

REVIEW



Social perception of brands: Warmth and competence define images of both brands and social groups

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Abstract

People form impressions about brands as they do about social groups. The Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF) a decade ago derived from the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) two dimensions of consumers' brand perception: warmth (worthy intentions) and competence (ability). The BIAF dimensions and their predictive validity have replicated the general primacy of warmth (intentions) and developed the congruence principle of fit to context. BIAF domains include various brands, product design, and countries as origins of products and as travel destinations. Brand anthropomorphism plays a role in perceiving brands' morality, personality, and humanity. Consumer-brand relations follow from anthropomorphism: perceived brand-self congruence, brand trust, and brand love. Corporate social (ir) responsibility and human relations, especially warm, worthy intent, interplay with BIAF dimensions, as do service marketing, service recovery, and digital marketing. Case studies describe customer loyalty, especially to warm brands, corresponds to profits, charitable donations, and healthcare usage. As the SCM and BIAF evolve, research potential regards the dimensions and beyond. BIAF has stood the tests of time, targets (brands, products, and services), and alternative theory (brand personality, brand relationships), all being compatible. Understanding how people view corporations as analogous to social groups advances theory and practice in consumer psychology.

1 | INTRODUCTION

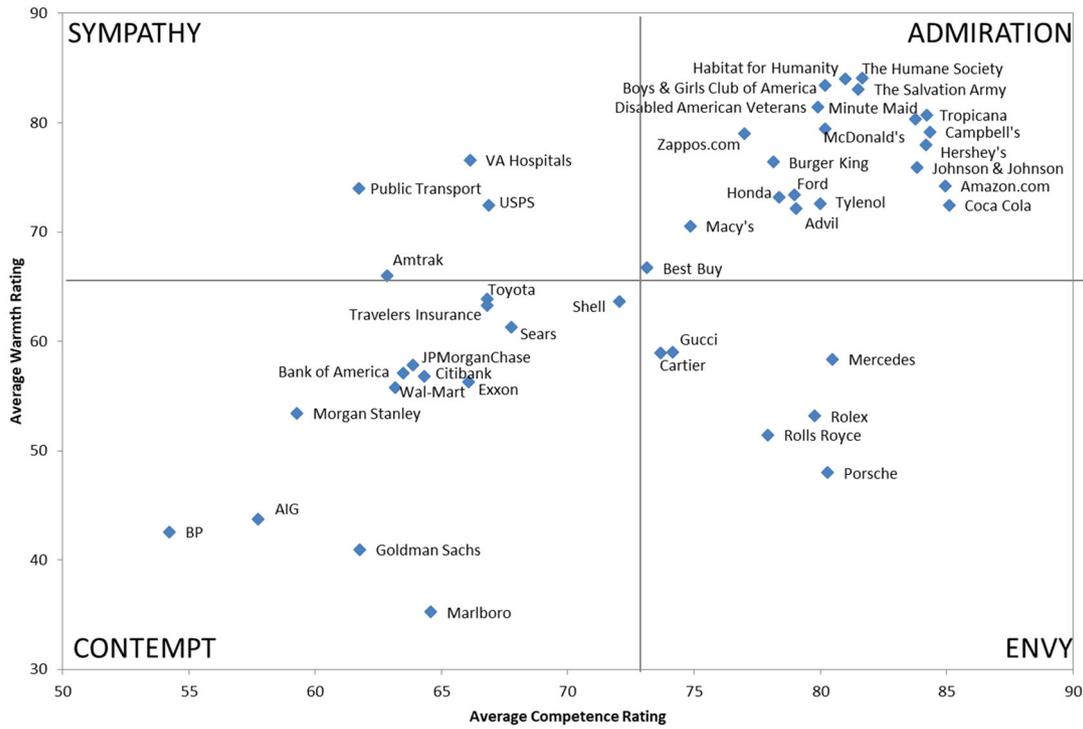
Twenty years ago, the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) arrived in social psychology (Fiske et al., 2002). The SCM's central claim is that stereotype content maps onto two fundamental dimensions: warmth—a group's perceived intentions—and competence—a group's ability to reach these intentions. Beyond stereotype content, the combination of perceived warmth and perceived competence leads to different elicited emotions and behavioral tendencies toward these social groups. Ten years later, the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF) proposed to apply the same idea to study brand perception (Kervyn, Fiske, et al., 2012). After summarizing the BIAF, this article reviews current research, which ultimately supports the roles of both warmth and competence in brand perception. The review also

identifies theoretical, practical, and conceptual challenges that encourage future research.

2 | WARMTH AS BRAND INTENTIONS AND COMPETENCE AS BRAND ABILITY

In the model, BIAF (Kervyn, Fiske, et al., 2012), the central proposition was simple: How consumers think about brands resembles how they think about groups of people. More precisely, BIAF proposed that brand images are cognitive shortcuts akin to stereotypes. Following this logic, BIAF applied the Stereotype Content Model (SCM; Fiske et al., 2002) to brand perception (see Figure 1).

Brand Warmth & Competence Perceptions of US Adults



Source: *The HUMAN Brand: How We Relate to People, Products & Companies*, 2013

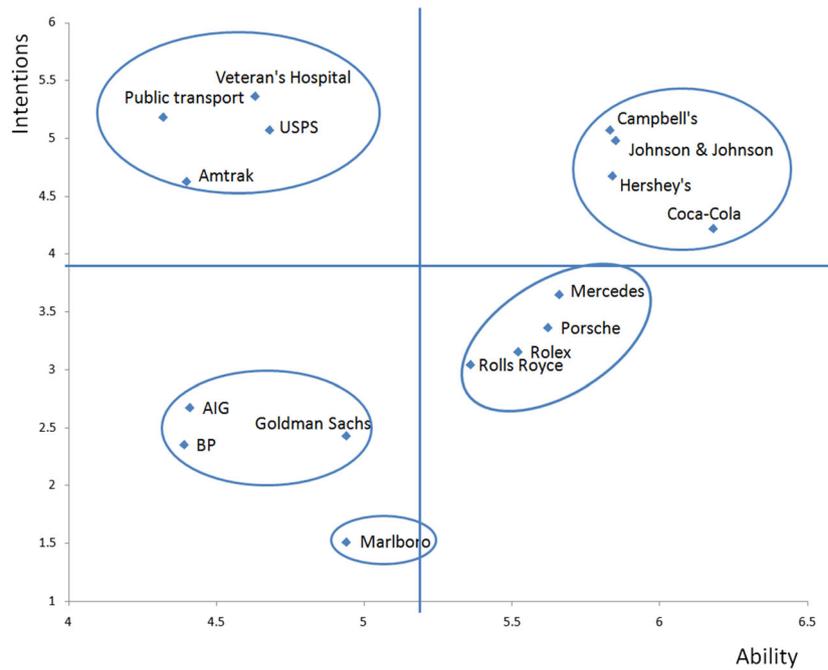


FIGURE 1 Warmth and competence scores of salient brands, emotions typical of each quadrant (Malone & Fiske, 2013)

The SCM's two stereotype dimensions are warmth (trustworthiness and friendliness) and competence (ability and initiative); the BIAF adapted them to brand perception and proposed viewing them in this context as perceived intentions and ability. As the data showed, positive perceptions on both dimensions increased

purchase intention and brand loyalty. Introducing the BIAF as a potential brand equity measurement tool brought a new focus on the warmth dimensions, as most brand equity measures primarily focused on competence-related features and benefits. The BIAF also had an emotional level. Positive-intentions/high-ability brands



elicited admiration, negative-intentions/low-ability brands elicited contempt, positive-intention/low-ability brands elicited pity, and negative-intentions/high-ability brands elicited envy. As in the Stereotype Content Model, these emotions mediated the impact of cognitive perceptions on behavior.

Foundational work in developing the BIAF was inspired by a number of high-profile brand reputation crises that occurred in 2010, during which company responses and the resulting impact on customer loyalty unfolded quite differently. In particular, BIAF guided examining the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the removal of Tylenol products from retail shelves, and the recall of Toyota vehicles due to accelerator problems during 2010. As a result of this early study, executives at Johnson & Johnson, Coca-Cola, Hershey, and OfficeMax commissioned commercial studies to inform their brand strategy decisions in 2011.

In the 10 years since its publication, the BIAF has informed research in consumer behavior, marketing, and management. Over 400 articles published in international journals have cited the BIAF. Included here are some of the most relevant and impactful papers, in the authors' judgment: published in international peer-reviewed journals, cited more than five times (except for very recent papers), and considered as relevant by the authors of this review. The review proceeds from closer empirical work (replications and developments) to extensions (anthropomorphism and consumer-brand relationships) to challenges (e.g., the role of trust), ending on corporate social responsibility. The review illustrates the BIAF's impact on brand management practices through some case studies.

Overall, consistent with the BIAF's central claim, brand perception shares many similarities with perceptions of human groups (stereotypes for good or ill) but provides new avenues for research. This review also discusses recent evolutions of the theory of the two dimensions in social psychology and how researchers in brand perception can use these evolutions.

3 | REPLICATIONS AND DEVELOPMENTS OF THE BRANDS AS INTENTIONAL AGENTS FRAMEWORK

Across various brands, products, and services, the BIAF replicates both the dimensions and their predictive validity. To anticipate, the BIAF's claim that both warmth and competence independently predict brand perception and purchase intent has largely replicated (Bennett et al., 2013; Ivens et al., 2015; Zawisza & Pittard, 2015). Some other characteristics of the two dimensions of stereotype content, namely the primacy of warmth and the innuendo effect, have replicated for brand perception. The BIAF has further extended to newly identified antecedents of the two dimensions (Ivens et al., 2015; Japutra et al., 2020) and to a proposed differentiation between two types of competence (Wang & Liu, 2020). This work also extends to product design, countries of origin, and travel destinations.

3.1 | Tests of the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework

Tried out in new domains, the BIAF does fairly well in validation tests. For example, key parts of the BIAF survived a test by Swiss respondents rating eight well-known brands (Ivens et al., 2015). Warmth perceptions positively correlated with admiration and, counter to the BIAF's predictions, also positively correlated with envy. Competence perceptions positively correlated with admiration and negatively correlated with contempt and pity. The univalent emotions of admiration and contempt had the strongest effects on consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions.

Also, testing the new hypothesis that brand personality is an antecedent to brand warmth and competence, the same study measured brand personality with Aaker's (1997) five dimensions (i.e., sophistication, sincerity, competence, ruggedness, and excitement). Warmth and competence mediated the effect of brand personality dimensions on emotions. Specifically, warmth mediated the impact of brand personality on admiration and envy. Competence mediated the relationship between brand personality and contempt and pity. Although it did not fully replicate the BIAF, this study confirmed that the BIAF's dimensions of warmth and competence are predictors of specific feelings about brands, and it added to the BIAF by showing that brand personality components are antecedents of the two dimensions.

The BIAF central claim to predictive validity replicates reliably: Perceived brand warmth and competence influence consumer behaviors (Bennett et al., 2013). Extending the model, US ethnic groups differ in their brand perception. Specifically, Hispanic American, African American, and Asian American consumers reported certain categories of branded products to be "warmer" than White Americans did, by a significant margin. No significant differences emerged for brand competence perceptions.

The primacy of warmth—the tendency to give more importance to warmth over competence when forming an impression—is well-established in perceiving others (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007); in spontaneous stereotypes (Nicolas et al., under review); and in relational, personal contexts (Nicolas et al., 2021). This replicates in the context of new brand perception (Andrei et al., 2017). Participants read a brand-launching communication that developed warmth then competence arguments or the other way around. The warmth-competence communication led to both more frequent and less negative word of mouth than the competence-warmth communication. Warmth's primacy also relates to the social perception innuendo effect (Kervyn, Bergsieker, et al., 2012)—making negative inferences about the missing dimension—which also replicates for brand communication (Peter & Ponzi, 2018). When an advertisement communicates only about one dimension, it leads to negative inference about the other dimension. As in social psychology, this is especially the case when this innuendo concerns the most relevant dimension: an ad for a hedonic brand omitting warmth or an ad for a utilitarian brand omitting competence (Peter & Ponzi, 2018, see also Kim & Ball, 2021).

Finally, the BIAF can differentiate between two types of brand competence (Wang & Liu, 2020): perceived operational competence (skills needed to manufacture existing products) and perceived conceptual competence (ability to generalize the abstract brand concept). This distinction parallels differentiating groups' competence between sheer ability (intelligence, knowledge) and effective activity (assertiveness, initiative, and confidence; Abele et al., 2021). In three consumer-psychology studies, these two different types of brand competence had a different impact on near versus far brand extensions. Brands with high operational competence are more able to manage near-brand extensions because of skills transferability, whereas brands with high conceptual competence are more able to manage far brand extensions because of brand-concept consistency.

3.2 | Congruence effect

Besides the reported support for a primacy of brand warmth over brand competence (Andrei et al., 2017), research using the BIAF has also provided a more nuanced answer. The BIAF shows a congruence effect (Zawisza & Pittard, 2015): The priority of the two dimensions depends on a range of factors such as product category, company size, consumer personality, and advertisement type. In brand perception, the congruence effect thus means that depending on the context, warmth or competence will be the most important of the two dimensions in brand perception.

The congruence effect emerged from studying impacts of warmth and competence on advertising effectiveness (Zawisza & Pittard, 2015). In theory, the high-warmth, high-competence "Golden Quadrant" (Aaker et al., 2012) would facilitate advertising effectiveness. Extending the BIAF, the prediction was that this golden quadrant would shift, relying more on warmth or on competence depending on the congruence between dimension and product category or consumer personality. In the first experiment, for high-involvement products (smartphone vs. toothpaste), competence had more impact than warmth on purchase intent. In a second experiment, consumers with high (vs. low) anxiety toward smartphones evaluated warm smartphone ads better than competent ads. These warm ads also proved more effective for these anxious consumers. A third study manipulated an ad for blood donations by ad type (warm vs. competent) and service type (self-focused vs. other-focused). This involving and anxiety-provoking service of blood donation also showed a congruence effect. The warm (vs. competent) ad was more effective for the other-focused messaging, whereas the competence (vs. warm) ad was more effective for the self-focused messaging.

As noted, the focus on warmth (communality) in perceiving others but competence (agency) in self-perception fits a related account in person perception (Abele et al., 2021; Zawisza, 2016; Zawisza & Pittard, 2015). This and the SCM context effects (relational vs. analytic; Nicolas et al., 2021) thus argue for adding a congruence (fit) principle to the BIAF. In order to help managers make informed decisions about which dimensions to put forward, a scale measuring

agentic and communal consumer motives has since developed (Friedman et al., 2016).

This congruence principle does indeed provide a useful tool to interpret other research that has found varying importance of warmth versus competence in their impact on consumer attitudes and behaviors. For instance, when consumers (are made to) feel a loss of control, they tend to prefer brand leaders (vs. non-leaders) (Beck et al., 2020). This effect is explained by the fact that brand leaders are perceived as having high agency, thus allowing consumers to regain a sense of personal agency. A congruence effect between company size and expectations of communion also emerges (Yang & Aggarwal, 2019). Both large and small companies are expected to display high agency. Customer-perceive small companies as having lower market power, and therefore they expected them to display higher communion. This congruence effect leads customers to have harsher reactions (e.g., lower yelp ratings) when faced with a low communion transgression from a small (vs. large) company.

Finally, a congruence effect emerged between local/global brand and the two dimensions. Local brands are perceived as having cooperative intentions and thus high on warmth, while global brands are perceived as able to enact their intentions and thus high on competence (Davvetas & Halkias, 2019). The high-warmth perception of local brands had a positive impact on emotional and behavioral reactions toward the brand. The high-competence perception of global brands had antagonistic emotional and behavioral effects, acting as a double-edged sword with both positive and negative consequences. Being a local brand also increased brand warmth, while being a global brand increased perceived competence (Kolbl et al., 2019). In a developing market (Bosnia and Herzegovina), perceived brand globalness had a positive effect on competence and, unlike a developed market in the first study, on perceived warmth.

The BIAF has thus replicated many times but also adapted and extended to better fit the reality and diversity of brand perception, under varying conditions. (The SCM has evolved in parallel ways, as later section review.)

3.3 | Product design

Together with the congruence effect, research on the BIAF and product design has developed the BIAF from a general model treating brands as abstract concepts to a framework that can apply all the way to practical issues. Indeed, applications of the BIAF have not stopped at brand perception. Product attributes (e.g., shape, packaging, and logo) demonstrably influence perceptions of brand warmth and competence and the other way around: brand warmth and competence impact product perception (e.g., food taste).

Several brand and product features influence brand warmth and competence perceptions. Products presenting gender cues such as color (pink vs. blue) or shape (round vs square) elicit different brand warmth and competence inferences (Hess & Melnyk, 2016). Feminine cues link to higher warmth perception, masculine cues to higher competence perceptions. Hard to pronounce brand acronyms lead to



higher competence than warmth perception, whereas easy to pronounce lead to similar competence and warmth perceptions (Kim & Dempsey, 2018). Compared to a control condition, a restaurant with sensory (e.g., sweet and buttery) and nostalgic (e.g., grandma's homemade and traditional) food names is perceived as providing a warmer service, whereas one that utilizes brand names (e.g., Bonefish Grill® and Haagen-Dazs®) in their food description is perceived as more competent (Kim & Magnini, 2020). In the retail sector, participants in a warm room rated the retail brand as warmer than participants in a cooler room (Möller & Herm, 2013). Finally, the typeface used in advertising messages influences brand warmth and competence (Kim, Jung, et al., 2020). Handwriting (i.e., Tornac) typeface led to higher warmth, whereas sans-serif (i.e., Nimbus) led to higher competence perceptions.

For product packaging and texture, consumers with a warmth (vs. competence) focus preferred matte products/packages, whereas competence focus led to a preference for glossy products/packages (Chen, 2020). For instance, one experiment asked participants to select an invitation postcard either for their grandma's birthday party (warmth focus) or for the company's annual meeting (competence focus).

In a taste tests, even though all participants tasted the same chocolate, those who read that the brand is competent (employing highly qualified staff and consistently meeting its performance targets) and/or warm (committed partner in equitable trading whose products are certified as fair trade) experienced the product as tasting better than those in the low warmth and/or low competence conditions (Bratanova et al., 2015). Thus, product features influence brand warmth and competence perceptions, but also the other way around: brand warmth and competence can influence the perception of certain product features.

3.4 | Countries as product origin and as travel destination

The research applying the two dimensions to the country-of-origin effect and country as destination offers another type of support to our claim that brand perception resembles social perception by showing that a single object, a country, can serve both as a social identity and a brand. In 1997, the two dimensions of competence and morality framed a study of national stereotypes, to help understand intergroup relations (Phalet & Poppe, 1997). Using the BIAF framework, marketing research also applied a two-dimensional model to country perception but from a marketing perspective. That is, they studied national stereotypes to understand the effect of country-of-origin of products or country as a destination.

The country-of-origin effect refers to the associative network elicited when consumer see a "Made in ..." label (Nagashima, 1977). In a study using India and China as countries of origin, both warmth and competence affected the perception of the country (macro image), but only competence affected the perception of the products from this country (micro image) (Motsi & Park, 2020). However, both

dimensions had an indirect impact on product evaluation, and warmth also had an impact of destination receptivity (attractiveness of the country as a journey destination). Two studies found a congruence effect between the country-of-origin perception and the type of advertisement message (symbolic vs. utilitarian). For foreign brands (but not domestic or global brands), a warm country of origin (Brazil/Italy) fit with symbolic advertising, and a competent country of origin (Japan/Germany) fit with a utilitarian message. This higher fit had positive effects on attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intent (Motsi & Park, 2020).

Factorial analyses of Chinese nationals' perception of 31 domestic destinations confirmed that destination stereotypes organize along the two dimensions of warmth and competence (Shen et al., 2019). These destinations' warmth and competence perceptions grouped in five typical Stereotype Content Model clusters: the four quadrants, plus high warmth/medium competence. Both warmth and competence perceptions were independent predictors of visit intention. Studying Hungarian respondents' perception of six popular countries as destinations (Micevski et al., 2020) replicated this predicted destination evaluation by warmth and competence perceptions. Additionally, the positive effect of warmth and competence on intention to visit were mediated by the country-related emotion of admiration. The positive effect of warmth and competence on evaluation of a country as destination also replicated in a study of the perception that Indonesians have of a destination that they had visited in the previous twelve months (Japutra et al., 2020). Perceived quality of a destination predicted its perceived competence, and enduring culture involvement predicted its perceived warmth.

4 | ANTHROPOMORPHISM

"Corporations are people, too," claimed a presidential candidate. Anthropomorphism refers to the tendency to perceive concrete or abstract objects as humanlike entities, "attributing human characteristics to nonhuman things or events" (Guthrie, 1993, p. 52). Anthropomorphism also applies to brands, a tendency termed brand anthropomorphism (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007) or brand-as-a-person (Veloutsou & Taylor, 2012). Anthropomorphism has mostly been measured by ad-hoc 2–7 item scales (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Epley et al., 2008; Waytz et al., 2010), but two validated scales (Guido & Peluso, 2015; Huang et al., 2020) were developed to investigate, respectively, brand personality and morality (see those sections).

Brand anthropomorphism underlies BIAF's claim that brand images are similar to stereotypes (but without the usually negative connotation). Responses to the original 2012 BIAF paper (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; Keller, 2012) immediately linked BIAF and brand anthropomorphism. As reviewing the active field of brand-anthropomorphism research will show, the BIAF has played a role in their theoretical background and their research questions.

According to the new evidence, brand anthropomorphism increases warmth per se, and this perceived warmth mediates the effect of anthropomorphism on brand outcomes such as brand



attitudes or purchase intentions. But context matters, so this straightforward sequence (anthropomorphism → warmth → liking) depends on the product or its positioning and whether the fit is congruent. For example, anthropomorphism interacts with brand positioning (Zhang et al., 2020). In this experiment, respondents learned about a fictional brand that was anthropomorphized through the logo design (facial features vs. control) and expression style (first vs. third person) for half the conditions and that used a popular (“loved by youth”) or distinctive (“pursue uniqueness and fashion”) positioning. For the popular positioning, the anthropomorphism manipulation led to better brand attitude, and warmth perceptions mediated this effect. No such effect occurred for the distinctive positioning. In the service industry, likewise, anthropomorphic communication (first vs. third person pronoun) leads to higher hotel visit intentions; this is partially mediated by an increased warmth perception. This effect emerged only in the sharing (vs. traditional) economy for hotels with local (vs. global) advertising (Lee & Oh, 2019). Finally, this positive impact of anthropomorphism on perceived warmth replicated for the perception of robots (Kim et al., 2019). However, in this case, anthropomorphism also can go too far; it decreased some attitudes due to the uncanny effect (distaste for robots that are too humanlike) (Kim et al., 2019). All three papers report some effect of anthropomorphism on perceived warmth but less effect on competence perceptions.

4.1 | Brand morality

One component of warmth is morality (Ellemers, 2018); friendliness is a secondary component (Abele et al., 2021). Related to brand anthropomorphism is consumers applying morality judgments to companies. By default, corporations are assigned moral agency (provoking anger when they act immorally) but not moral experience (no sympathy when they are suffering) (Gray et al., 2007). However, when people anthropomorphize a corporation (senior executives or people asked to imagine that the corporation “had come to life as a person”), they increase the corporation’s perceived moral experience (Rai & Diermeier, 2015). Although the anthropomorphism manipulations reportedly influenced the corporation’s perceived warmth and competence perception, more research needs to specify the relationship between warmth/competence and moral agency/experience. As a start, a newly developed, psychometrically sound scale measures anthropomorphism on two sub-scales: a think and a feel dimension (Huang et al., 2020). The think dimension of anthropomorphism influences moral agency, while the feel dimension influences moral experience. Warmth and competence positively correlated with both anthropomorphism dimensions, with a stronger correlation between warmth and the feel dimension of brand anthropomorphism.

4.2 | Brand personality

Brands’ perceived personalities are closely linked to anthropomorphizing them. Before the scale just described (Huang et al., 2020), another

newly validated scale also specifically measured brand anthropomorphism (Guido & Peluso, 2015). This scale comprises three dimensions: human body lineaments (e.g., This branded product looks like a person); human facial physiognomy (e.g., This branded product seems to have a human face); and self-brand congruity (e.g., This branded product is congruent with the image I hold of myself). This three-dimensional brand anthropomorphism scale predicts brands’ perceived personality and respondents’ own brand loyalty, one dimension of consumer–brand relationships. The tendency to attribute personality traits to a brand thus links to brand anthropomorphism. Indeed, a review of brand anthropomorphism (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017) identifies three ways of humanizing brands: brands as having human-like features/traits, brands as similar to self, and brands as relationship partners. The latter two humanizing drivers help explain the consumer–brand relationships (see that section). Regarding the third driver, attributing personality traits to brands is one of the ways to achieve brand anthropomorphism (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017).

Although the BIAF applied a stereotype model to brand perception, not a personality model, including the BIAF as applied personality traits to brands can be useful (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). Linking these different models, the BIAF’s warmth dimension resembles the brand trait dimensions sincerity and sophistication (Aaker, 1997), agreeableness and nurturance (Sweeney & Brandon, 2006), and female brand personality (Grohmann, 2009). The BIAF’s competence dimension seems close to the personality dimensions of competence and ruggedness (Aaker, 1997), dominance (Sweeney & Brandon, 2006), and male brand personality (Grohmann, 2009). Similarly, for luxury brands, competence links to the dimension of brand prestige (e.g., expertise and consistency), and warmth links to brand authenticity (good intentions) (Heine et al., 2018; see Davies et al., 2018, for empirical support of links among personality models). Through re-analysis of existing datasets (Davies et al., 2018) and new data measuring a total of 16 different brand-personality dimensions, the use of non-orthogonal rotations revealed three dimensions: sincerity (agreeable, friendly, and warm), competence (confident, effective, and efficient), and status (elegant, prestigious, and sophisticated). In the SCM (parent to BIAF), status serves as a social structure predicting competence, but a related model treats status and competence as a single dimension (see ABC and SCM in Abele et al., 2021). Thus, the brand personality work loosely supports BIAF and SCM.

4.3 | Human brands

Although sometimes used more broadly (Malone & Fiske, 2013), a human brand originally refers to an actual person actively branding themselves (Thomson, 2006). The notions of human brand and brand-as-a-person tend to combine when it comes to owners-managers of small and mid-size enterprises (Centeno et al., 2019). These owner-managers tend to anthropomorphize their brand mainly by projecting their own personality and values into the brand. In qualitative interviews, admired brands exhibit traits of warmth and competence traceable to employee and management behavior. Along the same line,



companies that use their own employees or CEO as spokespersons in their advertising enjoy more credibility, authenticity, and congruity with their storytelling (Zeitoun et al., 2020). Blending social perception and brand perception even further, a famous person can be both a social being and a brand, bringing closer together the notion of social perception and brand perception.

The notion of human brands also applies to politicians (Bennett et al., 2019). In one study measuring the warmth and competence of actual politicians in the 2016 election and two experiments manipulating the warmth and competence of fictional politicians, both warmth and competence influenced voting intentions.

5 | CONSUMER BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

Under the inspiration of Susan Fournier (1998), researchers have long been applying models of social relationships to brand perceptions. As the BIAF did later, they use social perception theory to study brands. Anthropomorphism provides the necessary context for relating to a brand as a social being. In research on consumer–brand relationships that included the BIAF theoretical framework and methodology, one concept is key: self-brand congruence, a fit between self-perception and brand perception, including on the dimensions of the BIAF. This evidence amends the way the BIAF considers brand trust.

5.1 | Brand anthropomorphism and social relationships

Anthropomorphizing brands renders them as social objects with whom consumers can develop relationships (Wijnands & Gill, 2020). Indeed, a review of research advances in consumer–brand relationships identified anthropomorphism (including perception as intentional agents) as the key factor on the brand side of the equation for the development of such relationships (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). On the consumer side of this equation, the BIAF offers a parsimonious model of how consumers relate to brands (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). However, consumers develop a variety of rich relationships with brands and, arguably, boiling down to the two dimensions of warmth and competence forfeits some of that variety and depth (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; Keller, 2012; MacInnis, 2012). Further, consumer storytelling about brand archetypes can convey the richness and complexity of consumer–brand relationships, in this view (Muniz et al., 2015).

Anthropomorphism and consumer–brand relationships are linked; for instance, using graphic and textual personification strategies leads to higher consumer engagement of global brands' Facebook pages (Chen et al., 2015). Social media thus offer a tool to anthropomorphize brands (Chen et al., 2015) and also to develop brand communities. These online brand communities can present the brand's good intentions and abilities and thus elicit consumers' engagement in the community (Wang et al., 2019). Brands use anthropomorphism strategies in their posts—such as the use of personal pronouns and imperative

verbs—and these brand personification strategies lead to higher consumer engagement with these posts (Chen et al., 2015).

On the consumer side of the equation, highly engaged consumers anthropomorphized brands—by using first-person pronouns—in their reactions. They also expressed more positive emotions toward anthropomorphized brands (Chen et al., 2015). This replicated in a longitudinal study that manipulated and followed reactions to a brand's fan page for 4 weeks (Kim, Sung, et al., 2020). In the anthropomorphized conditions, the product (a fictional vitamin water brand) had an anthropomorphized design (arms, legs, and face) and style of expression (personal pronouns, informal language, and emoticons). Anthropomorphism of the brand led to more engagement and the perception of the brand as a trustworthy relationship partner. More specifically, the anthropomorphism manipulation led to higher rating of the brand in terms of social presence (warm, social, and emotional), which in turn led to higher brand attitude and relationship partner quality. These positive effects of anthropomorphism were persistent over time, even after consumers were made aware of a brand transgression. Although not necessarily about the BIAF per se, the dimensions activated in brand relationships closely resemble warmth and its facets of trust and sociability.

On the explicit use of the BIAF to study consumer–brand relationships, theoretically, different types of relationships may match the two BIAF dimensions (Florack & Palcu, 2017). Communal consumer–brand relationships should develop when consumers perceive the brand as friendly and warm and give more weight to this warmth dimension, whereas exchange relationships will develop when the competence of the brand prevails. One of the strengths of the BIAF is that it combines the two dimensions of warmth and competence, thus creating the possibility for ambivalent perceptions (cold but competent/warm but incompetent) (Johnson et al., 2016).

5.2 | Self-brand congruence

Once one considers that consumers develop relationships with brands, the question is how close these relationships are. According to the Attachment–Aversion model, the brand prominence (accessibility of brand memories) and the perceived distance between a brand and self together predict the strength of the consumer–brand relationship (Park et al., 2013). This Attachment–Aversion measure proved to be a good predictor of a brand mind share (cognitive evaluations) and heart share (emotions and feelings) as well as of behavioral intentions and actual behaviors toward the brand. Rather than exploring the different types of relationships, self-brand congruence can help understand why different consumers turn to different brands (Wijnands & Gill, 2020). Rather than self-reported congruence, brand affective congruence can measure self-brand congruence. This brand affective congruence measures the fit between a brand and a respondent's (ideal and actual) self-perception using the Semantic Differential dimensions of evaluation, potency, and activity (Osgood et al., 1957). Higher self-brand congruence on these measures led to higher brand relational outcomes (e.g., brand trust) and better behavioral



outcomes (e.g., purchase intentions and willingness to pay a higher price). The semantic differential dimensions used in this approach systematically relate to the two dimensions of warmth and competence (Kervyn et al., 2013). A congruence effect also influences narcissists' consumption preferences (Lee et al., 2013). Narcissists, defined as being hyper-agentic but hypo-communal, prefer products that socially elevate and/or distinguish them. The authors labeled these choices "agentic purchasing."

Congruence is a key factor to building strong brand-brand relationships in B2B contexts (He et al., 2018). The BIAF's warmth dimension relates to the motivation of self-transcendence (brand associated with helpfulness, friendliness, and trustworthiness) while the dimension of competence relates to the motivation of self-enhancement (brand associated with efficiency, conscientiousness, and skills) (He et al., 2018). Data—collected from 251 B2B firms rating firms with which they had longstanding relationships—showed that both self-transcendence congruence and self-enhancement congruence positively influence brand trust, word-of-mouth, and value co-creation. Brand identification mediated these effects.

Even in work on consumer relationships with smart objects (internet of things) and not with brands, an innovative perspective links the two dimensions of agency and communality with relationship types (Novak & Hoffman, 2020). When the consumer and the smart object have similar agency and communal values, the type of congruency described above (He et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2013; Wijnands & Gill, 2020) leads to a partner type relationship. But when a difference in the agency value instead leads to a master-slave type relationship, the higher agency consumer or smart object takes the role of master.

5.3 | Brand Trust

In the stereotype content model and in the BIAF, trustworthiness is one of the components of warmth. However more recent research using the BIAF to study brand trust raises an alternative. In a response to the original BIAF paper (Aaker et al., 2012), US adults rated brands selected to vary in warmth and competence. As in the BIAF, perceived warmth and competence both encouraged purchase intentions. Beyond these main effects, brands rated as high in both warmth and competence have purchase intentions even higher than the combination of both main effects. Brand admiration mediated these effects of warmth and competence on purchase intentions. The high-warmth, high-competence combination earned the label "Golden Quadrant" (Aaker et al., 2012).

Their interpretation hinges on a sweeping view of trust, beyond the SCM and BIAF narrow view of trust as the warmth component (trust that the brand has positive intentions toward the consumer). Added to intent is a competence component (trust that the brand has the ability to achieve its goals) (see also MacInnis, 2012). With all due respect, this blurs the warmth-competence distinction between two dimensions: warmth of intent and competence to enact it.

Similarly, other views divide trust into rational trust (linked to competence) and emotional trust (linked to warmth) (Andrei & Zait,

2014). Emotional trust has more influence on brand trust than does rational trust. Brands should therefore establish positive intentions before establishing ability to achieve these intentions (Andrei & Zait, 2014). Later research also used the BIAF to research brand trust. In an experiment using a fictitious brand, results confirmed that brand trust mediates the effect that both the warmth and competence manipulation have on purchase intentions (Xue et al., 2020). In a subsequent experiment, participants' gender moderated this effect. The indirect effect of warmth on purchase intentions replicated only for female consumers, whereas the indirect effect of competence on purchase intentions occurred for both genders (Xue et al., 2020).

Brand authenticity is an antecedent of brand trust (Portal et al., 2018). In three South African airports, frequent flyers who rated airline companies showed that brand authenticity comprised four dimensions: continuity, integrity, originality, and credibility. Brand authenticity has a positive impact on brand trust. Warmth and competence perceptions partially mediated this effect of authenticity on brand trust.

5.4 | Brand love

Going beyond the BIAF claim that social perception applies to brands, consumer-brand relations could develop because of the same basic drives that make social relationships essential to humans (Ahuvia, 2015). In this theory, just as for human relationships, consumer-brand relations then develop brand communities and brand love. In proposed theoretical links with BIAF, the warmth dimension meets the need to manage relationship closeness, whereas the competence dimension relates to the need to maximize status. Consumers should thus more readily develop close relationships with warm brands. These warm brands can create or enhance interpersonal relations (brand communities) or substitute for these interpersonal relations (consumer-brand relations and brand love). On the other hand, competent brands hypothetically maximize status through materialism, consumed to create or maintain esteem and respect from others.

Anthropomorphism—including perceiving brands as intentional agents—was one antecedent of brand love, when respondents rated brands from one of four categories (clothing, sport shoes, body care, and chocolate) (Rauschnabel & Ahuvia, 2014). Also, the propensity to anthropomorphize a fashion brand facilitated brand love and brand forgiveness (Hegner et al., 2017). Anthropomorphism similarly encouraged brand love, when respondents rated a clothing brand randomly assigned to them (among brands that they had bought) (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2017).

6 | CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Even though Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a much wider issue (Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010), part of it overlaps with brand perception (Hur et al., 2013). This consumer perception of CSR has benefitted from BIAF, linking CSR perception and brand warmth. Here



too, a congruence effect matches consumers' concerns and brand perception on the two dimensions.

For example, perception of corporate social responsibility (CSR) fits the BIAF (Johnson et al., 2018), emphasizing warmth, but depending also on context. Manipulating an advertisement for a fictional coffee brand produced a congruence effect similar to that discussed earlier (Zawisza & Pittard, 2015). When consumers had goals specifying product attributes (vs. product experience), the ad communicating the brand's competence was more effective. Activating brand experience (vs. product attributes), consumption goals made the ad emphasizing the brand's warmth (CSR) more effective. This research assumed that manipulating CSR perception amounted to a manipulation of warmth (Johnson et al., 2018), and follow-up research (Grazzini et al., 2021) supported this assumption. In the context of fast fashion, the positive effect of having a CSR attribute (i.e., recycled material) on purchase intention was mediated by higher perceived brand warmth. Investor regret showed a similar CSR-warmth link (Vohra & Davies, 2020). Shares underperforming led to investor regret, but less so for firms presented as high in CSR. Perceived brand agreeableness mediated this effect of CSR on investor regret. Finally, brand extensions showed a similar CSR-warmth link (Johnson et al., 2019). In a series of experiments, consumers had higher purchase intentions for low-fit brand extensions when they came from a brand with a high CSR reputation. Higher warmth perception and higher helping intentions for these brands particularly held for participants with high communal orientation.

This link between CSR and the BIAF also exists at the emotional level of the BIAF (Castro-González et al., 2019). As a survey of consumers of a Spanish food company known for its CSR showed, admiration mediated the positive impact of CSR perception on brand advocacy. This was particularly true for consumers with high moral integrity.

The BIAF also proved useful to investigate the perception of green brands. One obstacle for brand positioned as environmentally and/or socially responsible is that their brand image is influenced by stereotypes about their typical consumers, who are perceived as "hippies, greenies, and tree huggers" (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016). Indeed, while consumers of green brands are perceived as high in warmth, this lowers envy and therefore lowers imitation of these consumers. Envy is stronger than admiration in driving imitation. Green brands are thus associated with higher warmth than conventional brands. In the context of brand placement, this turns out to be positive for green brands. Green (vs. conventional) brand placement led to better brand attitudes and higher purchase intentions (Meijers et al., 2018). This was mediated by a higher brand warmth and lower persuasion knowledge for green (vs. conventional) brand placement.

The BIAF has also helped explain charitable donations—how companies are perceived when they make donations—by manipulating the description of a fictitious high- or low-warmth company (Gershon & Cryder, 2018). When a high-warmth company makes any kind of donation, consumers perceive it as motivated by communal intentions and give the company high charitable credit. When a low-warmth

company makes the same donation, it is perceived as motivated by exchange intentions, and the company is awarded few charitable credits. Further, for goods donations vs. monetary donation (i.e., boxes of food vs. money to a food bank), then even the low-warmth company is perceived as having communal intentions and is awarded high charitable credit. In research studying the effect of warm vs. competent donation requests (Zhang et al., 2019), a warm message from the Red Cross ("... /Give out your helping hands and help the victims in the disaster-hit area to get through the difficulties!") led to more time than money donations. Social connectedness mediated this effect. A competent message ("... /Give out your powerful hands and help the victims in the disaster-hit area to get through the difficulties!") led to more money than time donations; competitive orientation mediated this effect.

6.1 | Corporate social irresponsibility

Corporate Social Irresponsibility is not necessarily the opposite of CSR (Lange & Washburn, 2012), so it is therefore worth studying for itself. However, results do mirror CSR: As for CSR, an experiment that manipulated the CSiR or Corporate Social Irresponsibility of a fictional company found effects similar to those reported (Shea & Hawn, 2019). Relative to the control condition, these manipulations had respectively positive or negative impact on purchase intentions and reputations. Warmth perceptions mediated these effects, whereas competence did not.

In a theoretical paper, Voliotis et al. (2016) make different predictions for the consequences of Corporate Social Irresponsibility depending on where the company belongs in the BIAF. A typical for-profit company is perceived as low in communality but high in agency. For this competent-but-cold type of company, Corporate Social Irresponsibility evokes anger and intense harmful behavior. However, for an admired company enjoying high communality and high agency perceptions, Corporate Social Irresponsibility will either slightly decrease respect and liking and evoke mild facilitation or it will significantly decrease the communality perception of the company and therefore lead to anger and intense harm. For the latter to occur, the Corporate Social Irresponsibility needs to be attributed to controllable factors and congruent with the communality of the company. This last prediction was empirically tested (Chen et al., 2020). Studying the perception of corporate hypocrisy, when Corporate Social Irresponsibility happened in the same domain as a firm's prior record of CSR, people perceived more corporate hypocrisy than if domains differs. A mismatch between the firm's CSR prior record and a Corporate Social Irresponsibility event indeed led to attributed lack of ability or resources, not corporate hypocrisy.

6.2 | Human resources

If CSR has an impact on consumer perception (Hur et al., 2013), it also has an impact on (potential) employees' perception of their company



(Prokopowicz & Zmuda, 2015). Here too, congruence between the workers' motivations and the company's perception.

In theory, the BIAF can explain how CSR perception impacts employees' career decisions (Prokopowicz & Zmuda, 2015), by equating Corporate Social Performance with the warmth dimension and Corporate Business Performance with the competence dimension. The position of a company in the BIAF will determine the distinctive meaning of work their employees can find in their job. Companies perceived high on Corporate Social Performance (Warmth), including nonprofit organizations and NGOs, will attract applicants who see their job as a calling, while companies perceived high on Corporate Business Performance (Competence) attract applicants who see their job as a career. Companies perceived as high on both dimensions attract both types of applicants, whereas companies perceived as low on both dimensions attract only applicants who see their job as a mere source of income.

Part of this model has empirical support (Prokopowicz & Zmuda, 2015). A survey of the general population showed that volunteers working for nonprofits are perceived as warmer rather than competent (Peiffer et al., 2020). In a second study sampling a population of volunteers, the volunteers' perception match those of the general population but that this ingroup's perception of warmth decreases when nonprofits adopt more business-like practices (i.e., rationalization, professionalism, managerialism, and a commercial focus). It thus fits well with the claim that high Corporate Social Performance companies attract applicants who see their job as a calling (Prokopowicz & Zmuda, 2015). In a survey of German medical graduates, nonprofit and public hospitals were more attractive to these young professionals than for-profit hospitals (Dreves et al., 2015). This effect was mediated by perceived warmth of the institution and perceived Self-Ownership Status fit, the perceived congruence between self-perception and the ownership status (nonprofit, public or for-profit).

Job seekers' perception of potential employers (Antonetti et al., 2020) empirically confirmed another part of the model (Prokopowicz & Zmuda, 2015), namely, the ability of low Corporate Social Performance/high Corporate Business Performance to attract applicants who see their job as a career. Corporate Social Irresponsibility had less negative impact on market-dominant employers' attractiveness. Perceived employer ethicality and perceived employer competence mediated this moderation.

Finally, in human resources, both company warmth and competence are important. Companies combining high Perceived Organizational Support and high Perceived Organizational Competence enjoyed the highest employee affective commitment (Kim et al., 2016).

7 | SERVICE MARKETING

Service marketing is a particularly social domain for brand perception, as it often entails personal contacts between consumers and customer-facing employees serving as brand representatives. In a

survey of retail bank customers, both warmth and competence perceptions were important (Güntürkün et al., 2020): warmth perception dominated competence as a predictor of relational outcomes, such as customer-company identification, whereas competence dominates warmth as a predictor of transactional outcomes, such as customer share of wallet. Subsequently, a replication manipulated warmth and competence across various service types (service context: retail banking, car repair, cleaning services, doctors, and hair stylists).

Framing a company's competence as caused by employees' effort leads to better brand outcomes (word of mouth; idea provision behavior) than attributing brand competence to employees' talent (Leung et al., 2020). Framing competence as effort (vs. talent) led to higher perceived warmth, which mediated the effect of competence framing on brand outcomes. This competence sub-dimension having different relations with warmth replicates earlier work in social psychology (Louvet et al., 2019).

In-store interactions with brand representatives influence online store value. In such interactions, friendliness (vs. competence) is a stronger predictor of online store value (Verhagen et al., 2019). This effect is mediated by perceptions of online store usefulness and online store enjoyment.

The Stereotype Content Model applies to patients' perception of hospitals. Both warmth and competence perception drive trustworthiness, which in turn determines hospital choices (Dreves, 2013). Three antecedents predict perceived warmth and competence of hospitals: Ownership Status (see also Dreves et al., 2015); Teaching Status; and Hospital Size. Parts of the model have empirical support (Seemann et al., 2015): for German patients, religious non-profit ownership status leads to higher trustworthiness and attractiveness.

Nightclub brand perception identified another type of antecedents to warmth and competence perception: guest selection (Aagerup, 2020). Interviews in three clubs identified the criteria door-men use to pick the best guests to allow into the club; this guest selection is a key feature of the nightclub's brand personality (Aagerup, 2020). Typical "good guests" are in a fashion or media career, have a clothing style and consumption habits that fit the club's brand positioning. Selecting the club manager's and staff's friends is a way to build brand warmth. It fosters trust and customer-to-customer interaction. Guests' good intentions manifest themselves via a polite and respectful demeanor. Brand competence on the other hand builds through being selective on criteria of identity fit and status. Building brand competence can thus come at the expense of building brand warmth and vice versa.

7.1 | Service recovery

The BIAF has also appeared in studying consumers' reactions to service failure. When faced with a data breach event, potential customers are more critical (expect a quick and stable solution) when the hotel is perceived as competent and are more forgiving when it is perceived as warm (Gao et al., 2021). Similarly, communicating about the company's CSR leads to less dissatisfaction after service failure but



only when relatedness motivation is activated (Alhouti et al., 2021). This effect was mediated by warmth perception and limited to service sectors that involve human interactions (vs. self-service technology).

Warmth-oriented (vs. competence-oriented) responses to a service failure online complaint are perceived as more relevant and sincere, leading to higher satisfaction and more positive word of mouth (Huang & Ha, 2020). This was particularly true for consumers who have a communal (vs. exchange) relationship with the brand. Furthermore, the gender of the apologizer affects the effectiveness of the apology. Female apologizers were more effective for value-related wrongdoings, while male apologizers led to more consumer forgiveness for performance-related wrongdoings (Wei & Ran, 2019). These effects are mediated by associating women with warmth and men with competence.

Positive warmth perception thus seems to protect from the negative effect of service failure (Alhouti et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2021; Huang & Ha, 2020). The corollary of this is the warmth negativity effect: perceived lack of warmth is more damaging than perceived lack of competence (Skowronski & Carlston, 1987). In a US representative-sample survey, scandals that damaged brand warmth perception were more consequential than scandals that damage a company's competence perception (Kervyn et al., 2014). Experimental data confirmed that framing a brand failure as a lack of warmth attribution is more damaging than a lack of competence framing (Kervyn et al., 2014). Similarly, negative brand publicity is more damaging when questioning a brand's values (corporate social irresponsibility) than when questioning its performance (poor R&D, low market performance) (Liu et al., 2018). This effect was mediated by the BIAF emotions of contempt and pity that were higher for value-related and performance-related negative publicity, respectively.

8 | DIGITAL MARKETING

The emergence of social media has given brands the opportunity to develop participatory interaction with their consumers (Dwivedi et al., 2015), going from one-to-many communication through mass media to one-to-one communication. This means that social media bring social perception and brand perception closer together. This is even more the case with the recent rise of chatbot and personal assistants that can hold a conversation with consumers. Brands thus have even more opportunity to act in a social way, thus encouraging consumers to perceive them as social objects. Social media leads to more brand engagement and purchase intentions through the mediation of higher brand warmth perception. Here too evidence is found for a congruence effect.

We have already mentioned how the BIAF has been used to study digital marketing in the anthropomorphism section. Social media offer a wonderful tool to anthropomorphize brands but also develop brand communities (Chen et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2019), and anthropomorphism has a positive effect on engagement with a brand's fan page (Kim, Sung, et al., 2020).

A series of experiments went further by showing that congruence between first-person advertising (a classic anthropomorphism technique) and warm images versus third-person advertising and competent images (Chang et al., 2019). The first person/warm combination led to more consumer engagement (i.e., likes) through the mediation of social belonging motivation. The third person/competent combination does so through the mediation of self-enhancement motivations. Warm brands should thus use first-person messages, and competent ones should use third-person messages (Chang et al., 2019). Similarly, a series of experiments manipulating Instagram posts found higher congruence for warm brands using entertaining engagement initiatives and competent brands using informative engagement initiatives (Eigenraam et al., 2021). This congruence led to higher brand authenticity perception and thus higher online consumer engagement. There is also a congruence effect between warmth and brand symbolism (Bernritter, 2016). Consumers read about brands pretested as highly symbolic (i.e., Apple and Nivea) and brands pretested as low in symbolism (i.e., Philips and Hansaplast) in the same product categories. Both perception of warmth and competence were positive predictors of consumers' intention to endorse, but only warmth reached significance. Brand symbolism moderated this effect of warmth: Warmth perception was an especially strong predictor of consumers' intention to endorse for highly symbolic brands. Furthermore, warmth was a better predictor of online brand endorsement than competence (Bernritter et al., 2016). In a series of experiments, participants rated the warmth, competence, and their willingness to endorse a series of for-profit and nonprofit brands. Respondents more willingly endorsed nonprofit than for-profit brands, and warmth perception mediated this effect, whereas competence did not.

Potential employers' social media presence influences the way job seekers perceive them (Carpentier et al., 2019). Being present and active on social media leads to higher brand warmth perception, while the informativeness of the information presented on social media influences the brand competence perception. Analyzing 1500 messages from 34 nonprofits (Chinese universities) and the reaction of web users, friendly and community-building messages generated the highest and most positive engagement (Wu et al., 2019). Similarly, when manipulating the type of interaction consumers had with intelligent assistant (e.g., Siri and Alexa) (Wu et al., 2017): Friendly interaction led to higher brand attachment through the mediation of high brand warmth and brand competence. An engineer type of interaction lowered brand attachment through the mediation of lower brand warmth. Perceived brand competence was not different between the two interaction styles. This result of warmth conversation type leading to better brand attitude and purchase intent was replicated through manipulation and survey of interactions with a chatbot (Roy & Naidoo, 2021). Participants' time orientation moderated this effect. Warm interactions were more effective for present-oriented participants, whereas chatbots with competence conversations were more effective for future-oriented participants.

As noted, high self-brand congruence leads to positive brand relational outcomes (He et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2013; Park et al., 2013; Wijnands & Gill, 2020), and some people can become human brands



(Bennett et al., 2019; Centeno et al., 2019; Thomson, 2006; Zeitoun et al., 2020). Combining these two ideas, research studied the way consumers relate to influencers. In a survey of Instagram users who followed at least one influencer, actual self-influencer congruence determined the psychological distance between the consumer and the human brand (Zogaj et al., 2020). So higher actual self-influencer congruence led to more purchase intentions (of the products recommended by the influencer) through the mediation of influencer trustworthiness. Ideal self-influencer congruence also had a positive effect on purchase intentions, but this time through the mediation of perceived competence of the influencer. So, like the country-of-origin effect and human brands, research on social media influencers (Zogaj et al., 2020) shows that social perception and brand perception are not only similar but sometimes apply to the same target.

9 | NOTHING SO PRACTICAL AS A GOOD THEORY

In addition to the academic explorations of BIAF, a wide array of practical applications seem to validate its usefulness as well. These business applications include strategic brand positioning, competitive analysis, product development, and customer segmentation, to name a few. In particular, BIAF insights have been especially compelling in measuring, understanding, and improving customer experiences across a variety of different industry sectors.

9.1 | Customer experience

In early 2014, the management team of a multi-national supplies distributor made the decision to focus on becoming a more customer-centric organization with a “customer-first” culture. This would be accomplished by gathering ongoing customer-experience feedback that could guide business strategy and implement targeted business initiatives. Specifically, the company sought to initiate a truly comprehensive and continuous customer-experience measurement and improvement program.

To guide the program, benchmark experience feedback from over 8000 customers created a foundation for ongoing tracking and improvements. This benchmark study captured customer warmth and competence priorities, perceptions, emotions, and loyalty. In addition, the study identified five distinct attitudinal segments of customers, each with very different priorities, perceptions, and loyalty. The analysis of the benchmark customer data revealed that while the supplies distributor was exceeding customer expectations on several competence dimensions, such as competitive payment terms and electronic billing, they were falling short on critical warmth dimensions. So despite the vast majority of customers being quite satisfied and loyal, certain customer segments were still being inadvertently alienated by poor and inconsistent customer experiences.

Based on these findings, a BIAF-based customer experience tracking program began across critical touch points that included

personalized correspondence and an early alert system that routed customer concerns to a dedicated problem resolution specialist who would follow-up personally within 48 h. During the first year, over 16,000 customers provided BIAF-based experience feedback, and over 1000 customer problems were proactively identified and promptly resolved through the tracking program. In addition, other operational changes resulted from the timely feedback received. These included simple but greatly appreciated improvements, such as increased inventory in certain locations, reduced supplier drop-shipping, and enhanced website search features. Customers responded with double-digit increases in satisfaction, willingness to recommend, and loyalty. These significant customer experience and loyalty improvements lasted over the next 4 years.

The company also observed compelling financial reasons for building stronger customer loyalty, as those accounts reporting the strongest loyalty spent 36–107% more on office supplies with them annually. In addition, their most loyal customers contributed fully 65% of annual revenues.

Perhaps most relevant here, structural equation modeling of BIAF-based customer experience and purchase data confirmed that for every 1 point increase in warmth and competence perceptions (on a 7 point scale), customer loyalty to the client increased by .91 points. In addition, for every 1 point increase in customer loyalty (on a 7 point scale), annual revenue increased by \$356 per customer—a 12% increase. This highlights the clear and significant financial impact¹ that can be achieved with a BIAF-based approach to customer experience measurement and management. Notably, warmth effects were twice as strong as competence effects, and warmth is the distinctive feature of BIAF.

9.2 | Nonprofit consumer experience

Practical applications of BIAF-based customer experience measurement have not been limited to for-profit, commercial enterprises. In 2019, a not-for-profit health system with \$7.1 billion assets also initiated BIAF-based patient, employee, and care-provider experience measurement programs that have yielded similar insights. Warmth, competence, and loyalty data were collected from over 3000 patients and compared to their visits and payments over the previous 10 years. Patient and doctor relationships are much longer and transactions are much less frequent, so they require a longer period of behavior data. In addition, the perceptions and loyalty of patients reflects their accumulated experiences with the health system over time. As a result, their responses are the outcome of their past behavior and interactions with the system. For instance, structural equation modeling of BIAF-based patient experience and payment data revealed that for every 1-point increase in warmth and competence perceptions (on a 7-point scale), patient loyalty to the health system increased by .42 points. In addition, for every 1-point increase in patient loyalty (on a 7-point scale), actual patient payments and visits to the health system over the previous 10 years had been 14%–16% higher. As a result, a focus on improving

BIAF-based patient perceptions could be expected to contribute significant increases in health system revenue.

Similarly, a non-profit organization focused on cancer research and prevention found that for every 1-point increase in warmth and competence perceptions (on a 7-point scale), donor loyalty to the charity increased by .89 points. Warmth effects again were far stronger than competence. In addition, for every 1-point increase in donor loyalty (on a 7-point scale), actual donor contributions to the organization over the previous 3 years had been 11% higher. Thus, donor behavior over time reflects loyalty, perceived warmth, and perceived competence. In both cases, although individually significant, warmth perceptions outperformed competence.

These effective practical applications of BIAF to the measurement and management of various customer experience types, along with the extension of BIAF and SCM into a wide range of business research endeavors, suggest that warmth and competence perceptions are likely foundational to a broad array of customer beliefs, decisions, and behaviors. As such, continued investigation and application of these models and constructs certainly seems warranted.

10 | EVOLUTION OF THE STEREOTYPE CONTENT MODEL AND CONSEQUENCES FOR THE BRANDS AS INTENTIONAL AGENTS FRAMEWORK

In social cognition research, the SCM fit the moment. Building on half a century's person perception insights, the primacy of warmth, and its interplay with competence, had first appeared in Solomon Asch's (1946) experiments on likeability. The warmth-competence configuration contrasted the intelligence of a cold man (threatening) with the intelligence of a warm man (admirable); the same feature's meaning depends on context. The SCM picked up on the insight that warmth and competence combine to create recognizable clusters of group stereotypes characterized by their emotional correlates: the pure admiration vs. contempt quadrants and the ambivalent pity and envy quadrants. In the SCM domain, the 2002 article has elicited 7,000 citations and has informed not only brand images but also images of animals (Sevillano & Fiske, 2016), artificial intelligence (McKee et al., under review), and politicians (Fiske & Durante, 2014). The SCM captures meaningful stereotype maps in nearly 40 countries (Durante et al., 2017).

But science never lets well-enough alone. Several competing approaches have challenged the SCM, and by extension, the BIAF. Preferring consensus over mutually assured destruction, some of the adversaries have collaborated to align their shared conclusions (Abele et al., 2021) and to identify continuing controversies (which apply to the BIAF as well). Consensus supports the two primary dimensions. The dimensions' priority, however, depends on paradigm: perceiver goals (epistemic or hedonic), the nature of the targets, and their sheer number. All these principles potentially apply to brands. For example, as noted, the SCM best describes a relational goal, making sense of societal groups to decide whether, how, and why to interact. Inferred

intent (warmth) and ability to enact (competence) capture these concerns. In contrast, a pragmatic goal to understand the landscape of many groups from an epistemic distance evokes a third dimension, ideology (progressive/conservative beliefs) (Nicolas et al., 2021). Priority also depends on the measure (processing speed and subjective weight favor warmth; pragmatic diagnosticity favors competence) (Abele et al., 2021); both SCM and BIAF could benefit from further validation here.

11 | POTENTIAL FOR FUTURE BRANDS AS INTENTIONAL AGENTS FRAMEWORK RESEARCH

Throughout, this theoretical review supports arguments that brand images are akin to stereotypes. This idea should go further. Much that we know about stereotypes could be tested on brand perception. Some ideas follow.

11.1 | Further research based on the two dimensions of stereotype content

The primacy of warmth/competence depends on a dual system (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007), as noted: Warmth tends to be the primary dimension for observers, but the competence is the most important dimension for actors. In BIAF, this might mean that for consumers perceiving a brand, warmth is more important, but for managers and workers within the organization, brand competence becomes more important. More recently, as noted, several other conditions for warmth and competence primacy emerged from the adversarial alignment (Abele et al., 2021).

The relation between brand warmth and brand competence perception also merits more research. A compensation effect (Aaker et al., 2010) finds some brands are perceived as either warm but not competent or competent but less warm. For these brands, describing just the positive dimension produces an innuendo effect (Peter & Ponzi, 2018) with the omitted dimensions being perceived as low (see also Kim & Ball, 2021). But this should be researched more thoroughly and combined with the congruence effect (Zawisza & Pittard, 2015), to help brand managers determine how to dose warmth- and competence-enhancing initiatives.

Another BIAF parallel to social cognition is a brand warmth negativity effect: Brand warmth failures are more damaging than brand competence failures (Kervyn et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2018). Social psychology has also found evidence for a competence positivity effect (Skowronski & Carlston, 1987) meaning that signs of high competence have more impact on social judgment than signs of high warmth. The logic behind this positivity effect is that it is possible to fake high warmth but more difficult to fake high competence. High competence displays, even irregular, thus seem more diagnostic of a person's true self. This competence positivity effect could be tested on brand perception.

11.2 | Further research beyond the two dimensions

In our review, the main narrative is that brand perception functions like stereotype perception because brands tend to be anthropomorphized and thus become social objects with which consumers develop relationships. However, two alternative interpretations were also mentioned in the review. One is that brand perception is social because consumers think about the people behind the brand such as the CEO (Centeno et al., 2019; Zeitoun et al., 2020) or employees (Leung et al., 2020; Zeitoun et al., 2020). The second is that consumers used their stereotypes about typical brand consumers to apply it to the brand (Aagerup, 2020; Antonetti & Maklan, 2016). It would be interesting to develop research addressing these three alternatives together.

This review highlighted that some concepts (countries, CEOs, politicians, influencers) have been treated as social groups/beings or as brands by social psychologists and marketers, respectively. Compared to a model presented alone, when a model is presented with a brand in an ad, she/he is dehumanized (Herak et al., 2020). Could we make the same prediction when a social being/group is treated as a brand?

Other characteristics of stereotypes could also apply to brand perception. Research on entitativity (Yzerbyt et al., 2001) has shown that when the group is perceived as very tight and sharing a common essence, stereotypes are much stronger. Would brands perceived as high in entitativity also be stronger? In research on stereotype maintenance, when people face contradictory evidence, people protect their stereotypes by using strategies such as sub-typing and alternative causal attribution. Consumers might use similar strategies to protect their brand image when facing contradictory evidence. Finally, social psychology research has shown the importance of meta-stereotypes (Vorauer et al., 1998): what do I think that members of this group think about people like me? It could also be the case that what consumers think that brands think about them impacts their consumer-brand relation. These possibilities make brands even more human, their warmth and competence even more vital.

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ENDNOTE

¹Further details on this case example are available for review here: <https://fidelum.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/The-HUMAN-Brand-Customer-Experience-Measurement-White-Paper.pdf>

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How to cite this article: Kervyn, N., Fiske, S. T., & Malone, C. (2021). Social perception of brands: Warmth and competence define images of both brands and social groups. *Consumer Psychology Review*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1002/arcp.1074>