

# **Boosting Trait Inferences: Psychological and Neural Mechanisms in the Effect of Faces on Brand Perceptions**

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Firms frequently select spokespeople—also called endorsers—on the basis of specific physical characteristics, such as the face, to better differentiate and position their brands (Erdogan and Drollinger 2008). For example, the body care company Beiersdorf recently screened thousands of models in the United States, Canada, France, and Germany to find the single most appropriate face for positioning its Nivea brand as sincere and sophisticated. Taken together, theory and practice suggest that human faces assist firms in shaping personality impressions of brands, which subsequently may affect consumer behavior.

The dissertation integrates Gestalt psychology and face research with perceptual priming theories to design and conduct five studies examining how faces of non-celebrities impact consumer trait inferences for existing brands. The research tackles this question from several perspectives using psychometric as well as neurological approaches to show that trait inferences largely depend on holistic face types of faces and mode of exposure (simultaneous vs. sequential presentation of face and brand). Studies 1 and 2 generate evidence that consumers infer brand personality impressions from holistic face types rather than from any single anatomical feature. Experiments 3 and 4 show that the match (or mismatch, respectively) between face-based and brand-based trait inferences as well as the mode of exposure (simultaneous vs. sequential presentation) affect brand impressions and lead to differential purchase intentions. Alternative explanations for these effects (i.e., face attractiveness, emotional attachment to the brand, and perceived self-similarity), which have received much attention in related research, are mostly ruled out. The final fMRI experiment shows that matching endorser face and brand on a salient personality trait as well as presenting them simultaneously has a unique emotional basis that leads to more favorable choices. Overall, these findings suggest that matching faces and brands that are presented simultaneously boost brand personality inferences, elicit emotion, and favor brand choice, whereas mismatching faces and brands presented sequentially, although boosting brand personality inferences, do not generate emotion that drive choice. Implications for marketing theory and brand management are discussed.