Introduction

The decline in student enrollment numbers has been a major concern for academic degree programs across universities. Higher education presidents and deans tend to utilize enrollment numbers as one of the criteria when they decide on the allocation of funds and human resources (Conrad 1996). The decline in student enrollments for a particular business degree program is a major concern since business degree programs compete for the limited resources in their department, college or university (Brasfield et al. 1996). For example, the number of students earning undergraduate degrees in economics decreased significantly in the 1990s (Brasfield et al. 1996; Salemi & Eubanks 1996). The number of economics majors peaked in 1990 and dropped by 20 percent between 1992 and 1994 (Willis & Pieper 1996). Similarly, the number of management information systems (MIS) majors has declined substantially. These developments in the educational landscape may lead to serious consequences for business degree programs. In order to keep the number of student enrollments for each business major at the desired level, it has become extremely critical for academic institutions to try to understand the factors that are likely to influence the student’s choice of major.

Undoubtedly, choosing a major is a critical high-involvement decision that has long-term implications (Kumar & Kumar 2013) for the student’s career and personal life. This decision involves many potential risks. Choosing a major can be particularly an overwhelming experience for today’s students since the options are endless and the information available is limitless (Schwartz 2004). Information overload can occur and leads to suboptimal decisions. The process of major selection may also be associated with significant financial and emotional costs for both students and their parents (Kumar & Kumar 2013). Higher education institutions need to find ways to help students select the right majors for themselves.

There are many studies that have explored the factors that affect major selection by university students. The factors that have been identified by past studies can be divided into five groups: (1) Student Characteristics (gender, knowledge about the major, personality, self-concept, previous exposure); (2) External Influences (family, friends, advisors, advertising); (3) Job Characteristics (prestige, job stereotypes, earning potential, people-oriented/things-oriented),
(4) Program Characteristics (accreditation, curriculum); and (5) Job Market Characteristics (job opportunities, etc).

Several studies investigated the effect of personality as defined by the Big Five Model on students’ choice of a business major (e.g., Fallan 2006; Martin & Bartol 1986; Noël, Michaels & Levas 2003; Pringle, Dubose & Yankey 2010; Lakhal, Frenette, Sévigny & Khechine 2012). However, there are no studies that have explored brand personality of a business major and the congruence between the student’s personality and brand personality of a business major selected. This study aims to fill this void in the literature by investigating (1) whether it is possible to differentiate business majors with respect to their brand personalities, (2) the effect of the self-brand congruence on the student’s interest in the major, and (3) potential consequences of the self-brand congruity as mediated by the student’s interest in the major.

Theoretical Considerations

**Effect of Personality on Major Selection**

Few studies have investigated the effect of personality on major selection (e.g., Gilbert, Burnett & Leartsurawat 2010; Lakhal et al. 2012; Pringle, DuBose & Yankey 2010). Gilbert, Burnett & Leartsurawat (2010)’s study examining work preferences of 984 students across business disciplines revealed that business majors selected reflect students’ work preferences which were closely associated with their personalities and individual strengths. For example, students majoring in accounting, finance, and information technology/decision sciences strongly prefer to analyze data while marketing students mainly prefer to interact verbally, be liked by others, and work with ideas (Gilbert, Burnett & Leartsurawat 2010). Pringle, DuBose & Yankey (2010) reported the presence of the fit between the student’s personality characteristics and traditional societal stereotypes associated with some business majors including accounting and marketing and, to a lesser extent, computer information systems and economics. According to the results of this study, marketing majors were characterized as the most extroverted while students majoring in accounting received the highest scores in conformity. According to Lakhal et al. (2012), gender and personality (neuroticism, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) account for 42.2% of the variance in business majors’ choice, while controlling for gender. There is evidence suggesting that people seek work environments congruent with their needs or predispositions (Barnowe, Frost & Jamal 1979).

**Brand Personality of a Major**

Brand personality has been a popular research topic and has received significant scholarly attention for the last two decades. Brand image is briefly described as “what people think of and feel when they hear or see a brand name” (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh 2013, p. 342). Brand personality is defined as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker 1997, p. 347) and is a special type of image that some brand names possess (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh 2013). Brand personality can be described using the characteristics of human
personality (Levy 1959; Aaker 2010; Dikcius et al. 2013) including social-demographic characteristics (gender, age, occupation, education, social class, etc.), lifestyle characteristics (leisure time, hobbies, interests, activities, etc.), and specific character traits (friendly, considerate, bold, selfish, careless, self-reliant, etc.). According to Dikcius et al. (2013, p.526), brand personality is formed through various sources including associations consumers have about the brand, image of the company that owns the brand (corporate image), product attributes or characteristics, such as design, packaging, etc., image of brand users (typical consumers of the brand), and image of employees of the company. A substantial research effort has been put forth to develop scales to measure the personality of brands (Aaker 1997; Kaplan et al. 2010). According to Helgeson & Supphellen (2004), there are two types of measures of brand personality that are present in the literature – general scales and idiographic (brand-specific) measures. There is one general scale that specifically evaluates the personality of brands (Aaker 1997; Helgeson & Supphellen 2004) and was developed by Aaker (1997).

A large section of studies on brand personality has focused on conventional product or service brands. However, there are a few studies that applied the concept of brand personality to other unconventional products such as places. Kaplan et al. (2010) examined brand personalities of city brands over a sample of 898 college students and found that differentiating places with regard to their brand personalities could be attainable. Morschett et al. (2008) investigated brand personality of retail brands over a sample of 515 graduate and undergraduate students.

Do academic majors have brand personalities? Whether the concept of brand personality can be applied to a business major is an interesting research question that will be investigated by the current study. The anecdotal evidence suggests that business majors can be distinguished with respect to their brand personalities. Pringle, DuBose & Yankey (2010) argued that students hold stereotypes of particular occupations. It was suggested that students put business majors in two separate groups, viewing accounting, finance, and decision science majors differently than marketing and management majors (Strasser, Ozgur & Schroeder 2002). Brand personality of a major can be formed on the basis of stereotypes of occupations representing specific majors, characteristics of majors learned via formal education, associations students have about majors, advertising and entertainment programs such as movies and TV shows depicting occupations in certain ways, image of the company that hires specific majors, image of people specializing in a particular major, and so on.

Theoretical Framework And Research Hypotheses
Aaker (1997) argued that “The symbolic use of brands is possible because consumers often imbue brands with human personality traits” (Aaker 1997, p. 347). A considerable research reveals that people tend to choose brands that have images similar to their own self-images (Dolich, 1969; Sirgy, 1982; Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy et al., 1997; Govers & Schoormans, 2005). The higher congruity between the human characteristics that consistently and distinctively describe
an individual’s actual or ideal self and those that describe a brand leads to the higher preference for the brand (e.g., Malhotra 1988; Sirgy 1982; Aaker 1997).

It was argued that students hold stereotypes of particular occupations and utilize these stereotypes when they select their academic major. The degree to which they believe that their personalities match those stereotypes affect their choice of academic major (Pringle, DuBose & Yankey 2010). The current study aims to go further and explore whether the degree of the congruity between the student’s personality and brand personality of the academic major affects the student’s interest in the major and in turn, his/her choice of academic major. Figure 1 displays the theoretical framework that depicts potential consequences of the self-brand congruity with regard to major brand personality.

Figure 1
Framework for The Self/Personality Congruity and Major Choice

The review of the literature reveals that interest in the academic major mediates the relationships between the self-brand congruity and its outcomes such as major choice. In other words, the student’s choice of the major will be influenced by his/her interest in the major that is strengthened by the self-brand congruity. Interest in a major and career has been noted by many studies as one of the strongest influences, if it is not the strongest influence in most studies, in a student’s choice of academic major (Downey 2011). Interest or the state of being interested is a cognitive characteristic and is associated with mental processing. It characterizes the interaction between an engaged person and the external world (Armstrong et al. 2008; Hidi 1990; Downey 2011). Interest or the state of being interested is not a biological orientation reflex even though it involves attention; it is clearly more than that (Izard 1991). A
person can be attentive to a math problem, but have little interest in math. Interest has been treated as a one-dimensional construct by many studies. However, according to Downey (2011), interest is a multi-dimensional construct. The high level of interest in the major will lead to several positive outcomes. According to the theoretical framework in Figure 1, the interest in the major affects the major choice, better student retention in the major, better GPA, and more satisfaction with the major choice. The following hypotheses will be posited as part of the theoretical framework:

H1: The higher the congruency between the student's personality and brand personality of the major, the higher the student's interest in that major.
H2: The students will select the major in which they have the highest interest.
H3: The higher the level of the interest in the major, the greater the level of intent to stay (persistence) in the selected major.
H4: The higher the level of the interest in the major, the greater the level of intent to have a career in the selected major.
H5: The high level of the interest in the major leads to a better overall GPA.
H6: The high level of the interest in the major leads to a high degree of satisfaction with the choice decision made.

Conclusions and Implications for Theory and Practice

This study makes several unique contributions to the literature: According to the Chronicle of Higher Education (2001), 15% of entering freshmen believe that there is a good chance they will change their college major and 8% are undecided (Strasser, Ozgur & Schroeder 2002). This is an eye-opening statistic. Given the fact that some business majors have experienced a decline in the number of enrolments, it is critically important for researchers to find out the factors that influence the student’s choice of major. The current study theoretically investigates the impact of the self-brand congruity on the student’s choice of major. More specifically, this study investigates the applicability of the brand personality concept to academic business majors and the effects of the self-brand congruity on interest in the major and related potential outcomes through a theoretical framework. According to the proposed theoretical framework, the interest in the major leads to several positive outcomes such as better student retention in the major, better GPA, and more satisfaction with the major choice. This study basically explores the notion that the student’s choice of the major is influenced by his/her interest in the major and examines interest in the major as a consequence of the self-brand congruity.

The theoretical model proposed in this study has significant implications for major selection by students in higher education. If students view business majors having different brand personalities and try to match the perceived brand personality of their major to their own personality, higher education administrators need to pay a close attention to this issue. They need to make sure that perceived brand personality characteristics representing each major reflect realistic associations and expectations. Even universities can have an active role in shaping the brand personalities of business majors they offer.
References


*Keywords*: brand personality, personality, self-brand congruence, student’s interest, business majors

*Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners*: The theoretical model proposed in this study has significant implications for major selection by students in higher education. If students view business majors having different brand personalities and try to match the perceived brand personality of their major to their own personality, higher education administrators need to pay a close attention to this issue. They need to make sure that perceived brand personality characteristics representing each major reflect realistic associations and expectations. Even universities can have an active role in shaping the brand personalities of business majors they offer.

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