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The Brand Company You Keep: When People Judge You By the Brands You Use

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Do consumers form judgments of other people based on the brands they use? Our answer is yes, but only for some consumers. We find that entity (not incremental) theorists draw inferences about a person's personality from his or her brand usage.

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A Holistic View of Consumer-Brand Connections

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Paper #1: The Self-Expanding Process of Falling in Love with a Brand

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Paper #2: Salient Cultural Identities and Consumer Relationships with Culturally Symbolic Brands

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Paper #3: When Strong Self-Brand Connections Don't Protect Brands: Achievement Mindsets and Brand Dilution

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Paper #4: The Brand Company You Keep: When People Judge You by the Brands You Use

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SESSION OVERVIEW

The study of consumer-brand relationships has been a central focus of research in the recent past (Fournier 1998; Escalas & Bettman 2003; Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2011). Aligning with the conference's theme of "Advancing Connections," this session provides a holistic view of consumer-brand connections by exploring different antecedents of these connections as well as their downstream consequences. The papers in this session explore motivational-emotional, as well as collective, processes underlying the formation of consumer-brand connections, as well as some of the consequences of such connections for consumers' views of the brand (i.e., their response to negative brand information) and others (i.e., attributions based on the connections other people form with brands). Collectively, the papers here provide a broader framework to understand the antecedents and consequences of consumer-brand connections.

Rodas and Torelli explore the motivational-emotional process of falling in love with a brand by applying the self-expansion model (Aron et al., 2013) to consumer-brand relationships. This model suggests that novel and exciting activities, as well as direct acquisition of resources, can trigger self-expansion, which in turn can result in positive feelings or love for the brand. The authors demonstrate that consumption experiences that are novel and exciting, or that provide direct resources to consumers (in terms of information) result in greater love for the brand, and this effect is mediated by feelings of self-expansion.

Torelli and colleagues focus on the role of self-relevant collective identities in shaping self-brand connections. They find that a brand's cultural symbolism impacts the strength of the consumer-brand relationship. Stronger bonds with culturally symbolic brands are more likely to emerge when cultural identities are chronically or temporarily salient, as a result of identity salience heightening the valuation of culturally symbolic brands.

Camurdan and colleagues investigate how self-brand connections interact with consumers' mindsets to impact their evaluations of brands under the presence of negative brand information. Findings from two studies show that consumers in a mastery mindset tend to

find negative brand information more diagnostic and hence become more susceptible to brand dilution when they have a strong self-brand connection, whereas consumers in a performance mindset tend to find negative brand information more diagnostic when they have a weak self-brand connection.

Finally, Park and John study how consumer-brand connections impact people's views of other consumers. The authors examine how brand signals are perceived by others. They find that not all consumers perceive brand signals in the same way. Only entity (not incremental) theorists appear to form judgments about other people based on the brands they use. Furthermore, this process is mediated by their perception of brands as diagnostic information when judging others.

In keeping with the theme of the conference ("Advancing Connections"), the papers in this special session build connections across the growing field of consumer-brand connections to provide a holistic view of its antecedents and consequences. The papers in this session should appeal specially to scholars interested in branding, brand signals, negative publicity, as well as generally to those interested in the psychological processes underlying self-brand relationships.

The Self-Expanding Process of Falling in Love with a Brand

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Brand love, a construct that assesses consumers' passionate emotional attachment to particular brands, has experienced a surge in research in the recent past (Batra et al., 2012). The focus has been on conceptualizing and measuring the construct and on exploring the downstream consequences of brand love, such as WOM, loyalty, and protection against brand failures (e.g., Carrol and Ahuvia, 2006). However, there is little research that explores the underlying process of falling in love with a given brand. There are potentially several ways in which consumers fall in love with brands (e.g., finding a match between what the brand signals to others and what consumers want to signal), but our research explores a novel antecedent of brand love, namely that feelings of self-expansion can result in love for a brand.

According to the self-expansion model (Aron et al., 2013), people have a fundamental motive to expand their selves and one way of achieving this is by forming close relationships in which each includes the other in the self. Self-expansion can occur by directly acquiring resources from the other person (e.g., through sharing and learning from each other), or by sharing novel and challenging experiences, which is arousing and thus provides a sense of expansion. As such, the self-expansion model posits that when a potential relationship partner is associated with arousal or new resources (material, cognitive or psychological), the partner is viewed more positively, or loved more, because of this link to self-expansion.

There is initial psychological and neurophysiological evidence that the self-expansion model can be applied to self-brand relationships (Reimann et al., 2012). However, this research focuses on already established relationships with brands and their impact on emotional arousal, without addressing the questions of how the love towards the brand emerged and whether the link between brand love

and arousal is bidirectional. To address these questions, we propose and find evidence that arousal (in the form of exciting and novel activities) can lead to falling in love with a brand (study 1) and that this process is mediated by self-expansion (study 3). Furthermore, we find evidence that another path to self-expansion, namely the direct acquisition of resources (in the form of information), also leads to brand love (study 2).

In order to explore whether engaging with a brand in a novel/challenging way leads to higher levels of brand love, 165 U.S. participants reviewed information about an ostensible new brand of athletic shoes, *FastForm*. They were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the ‘exciting’ condition, they wrote a positive review about an imaginary exciting experience while wearing the athletic shoes; whereas in the ‘control’ condition they wrote about a pleasant experience. After this, they all rated their love for the brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). As predicted, writing about having an imaginary exciting/novel experience with the brand resulted in greater love towards the brand than writing about an imaginary pleasant experience ($M=4.88$ and $M=4.31$, respectively, $p<.005$).

Study 2 was designed to explore the extent to which directly acquiring resources from a brand (another proposed process of self-expansion) results in higher brand love. To do so, 63 U.S. participants rated an ostensible new campaign by an unfamiliar brand (*Ten Acre*, a relatively new brand of potato chips in the U.K.). The campaign consisted in printing fun facts inside the chips’ bags. Past research has shown that reading more (vs. less) novel, exciting and interesting facts leads to self-expansion (Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2013). Based on this notion, participants were randomly assigned to either a ‘novel’ condition presenting novel/exciting facts (e.g., “butterflies taste with their feet”), or to a ‘control’ condition including similar, but less novel facts (e.g., “butterflies begin life as a caterpillar”). After this, they indicated their love for the brand. Results showed that including more (vs. less) novel and exciting facts led to higher levels of brand love ($M=4.17$ and 3.72 respectively, $F(1, 60) = 3.631$, $p<.05$). This effect emerged even after controlling for brand familiarity.

In study 3, we assessed directly the extent to which feelings of self-expansion mediate the past effects. 166 U.S. participants were asked to directly interact with the brand. Under the cover story of studying the effects of multitasking on people’s judgments, we asked the participants to review an unfamiliar brand (*The Fruit Factory*, a brand of fruit gummies in the U.K.) while using their motor skills. In the ‘control’ condition, participants spent 90 seconds reading about the brand while eating as many gummies as they wished out of a cup. In the ‘novel/exciting’ condition, participants did the same, except that they ate the gummies using easy chopsticks. After this, participants indicated their love for the brand. A one-way ANOVA with condition as a fixed factor revealed significant differences between the control and novel conditions ($M=3.63$ and $M=4.08$, respectively, $p\leq.05$). Additionally, we counted the gummies left in the cup as a behavioral measure of enjoyment (i.e., less gummies left=more enjoyment) and there were also significant differences between the control and novel conditions ($M=14.30$ and $M=11.12$, respectively, $p<.05$). To measure self-expansion, at the end of the session, participants were asked to draw two circles on a sheet of paper: one representing them and one representing their current context. We used the ratio of the diameter of the ‘self’ circle divided by that of the ‘context’ circle as a measure of self-expansion—a greater ratio means a more expanded self. Results of a mediation analysis suggested that greater self-expansion mediated participants’ higher levels of love towards the brand in the novel (vs. control) condition (mediated effect = .207, SE = .105, 95% CI = .04 to .46).

This research contributes to the emerging literature of self-expansion in consumer-brand relationships by providing evidence that interacting with a brand in an exciting and/or novel way or directly acquiring resources from it can result in brand love, and that this process is mediated by self-expansion. Furthermore, and more importantly, this work sheds light unto the process of falling in love with a brand.

Salient Cultural Identities and Consumer Relationships with Culturally Symbolic Brands

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Brands are used by consumers to signal self-relevant characteristics (Levy 1959). Thus people tend to prefer and connect with those brands that match their self-relevant personalities and values (Aaker 1999; Torelli et al. 2012). Although the impact of personal traits and characteristics on brand attitudes is well established, relatively less is known about the role of self-relevant collective identities in shaping self-brand connections. This research attempts to fill this gap by identifying the role that a brand’s cultural symbolism plays in the long-term bonds that consumers establish with brands.

Consumers don’t always act according to culturally-prescribed norms, and the effects of culture on persuasion are often only evident when consumers engage in little deliberation (Briley and Aaker 2006). However, consumers who are reminded of their cultural identity tend to think and behave in identity-consistent ways (Oyserman 2009). This explains why making a consumer’s social identity salient can result in more favorable evaluations of hypothetical products that are promoted in identity-relevant terms (e.g., Reed 2004). Because acting according to cultural mindsets seems to be highly context-dependent, it is still an open question whether cultural identities shape the long-term relationships that consumers establish with brands. We propose that because chronic identification with a cultural identity should increase the likelihood that the identity is salient when evaluating a brand, highly identified consumers should exhibit more favorable attitudes toward brands that symbolize a valued cultural group (i.e., culturally symbolic brands). Over time, this should lead highly identified consumers (more so than those low in group identification) to establish stronger bonds with culturally symbolic brands. Four studies with participants from different cultural groups were conducted to test these hypotheses.

Study 1 tested the basic prediction that consumers high (vs. low) in their identification with a cultural group exhibit more favorable attitudes toward brands high in cultural symbolism (CS) for the group. Male and female participants in the U.S. and China ($N_{U.S. Males} = 56$, $N_{U.S. Females} = 50$, and $N_{Chinese Females} = 51$) evaluated two pairs of brands (from pretests) chosen to be either high or low in CS for the group (*Budweiser* and *Harley-Davidson* [high-CS] and *Jansport* and *American Express* [low-CS] for American men; *Special K* and *Aveda* [high-CS] and *Jansport* and *American Express* [low-CS] for American women; *Gege Qipao* and *Yuesai* [high-CS] and *Swatch* and *Jeanswest* [low-CS] for Chinese women). After completing some filler tasks, participants also rated their identification with their corresponding cultural group (i.e., Bem Sex Role Inventory for American men and women, Bem 1974; or the Chinese Sex-Role Inventory for Chinese women, Zhang et al. 2001). Fitting a multi-level linear model to the brand evaluations data (evaluations for the two types of brands are nested within participants, which in turn are nested within each cultural group) showed that, for all cultural groups, individuals having high (vs. low) identification with the group exhibited more favorable evaluations of brands that are high in symbolism of abstract group characteristics. In contrast, evaluation

of brands low in cultural symbolism is unrelated with cultural group identification ($p > .16$).

Salience of a cultural identity can occur spontaneously due to a chronic tendency to view the self in terms of the cultural identity (i.e., strong cultural identification), or can be triggered by contextual cues (Forehand, Deshpandé, and Reed 2002; Torelli 2013). Studies 2a and 2b were designed to assess the extent to which favorable responses to brands high (vs. low) in cultural symbolism are indeed driven by the salience of cultural group identity. Minnesotan participants read an article aimed at making the Minnesotan identity salient or completed a neutral task. After this, participants in study 2a were informed about a promotional activity that consisted in paying college students to carry a brand logo on their backpacks. Half of the participants were told that the brand involved in the activity was “Target” (Minnesota-symbolic brand), whereas the other half were told it was “Dasani” (Minnesota-neutral brand). Participants indicated the amount in dollars that they would require as a payment to participate in this promotional activity. For Study 2b, participants were presented with an actual set of poker chips with the “Target” logo stamped on each chip and indicated the dollar amount that they would be willing to pay for it. Results showed that when the Minnesotan identity was made salient, participants were willing to receive *less* money for promoting a Minnesota-symbolic brand (“Target”), and also to pay *more* money for a product that carried the brand’s logo, as compared to participants in the baseline condition. No such effect emerged when the brand was low in association with the salient identity (“Dasani”).

Finally, study 3 assessed directly the long-term relationships that consumers establish with brands that vary in their cultural symbolism as a function of their cultural group identification. A sample of 320 American and Chinese participants were prompted to spontaneously elicit their favorite brand and assessed the extent to which they were likely to elicit a brand that was high (vs. low) in cultural symbolism. We also assessed the extent to which their perceptions of self-brand connections (SBC) were influenced by the congruity between their own chronically salient cultural identity and that of the brand. Identity salience was measured via identification with their cultural group for two different samples (American and Chinese). Results showed that participants with a chronically salient cultural identity (i.e., those highly identified with their cultural group): (a) were more likely to spontaneously list a brand that was strongly associated with their salient cultural identity schema; and (b) reported a higher level of SBC for brands high in CS. No such relationships emerged for participants low in identification with the cultural identity.

Results from this research demonstrate that a brand’s cultural symbolism impact the strength of the consumer-brand relationship. Stronger bonds with culturally symbolic brands are more likely to emerge when cultural identities are chronically or temporarily salient. This occurs because identity salience heightens the valuation of culturally symbolic brands.

When Strong Self-Brand Connections Don’t Protect Brands: Achievement Mindsets and Brand Dilution

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Instances of the spread of negative information about brands are becoming increasingly common (Monga & John, 2008), especially now that social media facilitates the share of unfavorable brand experiences. One of the main reasons why consumers are attentive to negative brand information, and hence become more susceptible to brand dilution, is because they tend to perceive negative brand

information as more diagnostic (Ahluwalia & Gurhan-Canli, 2000). Having a strong connection to a brand protects the brand against negative information. This research expands past theorizing by focusing on achievement goal theory. We demonstrate that consumers’ differential views of competence that can be salient in a branding context alter the diagnosticity of negative information, and hence affect consumers’ susceptibility to brand dilution. Furthermore, we demonstrate this effect even under the influence of a strong self-brand connection.

According to achievement goal theory, there are two different ways in which individuals interpret competence: mastery and performance. While some individuals focus on competence with the aim of outperforming themselves (mastery mindset), others focus on competence with the aim of outperforming others (performance mindset) (Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999). Thus, there are differences in how individuals in each mindset perceive negative feedback. Individuals in a mastery mindset welcome negative feedback, as it hints diagnostic cues about possible ways for improvement (Dweck & Leggett, 1988, Cron et al., 2005). In contrast, individuals in a performance mindset emphasize normative performance, thus perceiving negative feedback as a threat to one’s perceived ability and worth (Cron et al., 2005).

Prior literature suggests that, when consumers integrate a brand into their own self-concept, there is a strong link between how individuals view information about themselves and how they view information about the brand (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). According to Cheng, White and Chaplin (2012), when consumers strongly connected to a brand encounter negative information about the brand, they react to it as they would respond to negative information about themselves. We propose, and find evidence across two studies, that when consumers have high self-brand connections, those in a mastery (vs. a performance) mindset tend to find negative brand information more diagnostic and hence become more susceptible to brand dilution. In contrast, when consumers have low self-brand connections, those in a performance (vs. a mastery) mindsets tend to find negative brand information more diagnostic and hence become more susceptible to brand dilution.

Study 1 was designed to explore how people in different achievement mindsets perceive the diagnosticity of negative brand information, as well as to assess the extent to which self-brand connection moderates these perceptions. To do so, achievement mindset was manipulated by asking participants to recall a time in their lives in which they tried to outperform themselves (for mastery mindset) or others (for performance mindset). Then, participants read a fictitious newspaper article stating that the industry experts and some selected consumers already had a chance to evaluate a Google product and the reviews came in highly negative. Afterwards, participants were asked to assess the diagnosticity of the newspaper article (how useful/relevant was the newspaper article; Ahluwalia, 2002) and rated Google in terms of self-brand connection. Using Preacher and Hayes’s (2013) method of calculating standard errors and 95% confidence intervals of the effect of self-brand connection on achievement mindset, the results suggest a significant achievement mindset x self-brand connection interaction ($\beta = -.48$, $t = -2.80$, $p < .01$). We used Johnson-Neyman technique to decompose this interaction and we found that when self-brand connection is high, consumers in a mastery (vs. a performance) mindset are more likely to find negative information to be diagnostic. In contrast, when self-brand connection is low, consumers in a performance (vs. a mastery) mindset are more likely to find negative brand information to be diagnostic.

In study 2, we used a different brand (Sony) to further explore people's susceptibility to brand dilution under different achievement mindsets, as well as to assess the extent to which diagnosticity of information mediates the interactive effect of self-brand connection and consumer mindset on susceptibility to brand dilution. We measured participants' evaluations of the Sony brand. Next, participants read a fictitious newspaper article with negative information on the Sony brand (adapted from Monga & John, 2008). Afterwards, participants rated Sony using the same items as before, assessed the diagnosticity of the newspaper article and completed the self-brand connection scale. We subtracted the post-exposure mean of brand evaluation index from pre-exposure mean of brand evaluation index to create the brand dilution measure. Using Preacher and Hayes's (2013) method of calculating standard errors and 95% confidence intervals, we found a significant achievement mindset \times self-brand connection interaction ($\beta = -.32$, $t = -2.76$, $p < .01$). Johnson-Neyman analysis showed that when self-brand connection is high, consumers in a mastery mindset are more susceptible to brand dilution than consumers in a performance mindset. In contrast, when self-brand connection is low, consumers in a performance mindset are more susceptible to brand dilution than consumers in a mastery mindset. To examine whether information diagnosticity mediated the effect of achievement mindset and self-brand connection interaction on brand dilution, we used Preacher and Hayes's moderated mediation model. The index of moderated mediation was significant ($\beta = -.08$, $CI = -.214$ to $-.016$) suggesting that information diagnosticity is mediating the effect of achievement mindset on brand dilution when self-brand connection is taken into account.

Our findings contribute to theory in several different ways. First of all, we extend the brand dilution literature by demonstrating achievement mindsets' differential effect on brand dilution. Second, to our knowledge, this research is the first one to examine achievement mindsets in a marketing context. Third, we extend the literature on self-brand connection by demonstrating that strong self-brand relationships do not always protect the brand from negative information. Lastly, this research contributes to the achievement goal theory by demonstrating that when individuals in mastery/performance mindsets see the target of the information as an extension of their selves, they treat negative information in the same way they treat negative personal feedback.

The Brand Company You Keep: When People Judge You by the Brands You Use

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

One of the most pervasive findings in the branding literature is the existence of strong connections between consumers and the brands they use. Consumers use brands to express themselves, communicate who they are to other people, and signify membership in a group. A common theme of much of this work is that consumers use brands to signal aspects of themselves—such as their personalities, interests, and status—to other people.

Surprisingly, there has been little research on whether these brand signals are received as intended. For example, if I wear a Rolex watch, will other people view me as successful? If I own a Mercedes, will other people perceive me as sophisticated?

In this paper, we examine how brand signals are perceived by others. We focus our efforts on the following question: Do all consumers perceive brand signals the same way—or, are some types of consumers more likely to use a brand signal to draw inferences about a brand user? We predict that that there are individual

differences in consumers' propensity to use brand signals, and draw upon research on implicit self-theories as a starting point. Implicit self-theories are lay beliefs regarding the malleability of personal qualities. Two types of implicit self-theories have been identified: incremental and entity theory (Dweck 2000). Individuals who endorse *entity theory* ("entity theorists") view personal qualities and abilities as fixed, whereas as individual who endorse incremental theory ("incremental theorists") view personal qualities and abilities as malleable.

We reason that individuals who are entity theorists are more likely to use brand signals to make inferences about a brand user. Because they believe that everyone's traits are fixed, and that one's behavior is indicative of those traits, entity theorists make judgments of others based on very limited information (Plaks, Stroessner, Dweck, and Sherman 2001). Thus, simply seeing someone using a particular brand is sufficient to ascribe certain personality traits to that person. In contrast, incremental theorists believe everyone's traits are malleable, and therefore, one's behavior at one point in time is not necessarily diagnostic of their traits (Plaks et al. 2001). Thus, they are less likely to use brand signals as sufficient evidence of someone's traits.

We find support for our predictions in three studies. In the first study, we tested whether entity theorists (but not incremental theorists) judge the personality of a stranger by using the brand he or she uses. Participants were asked to view the pictures of two people that showed a moment of their daily lives, and to report their general impressions of each person by rating them on five personality domains (Aaker 1997; sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness). The first picture was a filler picture showing a woman talking on the phone. The second picture was the target picture showing a man who was reading a pamphlet about Mercedes Benz cars (brand information) or a magazine about cars in general (no brand information). After rating the target person on the five personality domains, participants completed an implicit self-theory measure. As expected, entity theorists perceived the target person to be more sophisticated (associated with Mercedes Benz) when the brand information was provided than when it was not. Such a difference was not found in other personality domains. Further, incremental theorists were not influenced by the brand information provided.

In the second study, we extended our findings by using a different brand (Godiva), changing the gender of the target person (female), and showing the image of the target person actually consuming the brand. Also, we manipulated beliefs in entity versus incremental theory (Chiu, Hong, and Dweck 1997) prior to seeing the target person's image. As predicted, participants in the entity theory condition perceived the target person as being more sophisticated (associated with the Godiva brand) when she consumed Godiva chocolates than when she consumed regular chocolates (no brand information). However, incremental theorists were not influenced by the brand information provided.

In a third study, we examined the mechanism underlying reliance on brands in judging others found among entity theorists in the first two studies. Entity theorists, who use brands as an important signal of the self, are likely to view brands as diagnostic information when judging others. However, if entity theorists have a chance to reflect the target person's life as if they were the person (which facilitates people to ascribe self-descriptive traits to the target person; Davis et al. 1996), they will put more weight on self-descriptive traits than a brand the person uses when judging the person. We thus predicted that when taking the perspective of a stranger, entity theorists will reduce their reliance on brands when judging him or her.

Participants were told that we were interested in people's ability to construct life-event details from visual information alone. They were asked to take a moment to look at the man reading the pamphlet about the Mercedes in the picture, and then to write a short narrative essay (2 pages) about a typical day in the life of the person in the picture. Participants in the perspective-taking condition were asked to write an essay about a typical day of that person while imagining as if they were that individual. Participants in the no perspective-taking condition were asked to write objectively without reflecting on their own life. Prior to the perspective-taking manipulation, we measured implicit self-theory. As expected, entity theorists perceived the target person to be less sophisticated (associated with Mercedes Benz) in the perspective-taking condition than in the no perspective-taking condition. However, incremental theorists were not influenced by the perspective-taking manipulation. More importantly, results from a *mediation analysis* showed that perspective taking decreased the belief that the target person used the brand (Mercedes Benz) as a way to signal and communicate his identity, which led to reduced reliance on the brand when judging the target person.

In sum, not all consumers perceive brand signals in the same way. Only entity theorists appear to form judgments about other people based on the brands they use.

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