Self-Brand Connections and Brand Resonance: the Role of Gender and Consumer Emotions

David Moore, The University of Michigan, USA
Dayna Wurster, The University of Michigan

This study tested the relationship of self-brand connections (SBC) - the notion that brand associations are used to express one’s self to others (Escalas 1996) and brand resonance – the extent to which consumers are able to be ‘in sync’ with a given brand (Keller 2003). Results showed that: (1) the SBC construct is closely related to brand resonance; (2) females reported higher SBC scores than their male counterparts in response to a gendered brand but not in response to a gender neutral brand; and (3) emotions played a spectacular role in mediating the influence of SBC and brand resonance on consumer attitude. Implications for branding strategy are discussed.

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David Moore, University of Michigan, USA
Dayna Wurster, University of Michigan, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The fundamental premise of the Self-Brand Connections (SBC) construct is that when brand associations are used to construct one’s self or to communicate one’s self to others, a strong connection is formed between the brand and the consumer’s self identity (Escalas, 2004). In a similar manner, brand resonance suggests a profound consumer brand relationship that is based on loyalty, attachment, and an enduring sense of communal kinship or affiliation. This relationship is so strong that members of that brand community are willing to make investments of their personal resources to remain connected to the brand (Keller 2001).

First, it is predicted that brand resonance should be significantly related to Self-Brand Connections and that respondents should respond in a similar manner to both constructs. Second, as a test of the SBC construct, it is expected that consumer fans who identify with a specific in-group organization (the home team) will report significantly higher SBCs and stronger brand resonance scores than those who support the out-group or rival team. Third, no gender differences are expected to occur in response to a gender neutral brand like college football. More specifically, females will resonate and connect with a brand only when that brand is perceived as gender relevant. Fourth, brand resonance and self-brand connections are especially capable of building deep attachments and evoking strong emotions (Keller 2003; Escalas 1996). Emotions are known to influence consumer attitudes (Edell and Burke 1987). Accordingly, it is hypothesized that the effects that self-brand connections and brand resonance may have on attitudes will be mediated by the emotions that consumers express.

Method
Subjects and Procedure
Subjects were 183 University of Michigan undergraduates (male=104; female=79) who were asked to give their opinions about the upcoming biggest rivalry football game against Ohio State. In one condition (In-Group Perspective, U-M), subjects read an enticing narrative relating the highlights of his/her experience as a home team fan while attending the famous Michigan vs. Ohio State football game. The second version (OSU fan) maintained the identical structure, relating the game experience from the Buckeye perspective. Subjects were first asked to identify themselves as either a U-M or an OSU fan. Subjects then responded to questions about their emotional reactions to the upcoming football game. This was followed by a series of questions about loyalty and attachment to the respective teams (U-M and OSU). These 16 measures were, in fact, measures of self-brand connections (Escalas and Bettman 2003) and brand resonance (Keller 2003). A pre-test confirmed that college football is a gender neutral brand, and the WNBA represents a female gendered brand.

Measures
Self-brand Connections measures were taken from Escalas and Bettman (2003) and brand resonance measures were selected from Keller (2003). Emotional Responses were measured by 1-9 point semantic differential scales (Cronbach’s α=.96): negative/positive, not exciting/exciting; not thrilling/thrilling; not confident of victory/confident of victory. Attitudes (α=.96) to the upcoming game were measured using 1-9 semantic differential scales: unfavorable/favorable, negative/positive, dislike/like, very bad/very good. Behavioral intentions measures were: very unlikely/likely to attend, unwilling/willing to attend, no desire/strong desire (α=.86).

Results and Discussion
These results provided several new insights into the Self-brand Connections construct. First, it was confirmed that gender had no significant effect on SBC when the target brand is equally popular between male and female respondents. This was a necessary test to provide more validity to the notion that females will exhibit stronger self-brand connections towards products that ‘match’ their own gender. Thus, women, compared to their male counterparts, should report higher levels of self-brand connections as well as stronger brand resonance when the brand is perceived as a female-gendered brand such as the WNBA. However, when the target brand was football, with a non-female gendered identity, women no longer demonstrated stronger self-brand connections. This finding suggests that the WNBA may have a leading role to play in connecting with the aspirations of young women today. In order for the WNBA to continue to build a strong brand community among its target audience, special care should always be exercised when selecting the most appropriate female role models who could effectively resonate with the values and ideals of its gendered audience (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990).

Second, this study showed for the first time in the extant literature the close relationship between SBC and brand resonance. This is particularly interesting given the crucial role that brand resonance plays in customer relationship management and the development of sustainable brand equity between customers and the brand (Keller, 2001). A principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation revealed that all the measures of SBC and Brand Resonance loaded on a single factor with eigenvalue=12.63, accounting for 84% of the total variance (Cronbach α=.98). The items comprising SBC and brand resonance were used to create two distinct variables, respectively. To understand the fit between these two constructs, Confirmatory Factor Analysis using Amos (Arbuckle, 1997) was conducted with all the items of SBC and brand resonance representing one single factor. The chi-square for this model was significant (indicating a poor fit): χ² (104, N=180)=620, p<.000; NFI=.89, Bollen’s (1989) Incremental Fit Index (IFI)=.91, CFI=.91, RMSEA=.160.

Third, emotions played a spectacular role in mediating the influence of SBC (and brand resonance) on consumer attitude. This intriguing relationship to emotions has never been explored before. Given the dominant role that emotions and passion play in the consumption and experience of sports, this insightful revelation of the link between emotions, brand resonance and self-brand connections offers exciting opportunities for future research. Moreover, since females have been shown to score significantly higher than men in the expression of emotions (Diener, Sandvik & Larsen, 1985), the appropriate role of gender should be included in future studies on affect, brand resonance, and self-connections in human behavior and particularly in our efforts to enhance the consumers’ experience of sport, entertainment, or any other delivered service.
References


