



Doctoral Thesis

*Towards a Methodological Design for
Evaluating Online Brand Positioning*

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With the continued growth of the *Web* as a viable marketing channel and brand-building tool, traditional bricks and mortar organisations have increasingly been moving their branding efforts to this digital “clicks” medium. As a result of this movement, the trend towards online branding does not appear to be slowing down, and is becoming an essential form of marketing communication to convey the brand image. To make an impact in this medium it is argued that the ability of an organisation to use a comprehensive and integrated marketing communications website strategy to differentiate itself from its competitors is becoming a necessity as more and more organizations use websites while trying to foster relationships with customers. However, as the language, the mode of expression and the words selected to communicate in this medium is crucial for online branding efforts, several studies have pointed to the fact that continued progress in content analysis research requires researchers to confront several challenges to developing reliable and valid analyses of *World Wide Web* based content. In line with the above, the core objective of this thesis is to develop and illustrate a relatively simple but powerful tool to examine the intended online brand personality positioning of organisational websites.

In order to accomplish this set objective, the thesis is divided into two sections – Study A and B. On the basis of a multistage research methodology, the first section otherwise known as Study A consists of the summary of a study (the author’s Licentiate thesis conducted in 2005) which was aimed at developing a method to evaluate the intended online brand personality positioning of websites of some 30 top business schools’ full-time global MBA programmes. This aim was accomplished by using a combination of computerized content and correspondence analyses. The content analysis was structured using Aaker’s five-dimensional framework whilst the positioning maps were produced by examining the data using correspondence analysis. Study B is made up of journal articles. The common character that runs through all the papers in Study B is that they are all in a way designed to explore the issue of branding in Africa – a much under-researched phenomenon. Of the four papers in Study B, three were designed to fill some gaps in some neglected but interesting areas of research by demonstrating the application of the earlier developed methodological design in different contexts: African countries and South African business schools. International SME restaurants were also selected as samples in one of our studies because of the important role SMEs play in every economy. A fourth study attempts to reinforce the importance of what we have been doing by looking at relationship between effective brand management practices and business performance among South African businesses.

Whilst logically providing a step by step procedure to be followed in evaluating online brand personality positioning, our findings also suggest that all the five brand personality dimensions (competence, sincerity, excitement, sophistication and ruggedness) put forward by Aaker (1997) could be identified in the intended online communications of the selected samples. Limitations of the studies and suggestions as to how further research would be essential for making the method of evaluating online brand personality to be increasingly valid, reliable, and practical are also provided. All in all, it is expected that the understanding of brand personality and brand management in all the chosen contexts in this thesis will provide a new insight into brand personality in particular and brand management research in general.

Keywords: *African Countries, Business Schools, Brand, Brand Personality, Content Analysis, Correspondence Analysis, Food SMEs, Internet, Online Communication, Online Branding, South Africa*