ABSTRACT

Today, as business becomes ever more challenging, brands become the main assets of many companies. Fierce competition forces companies to differentiate their products from those of competitors in the market. However, it is extremely difficult to create this differentiation based on the functionality attribute of the products, since advanced technology makes it possible for companies to imitate the functionality attributes. Hence, marketers begin to create personalities for their brands in order to be more appealing to the consumers. Brand personality is defined as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” and it is asserted that the brand personality leads to differentiation in terms of consumer perceptions and preferences. At the moment, millions of people use search engines in order to reach the most relevant information. Since search engines, as the senior actors of the online world, provide similar services, it is enormously crucial for them to create differentiation. Google is the dominant search engine brand and, in this paper, its success has been examined by utilizing the brand personality scale of Aaker (1997). This study tries to identify the brand personality dimensions that search engine companies create in the minds of Internet users by using past research on brand personality scales as a guide. Furthermore, it is also aims to determine the distinct brand personality dimensions of Google as the most preferred and used search engine. It is found that Google has been perceived as the most “competent” search engine brand. Furthermore, depending on the MANOVA results, it is shown that all three search engines have statistically significant differences only on the “competence” dimension. “Sincerity” and “excitement” are the other two dimensions which significantly differentiate Google from both MSN and Yahoo.
INTRODUCTION

Today, there has been a growing recognition about branding and brand management. There are plenty of developments such as increased globalization, fierce competition, and savvy consumers that have significantly complicated marketing practices and create challenges for the brand managers. In today’s markets, it becomes difficult to develop new products with distinct features whereas it is relatively easy to copy them with advanced technological resources. Moreover, there is also a proliferation of brands as the number of brands for the same product category expands. Additionally, the Internet has completely changed the business world. Internet, as a new media channel, enables a company to efficiently target, detain and interact with its potential customers. Twenty-first century has witnessed a rush by new and existing businesses to create their online Internet brands. But not all of them have the opportunity to show success due to fatal mistakes in brand management. In such an environment brand management, through the affective use of brand image and brand positioning, becomes extremely important. Being a major component of brand image, brand personality is the most valuable way of creating brand differentiation and hence consumer preference and loyalty.

While examining on-line branding topic, a special attention has to be given to search engines since they’re continuing their activities from the very beginning of Internet age. As a result, Internet users are more familiar with the brands operating in this on-line business. Increased search engine usage among Internet users justifies the argument that a remarkable interest should be paid to the analysis of search engine branding. Search engine use is one of the top activities of the 94 million American adults who use the Internet; moreover, the search-using population totals 90 percent of all Internet users (Burns, 2005). The number of U.S. searches also grew 55 percent in December 2005 (5.1 billion searches) over December 2004 (3.3 billion searches) (Burns, 2006a). Consequently, as the search engine market continuously expands, the number of players in this market also inflates. This leads to intense competition among search engine brands. On the demand side of this market, search users prefer to use well-known search engines because they believe that well-known search engines generally provide more dependable and relevant results. On the other hand, companies that have Internet operations want to be listed in well-known and well-used search engines because these places potentially generate so much traffic (Sullivan, 2004a).

Being a preferred and well-known search engine provides crucial revenue sources to search engine brands. Revenue that comes from the paid listings is one of the most important benefits of being a leading search engine. Every major search engine with significant traffic sells paid placement listings. Anyone who runs a website wants to be in the “top ten” results. Being listed in 11 or beyond results means that many people may miss your website; that’s why a website with good search engine listings may see a dramatic increase in traffic (Sullivan, 2004b). Besides, revenue that comes from the advertising also plays a critical role for the survival of the search engine companies. An increasing number of advertisers allocate a portion of their budgets to the Web. In 2006, online marketing spending is expected to increase 19 percent (Burns, 2006b). Within online’s increase, search engine ad spending is set to grow 26 percent this year; additionally, budget allocation for Google amounts to $3.7 million; $4.6 million for Yahoo; and $4.6 million for MSN (Burns, 2006b). As the online advertising becomes more popular, advertisers increasingly include the Internet in their marketing mix. To reach masses, advertisers prefer to give advertisements to well-known and preferable websites. So that, being a well-known and preferable search engine brand is also very crucial to attract much more advertising, which in turn brings more revenue. However, it should also be noted that Google makes money from paid