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## Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

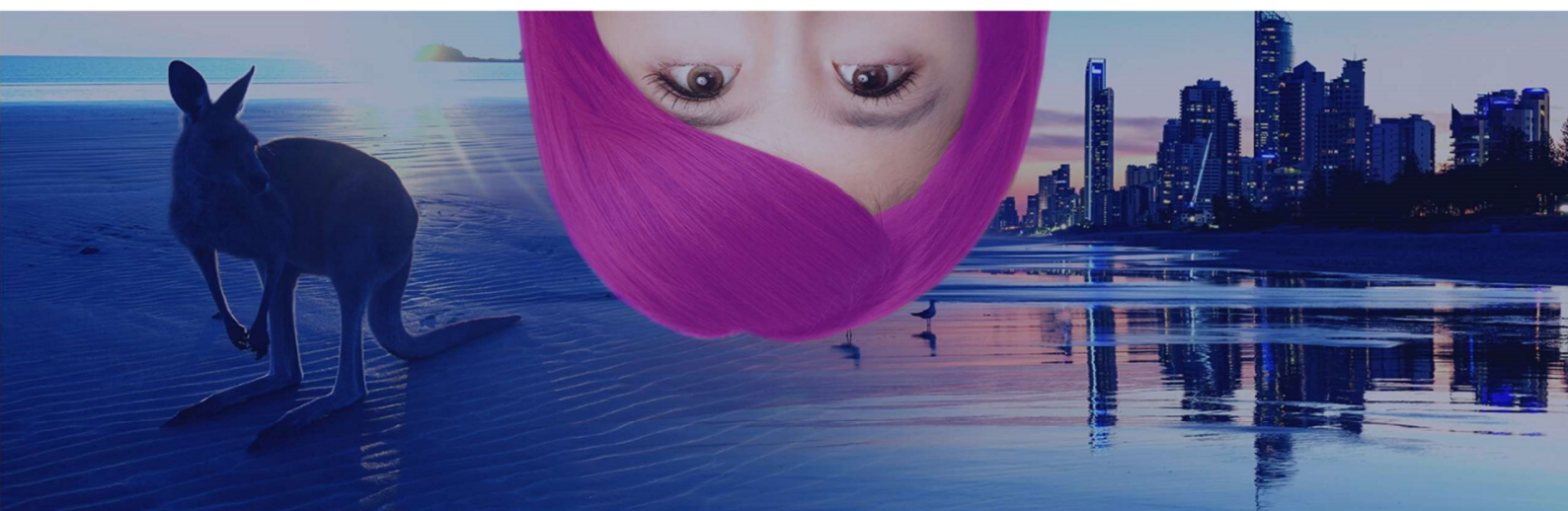
Bruder, Maximilian. 2020. "The impact of voice and speech on brand personality perceptions." In *11th SERVSIG Conference, Brisbane, Australia, 9-12 July 2020*, 75–77. Brisbane: School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, QUT Business School.

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# HIGH TECH AND HIGH TOUCH: THE FUTURE OF HUMAN SERVICE



## BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

Published by:  
School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations  
QUT Business School  
Queensland University of Technology  
Gardens Point  
Brisbane, Queensland 4000

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SERVSIG 2020 Conference - High Tech and High Touch: The Future of Human Service  
Conference Co-Chairs: Professor Rebekah Russell-Bennett & Associate Professor Dominique A. Greer, QUT

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# The Impact of Voice and Speech on Brand Personality Perceptions

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Track: Service technology

## ***Introduction to the research problem***

Consumers increasingly interact with brands via smart assistants like Apple's Siri or Amazon's Alexa (Dawar & Bendle, 2018). These interactions are almost human-like, because communication takes place through very realistic voices and speech, leading to an attribution of human attributes to brands (i.e., brand personality perceptions). As voice and speech are the only determinants (i.e., no pictorial cues) of consumers' brand personality perceptions in these interactions and research from psychology suggests that people infer human personality from voice and speech (Scherer, 1979), companies must understand what this implies for managing their brands.

Extant research shows that sensory elements like color (Labrecque & Milne, 2012) or package design (Orth & Malkewitz, 2008) affect brand personality perceptions. Further, we know that sound impacts important marketing outcomes (e.g., Dong, Huang, & Labroo, 2019). Two studies also provide evidence for the effects of speech on brand personality, whereby these studies solely focus on written (i.e., not auditive) effects of speech (Ang & Lim, 2013; Sela, Wheeler, & Sarial-Abi, 2012). The goal of this research project, therefore, is to provide first evidence for the auditive effects of voice and speech on brand personality perceptions, which prior research did not examine yet.

In a sequence of studies, we will show (a) the effects of two key characteristics of voice and speech (i.e., voice pitch and speech rate) on two important dimensions of brand personality (i.e., competence and excitement). (b) We will demonstrate that the mechanisms of these effects differ between brand personality dimensions (i.e., the elicitation of arousal for the excitement dimension and imagery for the competence dimension). For excitement, we expect a positive direct effect of speech rate mediated through an increase of arousal, and for competence, we expect an interaction rather than direct effects of voice pitch and speech rate as imagery is assumed to be greater for voice and speech characteristics being on similar levels (e.g., high voice pitch and high tempo). (c) We will explore relationships of several additional characteristics and types of voice and speech with brand personality perceptions in correlational studies using recordings of 50 different spokespersons. (d) We will examine the role that brand-voice-fit (i.e., the fit of voice and speech with an intended brand personality) plays for other important marketing outcomes (e.g., brand purchase).

With our studies, we respond to a recent call for research on structural sound elements like voice pitch and speech rate associated with a brand by Lowe & Haws (2017) and contribute to the literature by providing first empirical evidence on the relationship between the acoustic characteristics of voice and speech with brand personality perceptions. The findings help to understand what the use of voice and speech implies for managing an intended brand personality and other important branding outcomes. The findings are of particular importance as nowadays perceptions of brand personality and relationships among consumers and brands increasingly build on cues such as voice and speech due to more frequent and more human-like interactions via smart assistants.

### ***Literature review***

Extant research shows that sensory elements like logo design (Luffarelli, Stamatogiannakis, & Yang, 2018), color (Labrecque & Milne, 2012), or package design (Orth & Malkewitz, 2008) affect brand personality perceptions. The effects of sound in general and the effects of voice as a frequently occurring medium of marketing communications has been neglected in this stream of research. Nevertheless, research shows that sound affects marketing outcomes. Dong, Huang, & Labroo (2019) for example show that the pitch of music affects consumption choices by inducing morality. Further, we know that speech in terms of closeness-implying pronouns and metaphors can affect brand personality perceptions, even though these findings are based on written characteristics of speech, but not auditive ones (Ang & Lim, 2013; Sela, Wheeler, & Sarial-Abi, 2012). Summarizing, extant research shows that (a) sensory elements impact brand personality perceptions without considering sound, (b) sound, in general, affects other important marketing outcomes, and (c) written speech affects brand personality perceptions. The effects of auditive characteristics of voice and speech on brand personality perceptions have not been investigated yet.

### ***Method/Approach***

For this research project, we plan a sequence of studies including experimental manipulations of voice pitch, speech rate, and voice-brand fit as well as large correlational studies using recordings of 50 spokespersons. Until now, we developed two stimuli with professional female and male spokespersons in cooperation with advertising agencies and conducted a first two (voice pitch: low vs. high) x two (speech rate: slow vs. fast) randomized between-subjects scenario experiment ( $n = 140$ ). For the manipulations of voice pitch and speech rate, we used the recordings of the female spokesperson and the digital sound engineering software Avid Pro Tools. The use of professional spokespersons and sound engineering software strengthens the ecological validity of our experiment. In the scenario, participants went through a voice-based table reservation process of a restaurant chain using a smartphone mock-up with the voice of the restaurant chain being manipulated. We measure all variables on established seven-point Likert scales. For data analyses, we use regression-based mediation and moderation analysis.

### ***Results/Findings***

Our first experimental study shows a significant direct effect of speech rate on brand excitement ( $b = 0.54$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and a significant indirect effect of speech rate on brand excitement via arousal ( $b = 0.34$ , 95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI with 5000 samples: 0.03, 0.44). Further, we find a significant interaction effect of voice pitch and speech rate on brand competence ( $b = 1.02$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) mediated through imagery (95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI with 5000 samples: 0.07, 0.60). These results are as hypothesized. Further studies will be presented at the conference.

### ***Discussion and implications***

Our studies will provide first evidence for the acoustic effects of voice and speech on brand personality perceptions. Further, we show the underlying mechanisms of these relationships and the role that brand-voice fit plays for other important marketing outcomes. The findings have crucial implications for brand management. Our findings suggest that consumers infer brand personality from acoustic characteristics of voice and speech. Results of our first study suggest, that fast speech rate facilitates the perception of brand excitement and having the same levels of voice and speech characteristics (e.g., high voice pitch and high tempo or reversely) facilitates the perception of brand competence. In a sequence of further studies, which will be presented at the conference, we will provide further evidence for these and additional effects.

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