



# Why Brand Personality Matters: Aligning Your Brand to Cultural Drivers of Success

For many years, researchers have been using the concept of brand personality to help describe brands and understand how they relate to consumers. More recently, using data from WPP’s BrandZ study, we have looked at brand personality from a cross-cultural perspective and demonstrated that there is a relationship between the way brands express themselves in different countries and the strength of the consumer relationships they generate.



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By combining key outputs of BrandZ and CharacterZ and examining them in light of Geert Hofstede’s model of the dimensions of culture, we can identify the brand characteristics that are most likely to ensure success in different regions. Marketers who hope to achieve global success for their brands must take heed of these findings and use them to modulate the tenor of their brands’ communication across local and global campaigns.

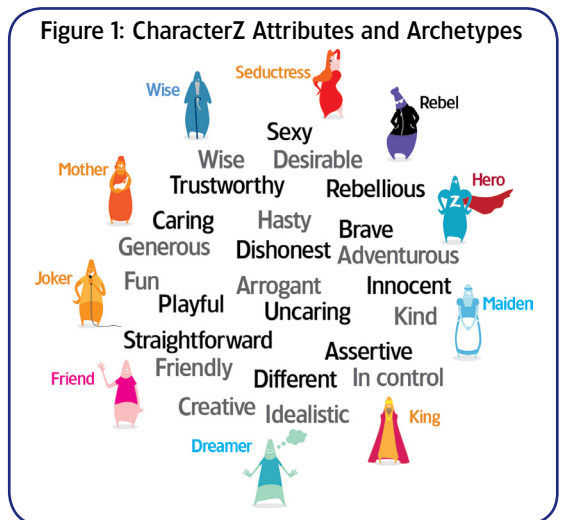
## What We Mean by Brand Personality

When we speak of a brand’s positioning, we are describing the things that differentiate one brand from others. When we speak of a brand’s personality, we are describing the way a brand expresses and represents itself. In BrandZ, we have asked over 500,000 people to describe brands using a set of 24 adjectives chosen to cover a wide range of personality characteristics. We then assigned each brand to one of 10 archetypes according to its dominant character. Developed using semiotics and both qualitative and quantitative research, these archetypes allow us to reduce a vast array of brand personalities to a manageable number of well-defined and recognizable characters.



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Some global brands are characterized differently in different parts of the world. For example, in Italy, Spain, and the UK, the Apple iPhone is viewed as a **Seductress**, but in Australia it is a **Joker**, and in Japan, a **Dreamer**. This discrepancy highlights the many factors that influence a brand’s personality. Not only do consumers experience a brand’s marketing activities in light of their own values, traditions, and circumstances, but they also perceive personality traits through



the lens of their cultural conditioning. Therefore it is imperative that marketers pay attention to the personalities their brands project; few characters have the power to transcend all cultures.

### Brand Strength Varies with Brand Personality

In BrandZ, one of the key measures of a brand’s strength is Bonding. Bonding is the highest level of attitudinal loyalty; when people are bonded to a brand, they feel the brand is closer, more meaningfully different, and hence more valuable to them. When we correlated Bonding with our set of brand personality attributes, we found a range of significant results—from high positive correlations to surprising negative correlations that associated personality traits with weakness rather than strength.

### Two Global Success Traits

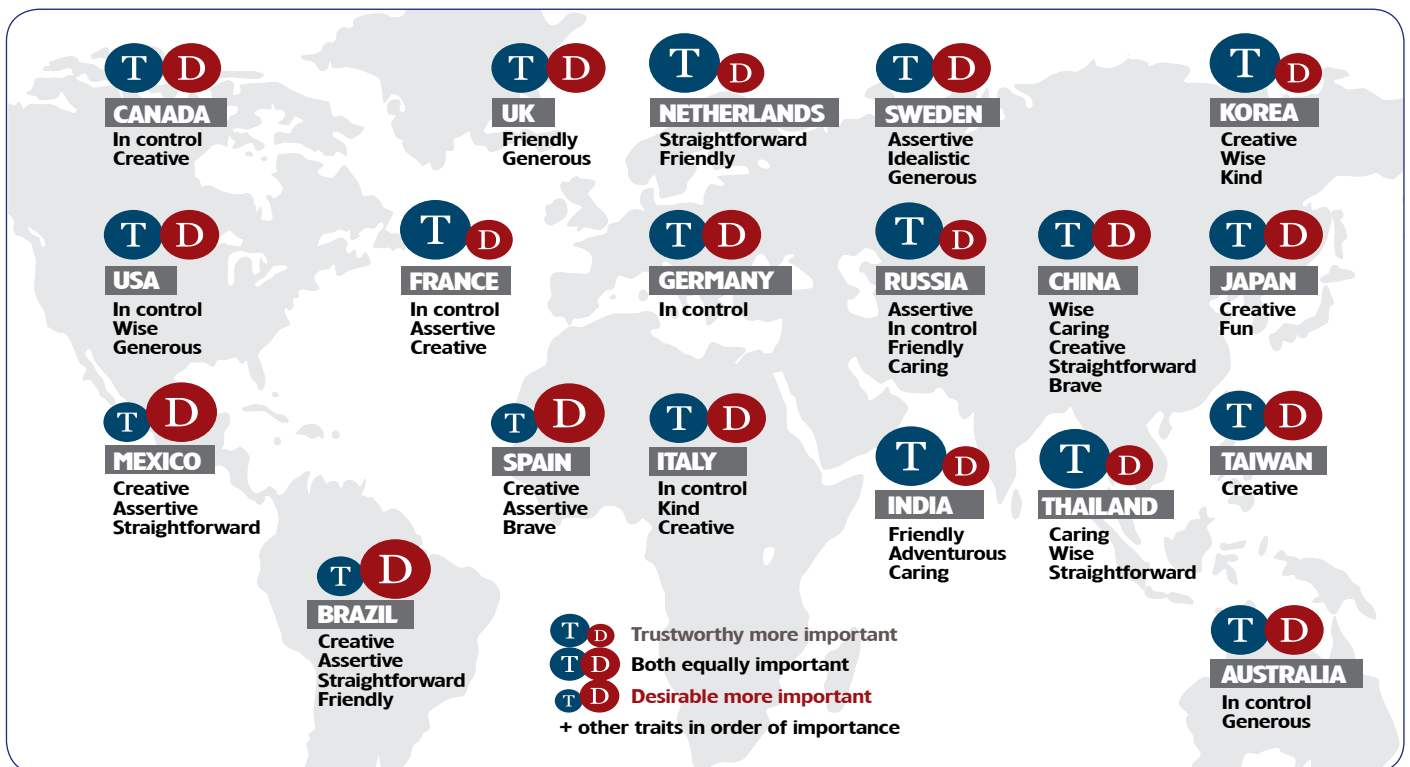
Two of the 24 words used to describe personality correlated with Bonding significantly more than all the others: *desirable* and *trustworthy*. Though both these words had strong correlations everywhere, their importance relative to one another did vary in some markets, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Desirability, which embodies qualities such as allure, status, and exclusivity, is particularly associated with aspirational brands that have emotional resonance; it is a notably strong driver of Bonding in Latin markets such as Brazil, Mexico, and Spain. Trustworthiness, the attribute which underpins a consumer’s belief that a brand will deliver consistent quality, is an especially strong driver of Bonding in India, Russia, and Korea.

### The Role of Other Personality Traits

Some words, such as *innocent* and *rebellious*, tend not to be associated with the most successful brands. For example, the word *innocent* is often used as a descriptor for brands that are neither well known nor well defined, while the most successful brands (according to Bonding) tend to have strong clarity of associations. Similarly, *rebellious* brands are more likely to be seen as challengers than as leaders. In Taiwan, being seen as too *straightforward* can negatively affect Bonding, suggesting that in that country, cleverness is appreciated by consumers. Table 1 shows the countries for which each of these traits is negatively correlated with Bonding.

Figure 2: Personality Traits Associated with the Most Successful Brands





**Table 1: Negative Correlations with Bonding**

Innocent	Sweden, Spain, Mexico, Australia, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Korea, USA
Different	Thailand, Netherlands, Sweden, Australia, Germany, USA, Canada, UK, Italy, Japan
Rebellious	China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan
Straightforward	Taiwan, Korea

It was surprising to find that *different* had a negative correlation with Bonding in some countries, since the role of marketing is to create difference for brands. But evidently, a *different* personality is not the same as a meaningfully different brand experience. Being seen as different in personality terms suggests a lack of identification with consumers and some social or emotional distance from them. The brands that are perceived this way fit less comfortably into a market.

**A different personality is not the same as a meaningfully different brand experience.**

In the same way that the importance of trustworthiness and desirability varies from one country to another, the degree to which other traits drive Bonding also varies across markets. The personality traits (other than *trustworthy* and *desirable*) that your brand will find most useful in different markets are shown in Figure 2, below the country names. For example, *friendly* brands are more successful in Brazil and India, *wise* brands do well in China and the United States, and brands that are *creative* are especially well received in Japan, Taiwan, and Korea.

**Cultural Dimensions**

Many of the differences we have observed in how people appreciate brands’ personalities can be explained through the cultural dimensions theory put forth by Geert Hofstede, a researcher recognized internationally for having developed the first empirical model to describe and differentiate cultures. His model includes the following five dimensions:

- Power Distance: The degree to which members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Runs from high (difference accepted) to low.

- Individualism: The degree to which societies believe people share an obligation for the care of those outside of their immediate families. Runs from high (obligations to close family only) to low.
- Masculinity: The degree to which a society emphasizes the value of achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material rewards for success. Runs from high (these values are important) to low.
- Uncertainty Avoidance: The degree to which the members of a society feel comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. Runs from high (where people need clarity and rules) to low.
- Long-term Orientation: The degree to which a society believes that truth depends on situation, context, and time. Where long-term orientation is high, people adapt traditions and are more likely to save, invest, and persevere.

**Three Countries with Contrasting Cultural Preferences**

Russia, China, and the UK vary widely in terms of Hofstede’s dimensions (see Table 2). Russia and China both score high on Power Distance and low on Individualism, but they are on opposite ends of the scale on Uncertainty Avoidance (where Russia is high and China is low).

**Table 2: Selected Dimensions for Russia, China, and the UK**

	High	Low
Russia	Power Distance Uncertainty Avoidance	Individualism
China	Long-term Orientation Power Distance	Uncertainty Avoidance Individualism
UK	Individualism Masculinity	Power Distance Long-term Orientation

The culture in Russia favors brands that are assertive and in control, while also appreciating brands with a friendly and caring nature. In China, respect for authority, coupled with a long-term orientation, enables brands with *wise* and *trustworthy* personalities to dominate. Brands with *assertive*, *rebellious*, or

<sup>1</sup> More details about Hofstede’s model can be found on this website: <http://geert-hofstede.com>.



*playful* traits are less likely to be widely accepted by society, although emerging generations of younger and more affluent consumers may change this.

In the UK, where there is an emphasis on individualism, tolerance, and respect for equality (evidenced by the low Power Distance score), we see fewer strong associations between any particular personality trait and brand success. The two traits with the most consistent relationship with strong brands are *friendly* and *generous*.



### Implications for Global Marketers

While global communications and other marketing levers can help ensure that a brand is positioned in a consistent way around the world, a single tone of voice is unlikely to succeed in engaging consumers across varied cultures. Marketers need to understand the cultural context in which their brand communicates; they may find that they need to vary not only what they say, but how they say it. Though every brand will face a unique situation due to a number of factors, including product category and country of origin, the following recommendations apply to all brands:

1. **Personality can differentiate.** The strongest brands are those with the most well-defined personalities. These brands have differentiated themselves by the way they relate to consumers as much as by functional or other aspects.
2. **Some traits are always good to have.** Make sure your brand's communication clearly shouts either *desirable* or *trustworthy*. Or, like BMW, DoCoMo, El Cortes Inglés, or Emporio Armani, you may choose to emphasize both.
3. **Give your brand a global personality check.** Consider the culture in your brand's country of origin and that of the country to which you're marketing. Use BrandZ and CharacterZ to identify the brands that fit well in the specific cultures that are most important to you.

### Brand Personality Matters

Brand managers and advertising planners have long understood that their brands are differentiated by the way they address their customers. Our analysis goes beyond this to show that emphasizing particular personality traits can strengthen or undermine a brand's competitive position. If your brand has a particularly strong personality, you may need to adjust its tone of voice to match local cultural dynamics. Smart marketing practitioners will use research to understand the role that their brands' personalities play in building consumer relationships, and will apply that learning to maximize brand appeal around the world.

To read more about brands, visit our blog at [www.mb-blog.com](http://www.mb-blog.com).

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