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Ronald E. Goldsmith

Florida State University, rgoldsmith@cob.fsu.edu

Leisa R. Flynn

University of Southern Mississippi, Leisa.Flynn@usm.edu

Felipe Korzenny

Florida State University, fkorzenny@gmail.com

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Ronald E. Goldsmith, Leisa R. Flynn and Felipe Korzenny

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Ronald E. Goldsmith
Florida State University
rgoldsmith@cob.fsu.edu

Leisa R. Flynn
University of Southern Mississippi
leisa.flynn@usm.edu

Felipe Korzenny
Florida State University
fkorzenny@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Brand engagement describes the tendency of consumers to make the brands they buy part of their self-concept. This new insight into consumer behavior offers marketers many ways to create relationships with their customers. An unexplored aspect of brand engagement is how it is related to consumer innovativeness, the tendency to be among the first buyers of new products. The present study used survey data from 2399 adult U.S. consumers to show that brand engagement is positively related to consumer innovativeness. This finding suggests that in addition to promoting the features of new products likely to attract innovators, showing how the brand can express the self-concept of the innovator may also encourage its adoption.

INTRODUCTION

As marketing management has evolved over the past several decades, the goals of marketing strategies have changed from an emphasis on sales and share (attracting customers) to profit and loyalty (retaining customers). Currently, marketing management theory is again changing the way its objectives are phrased to emphasize the establishment of “relationships” with customers that underlie the long-term value of each customer. This latest step in the evolution of marketing has been driven in part by the growth of Customer Relationship Management theory and practice on the one hand (Payne and Frow, 2005) and by the changing concept of “product” suggested by the Service Dominant Logic of Marketing (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) on the other. In order to win customers for life, marketers are encouraged to collaborate with customers and to learn from them so that customers see themselves as partners with the firm in satisfying their needs and wants in highly personalized ways.

A third stream of thought has examined this issue and recommends that in order to achieve the desired relationships, firms need to encourage customers to *engage* with their brands (Keller, 2001; Uncles, 2008). Engagement with brands yields high use, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth. Thus, the concept of *brand engagement* has become a key objective of many marketing strategies. By encouraging consumers to go beyond the functional consumption of products to solve problems, brand engagement strategies encourage consumers to use brands to express their self-concepts. When the brand becomes intimately part of a consumer’s life, it takes on a meaning and importance that

reaches beyond the usual scope of the meaning of the brand, cementing the relationship and achieving the desired goal of a long-term relationship.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between brand engagement as an individual difference variable and another important aspect of consumer behavior, innovativeness. Consumer innovators, the earliest buyers of new products, are crucial to the success of many new products (Tellis, Yin, and Bell, 2009). Thus, the more we can learn about them, the more effectively will marketing managers be able to design new product introduction strategies to appeal to these early buyers. Learning that innovators are likely to be high on brand engagement suggests that stressing how the new product can express self-concept might improve its acceptance. It is hoped that as more information is gathered on these phenomena, marketers will become better able to appeal to these consumer motivations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Engagement

Ample evidence in the literature supports the notion that consumers incorporate what they own into their self-concepts so that they can both create and express their self-images. Long ago, Levy (1959) argued that products were more than utilitarian or functional solutions to problems; they also act as personal and social symbols for consumers. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) used ethnographic methods to describe how even the most practical objects could have symbolic meanings for consumers: "Even purely functional things serve to socialize a person to a certain habit or way of life and are representative signs of that way of life" (p. 21). Several consumer psychologists propose that products can be chosen and used by consumers to express their real and ideal self-concepts (Sirgy, 1982; Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). Belk (1988) argues forcefully on the basis of a variety of ethnographic observations that possessions were an important component of the sense of self, forming an "extended self" consisting of self plus possessions. The basic notion that products are part of self can be made even more specific when brands are brought into the picture.

Brands have personalities and images (Allen, Fournier, and Miller, 2008). Many scholars argue that the meaning of brands for consumers is equal to or more important than the functional or utilitarian benefits these brands provide. Fournier (1998) describes how consumers come to form relationships with their brands so that the brands take on important psychological meaning for them. Solomon (2003) discusses at length the new "consumerspace" where consumers use brands to construct their personal and social realities. Walker (2008) describes several instances where brands become important symbols to consumers of who they are and several instances where consumers co-create the meaning of the brand independently of the brand's managers. Allen et al. (2008) lay out the cultural process by which consumers derive meanings from the "culturally constituted world" and transfer them to their favorite brands.

Sprott, Czellar, and Spangenberg (2009) take the idea of products as symbols for self and extend it in a new direction. They propose not only that consumers form relationships with or engage with brands, but also that consumers differ in the extent to which they do this and that this individual difference variable can be measured reliably and validly via self-report. They define brand engagement in self-concept (BESC) as the "degree to which they incorporate brands as part of their self-concept" (p. 92). Sprott et al. develop and validate an eight-item Likert scale to operationalize BESC (see Table 1) and present a variety of evidence supporting its validity.

Table 1
 Brand Engagement with Self Concept Items

Brand Engagement Items	Factor Loading*
I often feel a personal connection between my brands and me.	0.852
I consider my favorite brands to be a part of myself.	0.837
I feel as if I have a close personal connection with the brands I most prefer.	0.833
Part of me is defined by important brands in my life.	0.832
My favorite brands are an important indication of who I am.	0.825
There are links between the brands that I prefer and how I view myself.	0.799
I can identify with important brands in my life.	0.799
I have a special bond with the brands that I like.	0.770

Source: Sprott, David, Sandor Czellar, and Eric Spangenberg (2009), "The Importance of a General Measure of Brand Engagement on Market Behavior: Development and Validation of a Scale," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 46 (1), 92-104.

* Loadings from the EFA using SPSS principal axis factoring. A CFA using AMOS confirmed the unidimensionality of the scale.

Part of their validation effort consisted of showing that brand engagement is positively related to materialism (Sprott et al., 2009). As people's materialism grows, they seek to acquire material goods to compensate for low levels of well being and psychological health (Kasser, 2002). Materialistic people often have a fragile sense of self-worth and they form poor relationships with others (whom they view as objects); thus, brands and the way brands can represent self-concept may fill the gaps in their lives ordinarily filled by human relationships. Sprott et al. (2009) also found that brand engagement was also positively related to stronger links between self-concept and favorite brands, better recall for names of current branded possessions, paying more attention to brands in incidental brand exposure, and willingness to wait longer for a new product introduced by the favorite brand. This last finding suggests that new products, at least those of their favorite brands, are sought by consumers high in BESC. Thus, we feel it is important to examine this issue further by investigating whether brand engagement is related to consumer innovativeness.

Consumer Innovativeness

According to Tellis et al. (2009), Consumer innovativeness is defined as "a predisposition to buy new products" (p. 2). The concept has been extensively researched so that many consumer behavior texts describe both the concept and its consequences (e.g., Hawkins, Best, and Coney, 2004, Ch. 7). Consumer innovativeness can be thought of as a domain specific construct, describing the predisposition to buy new products in a specific category (Goldsmith and Hofacker, 1991) or as a general predisposition toward the market and across product categories (Tellis et al., 2009). The latter orientation is adopted in the current study so that it matches the level at which brand engagement is conceptualized. Evidence suggests that brand engagement is associated with product involvement and product knowledge (Sprott et al., 2009). We hypothesize that brand engagement and consumer innovativeness are positively related because placing special importance on brands belies involvement and knowledge of them. These characteristics are shared by consumer innovators who are especially involved with their category of interest and know a lot about the products and brands in that category (Goldsmith, Flynn, and Goldsmith, 2003).

METHOD

Sample

Data were collected via online surveys by a Center for Hispanic Marketing Communication at a large southeastern U.S. university. Respondents were intercepted online through pop-up and other ads, asked to complete a survey, and offered a small incentive. DMS Research Opinion Place (www.dmsresearch.com) was used for English speaking respondents. DMS Research Tu Opinión Latina, a Hispanic online panel, was used to recruit Spanish speakers. English speaking respondents were originally sampled via the Opinion Place online "River" methodology. This method has also been referred to as "RDD for the web" as it uses broadcast promotional intercepts to generate a flow of respondents to the Opinion Place site. Respondents are screened and assigned to surveys in real-time, but are not considered registered panelists since most do not return to the site for ongoing survey participation.

In addition, given the quota requirements for this study, a random sample of past respondents was selected based on their demographic characteristics and invited to participate in this special survey opportunity via a custom email invitation. Respondents completed the survey by clicking on a link in the email invitation, which connected them with the online questionnaire. Respondents were required to be 18 years of age or older, and the final sample included 505 non-Hispanic whites, 541 English speaking Hispanics, 351 Spanish speaking Hispanics, 500 African Americans, and 502 Asians. The surveys took an average of 20 minutes for English speakers and 29 minutes for Spanish speakers to complete. The completion rate was 74.5 % for English speaking Hispanics and 64.4% for Spanish speaking Hispanics.

Measures

The screening portion of the questionnaire asked participants to indicate their gender and ethnic identification (Caucasian/White, African American/Black, Asian or Pacific Islander, or Hispanic/Latino/Spanish, or other). The final section of the survey asked participants to report their highest level of education completed (1 = elementary school to 6 = Graduate Degree) and their household income (1 = \$19,999 or less to 12 = \$150K or more) (see Table 2). Education and income were treated as interval level variables in the subsequent analyses.

The eight BESC items were interspersed with 39 other items for a different study in a list of items that the interviewers rotated when they read them. The response scale was six points from "1 = completely disagree" to "6 = completely agree." Consumer innovativeness was operationalized in two ways. The first was a Likert statement appearing in the list of items with the BESC: "I am usually among the first to try new products." Scores on this item ranged from 1 to 6 with a mean of 3.6 (SD = 1.6). The second operationalization of consumer innovativeness was different in format. The interviewers read the statement: "Which of the following best describes what type of shopper you are," and the participants chose from a rotated list of labels: impulsive, discount, need based, wandering, innovator, or none of the above (see Table 2). The relationships between total BESC scores with the demographics and the two innovativeness items were assessed through correlation and ANOVA.

Table 2
 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Groups	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Women	1457	60.7
	Men	942	39.3
Age	18-29	574	23.9
	30-39	649	27.1
	40-49	516	21.5
	50-59	428	17.8
	60-69	186	7.7
	70+	46	1.9
Education	Elementary	7	0.3
	Middle School	23	1.0
	High School	365	15.2
	Some		
	College/Technical	912	38.0
	Bachelors	641	26.7
	Graduate	424	17.7
	No Response	27	1.1
Income	<\$49,999	974	40.6
	\$50,000 - 89,999	682	28.4
	\$90,000+	543	18.9
	No Response	290	12.1
Ethnic Group	White (non-Hispanic)	505	21.1
	Black(non-Hispanic)	500	20.8
	Asian-American	502	20.9
	Hispanic English Speaking	351	14.6
	Hispanic Spanish Speaking	541	22.6
Shopper Type	Impulsive	217	9.0
	Discount	955	39.8
	Need Based	815	34.0
	Wandering	214	8.9
	Innovator	103	4.3
	None of the Above	95	4.0
Total		2399	

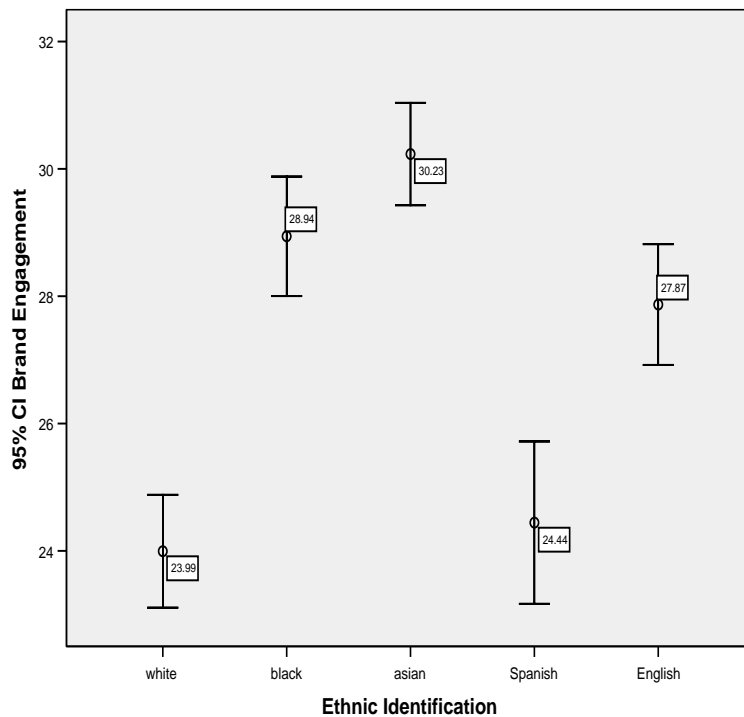
RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

The demographic characteristics of the survey participants appear in Table 2. Responses are spread over the ranges and categories with good balance reflecting the population in terms of age, education, and income. The eight BESC items were factor analyzed using common factor analysis (see Table 1) and formed a unidimensional scale for the total sample and for each demographic group separately. Internal consistency for the BESC was high ($\alpha = .94$). The BESC scores ranged from 8 to 48, with a mean of 27.3 (SD = 10.4) and were correlated with respondent gender, age, education level, and household income. All these correlations were small, but significant: gender ($r_{pb} = .05, p = .025$), age ($r = -.20, p < .001$), education ($r = .08, p < .001$), and income ($r = .053, p = .018$). Brand engagement decreased with age, but increased with education and income. Women reported a significantly lower mean BESC scores ($M = 26.9, SD = 10.5$) than did the men ($M = 27.9, SD = 10.3$) ($t = 2.2(2205), p = .025$).

A one-way analysis of variance showed that mean, summed BESC scores were significantly different across the five ethnic groups ($F = 31.8(4, 2202), p < .001$): Asian-American ($M = 30.2, SD = 8.9$), non-Hispanic Black ($M = 28.9, SD = 10.2$), English-speaking Hispanics ($M = 27.9, SD = 10.8$), Spanish-speaking Hispanics ($M = 24.4, SD = 11.1$), and non-Hispanic whites ($M = 24.0, SD = 9.9$). Post hoc tests (Bonferroni) and the means plot shown in Figure 1 reveal that although non-Hispanic whites and Spanish-Speaking consumers did not differ in BESC, they scored significantly lower than did Blacks, Asian-Americans, and English-Speaking Hispanics.

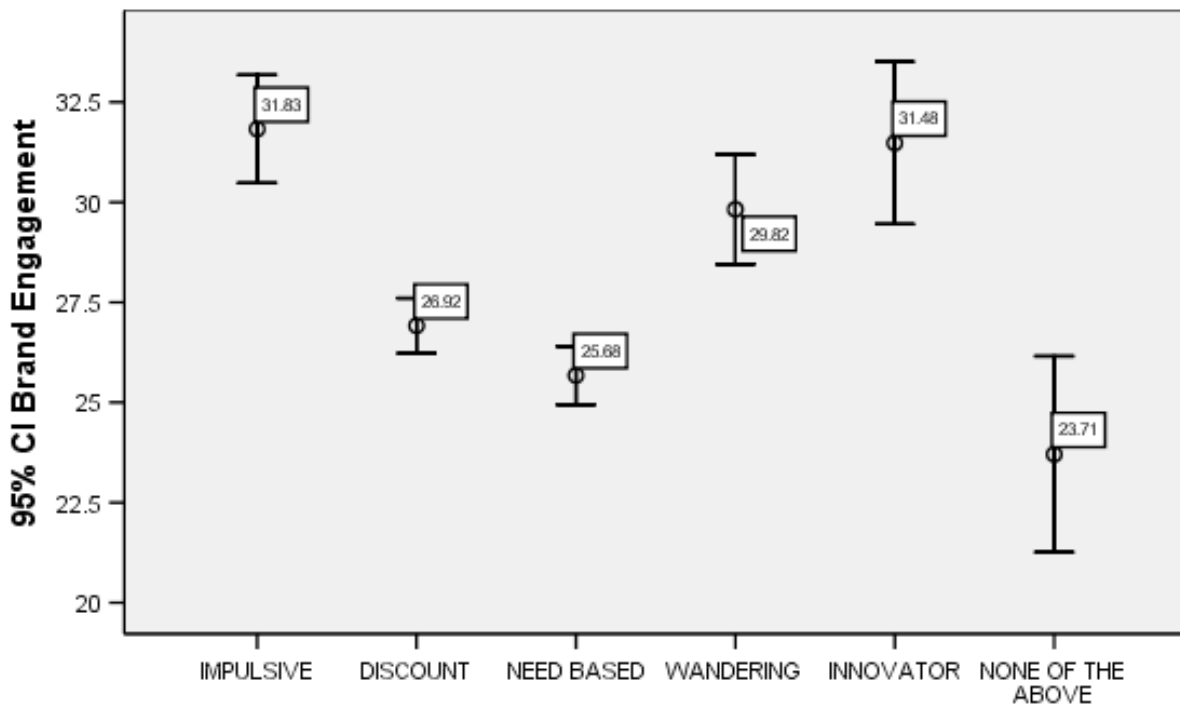
Figure One
 Mean BESC Scores for Ethnic Groups



Hypothesis Tests

The hypothesis that brand engagement is positively related to consumer innovativeness was first tested by correlating the BESC scores with the single statement “I am usually among the first to try new products.” This correlation was large, $r = .5, p < .001$, and was nearly the same with the effects of age, education, and income controlled (partial $r = .47$). The correlation was also the same for men and women analyzed separately. The second test of the hypothesis used the shopper classification variable. The mean BESC scores for the six shopper types were compared using one-way ANOVA. This analysis showed a significant difference ($F = 20.0, p < .001$) across shopper types. Post hoc Bonferroni tests and the means plot shown in Figure 2 reveal that as hypothesized, consumers who designated themselves as innovators reported high scores on BESC. Impulsive and wandering shoppers reported mean BESC scores similar to those of the innovators, and all three groups were higher than the Discount and Need-Based buyers. Thus, two separate operationalizations of consumer innovativeness show that brand engagement is characteristic of this consumer trait, as hypothesized.

Figure Two
Mean BESC Scores for Shopper Groups



Q17. Which of the following best describes what type of shopper you are?

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to assess the hypothesized positive relationship between brand engagement and consumer innovativeness. The results supported the hypothesis. Consumers who are high in brand engagement also seem to be innovative consumers, meaning they are eager to try new products. This finding not only adds to the extensive catalog of information we have about consumer innovators, it begins to expand what is known about the increasingly important topic of brand engagement. As companies rely more and more on strategies designed to engage consumers with their brands, such information might prove useful in shaping these strategies. Although the

study has its limitations (the sample is not representative of the total U.S. population, the measures are self-reports and not behavioral, only one form of survey method was used), it also has strong features found in the large sample size and its demographic variety. Thus, the findings have implications from the methodological, theoretical, and managerial perspectives.

From a methodological perspective, this study contributes to the validation of the BESC scale. The BESC scale was unidimensional and high in internal consistency. It was not redundant to any measured demographic variable, and so the results support the psychometric soundness of the scale. This type of evidence is critical in the development of new measurement scales providing evidence of construct validity.

The findings have value for marketing theory. First, we have evidence that not only are the innovators interested in new things, they are also interested in representing themselves through the brand names associated with new products. Perhaps they are displaying or reinforcing their self-images as people who get on board early by purchasing the important brands. Other studies have found that innovators are more likely to be status seekers (Eastman, Flynn, and Goldsmith, 1996). Perhaps their tendency to use brand names as self-designating symbols is related to the desire to achieve status. Second, this study helps to develop a better picture of what the BESC scale represents. Evidence that consumers scoring high in BESC are also likely to be innovators paints a picture of those with high brand engagement scores as a sort of “super consumer,” at least when it comes to branded merchandise. From the original study (Spratt et al., 2009) we learned that high BESC is associated with more brand preference, higher brand recall, and more brand meaning among other consumer characteristics. The present study adds higher levels of generalized innovativeness to the picture that is brand engagement with self-concept.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING PRACTITIONERS

Finally, managers can use this information in a number of ways. Realizing that consumers vary on the intensity with which they relate themselves to brands could be a valuable key to market segmentation strategies. Heavily promoting brands to low BESC consumers would be a waste of time and money, but carefully linking brand image to high BESC consumers' self-image could prove to be very valuable. Knowing that the same high BESC consumers are also likely to be innovative adds to the communication and positioning arsenal. The implication is that companies with well-loved brand names should also push for innovative new products. In addition, companies who have a new product would be better served by family branding if they know their target market is high on BESC.

Moreover, the unanticipated finding that shoppers who described themselves as “impulsive” and “wandering” appear to be nearly as engaged with brands as the innovators (see Figure 2). These two shopping styles have not heretofore been linked with engagement with brands as described here. This new finding also gives valuable information to marketers and retailers. For instance, if the products impulsive shoppers are prone to buy are known, the most profitable brands could be given the most prominent locations for impulsive purchases to be made. Shoppers who “wander” deserve further study. They might be bargain hunters looking for deals or recreational shoppers enjoying the experience. Placing profitable brands with which they are likely to be engaged in multiple locations in the store would give wandering shoppers overlapping opportunities to encounter them. The findings that the need based and discount shoppers are less brand engaged than the other shoppers are fits well with the profiles of frugal shoppers (Goldsmith and Flynn, 2015; Goldsmith, Flynn, and Clark, 2014) who are likely more interested in price than in brands. Retailers might use some of the many available tools for encouraging brand engagement to cultivate these shoppers' attachments to store brands whose lower prices attract them.

In conclusion, this study gives managers new insights into a potentially valuable market segment, extends the validation of the BESC measure, and expands researchers' understanding of consumer

innovators. Future studies should examine the relationships between BESC and a variety of important consumer individual difference variables. Not only would this evidence improve our understanding of consumer behavior in general, it could give managers additional information the motives of their buyers.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ronald E. Goldsmith, Ph.D., is the Richard M. Baker Professor of Marketing at Florida State University where he specializes in individual differences in consumer behavior.

Leisa R. Flynn, Ph.D., is BAC Research Professor of Marketing at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Felipe Korzenny, Ph.D., is retired from Florida State University where his research focused on communication and marketing in the Hispanic community.