Perceptual Fit in Symbolic Brands: Evaluation From a Brand Personality Perspective

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The focus of this study is to examine the moderated mediation model for invoking brand affect in extension brands. The model examines how brand image fit would mediate the relationship between brand personality fit and brand affect. Self-monitoring is examined as a moderator to this mediation process. Through an experimental study with two symbolic brands, it was revealed that brand image fit would mediate how brand personality fit would elicit positive affect on an extension brand. High (versus low) self-monitors were found to experience stronger positive affect towards the extension brand as a result of this mediation process.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Perceptual fit is defined as the perceived similarity between the parent and extension brand. Many studies have considered this as a critical success factor for brand extensions (Aaker and Keller 1990 1992; Boush and Loken 1991; Tauber 1988). Particularly for symbolic brands, studies have demonstrated that brand image fit is vital for invoking positive affect from extension brands (Bhat and Reddy 2001; Martinez and Pina 2003). However, some inherent gaps still persist. First, although the evaluation of brand image fit has proven to invoke a positive affect towards extension brands, the relative role of brand personality towards this relationship has not been addressed (Czellar 2003). With literature supporting the notion that brand personality as a key driver for determining brand image (Aaker 1999; Kapferer 1997; Keller 1993), a causal relationship between brand image fit and brand personality fit may surface. Hence, this becomes an issue to be examined in this study. Second, Czellar (2003) have also postulated that self-monitoring would moderate perceptual fit when the evaluation of fit is dependent on non-product related attributes such as the brand’s image and personality. This is based on the premise that the preference for symbolic brands is very much influenced by the self-monitoring disposition of consumers (Hogg, Cox and Keeling 2000; O’Cass 2001).

Therefore, by using a moderated mediation/mediated moderation approach, the focus of this study is to examine the relationship between brand personality fit and brand image fit; while examining how both of these evaluations would invoke a positive affect towards the extension brand. Parallel to this, it will also examine the implication of self-monitoring as a moderator to this mediation process. As such, the following hypotheses are put forward:

H1: There is a positive causal relationship between brand personality dimension fit and brand image fit between parent and extension brands.

H2: The positive relationship between brand personality fit and the affect towards the extension brand is mediated by brand image fit.

H3a: The magnitude of the overall effect of brand personality fit towards affect on the extension brand is dependent on one’s self-monitoring disposition (mediated moderation).

H3b: The mediating process of brand image fit that intervenes between brand personality fit and affect on the extension brand will vary as a function of one’s self-monitoring disposition (moderated mediation).

An experiment was performed with 144 undergraduate students from a Western Australian university to verify the above mentioned hypotheses. In this experiment, two symbolic brands (i.e. BMW and Omega) were selected via a focus group exercise. The symbolic nature of these brands was subsequently verified through a pretest using Bhat and Reddy’s (1998) scale for measuring symbolism. The questionnaire for the main experiment consists of established scales for measuring brand personality (Aaker 1997); brand image fit (Bhat and Reddy 2001); self-monitoring (Lenox and Wolfe 1984) and brand affect (Bhat and Reddy 2001). During the experiment, the subjects were to different groupings. The ad stimulus used for each group differs in their brand personality characteristics. After being exposed to these ads, the subjects were instructed to respond to the questionnaire accordingly. A debrief session was conducted at the end of each experiment session.

Upon completion of the experiment, the data was analysed using a set of 3 regression analyses for measuring moderated mediation and mediated moderation (Baron and Kenny 1986; Muller, Judd and Zerbyt 2005). H1 was supported with brand personality fit found as a predictor for image fit. Similarly, H2 was supported as the results reflect that brand image fit provides both partial (Omega) and full (BMW) mediation towards the relationship between brand personality fit and the affect towards the extension brand. This implies that the positive affect that is associated to the parent brand is made accessible when brand personality fit is established (Johar, Sengupta and Aaker 2005; Meyvis and Janiszewski 2002). Hence, through the causal relationship between brand personality fit and brand image fit, the affect linked to the parent brand is then transferred to the extension brand. Thus, this extends the findings of Bhat and Reddy (2001) by revealing that the brand image fit which was found to causally influence brand affect is actually a mediator for brand personality fit. However, as for hypotheses 3, only H3b was supported but not for H3a. This demonstrates that self-monitoring would moderate the mediation process but not the direct effect of brand personality fit towards affect of the extension brand. More specifically, this implies that for high (versus low) self-monitors, the mediating process for invoking affect on the extension brand is dependent on the evaluation of brand personality fit for generating a more positive brand image fit. In turn, the positive brand image fit would transfer the affect generated by brand personality fit evaluation to the extension brand. Nonetheless, brand personality fit maintains as a predictor for brand affect regardless of one’s self-monitoring disposition.

Finally, there are some key theoretical and managerial contributions derived from this study. First, it has addressed Czellar’s (2003) proposition by demonstrating that brand personality fit evaluation is a crucial process underlining brand image fit evaluation. More precisely, it shows that consumers evaluate brand image fit by firstly making an assessment on the personality dimensions that are conveyed by both the parent and extension brands. Second, this study has provided unprecedented empirical evidence that high self-monitoring consumers would favour evaluating the entire image of the brand for perceptual fit before establishing the transfer of affect from the parent brand to the extension brand. As such, high self-monitors being more sensitive towards the social symbolic meaning of a brand would find brand image fit a more comprehensive evaluation as compared to an evaluation based solely on
brand personality fit (Czellar 2003). Finally, from a managerial perspective, this study has demonstrated that marketing professionals would need to employ different strategies for eliciting positive affect towards new extension brands. They should consider different options in communicating to consumers with differing levels of self-monitoring dispositions to bring out the optimum effect from their ads and promotions.

REFERENCES