Creating Life-Stories Creating Happiness: Autobiographical Memories and the Psychological Mechanism of Consumers’ Long-Lasting Self-Brand Connections

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We explored qualitatively consumers’ autobiographical memories and the psychological mechanism of long-lasting self-brand connections based on a grounded theory approach. Findings highlight 1) the essential role of positive self-representation emerged from the dramatic episode 2) the fact that consumers create life-stories related to the brand 3) happiness as the critical mediator as well as the purpose of self-brand connections.

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Creating Life-stories Creating Happiness: Autobiographical Memories and the Psychological Mechanism of Consumers’ Long-Lasting Self-Brand Connections

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INTRODUCTION

Autobiographical memory is a memory system consisting of episodes recollected from an individual’s life. The critical concept of autobiographical memory theory is the notion that autobiographical memories are related to the self and have personal significance (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000). It is of fundamental significance for the self, for emotions, and for the experience of personhood; that is to say, autobiographical memory is significant for the experience of enduring as an individual, in a culture, over time (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000). Although research about autobiographical memory is conducted in many different subareas of psychology, most prominent among them cognitive, social, developmental, clinical, and neuropsychology, research findings within consumer psychology are still rare.

Investigating connections between consumers and their brands, scholars have demonstrated that the self-brand connections exist and can lead to positive attitudes towards brands (Escalas 2004; Escalas and Bettman 2005). Much research has sought to account for the reasons why consumers connect to a specific brand or organization. However, the reasons are still unclear and the existing research largely focused on the link between brand and consumers’ self-concept.

This study focuses on consumers’ long-lasting self-brand connections and autobiographical memories. Among individuals, long-lasting relationships ensure health, satisfaction, and security. They also create positive feelings between the two individuals involved (Meunier and Baker 2012). With relation to businesses, building and sustaining long-term relationships with customers is essential for brand management (Kapferer 2008). This study initiated from preliminary in-depth interviews with a consumer group of a high brand-commitment level; their stories with brands displayed long-lasting ties and autobiographical characteristics beyond just momentary experiences. In accordance with this phenomenon, the purpose of this study is to explore a set of underlying psychological mechanisms for developing long-lasting self-brand connections through analysis of their autobiographical narratives.

METHODODOLOGY

Given the relative specificity of this line of discovery-oriented research, we designed this study to be qualitative and inductive in nature. After screening tasks, Involuntary Autobiographical Memory (IAM) interviews were conducted with twelve female participants (those with high levels of self-brand connections, long-term relationships with a specific brand that have lasted between 17-39 years, and the ages of 26 to 63). Interviews lasted from 2-6 hours.

This study used a grounded theory approach. Data collection and analysis followed an iterative process and the analytic techniques offered by Strauss and Corbin (2008) were used to arrive at themes. The hierarchical category system was also used to create the emergent model describing the development of long-lasting self-brand connections. Based on broader theoretical and empirical literature in psychology and psychoanalysis, we chose the psychoanalytic notion of self-representation first and used it as the unit of analysis. Self-representation is the psychological entity that is accomplished in the brain and mind, and refers to the image humans have of themselves based on their own interpretations (Paivio 1990).

RESULTS

Results of this study were divided into significant themes and dimensions to create the emergent visual model. Three emerging themes were as follows; first, self-brand connections emerged from the momentum of a dramatic semantic episode that involved rising self-development, happiness, and prosperity. The highest positive self-representation was concurrently etched in their minds, which became the source of all phenomena. The second theme concerned the fixation on this highest instance of positive self-representation. Consumers tended to adhere to this mental representation, and used it as the driving force of developing self-identities and enhancing happiness across the life-span. It was, most intriguingly of all, linked to the process of creation of their life-stories. Third, some degree of obsession was embedded in the self-brand connections, with significant investments of time, energy and attention dedicated to the brand;
Consumers yearned strong attachments to the brands and some even passed down this connection to their children as a legacy. This process led to consistent repurchase over long periods of time.

This study also drew three dimensions that consisted of an internal working model of long-lasting self-brand connections: self-motive, emotion, and the reemergence (or reproduction) of positive self-representation. Self-related motives were fundamental, unconscious reasons and acted simultaneously as kinds of social motive in communicating within the self, brand, and real world. Semantic memories with the specific brands held an emotional power, and consumers felt especially connected with the brands when recalling such memories. The most common emotion expressed was happiness; it was socio-emotional responses beyond hedonic or physiological responses. Self-motives had effects on the type of emotion and the reemergence of positive self-representation. The strength of emotions had effects on the reemergence rate of positive self-representation and the loyalty spectrum. Collectively, thematic results and dimensions supported the psychological mechanism of long-lasting self-brand connections.

**DISCUSSION & IMPLICATION**

This study explored qualitatively the consumers’ autobiographical memories, which encompassed time, self, brand, episode, and life. We also demonstrated the psychological mechanism of long-lasting self-brand connections inductively and hierarchically. The highlights of our findings are as follows: 1) the essential role of positive self-representation as the driving force of developing long-lasting self-brand connections, 2) the fact that consumers create life-stories related to the brand through their autobiographical memory system, and 3) happiness as the critical mediator of future behavior as well as the purpose of self-brand connections.

This research is significant in its exploration of an important yet an under-studied phenomenon in consumers’ autobiographical memories and long-lasting ties with the brand. Consumer and brand sometimes share the same path in life. Long-standing relationship is priceless. We expect that this study will support foundation for companies to attain the ultimate achievement of authentic long-lasting relationships between consumers and their brands. With the emergence of consumer-generated advertising and user-generated branding (Arnhold 2010), findings of this research provide insights into the key facets of facilitating engagement and the underlying processes of consumer-brand connections.

**REFERENCES**


