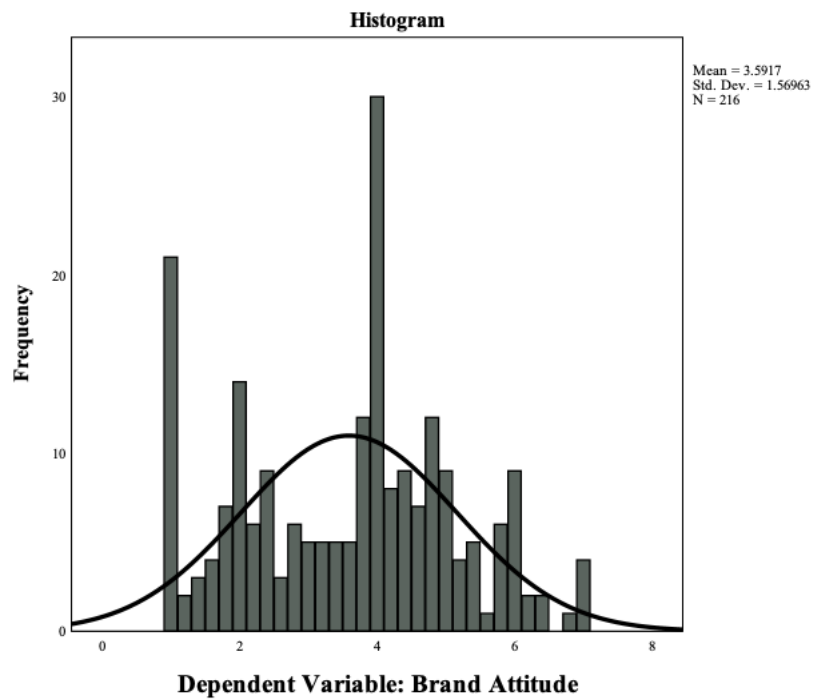
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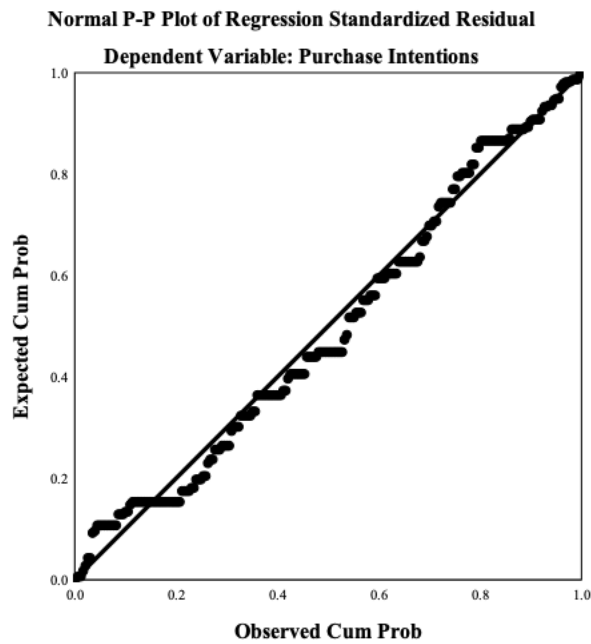
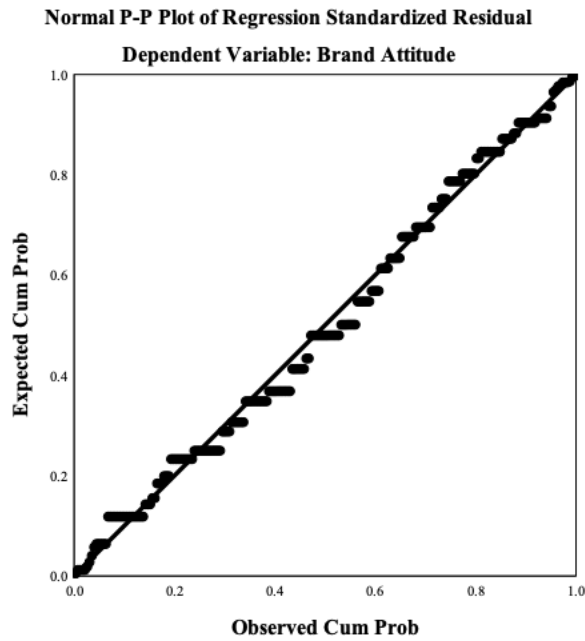
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## Appendix A

### Normality assumptions



### Linearity assumptions



### Homoscedasticity assumptions

