

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY INTO BRAND ALIGNMENT IN B2B  
RELATIONSHIPS**

*Forthcoming in Industrial Marketing Management*

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# **AN EXPLORATORY STUDY INTO BRAND ALIGNMENT IN B2B RELATIONSHIPS**

## **ABSTRACT**

B2B relationships are characterized by strategic partnerships between firms and the suppliers of goods and services integral to their offerings. Failure to choose the right partner could jeopardize the survival of both partners. While a number of studies suggest that partnering firms need to be aligned operationally, few studies look at whether there should be alignment between the brands of firms and their suppliers. Therefore, we build on existing studies on sexual selection to develop a theory of whether similarity in brand attributes affects the success of B2B relationships. We propose that firms wishing to portray particular brand images to their customers choose suppliers whose images mirror their own. To develop our proposition, we investigate the brand personality alignment between well-known firms and their suppliers in four industries. The findings of our analysis have significant implications for scholars and managers interested in the nature and success of B2B partnerships.

Keywords: B2B partnerships, supplier-buyer relationships, brand image, brand personality, brand alignment, content analysis

## **AN EXPLORATORY STUDY INTO BRAND ALIGNMENT IN B2B RELATIONSHIPS**

Industrial marketing is characterized by large transactions between a firm and its suppliers related to goods used by the firm in the production of its own products and services. These transactions are usually of high value and integral to the success of both parties. The strategic nature of the purchases indicates that the relationship between industrial firms and their suppliers is a key element to success. Such relationships ensure that suppliers provide products aligned to the firm's goals and objectives, which in turn ensure repeat purchases of the supplier's products (Hutt and Speh 2001). This premise is widely understood as a cornerstone of industrial marketing.

Knowledge that firms form relationships is accepted (Shocker, Srivastava and Ruekert, 1994). However, *how* firms choose which suppliers to align with has not been addressed extensively in the marketing literature. Partly, this stems from the fact that the term 'alignment' could indicate a number of things, from similarity to relative positioning ([www.mirriam-webster.com](http://www.mirriam-webster.com)). As a result, the characteristics that make up best partner candidates amongst the potential suppliers from which a firm could choose have not been agreed upon from a theoretical or practical perspective. Although studies into this topic exist, most concentrate on internal skill and technology based issues. Partnership, alliance, and merger studies that examine B2B relationships in the management and marketing literature conclude that successful ventures are those that identify and exploit operating synergies (Wilkinson, Young and Freytag, 2005). From a strategic perspective, traditionally the indicators of successful relationships include complementary resources

and capabilities (Anderson & Narus, 1991; Collis and Montgomery, 1995; Wittman, Hunt and Arnett, 2008), and the existence of overlapping goals (Wilkinson, Young & Freytag, 2005). From a supplier-provider position, alignment has been discussed mostly with regard to product customization (Anderson and Narus 1995). Alignment of values has also been mentioned with research in this area focused mostly on personal characteristics of sales people and their contacts at client companies (e.g. Price and Arnould 1999; Swan, et al., 2001).

The matter of choosing the correct partner is not trivial. The benefit of selecting a suitable supplier can be substantial, including access to new markets, increasing market share, filling resource gaps, and achieving operational efficiencies (Argyle, 1990; Wittman, Hunt and Arnett, 2008). Certain B2B relationships are purely transactional - specified and executed according to a contract and beginning and ending with the transfer of a good from supplier to firm. However, the nature of the strategic relationship between industrial firms and their suppliers on whose goods and services their core offerings rely, suggests a mutual dependence on each other for survival. Failing to choose the right partner could be “a potentially fatal obstacle to the success of [each party’s] brand” (Shocker, Srivastava and Ruekert, 1994: 153)

The impact of partner selection on each party’s brand including the differentiated images of firms and their offerings (Opoku, et al., 2007), or the set of associations relating to what the firms represent (Dacin and Smith, 1994), has only received limited and tertiary attention. An exploration of the small set of related literature reveals Lambert, Emmelhainz and Gardner’s (1996) discussion of the managerial processes on which partnering firms should concentrate, but these authors mention only briefly that partners

sharing similar brand images and company reputations will enjoy stronger relationships. Others touching on the topic state that brand management within the industrial marketing channel is crucial, but stop short of discussing exactly what this entails (Shocker, Srivastava and Ruckert, 1994). Whether and how the brands of firms and their suppliers should be aligned seems to have been overlooked in the marketing literature to date. More specifically, unaddressed topics include (1) whether partnering firms exhibit different brand characteristics without affecting the viability of the relationship, and (2) which differences or similarities improve the value of the relationship.

Nonetheless, a key paper by Wilkinson, Young and Freytag's (2005) that looks into the biological and social foundations of business partnering seems to give particular insight into the issue of strategic relationships in the industrial space. Insights from this paper, along with the sociological theory of attraction in which partner choices are made based on perceptions on an ideal image, provide the theoretical foundation for this paper. More specifically, taking Wilkinson, Young and Freytag's (2005) view that trait *alignment* is indicated by trait *similarity*, we propose that successful firms choose strategic suppliers whose brand personalities are similar to their own. Thus, in order to portray a consistent brand image to their customers, firms choose suppliers whose images mirror their own. To develop our proposition, we proceed as follows: First we discuss the existing literature on business relationships, focusing particularly on the most recent contributions to this literature which cover criteria for partner selection. Also we look at the concepts of brand image and personality as issues distinct from those discussed in the B2B relationship literature. We then present our study of brand personality alignment between well-known firms and their suppliers in four industries. We discuss the results of our analysis and the

implications for scholars and managers. Finally, we address the limitations of our study, and propose future areas of research.

## **BUSINESS TO BUSINESS RELATIONS**

The literature business-to-business relationships is vast (e.g. Anderson and Narus, 1998; Barney, 1991; Connor, 1991; Hamel and Prahalad, 1994 a&b; Heimeriks and Duysters, 2007; Jap, 1999; Lado, Boyd and Wright 1992; Lambe, Spekman and Hunt, 2002; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Morrow, et al., 2007; Park, Mezias and Song, 2004; Wernerfelt, 1984). Relationships are central to the success of mergers and acquisitions (Weber and Dholakia, 2000), joint ventures, alliances, and B2B supplier-distributor partnerships (Lambert, Emmelhainz, and Gardner, 1996). Studies into how two or more firms join together to perform tasks that would otherwise not be possible (Argyle, 1990), or secure competitive advantage have been focused mainly on integrating internal departments (Blois 1996; Gadde and Hakansson, 1993, 1994; Monthoux, 1975; Wilkinson, Young, and Freytag, 2005). For example, Ellram's (1990) study shows that successful firm-buyer relationships entail that each partner demonstrates financial performance and stability; top management and organizational culture compatibility; overlap in manufacturing and design capability; a good safety record; and an attractive customer base. Studies show that firms in partnership perform best when they are able to capitalize on marketing synergies (Weber and Dholakia, 2000).

An area of significantly less research focus are the characteristics exhibited by firms entering into relationships and the importance of these characteristics in choosing a partner (see Wilkinson and Young 2002; Wilkinson, Young and Freytag, 2005; Wong

and Ellis, 2002). To date, some studies have concluded that firms are likely to choose others familiar to them, or those with whom they have worked before (Li and Rowley, 2002). Both observations reveal little about the nature of the firms chosen as partners. Alternately, studies indicate that “self-reflection”, or choosing firms that most resemble themselves may be important to partner choice. Lambert, Emmelhainz and Gardner (1996) propose that firms choose partners who are symmetrical in relative size, market share, financial strength, productivity, brand image, company reputation, and level of technological sophistication. Alderson (1951) referred to this as “double seeking” (pp 82), while Wilkinson and colleagues (2005) state that firms choose partners who exhibit similarities rather than differences. However, specific characteristics that indicate whether a firm would be more likely selected as a business partner have seldom been discussed specifically (Young and Wilkinson, 1997). Drawing on biological theory of partner selection, Wilkinson, Young and Freytag (2005) are among the few to qualitatively investigate how managers describe and explain the physical characteristics they admire and pursue in business relationships, and thus their work provides the foundation for our study.

### **B2B “Mates”: Like Attracts Like**

Based on the notions of symmetry, “double seeking” (Alderson, 1952), and firms’ preferences for characteristics in partners that reflect their own (Wilkinson and colleagues, 2005) discussed above, B2B alignment can be understood in terms of strategic similarity. The idea that firms choose partners similar to themselves is appealing from an intuitive standpoint. It seems logical that firms which operate in similar ways in similar market positions are more likely to understand each other and reach agreement,

work together, and sustain a relationship (Wilkinson, Young and Freytag, 2005). Based on the “business equivalent of sexual attraction” (pp673), firms enter into a relationship based on what they expect to get out of it – joint value and equality. If firms are equal in size, scope and brand strength, then one cannot dominate the other. These authors suggest that the pool from which to select the right partner is decided based on intrinsic firm attributes. Research confirms that firms choose partners with matched characteristics and find customer or partner capabilities and characteristics similar to their own (Wilkinson, Young and Freytag, 2005).

An explanation for the preceding is derived from research into sexual selection which shows that humans choose partners who conform to an image of how an ideal mate should look. The ideal resembles that with which the individual is most familiar concerning self or family characteristics (Wilkinson, Young and Freytag, 2005).

Research from social psychology confirms that familiarity and similarity on a wide variety of dimensions are key principles of attraction, with similarity playing a large role in eventual mate selection (Seyfried and Hendrick, 1973; Gilbert, Fiske and Gardner, 1998). Attributes of most importance in a partner can be classified as largely cultural in nature including religion, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, age, or political views. Intelligence and attractiveness are less important when choosing a mate. Marriage between individuals with similar cultural backgrounds is understandable from the perspective of mutual agreement between two people to be together, since agreement is easier to reach if both parties share history and beliefs (Wilkinson, Young and Freytag, 2005). This finding is echoed within the sociology literature (Kalmijn, 1994).

From a business partnering perspective, cultural similarities can be understood in terms of the nature and goals of the business relationship. Firms in strong relationships appear to have closely corresponding market positions, market share, and financial strength. Wilkinson et al. (2005) found that firms not sharing these characteristics would have “affairs” – short-term, ad hoc partnerships - rather than “marry” (pp678).

While the preceding research provides insight as to why a particular supplier might have been chosen, it fails to give any a priori indication as to which of the many potential partner targets with similar financial and market share information a firm might pick. More specifically, criteria for *selecting* a partner are missing. Wilkinson, Young and Freytag (2005) discuss that firms, like humans, pick partners who are similar to themselves, however this study stops short of exploring this question fully. Although these authors dismiss physical attractiveness as a leading criterion for selection, they did not address the issue of brand and brand image which can be understood as *what* the firm looks like objectively (Brown, et al., 2006) rather than *how* it looks subjectively. The authors suggest that firms should look the same from a brand association perspective, but this construct requires more explanation than “financial performance” or “market share” which reflect commonly understood concepts. Therefore, to extend Wilkinson, Young and Freytag’s (2005) argument, we discuss the notions of ‘brand image’ and ‘brand association’ as material components of firms’ characteristics, and propose that firms seeking B2B partners consider alignment in these areas as well.

## **BRAND IMAGE, BRAND PERSONALITY, AND PARTNER ALIGNMENT**

Brands are symbols that customers have learned to trust over time. Brands are constructed by firms, intentionally or unintentionally, and communicated to others through a firm's products and marketing activities. Brands transmit information that enables outsiders to gain insight into the firm, and assists them in making evaluations of the firm and its activities (Brown, et al., 2006; Pitt & Papania, 2007). Brand associations are those opinions, inferences, and beliefs about a firm; information about the firm's past actions; and overall and specific evaluations of the firm that are automatically triggered when a customer interacts with a brand (Brown and Dacin, 1997). Firms spend years developing and nurturing their brands so that they signal intangible characteristics such as reliability, quality and safety in the mind of customers (Erdem, 1993; Nelson, 1970; Opoku, et al., 2007; Wittman, Hunt and Arnett, 2008).

Brand image is the mental picture that the firm wants others to hold of it (Brown, et al., 2006). Brand images are constructed through traditional and virtual, formal and informal, firm communications (Brown, et al., 2006; Duriau, Reger and Pfarrer, 2007; Pitt & Papania, 2007). The images conveyed carve a unique position of the firm in the recipient's mind (Keller, 1993) which separates the firm from others in its industry (Duncan, 2005). Brown and colleagues (2006) consider the positioning of a firm in the mind of its stakeholders through its brand image as "one of the most important strategic-level decisions that corporate managers make" (pp103). Actions associated with constructing brand images – i.e. communications about the firm's characteristics and activities – correspond with an interpretation of personality from the field of social psychology (Hogan, 1991). This interpretation describes personality as a set of "internal processes and propensities" that explain why an individual (or the firm) does things in a

particular way (Pitt & Papania, 2007: 3) and echoes Aaker's (1997) definition of brand personality as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand". Thus, firms' brand images become understood by customers as extensions of their brand personalities (Hayes et al., 2006).

Given the importance of a firm's brand image and personality, and following from the argument we developed earlier, it might be expected that firms would choose partners whose brand personalities match their own. Further, we would expect firms to select partners with similar personalities to reduce the risk that the firm is being perceived incorrectly by its target audience with possible negative consequences (Brown, et al., 2006).

### **Determining a Firm's Brand Personality**

Unlike many other firm characteristics, there is not a line item on the income statement to indicate brand personality. Rather, brand personality must be inferred from a firm's brand communications. In the present study, brand personality is ascertained through analysis of the information communicated by firms on their websites. "[U]sing website information is consistent with the assumption that images are constructed by organizations through explicit communications and deliberate identity claims" (Lamertz, Heugens and Calmet, 2005:824).

Existing research into how firms portray themselves on their websites provides readily available tools for analyzing brand personalities. In particular, Aaker's (1997) 42-item Brand Personality Scale (BPS) analyzes brands on five key dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. The scale is independent of a

particular observer and consists of a list of adjectives associated with each of these five personality dimensions, and firm websites can be scanned for these words. Based on the frequencies with which these words occur, a graphical representation of the firm's communicated brand personalities can be constructed.

Hence, we propose that firms choose business partners whose brand personalities align their own when analyzed using Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality Scale. We expect strong B2B relationships to be expressed in strategically supportive brand alignment on the following five brand personality dimensions: Ruggedness, Sincerity, Sophistication, Competence, and Excitement. This leads to our research question, grounded in the sociological theory of attraction and the biological and social foundation of business partnering (Wilkinson et al. 2005):

*Do firms choose B2B partners whose brands closely align with theirs? If so, which brand dimensions are most salient in their choice?*

## **SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of the present study is to utilize an existing methodology of exploring corporate brand personality conveyed through websites to explore how and why firms choose partners, and the extent to which these choices depend on brand similarity. A secondary goal is to illustrate the results of such analysis in a fashion meaningful to both academics and practitioners.

Four different B2B relationships were chosen for analysis in this investigation. Selection of these relationships proceeded as follows. Each of the four authors and two additional business scholars independently constructed lists of B2B industries in which alignment

between firms could possibly occur. These lists were then compiled into one large list. Each industry was investigated for its ability to be operationalized in the present study. First, each industry was investigated to ensure a sufficient number of firms operated within it so as to permit an analysis. Second, information on the relationships between an industry's firms was required in order to shed light on our research question. Several industries were discarded since such information was not available. Lastly, it was a requirement that each firm featured a website so as to permit analysis. Following this process four industries remained. The four categories of partnerships selected were quick service (fast food) restaurants and food suppliers; automobile manufacturer interrelationships; tire manufacturers and the races they sponsor; and airlines and aircraft manufacturers.

Within the quick service restaurant industry, McDonalds ([www.mcdonalds.com](http://www.mcdonalds.com)), Burger King ([www.burgerking.com](http://www.burgerking.com)), Starbucks ([www.starbucks.com](http://www.starbucks.com)), and Dairy Queen ([www.dairyqueen.com](http://www.dairyqueen.com)) were chosen. McDonalds, Burger King, and Dairy Queen (DQ) are large franchises specializing in hamburgers and other quick food items, while Starbucks is a large company that sells a variety of coffee-based beverages and snacks. In terms of suppliers, Pepsi ([www.pepsico.com](http://www.pepsico.com)), Heinz-Oreida ([www.heinz.com](http://www.heinz.com)), McCain ([www.mccain.com](http://www.mccain.com)), and Koch Foods ([www.kochfoods.com](http://www.kochfoods.com)) were included. Pepsi is a bottler for Starbucks's successful line of coffee-based bottled beverages and Ethos water. Starbucks also recently replaced their in-store selection of Happy Planet juices with Pepsi's Naked Juice lineup. Heinz-Oreida and McCain supply fries and ketchup to quick service restaurants such as McDonalds, Burger King, and Dairy Queen. Lastly, Koch

Foods is a chicken supplier to Dairy Queen and was recently named “DQ Supplier of the Year”<sup>1</sup>.

To examine automobile manufacturer relationships we chose two known relationships: Lotus-Toyota and Audi-Porsche. Lotus ([www.grouplotus.com](http://www.grouplotus.com)) is a high-end sports car company that focuses its efforts on designing cars tailored to enthusiast drivers. As such, Lotus does not manufacture its own engines and instead purchases them from Toyota ([www.toyota.com](http://www.toyota.com)), a top international car manufacturer. This relationship allows Toyota to take advantage of further economies of scale at its own plant, and frees Lotus from costly development and manufacture of engines for such a small production volume. Audi ([www.audi.com](http://www.audi.com)) and Porsche ([www.porsche.com](http://www.porsche.com)), two high end car brands, were selected based on evidence of further collaboration beyond existing partnerships on products such as their SUV platforms<sup>2</sup>. We recognize that Audi and Porsche are related in terms of ownership, which could present a possible confound in our analysis. We argue, however, that each company is largely independent, something we believe evident in that many of their vehicles are direct competitors. Either manufacturer could, and we believe would, choose whichever components are best for their vehicles and brand. We thus argue that component choice, rather than being a mere artifact of ownership, speaks to the quality and appropriateness of such components to a company’s products.

Sponsorships between car races and tire companies is another sector that we examined.

Such relationships are particularly interesting given the high exposure sponsors receive,

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.kochfoods.com/html/news/news\\_detail.php?articleid=91cfaab](http://www.kochfoods.com/html/news/news_detail.php?articleid=91cfaab), accessed 14 April 2008

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.autoblog.com/2007/07/02/porsche-audi-to-unite-on-audi-r4/> and <http://www.leftlanenews.com/porsche-to-meet-with-vw-discuss-partnership.html>

and thus the close association formed within customers' minds. We examined sponsorships of three different races: Goodyear ([www.goodyear.com](http://www.goodyear.com)) and Nascar ([www.nascar.com](http://www.nascar.com)); Bridgestone ([www.bridgestonetire.com](http://www.bridgestonetire.com)) and Formula 1 ([www.formula1.com](http://www.formula1.com)); and Pirelli ([www.pirelli.com](http://www.pirelli.com)) and the World Rally Championship (WRC – [www.wrc.com](http://www.wrc.com)). Goodyear, Bridgestone, and Pirelli are leading tire manufacturers and Nascar, Formula 1, and the World Rally Championship are large, well known car races.

Lastly, our analysis included airlines and aircraft manufacturers. On the supply side we examined the world's top two wide-bodied aircraft manufacturers – Airbus ([www.airbus.com](http://www.airbus.com)) and Boeing ([www.boeing.com](http://www.boeing.com)). In terms of airlines, Air Canada ([www.aircanada.com](http://www.aircanada.com)), Singapore Airlines ([www.singaporeair.com](http://www.singaporeair.com)), British Airways ([www.british-airways.com](http://www.british-airways.com)), Thai Airways ([www.thaiair.com](http://www.thaiair.com)), and Continental ([www.continental.com](http://www.continental.com)) were selected for inclusion based on access to data on their fleet composition as well as their outstanding orders.

Following company selection, we turned to acquiring data on each company's self-professed brand image. Following previous research, information displayed on company-created websites was used to represent data on brand image (Opoku, et al., 2007). Initial efforts focused on downloading the entire set of textual information from each company's website. This proved unwise for a variety of reasons including technical limitations posed by some website formats (flash), as well as the inability to exclude text of different languages. A new method was therefore necessary.

Our adopted approach involved manually downloading a select set of relevant pages from each website. This set comprised the main page and all contents under the “About Us” section of the website including company mission statement, values, environmental policy and commitments, diversity statement, and volunteer activities. Documents posted on company websites, such as Annual Reports, were not included except in cases where the company mission statement or values only appeared in such a document. In this case only the relevant portion of the document was used. When more than one website was available, the U.S. version was chosen. In situations when uncertainty arose regarding what should be included, a second researcher was involved and a consistent and joint decision was required.

Analysis of data from firm websites was conducted using content analysis which is a statistical method that searches text for selected words, meanings, ideas, or themes (Neuman, 2003). Content analysis is widely used within marketing and the social sciences (Kassarjian, 1977; Kolbe and Burnett, 1991). This study relied on WordStat statistical software for analysis of textual data (Peladeau, 2003). WordStat requires the creation of a dictionary file encapsulating the dimensions being studied. For this study, we required a dictionary for Aaker’s (1997) set of brand personality dimensions. As Aaker’s (1997) dimensions have been used in previous research (Opoku, et al., 2007) we were able to use the previously created dictionary file which provides continuity across research projects.

The original brand personality dimension dictionary file was created by compiling a set of synonyms to Aaker’s (1997) five basic dimensions as well as forty-two personality trait norms as set out in her paper. The basic dimensions are sincerity (domestic, honest,

genuine, cheerful), excitement (daring, spirited, imaginative, up-to-date), competence (reliable, responsible, dependable, efficient), sophistication (glamorous, presentation, charming, romantic), and ruggedness (tough, strong, outdoorsy, rugged). The dictionary was created using synonym lists of two independent researchers and then merging only those identified by both. The list contained 922 words divided evenly between the five original dimensions of brand personality (Sincerity 20%, Excitement 19%, Competence 21%, Sophistication 21%, and Ruggedness 19%). WordStat software was then used to create an electronic representation of the list.

Following conversion of the dimensions into WordStat format, analysis of the downloaded text proceeded following the approach set forth by Bendixon (1995, 1996). WordStat first cleaned each text file by removing words of little semantic value as well as performing a process called stemming. Stemming returns words to their singular or root form and thus allows accurate content analysis to take place. Next, during content analysis, WordStat analyzes each text document for words that correspond to those within the previously defined dictionary. The software then outputs information on the relative distribution of words within each company text file across the five brand personality dimensions. Correspondence analysis was then carried out in order to reveal associations between websites and the brand personality dimension. Correspondence analysis is a perceptual mapping technique that projects cross-tabulated data onto a joint space map by a decomposition of the chi-squared statistic (Greenacre, 1993; Bendixon, 1995, 1996). This technique allows firms to be compared across each of the five brand personality dimensions simultaneously rather than individually. Correspondence analysis creates output that is easy to interpret (O'Brien, 1993), and is particularly useful in

exploratory data analysis (Hair, et al., 2006). The technique is also effective to unearth structural relationships between variables (Inman, Venkatesh and Ferraro, 2004).

## **RESULTS**

In Table 1 a summary of the number of words as analyzed on each company website is provided. Eigenvalue decomposition from each of the four analyses is shown in Table 2. Interpretation is largely similar to that of principal components factor analysis. Each eigenvalue represents the amount of variance explained by each extracted dimension; larger values are preferred. The square root of the trace of each industry's eigenvalue decomposition is above the threshold of 0.20 as required for establishing dependence between firms and the brand personality dimensions (Bendixon, 1996). As such, support of a relationship between firms and brand personality dimensions exists. Next, eigenvalues and the cumulative proportion explained by each extraction were used to explore the dimensionality of the solution (Greenacre, 1993; Bendixon, 1995, 1996). Two-dimensional solutions were adopted for all four plots due to low third-dimension eigenvalues as well as to ease reader interpretation. The ensuing correspondence plots are shown in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 5. Results of each of the analyses are discussed in detail below.

Results from the quick service restaurant category proved surprising and appear in Figure 1. The horizontal axis accounts for 76.5% of variation while the vertical axis has 19.2% variation, thus making differences along the horizontal axis more meaningful. As shown in Figure 1, there was a strong clustering of companies – both B2B and B2C – around the Competence dimension. This included Heinz-Oreida, McCain, Pepsi, Burger King, and

Starbucks. These firms are also close to the Sincerity dimension as well as to Excitement, a dimension to which Koch Foods is closest. Burger King aligns well with McCain and Heinz-Oreida, and Starbucks aligns well with Pepsi. McDonalds is particularly intriguing as the company is distinct along the dominant horizontal axis from all other quick service restaurants and suppliers. While Dairy Queen appears somewhat different from its chicken supplier Koch Foods, this difference lies in vertical space which is a weaker axis thus making the difference less significant. Overall, aside from McDonalds, considerable alignment exists between firms within the quick service restaurant category in support of our research proposition.

[Insert Figure 1 about Here]

For automobile manufacturer B2B relationships, two patterns of relationships emerge as evident in Figure 2. Toyota and Lotus (which is supplied by Toyota with engines), are distant both in horizontal space accounting for 75.5% of the variance, and vertical space accounting for 22.2% of the total variance. The horizontal distance is the stronger of the two in determining non-alignment. Lotus is situated near the Sophistication dimension while Toyota is close to Competence and Excitement. Given their distance the two can be considered non-aligned and thus not supporting our research proposition. Turning to Audi and Porsche, we see a different pattern. Audi is located near Sincerity and Excitement, and Porsche near Competence, but their minimal separation on the plot both horizontally and vertically suggests alignment of the two companies in support of our research proposition.

[Insert Figure 2 about Here]

While the industries presented so far exhibit at least some alignment, car races and their associated tire sponsors exhibit a rather distinct pattern of non-alignment. In the plot of car races and their tire sponsors, the horizontal lambda explains 65.0% of variance while the vertical lambda explains 25.1%. This again makes horizontal differences between firms more significant than differences along the vertical axis. According to our research proposition we expect alignment between Bridgestone and the Formula 1, Goodyear and Nascar, and Pirelli and the WRC. As shown in Figure 3 this is not the case. Competence is the dimension nearest Bridgestone while the Formula 1 resides atop Excitement. Goodyear is located closest to Excitement while Nascar is near Sophistication and Excitement. Pirelli, like Bridgestone, is nearest Competence while the WRC is close to Sincerity and Excitement. Therefore, the results are not consistent with our stated expectations.

[Insert Figure 3 about Here]

Finally, we examined the relationships between aircraft manufacturers and airlines that use their products. In Figure 4, which was employed to *a priori* relate aircraft suppliers and operators – the differences in both current fleet composition and future fleet acquisitions are outlined. While Air Canada could be considered a relatively better customer of Airbus than Singapore Airlines, we consider current orders to be a much stronger indicator of a current, deliberate choice to engage in business. Since aircraft represent a large sunk cost investment, existing fleet composition may not reflect decisions in the last decade or two. Thus, in this study outstanding orders are used to gauge the predicted degree of alignment between airlines and aircraft manufacturers.

[Insert Figure 4 about Here]

Looking closely at aircraft orders, Airbus is expected to align well with Singapore Airlines, British Airlines, and Thai Airways. Minimal alignment is expected with Air Canada, and none is likely with Continental. For Boeing, we expect significant alignment with Continental, moderate alignment with Air Canada, Singapore Airlines, and British Airways. Minimal alignment is expected with Thai Airways. Given these predictions refer to Figure 5 for the website analysis. The horizontal lambda explains 62.5% of the variance and thus is more important in judging firm distances than the vertical lambda which explains 22.7% of the remaining variation. The correspondence plot shows Airbus near Ruggedness and aligning closest with Thai Airways, located about equal distance from both Ruggedness and Competence. Airbus is about equal distance from British Airways and Air Canada which are located near Sincerity, and Singapore Airlines which is near Sophistication and Excitement. Continental is noticeably distant from Airbus. Aside from Air Canada being closer than predicted, possibly due to their relatively large existing fleet, these results generally support our predicted relationships for Airbus. Turning to Boeing we observe a different outcome. Boeing is located near Competence yet is relatively distant from most of the airlines and in particular from its best customer Continental. Instead, Boeing is closest to Thai Airways, the airline that has no current orders with Boeing. For Boeing our research proposition for alignment is not supported.

[Insert Figure 5 about Here]

## **DISCUSSION**

Our analysis was based on a narrowly defined concept of alignment – that of strategic similarity – which emerged from our literature search, and which could be practically operationalized. Our results, however, reveal there is brand personality alignment between firms and their partners in only in a few cases – particularly in the quick service restaurant industry between Burger King and Heinz-Oreida, and between Starbucks and Pepsi. In the automobile industry, Toyota and Lotus are quite distant. Audi and Porsche are closer, but by no means overlapping. Tire manufacturers and race sponsorship, and airlines and aircraft manufacturers show little or no alignment. This would suggest that our proposition, that firms seek partners who are more similar than different, as well as the sociological and business partnering theory it is based on, needs further development. Further drawing on the theory of biological attraction, the possibility arises that instead of choosing a partner similar to oneself, that partnering (firms or individuals) strive for complementarity based on differences, similar to the adage that “opposites attract”.

Looking at the literature from a slightly different perspective allows us to refine our original conceptualization of alignment by incorporating elements from the theory of relational balance (Wilkinson, Young and Freytag, 2005). This theory states that while similarities often hold the key to partnership success, differences are also necessary and that “compatibility is not necessarily the same as similarity” (pp 673). This seems plausible since in B2B relationships the parties occupy fundamentally different market positions – one buying and one selling despite being complementary. Wilkinson et al. argue that partners often display complementary characteristics which “allow[s] each partner to focus on the areas in which it can make the greatest contribution” (pp 4). By seeking different but complementary characteristics in partner firms, resources and

capabilities are harnessed that do not already exist. As such, our mixed findings add richness to existing theory on business partnerships, and add nuance to existing literature related to strategic partnering.

Our results provide some insight into when differences rather than similarities should be sought. Our study chose well-known firms in each of four industries. Each firm had its own well-developed and distinctive brand and brand personality. Thus, we can see partnerships forming where the end customer requires complementary benefits (e.g. for safety and excitement), when one partner specializes in safety such as Bridgestone and the other concentrates on excitement (Shocker, Srivastava and Ruekert, 1994). By choosing a partner with a complementary brand personality a firm is also able to leverage its partner's brand image to create credibility for itself in a new dimension (Shocker, Srivastava and Ruekert, 1994). Furthermore, this suggests that when brands are less well-known or distinctive it might be preferable for firms to choose partners whose brand personalities align with or reinforce their own. By combining brand personalities in an alliance each brand becomes more powerful (Ibid).

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

All research is subject to limitations and this study is no different. A key issue during the planning of this study was the identification of B2B relationships. Quite often such relationships are difficult to access and verify and this restricted both the articulation of the research question and the choice of industries and companies to be examined. We suggest future research look more closely at articulating the relationships between partnering firms, focusing specifically on identifying characteristics which are either

complementary or similar, and which characteristics are most important in achieving alignment.

Even when such relationships could be identified, technical hurdles sometimes prevented analysis. For instance, the processing of text from websites constructed entirely using script languages such as Java can only be done manually. We hope that improved software will eventually overcome this problem.

Another limitation lies in the restriction of our analysis to purely website-based material. This has two implications. First, just because a company states that it is competent on a website, it does not necessarily follow that it actually is. In fact, stating it, and failing to deliver may well precipitate dissolution of a vendor-supplier alliance. This is akin to the bias inherent in self-reported data. We had no way of easily verifying the claims on company's websites, and took them at face value (on both the supplier and vendor sites). Future research might examine the credibility of these claims using either industry data or questionnaires and observation to ascertain their validity. The second implication deals with our sample set. We could not, and did not sample all of a company's web site, but selected pages we felt were most representative and most likely to contain broad brand-related statements. Future research could examine all pages, looking for internal as well as external consistency. Future research may also look at congruence between websites and other media like print and visuals to establish consistency.

Websites, by their very nature, are dynamic. Our analysis only examined snapshots of sites and thus is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. Future research might look at brand personality evolution and shift of firms over time as relationships evolve.

Finally, as we noted earlier, the exploratory nature of this study meant that we looked at a convenience sample of firms based on our pre-existing knowledge of these industries and their suppliers, and for which enough data were available. Additional studies are needed to see if the effects we found hold across firms and industries. This research might also examine the success of these B2B alliances by looking at firm performance and success metrics. Lastly, future research might develop a measure of B2B brand alignment grounded in the present approach.

### **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

For managers, alliances have long been part of the strategic arsenal. Establishing, nurturing, maintaining, and exploiting these alliances for mutual benefit are tactical challenges that often eventually lead to the dissolution of alliances. One option is to treat suppliers as contractors, like Wal-Mart does. Wal-Mart imposes draconian penalties on suppliers if their stores stock-out on an item, and eventually de-list, or cease doing business with these suppliers if stock-outs happen repeatedly. As such, the nature of the relationship is a legal one, based on negotiated service-level agreements. The ultimate arbiter of any dispute is the contract, and in extreme cases, the courts. As the world's largest retailer, Wal-Mart has the power to impose these conditions and treats its suppliers much like a principal treats an agent.

Other less-concentrated firms and industries are not so fortunate, and depend on the delicate balancing act that successful vendor-supplier alliances need to survive and thrive.

This research offers managers in these firms a new way of screening potential alliance partners. Firms seeking suppliers can test beforehand, and unobtrusively, the strategic fit

between their brands and the supplier's. In this way, new suppliers can be identified. The tools we have developed can also be used to test the strength and potential sustainability of existing suppliers to a firm. Once again based on the theory of attraction, this might mean that firms will choose partners who conform to an image of an ideal mate. Depending on the industry, it may be that some industry partners seek suppliers with diverse "personalities" to gain greater complexity and larger skill or experience sets. In other cases, it is more advantageous to choose a partner who is similar to self. Exactly how this matching process unfolds requires additional research.

For firms who do not operate directly with end customers, the utility of this research also holds. It allows these firms to test the potential durability of the relationships they currently have, and also to identify firms that they might want to target as suppliers. Finally, it allows managers in these firms to identify competitors who might better align with their clients than they do.

It stands to reason that the brand dimensions attesting to Competence, Sincerity, and Excitement scored highly across our sample, as these are the attributes many companies espouse about their brands. This reassures us, and lends credence to our assertion that firms position themselves as carefully against other firms as they do their clients. Our research suggests that managers whose firms' websites do not contain assertions about their competency, integrity and dynamism should rectify this situation, and modify their websites accordingly.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is considerable research that suggests brand alignment between collaborating firms is a desirable thing. Alignment is a manifestation of the supplying firm's affinity for its client, can potentially strengthen both firms' brands, reduces potential friction or conflict, and otherwise sends a signal to competing firms and end-users that the original firm is substantial, grounded, and without equal. One has but to think of Intel's relationship with PC manufacturers to see this in its extreme. Intel's significant investment into its "Intel Inside" campaign, and co-branding of personal computers led to the microcomputer world being divided into Macs and "Wintel" machines (short for Windows + Intel) rather than Macs and PCs, on the street. This distinction has blurred notably following Apple's recent adoption of Intel architecture.

Our goal in conducting this research was to go one step further in investigating this relationship by determining along which dimensions brands could, and do align. To do so, we selected a convenience sample of well-known industries for which data was readily available. We analyzed some of the content in their web sites on the basis that company web sites are repositories of brand knowledge and public expressions of what a company and brand stand for.

Results are mixed and should not be interpreted as providing strong support of our initial proposition. However, our results provide limited evidence to suggest that brand alignment is not wholly accidental in all cases. Most quick service restaurant suppliers (McDonald's exempted) showed strong brand alignment with their clients, as did Audi and Porsche as well as Airbus' client airlines.

This first leads us to posit that Aaker's (1997) conceptualization of brands may extend to B2B relationships, as measured by brand expression in company websites. To the best of our knowledge no literature provides either a direct or indirect alternative explanation for our findings. Perhaps alignment is dependent on factors yet to be controlled for – a possible avenue for future research. Our results also offer scholars and managers a new set of dimensions they might use in assessing current or potential firms, and the degree to which there is strategic fit in either these firms or in the industry. The method that we have used in this paper provides a novel and useful tool to do so and we hope future empirical work can better test what we have proposed.

Finally, research has shown that most inter-firm partnerships eventually fail (Kogut, 1984). The present study offers one possible reason why this might be and an interesting tool for future research to explore.

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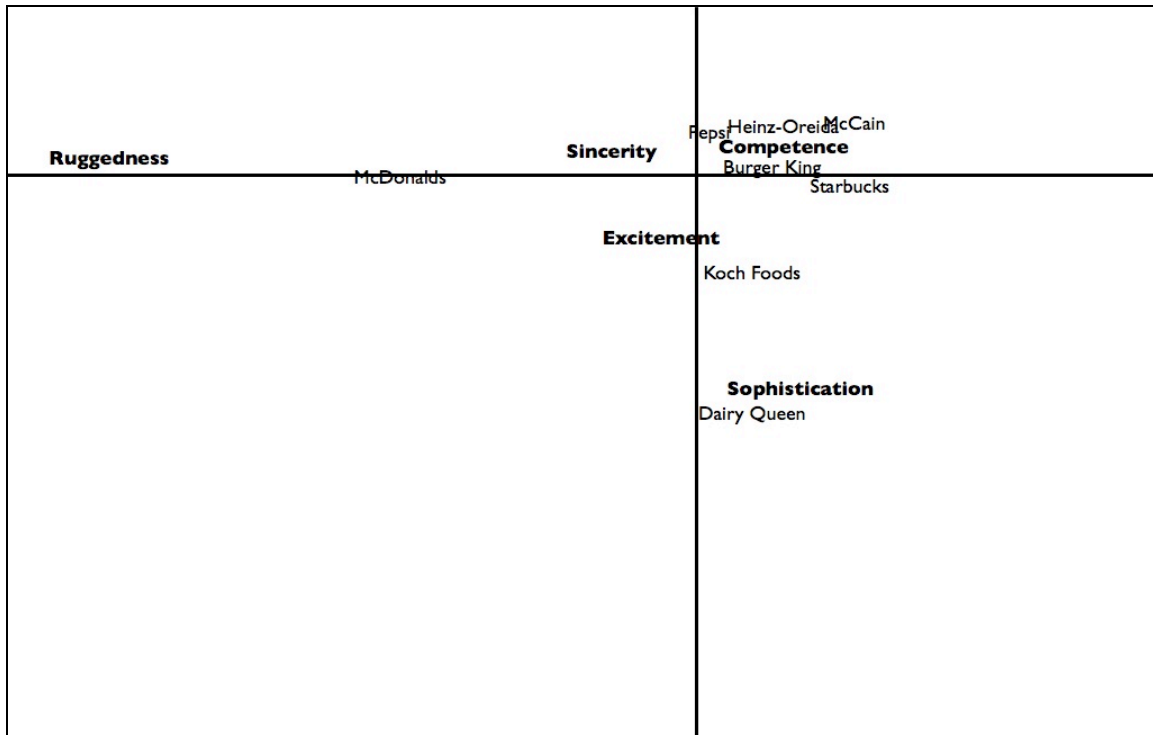
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**Figure 1: Quick Service Restaurants**



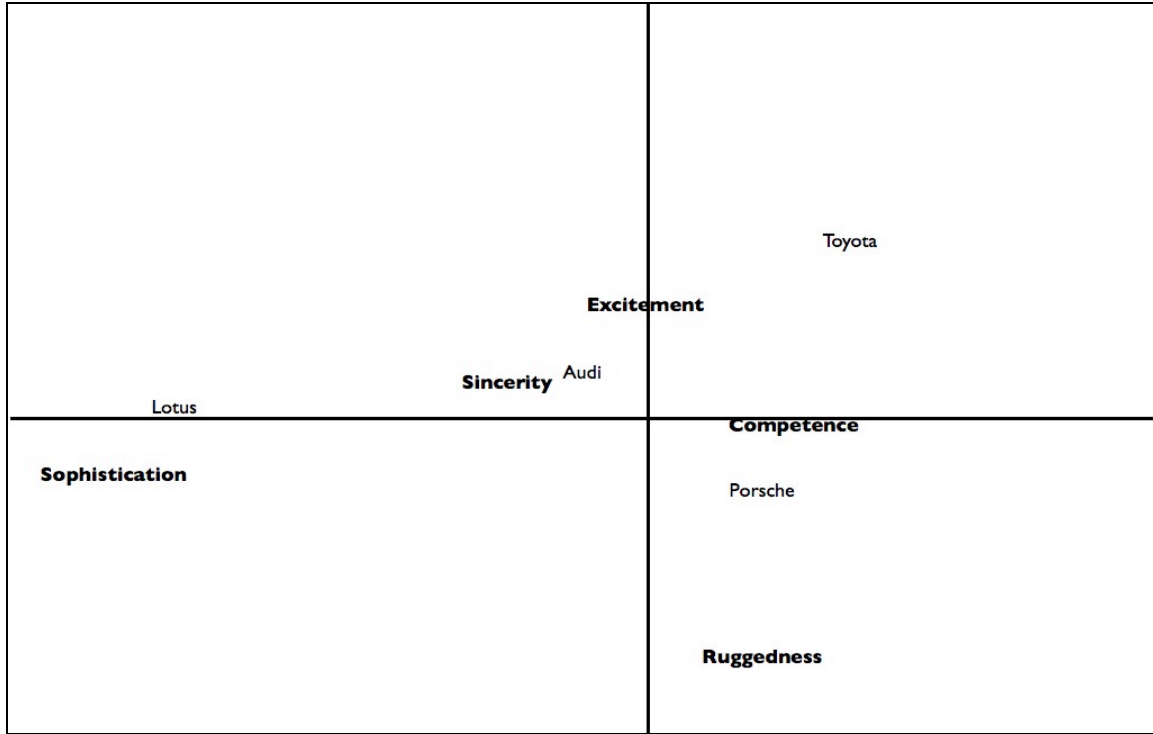
Lamda 1 (Horizontal axis) = 0.08

(76.5%)

Lamda 2 = 0.02

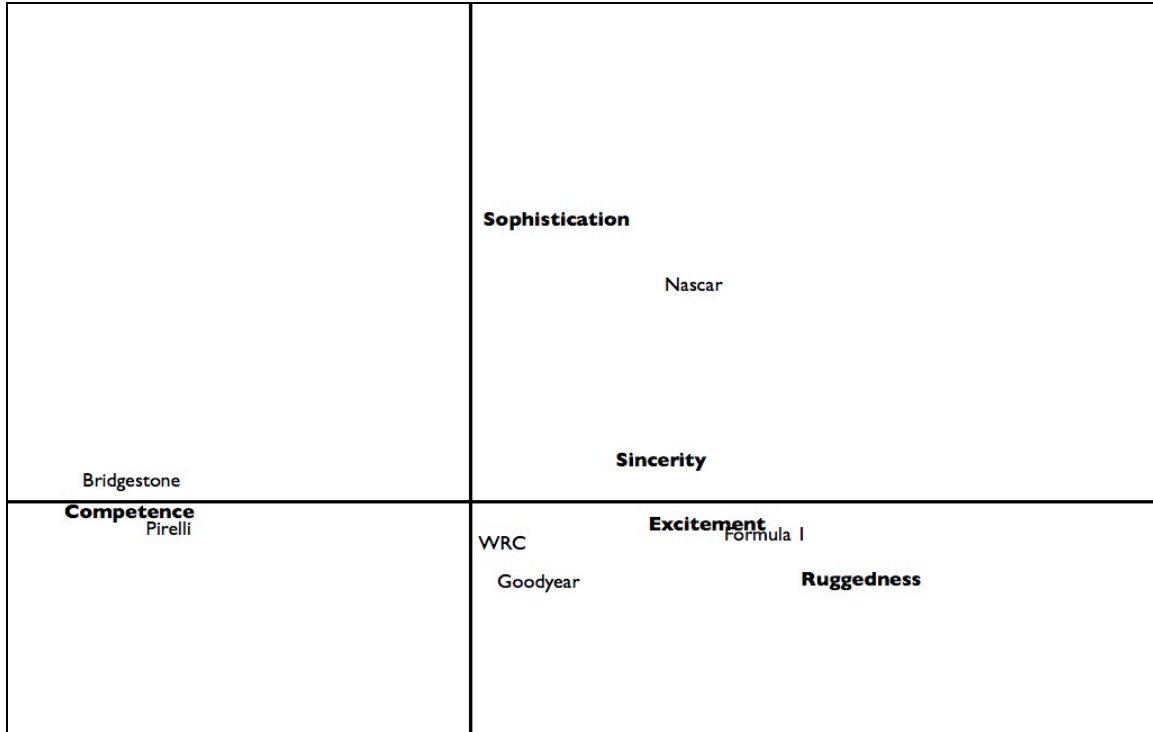
(19.2%)

**Figure 2: Automobile Manufacturer Relationships**



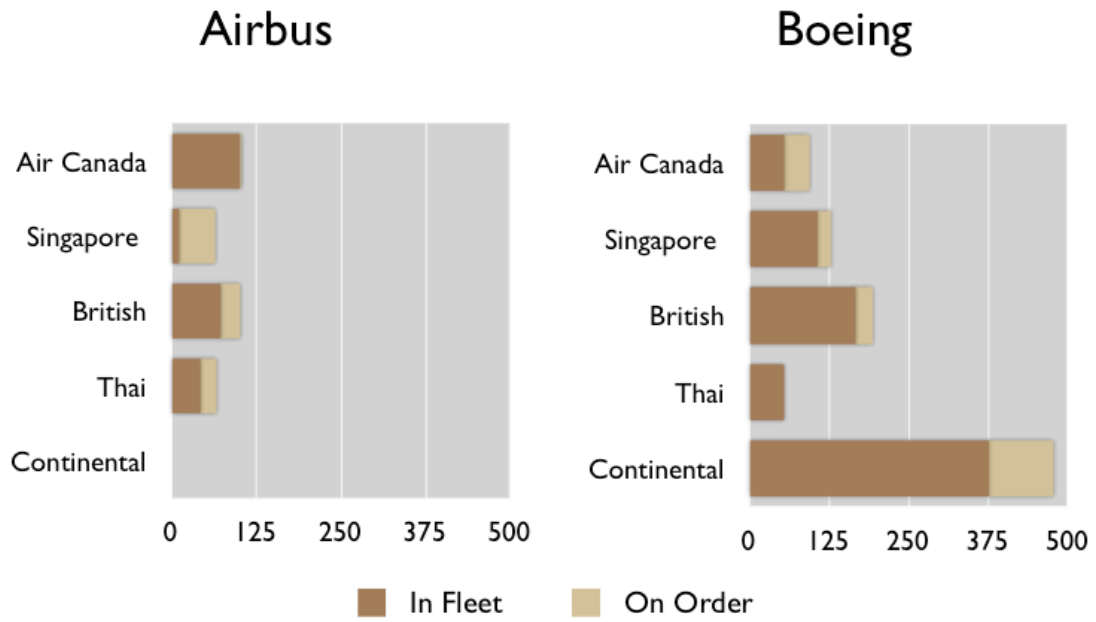
Lamda 1 = 0.08  
(75.5%)  
Lamda 2 = 0.02  
(22.2%)

**Figure 3: Tire Manufacturers and Associated Race Sponsorships**

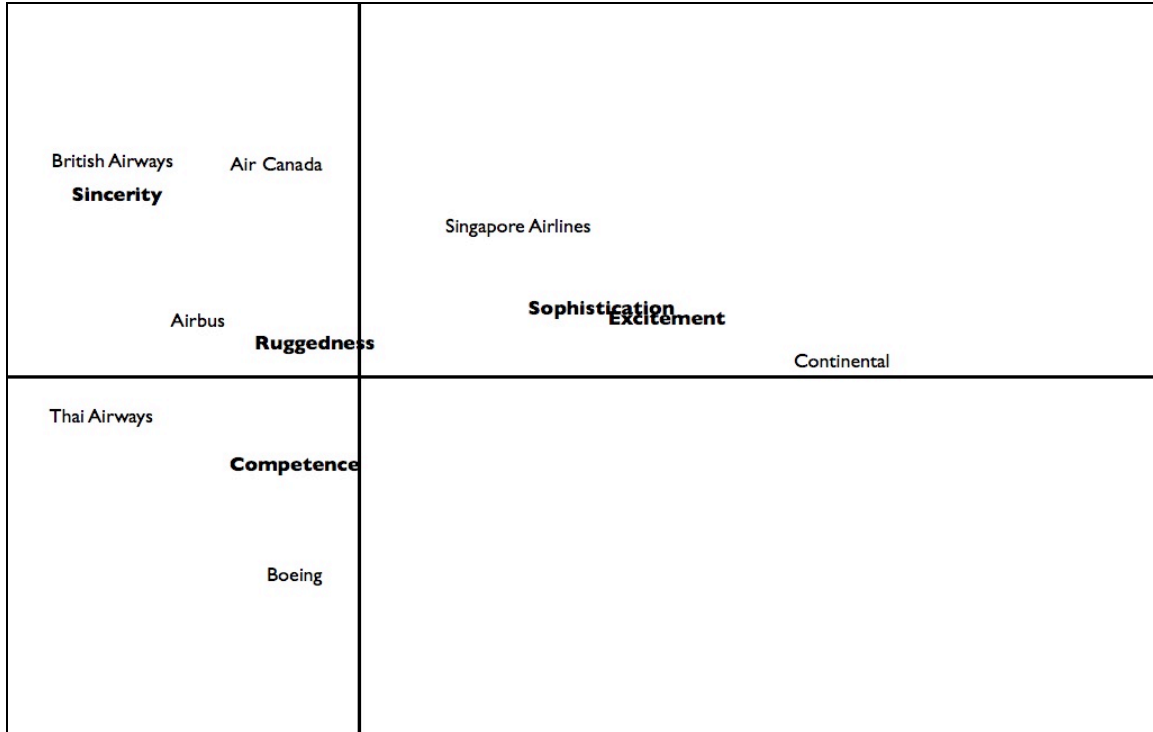


Lamda 1 = 0.17  
 (65.0%)  
 Lamda 2 = 0.07  
 (25.1%)

**Figure 4: Airlines Fleet Composition and Outstanding Orders**



**Figure 5: Airlines and Aircraft Manufacturers**



Lamda 1 = 0.06  
(62.5%)  
Lamda 2 = 0.02  
(22.7%)

**Table 1: Summary of Textual Information Analyzed**

<b>Company</b>	<b>Downloaded Words</b>	<b>Brand Personality Dimensions</b>
Koch Foods <sub>1</sub>	1,219	Excitement, Sincerity
Dairy Queen <sub>1,2</sub>	2,040	Sophistication
Heinz-Oreida <sub>2</sub>	5,272	Competence, Sincerity, Excitement
Burger King <sub>2</sub>	3,053	Competence, Sincerity, Excitement
McCain <sub>2</sub>	946	Competence, Sincerity, Excitement
McDonald's <sub>2</sub>	11,821	Sincerity
Pepsi <sub>3</sub>	13,954	Competence, Sincerity, Excitement
Starbucks <sub>3</sub>	15,184	Competence, Sincerity, Excitement
Lotus <sub>4</sub>	1,203	Sophistication
Toyota <sub>4</sub>	1,066	Excitement, Competence
Audi <sub>5</sub>	2,021	Sincerity, Excitement
Porsche <sub>5</sub>	4,312	Competence
Bridgestone <sub>6</sub>	2,995	Competence
Formula 1 <sub>6</sub>	8,915	Excitement, Sincerity, Ruggedness
Goodyear <sub>7</sub>	978	Excitement
Nascar <sub>7</sub>	1,485	Sophistication, Sincerity, Excitement
Pirelli <sub>8</sub>	2,112	Competence
WRC <sub>8</sub>	633	Sincerity, Excitement
Air Canada <sub>9</sub>	6,337	Sincerity
Airbus <sub>10</sub>	5,245	Ruggedness
Boeing <sub>9</sub>	8,288	Competence
British Airlines <sub>9,10</sub>	5,270	Sincerity
Continental <sub>9</sub>	11,346	Excitement, Sophistication
Singapore Airlines <sub>9,10</sub>	2,908	Sophistication, Excitement
Thai Airways <sub>10</sub>	4,393	Ruggedness, Competence
<i>Mean</i>	<i>4,920</i>	
<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>4,310</i>	

Notes: Matching subscripts on company names indicated predicted alignment; Brand personality dimensions listed are those appearing relatively close to a company as shown in Tables 1 through 4.

**Table 2: Eigenvalue Decompositions**

<b>Partnership Examined</b>	<b>Eigenvalues</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Cumulative Percentage</b>
Quick Service Restaurants	0.084	76.5	76.5
	0.021	19.2	95.8
	0.003	2.9	98.7
Automobile Manufacturer Interrelationships	0.080	75.5	75.5
	0.023	22.2	97.8
	0.002	2.2	100
Tire Manufacturers and Tire Races	0.168	65.0	65.0
	0.065	25.1	90.1
	0.017	6.5	96.6
Airlines and Aircraft Manufacturers	0.062	62.5	62.5
	0.023	22.7	85.1
	0.012	11.6	96.7