ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

Special Session Summary   Me, My Self, and My Brands

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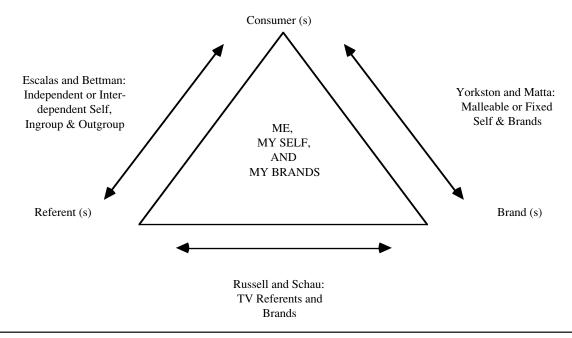
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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY
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SESSION OVERVIEW

The notion that consumers use brands to develop and express their selves is at the heart of much consumer research. It is well-established that brands can serve as active relationship partners and as a basis for various types of consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998). Beyond individual consumer-brand dyadic relationships, self-brand connections may also be used for consumers to evaluate brand extensions, affiliate themselves with reference groups (Escalas and Bettman 2003), or develop consumption constellations around a particular anchor-referent.

This session was organized around the consumer-brand-referent triad depicted in the Figure. Yorkston and Matta set the stage by introducing the notion that theories of the self can apply to brands and that brands, like people, can be perceived as either fixed or malleable. Next, Escalas and Bettman focused on the third component of the triad: referents. They demonstrated that reference groups can be used as a source of symbolic brand meaning and used by consumers to communicate their self-concepts. Finally, using a triangular set of methods, Russell and Schau illustrated the role of television characters in shaping brand constellations that consumers use for their own identity. Sanjay Sood concluded the session and further expanded the discussion about the role of referents in consumers' evaluations and experiences of brands.

Consumer (s)

Escalas and Bettman:
Independent or Inter-
dependent Self,
Ingroup & Outgroup

Yorkston and Matta:
Malleable or Fixed
Self & Brands

ME,
MY SELF,
AND
MY BRANDS

Referent (s)

Brand (s)

Russell and Schau:
TV Referents and
Brands

"Through the Looking Glass: How a Brand's Malleability Mirrors the Self"

Eric A. Yorkston, University of Southern California
Shashi Matta, University of Southern California

Individuals have lay-theories about the self, people's behavior and the motivations underlying that behavior. Dweck and her colleagues (Dweck, Chiu, and Hong 1995) have proposed and found strong support for their assertion that individuals hold systematic beliefs about the nature of people's personality, ability and moral character. One set of lay theories relates to how fixed or changeable they view personal traits (i.e. how much of a person's behavior is constant and how much is malleable). Based on these beliefs, people are generally categorized into two groups: those who believe that people change (incremental theorists) and those who believe that personalities are more rigid and hard-wired (entity theorists). This lay theory has been termed an implicit theory of the self.

This presentation posits that people not only apply these theories to how they and others behave, but that this implicit theory of the self acts as a gestalt perceptual filter through which even complex actions involving objects are viewed. Brands are often conceived as entities around which consumers organize their knowledge, attitudes, and affect. Further, past research has shown that individuals imbue objects and brands with personalities (Fournier 1998). It is therefore reasonable to expect that people use their lay theories of person perception when appraising brands. The implications of this theoretical expectation in the consumer domain are immense. This presentation examined one implication of applying these implicit theories of the self to brands and how this influences consumers' perceptions of the links or 'fit' between a brand and its extensions.

The extent to which a brand can extend into various other categories has been termed brand extendibility or the extent of 'stretch' (Kirmani, Sood, and Bridges 1999). In line with previous

definitions, brand extendibility can also be conceptualized as the perceptual distance between the parent brand and the farthest acceptable extension. Therefore, extendibility represents the extent to which a brand is seen as *malleable* while retaining an identity/personality. If consumers perceive a brand to be highly extendible, they would see the brand as being malleable, and the various extensions that fall within the extendibility range as having a fit with the brand. On the other hand, if they perceive a brand to be more fixed (than malleable), they would see the brand as less extendible into other categories. In sum, consumers who believe in an implicit theory of fixedness (i.e. entity theorists) would perceive brands as being less malleable or extendible, when compared to consumers who believe in an implicit theory of malleability (i.e. incremental theorists). The first study (n=60) demonstrates that this difference surfaces when consumers make evaluations of a brand's extendibility in 5 different categories.

In the second study (n=123), we successfully manipulate participants' implicit theories and examine the associations that consumers make between a brand and its extensions. We posit that these associative links can be seen as a measure of the malleability and transferability of a brand's "self". Incremental theorists show evidence of illusory correlations when evaluating an object. One process that has been implicated in the formation of illusory correlations is that of making 'associative links' between the two concepts in question (Anderson and Lindsay 1991). We demonstrate that incremental theorists do not generate more associations concerning an object, but instead see existing associations as more valid. In the case of branding, consumers primed to be incremental theorists do not make more associative links between a brand and an extension. Instead, they see the existing links between a brand and an extension as more valid connectors of the two concepts, thereby resulting in a better fit between the two products. Finally, study 3 (n=116) further explores this process and finds that this effect is mediated through consumers' relationships with the brand. As relationships between brands and consumers strengthen, brand personifications and connections to individuals' identities grow. In these cases implicit theories of the self are more vehemently applied.

Research in brand extensions has traditionally examined the concept of 'fit' or links between a parent brand and its extensions by focusing on the attributes or concepts that a brand and its extension share. For example, extant models have based fit on similar attributes, brand concepts, usage occasion, and goal orientation. This paper examines where consumers are willing to 'draw the line' of fit among these associate links. The novel framework explains how consumers' implicit theories influence the range of associative links that they make between brands and their extensions. The primary contribution lies in examining those links that consumers make between brands and brand extensions that are independent of the brand's attributes, but are a result of consumers' pre-existing notions of fixedness and malleability of the self. The fact that the utilization of these theories can be manipulated through contextual information enhances the processes' theoretical interest and managerial importance.

"Self-Construal, Reference Groups, and Brand Meaning"
Jennifer Edson Escalas, Vanderbilt University
James R. Bettman, Duke University

People engage in consumption behavior in part to construct their self-concepts and to create their personal identities (Richins 1994; McCracken 1989; Belk 1988). We examine one aspect of this construction process, namely the appropriation of the symbolic meanings of brands derived from the usage of these brands by reference groups. Building on McCracken's (1988) theory of

meaning movement, we propose that the symbolic properties of reference groups become associated with the brands those groups are perceived to use. These symbolic meanings can then be transferred from reference groups to consumers as they select brands with meanings congruent with an aspect of their self-concept, in this paper operationalized as independent versus interdependent self-construals. When the symbolic properties of brands are used to construct the self or to communicate the self-concept to others, a connection is formed with the brand. Two studies provide empirical support for the notion that brands used by reference groups are connected to consumers' self-concepts as they use these brands to define and create themselves, and we show further that the influence of ingroup versus outgroup brand usage differs depending upon whether the consumer has a primarily independent or interdependent self-construal. We also show that this effect is moderated by brand symbolism, that is, the degree to which the brand communicates something about its user.

Our paper provides an empirical demonstration of the ideas in McCracken's (1988) theory of meaning movement by demonstrating that brand use by reference groups is a source of symbolic brand meaning. Consumers form associations between reference groups and the brands they use. These meanings are in turn transferred from the brand to the consumer as consumers actively construct themselves by selecting brands with meanings relevant to an aspect of their self-concept. Consumers form connections to brands that become meaningful through this process and self-brand connections are intended to measure the extent to which individuals have incorporated brands into their self-concept (Escalas and Bettman 2003). A critical distinction in terms of such construction processes is that between the use of brand associations deriving from one's own group (an ingroup) versus groups to which one does not belong (an outgroup). Consumers are likely to accept meanings from brands associated or consistent with an ingroup and reject meanings associated or consistent with an outgroup. We propose that when consumers appropriate or distance themselves from brand associations based on reference group brand usage, they do so in a manner that is consistent with self-related needs, such as goals arising from independent or interdependent self-construals.

Although the self-concept often is considered to be distinct from other people's self-concepts, recent evidence from the cross-cultural domain suggests that individuals' mental representations of self often depend on social aspects of self, such as relationships with others and membership in social groups (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Markus and Kitayama 1991). Such research indicates that on average, Westerners tend to focus on the personal self, thinking of themselves in terms of unique personal traits and attributes and de-emphasizing others (independent self-construal), while Easterners tend to focus on the social self and how the self is related to other people (interdependent self-construal). Independent self-concepts can lead to different motivations than interdependent self-concepts. Independent self-construal goals include both independence, i.e., self-determination, and differentiation, i.e., distinctiveness, whereas interdependent self-construal goals focus on an aspect of self shared with some subset of others, enhancing maintenance of relationships and assimilation to ingroup norms (Kampmeier and Simon 2001; Triandis 1989). Our studies use two different approaches to operationalizing chronic differences in self-construal: ethnicity and Singelis' (1994) scales designed to measure independent versus interdependent self-construals.

Results from two experiments show that both independent and interdependent consumers report higher self-brand connections for brands with images that are consistent with the image of an ingroup compared to brands with images that are inconsistent with the image of an ingroup. This finding is consistent with the brand

congruency findings of previous reference group consumer research. However, we propose that congruency is the result of active self-construction, which depends on an individual's self goals. The positive effect of ingroup brand associations on self-brand connections is consistent with both assimilation goals for interdependent self-concepts and self-determination goals for independent self-concepts.

On the other hand, we find that consumers report lower self-brand connections for brands with images that are consistent with the image of an outgroup compared to brands with images that are inconsistent with the image of an outgroup, and that this negative effect is stronger for independent versus interdependent consumers. We propose that this stronger effect is due to stronger self-differentiation goals for consumers with more independent self-concepts. As Kampmeier and Simon (2001) argue, differentiation needs are more predominant for the independent self when outgroups are the focus; thus, individuals with independent self-construals show a stronger negative effect of outgroup brand associations than those with interdependent self-construals.

Finally, our effects are moderated by the degree to which the brand is symbolic, i.e., able to communicate something about the user, with more symbolic brands having greater effects than less symbolic brands. First, the positive effect of ingroup brand associations on self-brand connections is stronger for brands that are perceived to communicate something symbolic about the brand's user compared to brands that do not. Furthermore, we find that only symbolic brands are used to differentiate oneself from an outgroup. The fact that brand symbolism moderates the effects of ingroup and outgroup brand associations on self-brand connections provides additional evidence that consumers use brands to communicate their self-concept, appropriating brand associations that are the result of reference group brand usage.

"Does Being Glued to the Tube Mean Sticky Brand Associations? Consumer Television Connectedness and the Enrichment of Brand Meanings and Associations"

Cristel Antonia Russell, San Diego State University
Hope Jensen Schau, University of Arizona

This research is anchored in the consumption of television programming and motivated by the fact that consumers' experiences of TV programs and their characters can enrich and shape their experiences of brands. Over the course of viewing a TV program, consumers can develop parasocial relationships with its characters (Russell, Norman and Heckler 2004). Levels of connectedness not only reflect the degree to which consumers engage in referential relationships with the characters, but also their willingness to symbolically (Mick 1986; Solomon 1983) and physically consume consumption constellations (Solomon and Englis 1992) associated with the plot and characters of the program. As Schau and Gilly (2003) found, consumers volunteer brand associations in personal webspace (homepages and blogs) and these digital associations quite often involve highly contrived narratives that strategically employ consumer interpretations of brand meanings.

Combining these three concepts (television connectedness, consumption constellations, and digital brand association), this research examines the manner in which connected consumers engage in interpretations of brands associated with self-relevant television characters. We propose that, as connectedness increases, consumers rely on their experiences of television programs and their parasocial relationships with TV character referents to establish and express their consumer identity. Because consumption narratives developed around TV characters often involve brands (Russell 2002), they contribute to connected consumers' own brand experiences and identity expression (Aaker 1999).

The data consist of digital collages and surveys collected from television viewers as well as interviews with a subset of participants. Participants were recruited for a brand collage task focusing on a character within the TV program of their choice. Each participant created a brand collage for their chosen focal character using MS Word, the Internet and the "copy" and "paste" functions. Participants created collages that referenced between 5 and 36 brands, and often to varying degrees narrated their collages with commentary. This creative task served to uncover the brand narratives surrounding the focal TV character. Respondents' digital collages approximated a consumption constellation. The task requested that they consider a typical day in the life of the character and all the various products and services they are likely to use. A follow-up survey measured respondents' level of connectedness as well as a series of measures of connection between the respondent and the selected character (self-character connection and parasocial interaction) and between the brand collage and the respondent's self-identity.

Together, the collage and survey data access latent consumption constellations of the participating consumers and illuminate the role of consumer-character identification in the development of consumption constellations and consumer identities. Analyzing the collage data in a manner consistent with the analysis of projective data in Belk, Ger and Askergaard (1997), we garner an understanding of what the fan believes the consumption choices are for this character. Follow-up interviews with a subset of participants provide insights into how connectedness contributes to self-TV character-brand relationships. Using the collage in a manner analogous to Heisley and Levy's (1991) autodriving, participants were asked to walk the researcher through their collages discussing the meanings the collage creators attributed to the brands, the significance of their inclusion and placement within the collage, and the degree to which the collage represented the participants' own consumption constellations and identities. In each case, the researcher offered preliminary analysis of the collage and encouraged the participant to interact (affirm or contradict) these findings. This small scale member check served to achieve emic validity for our research assumptions and findings.

We find that participants' level of connectedness is related to the degree to which they identify with their brand collage but this relationship is fully mediated by the degree of self-character connection. Not only did participants identify strongly with the characters they chose as subjects of their collages, but these referential relationships affected the degree to which their brand collages related to their own consumer identity. The collages thus represent forms of self enacted in direct relationship to brands and commercial referents. We concluded that the brands that comprise the consumption constellation for the characters tap into both real and aspirational brand associations and that, as consumers develop strong, self-relevant relationships with television characters, those become important anchors of brand meanings and associations.

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