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Brands as a mean of consumer self-expression and desired personal lifestyle

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Abstract

Lifestyle has a great impact on consumer behaviour and brand preferences. Very often, consumers tend to choose brands that are considered "appropriate" for their self-image. Accordingly, companies will try to position their brands in order to fit into consumers' lifestyle. In addition to expressing their identity through the everyday choices they make, consumers will often seek new ways in which they can express their personal identity. As a result, consumers can use brands as a relevant mean of self-expression and also as a lifestyle "beacon". The purpose of this article is to examine the role of brands in this circumstances and to highlight the possible implications. Using two different experiments, the authors provide strong evidence that customers rely on brands with a desirable brand identity to express their own identity and they tend to prefer brands that are convergent with their identity as the primary mean of expressing an unique image about their personal lifestyle. This article also provides solid evidence that brands can be used as valid tools for status signalling in everyday circumstances.

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1. Introduction

In a world where every product is bigger, or better compared to its competitors, consumers have begun to face an important problem: the increased uncertainty about various product attributes. This arises from various asymmetric information consumers have access to, regarding a specific product. Consumers tend to assess certain product attributes in a holistically manner rather than a case by case basis (Ainslie&Rosii, 2005). Therefore both extrinsic and intrinsic factors must be accounted when trying to differentiate a product from its competitors. In these circumstances, brands can potentially play many different roles in the consumer decision process. Keller (2008), shows that consumers' psychological, sociological and economic processes are simultaneously involved in choice behavior.

At sociological level, consumer behavior can be described as a function of low-involvement decisions and high-involvement resolutions (Amaldoss et al. 2005). Brands tend to influence more the high-involvement resolutions because they provide a valid mean of identification. For example, nowadays almost everyone can own a watch, a suit, a pen or a car, but specific brands of watches, suits, pens or cars tend to confer some distinguished features

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among certain classes of consumers.

Often, consumers will tend to choose a brand that they consider congruent with their self-image. In this particular way each consumer at an individual basis will try to reflect his or her own identity through choice. When part of a larger social group, consumer choices tend to converge to a certain pattern thus forming the basics of an individual social identity (Kim&Aimee 2003). For example, a mobile phone user may choose to change the ringtone in an ubiquitous self-expression act. If the user considers himself a hipster, the ringtone choice will be made accordingly.

Each individual lifestyle reflects a person's values, life vision, aesthetic style and life goal (Vyncke, 2002). Therefore, it has a great impact on consumer behavior. Furthermore, lifestyle is a valid instrument of forging a solid sense of self that resonates with both personal and social identity. As a result, lifestyle can be considered as an irrefutable mean of self-expression in accordance with the social identity theory. We will try to determinate how consumers use brands for expressing their self-identity and to project a desired image about their lifestyle.

2. Consumer self-expression and personal lifestyle

2.1. Conceptual background

Marketers tend to use brands to differentiate a company' products from competitors and to create superior value to customers. The most important step in creating and delivering a superior value to customers is by adding meaningful brand associations that create value beyond the intrinsic characteristics of a product. One of the most important characteristics of a brand is the self-expressive function (Keller, 2008). Brands have the power to communicate valuable information and can be used and perceived in many different ways by consumers. A lot of customers tend to use brands as a mean to express their identity and lifestyle.

In ancient society each person had a well-established "place" in the social hierarchy. This "place" was attained through birth or by wealth. Nowadays, we can speak about a symbolic role of possessions in consumers' lives. People tend to make inferences about others based on their possessions and behavior. In these circumstances, brands have become instruments of status signaling, that satisfy consumer prevalence of a need for status (Han et al. 2010). Each individual strives to create a unique identity that is based on his choices, background and past experiences. Brands can reinforce or supplement this identity by adding perceptual anchoring points that other people can relate to. For example, the main reason a man will buy a Rolex watch is not to prevent being late, but to show to others that he can afford such a watch. For a brand to become a relevant mean of self-expression it must be easy to recognize and must encompass a large array of future positive associations (Aanand&Shacar, 2004).

In addition to serving as an external signal, brands can be used to create and confirm a consumer self-concept and unique identity (Fournier, 1998). Individuals try to express their identity through all means they have at their disposal. By choosing a particular brand, a person may reaffirm both his own and people's perception about his desired identity. As a result, people use brands to reassure themselves and to signal others what kind of person they are. For example, travelling at business class in a short distance flight is rather a lifestyle driven choice than a convenience decision (Georgescu et al. 2011).

In particular, consumers tend to prefer brands that are convergent with their perceived ideal identity. As a result of self-expression, a predilection for a certain brand is the result of only sociological factors because a person's need for self-expression is the result of interactions with other members of the community (Fournier, 1998). On the other hand, psychological factors have an effect upon identity projection. Not only consumers analyze how a brand can relate to their life goal and values but also they are also self-aware that brands can be used to project these values to the "outside world". In other words, as a mean of expressing their own identity, brand predilection is the result of intrinsic factors and brand preference is the result of extrinsic factors. Therefore, a successful brand must have a certain degree of resonance with both consumer personal identity and social identity (Berger&Chip, 2007).

Lifestyle can be seen as a sum of daily life patterns that each individual deliberately and voluntarily applies through his daily life (Vyncke, 2002). Consumers will prefer brands that "fit" into their lifestyle and disregard brands that do not reinforce their self-image in a positive manner. Common knowledge dictates that the cause of this behavior is people's constant need to be happy and to have a positive life. As a consequence, consumers will rely on

more than one brand and also on alternative means of self-expression to convey their identity and lifestyle.

When expressing their identity, consumer's need for self-expression is finite (Chernev et al. 2011) because they always seek to fulfill their needs and will be subject to need satiation when those needs have been met in a desirable manner. Need satiation has a great impact on consumer behavior. For example, a thirsty person is willing to pay more for something to drink, or a person deprived of nicotine will value more a package of cigarettes. As a consequence, consumers need for self-expression can be satiated not only by using certain brands but also by other available means of self-expression (Chernev et al. 2011). This is particularly important when analyzing the correlations between brands and lifestyle because the lines between personal identity and everyday doings are becoming more blurred as society evolves (Brewer, 1991).

2.2. Research methodology

For both experiments, the respondents were 108 undergraduate students randomly assigned to one of the two groups. Respondents from the first group were asked to think of brands relevant to themselves and respondents from the second group were asked to think of brands relevant for their friends. We have chosen friends as a reference group, because it is more likely that respondents will associate themselves with members of this group. In this situation it is expected that respondents need for self-expression is weakened and respondents need to strive for specific lifestyle traits is strengthened due to convergent effects of social identity theory (Brown&Zacefka 2006).

The primary objective of the first experiment is to test the ability of a brand to be used by consumers as a valid tool for self-expression. In this experiment respondents evaluated a set of four brands in three different categories: sportswear (Adidas, Nike, Puma, Lotto), deodorant (Rexona, Nivea, Fa, Dove) and fast food (McDonald's, KFC, Pizza Hut, Subway). We asked respondents to point out the most relevant brand in each category, in terms of expressing identity. For each category, all respondents allocated 100 points among the four brands based on the degree they perceived the brand to be relevant for expressing identity.

The primary objective of the second experiment is to determine if a brand can act as a compliance stimulus for the desired lifestyle. Respondents evaluated the same three categories of brands as in the previous experiment. This time, we asked respondents to point out the most relevant brand for projecting a desired image about individual lifestyle. In order to eliminate the impact of identity satiation (Chernev et al. 2011), before the second experiment respondents were asked to fulfill a random creative task that was presented as part of the experiment. For each category, all respondents allocated 100 points among the four brands based on the degree they perceived the brand to be relevant for expressing a positive image of a desired lifestyle.

2.3. Research results

Each of the 108 respondents evaluated brands in the three different categories resulting 322 ratings in both experiments. Two data points were missing. As a manipulation check for both experiments, we first compared the brand relevance and similarity ratings in all three self-reference categories and friend reference categories. The data show that the manipulation had the predicted effect in both experiments.

For the first experiment, the brand relevance ratings in the self-reference categories were higher than in the friend reference categories. In particular, the rating of the brand perceived as most relevant for self-expression in each product category was higher for the self-reference group compared to the friend reference group.

For the second experiment, the brand relevance ratings in the self-reference categories were lower than in the friend reference categories. We consider that the creative task taken between the two experiments completely eliminated identity satiation. In particular, the rating of the brand perceived as most relevant for expressing particularities of a desired lifestyle in each product category was lower for the self-reference group compared to the friend reference group. As a result, experimental manipulation weakened the respondent's need for self-expression and amplified the need to strive for specific lifestyle traits when friends are considered as the reference group.

Table 1. Mean ratings of brand relevancy in expressing identity and lifestyle

Product Category	Brands	Identity (self reference)	Identity (friend reference)	Lifestyle (self reference)	Lifestyle (friend reference)
Deodorant	Rexona	20.5	19.7	20.5	22.3
	Nivea	18.2	18.4	16.6	16.7
	Dove	41.1	36.9	38.9	41
Sportswear	Fa	20.2	25	24	20.1
	Adidas	32	29.9	37.9	39.3
	Lotto	19.2	20.3	12	11.1
	Nike	36.5	34.5	34.6	35.7
Fast food	Puma	12.3	15.3	14.5	13.9
	McDonald's	23.7	27.8	12.3	10.1
	Pizza Hut	21	21.1	33.2	30.9
	Subway	29.6	27.5	40.3	44.5
	KFC	25.7	23.6	14.2	14.5

Note: Numbers in each cell represent standard mean ratings ($p < .05$)

The data summarized in Table 1 show that consumers can use brands as a valid tool of self-expression when brands are convergent with their perceived ideal identity. This effects are consistent across all product categories and are statistically relevant (absolute ratings: $M_s=41.1$; $M_f=36.9$; $F_{2, 320}=35.12$, $p < .001$; marginal ratings: $M_s=12.9$; $M_f=10.9$; $F_{2,320}=31.12$, $p < .001$).

The data presented in table 1 show that brands can be used at projecting a strong congruent image about individual lifestyle (absolute ratings: $M_s=40.9$; $M_f=44.5$; $F_{2,320}=37.72$, $p < .001$; marginal ratings: $M_s=11.9$; $M_f=14.5$; $F_{2,320}=32.29$, $p < .001$). Brands can also serve as an instrument for expressing certain preferences regarding lifestyle in circumstances where identity satiation is strong. These results provide strong evidence for supporting the claim that the brand and not the product is the one that must be congruent with customer identity (McGovern&Moon, 2007).

The fact that data from the two experiments show a strong convergence across lifestyle and brand relevance on one hand and identity and brand relevance on the other hand, clearly enhances the validity of the observed effects. Additionally, the data from the two experiments lend further support that brands can be used as valid tools for status signaling in everyday circumstances, because they possess the capacity to aid consumers in projecting a desired image about their own unique identity and lifestyle.

3. Conclusions

In this study we investigated the role of brands as a mean of self-expression and as a lifestyle "beacon". In particular, we show that in addition to expressing their identity through the everyday choices they make, consumers will often seek new ways in which they can express their personal identity through brands. As a result, brands can be used to create a unique social identity for each customer. Whereas prior research on brands and self-expression is based on dissociative reference groups, we based our research on associative theory using brand relevance as a measurement tool linked to an associative reference group. Furthermore we show that brands are more than just instruments of hedonic experiences as Nelson and Meyvis stated (2008) because they have the power to harness and channel specific hedonistic desires in expressing a bigger sociological and psychological construct such as lifestyle.

From a theoretical standpoint, our findings contribute to the extant body of knowledge related to brand-consumer interactions at a psychological level. The most important contribution of our findings to the development of theory is that consumers not only use brands as instruments for expressing their own identity as previous research had shown (Chernev et al. 2011) but also for projecting an individualized image of a desired lifestyle. We show that beyond a predilection for a certain brand is the result of sociological factors driven by interactions with other members of the community, consumers are influenced by psychological factors that possess a strong effect upon identity projection. Consumers' brand predilection is also the result of the degree that a brand can be used by a customer to project his own values, life visions and life goal to the "outside world".

From a managerial perspective we indicate that managers could benefit from positioning their brands as lifestyle brands for creating a strong competitive advantage. In order to avoid the perils of lifestyle branding such as increased competition or the lack of differentiation, brand managers can create "lopsided" lifestyle brands. Good examples regarding this strategy are brands like Ikea, Apple or Dove. Moreover, we argue that when creating a new brand extension, managers must carefully design the new extension to "fit" into the target audience lifestyle and not only to be accepted by these consumers as another product that is intended to satisfy their needs.

Our results suggest multiple directions for further research. The motivation behind the need of expressing personal identity and lifestyle through brands can be investigated both from a psychological and marketing point of view. Another promising direction for further research is exploring the link between brands and each of the four specific constructs of lifestyle: values, life vision, aesthetic style and life goal.

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