Celebrity Endorsement and Self-Brand Connections

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We propose that consumers purchase brands in part to construct self-concepts and, in so doing, form self-brand connections. We focus on celebrity endorsements as a source of brand meaning. Results from our first experiments show that brands with images consistent with a celebrity endorser enhance self-brand connections for consumers when they like the celebrity, but harm them when consumers dislike the celebrity. A second study, in progress, tests our prediction that the influence of celebrity endorsement will differ depending on whether the consumer has active self-enhancement goals, such that the influence of celebrities will be greater for higher self-enhancement needs.

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SESSION SUMMARY

The objective of the proposed session was to stimulate discussion and encourage research on the dynamic relationship between the self and consumer contexts. Researchers have argued that consumers evaluate and choose brands on the basis of whether they express aspects of the self to others, or fulfill some self-enhancement or self-verification goal. Although research has clearly shown that consumers evaluate and choose brands based on these self-related motivations (thereby forming self-brand connections (SBC)), several research questions remain unanswered—Are there important moderators to consider that would further illuminate the relationship between the self and consumption? Additionally, research has explored the influence of brand evaluations on SBC, but to what extent might SBC affect brand evaluations? Finally, a major assumption is that consumers bring salient and relevant self-concepts to the brand consumption context, however to what extent might the consumption context influence consumers’ self-concepts? The aim of this session was to shed some light on these research questions.

Paper #1, by Escalas and Bettman, questioned the simple manner in which researchers currently view how consumers’ views of the self drive consumption and present findings on how self-enhancement goals and brand symbolism moderate the influence of brand meaning on self-brand connections. Paper #2, by Cheng, White and Chaplin, challenged the unidirectional assumption that brand evaluations/attitudes determine SBC, and presented results that suggested a feedback effect. Specifically, the authors suggested that when consumers make a SBC, brand-evaluation will become an important component of self-evaluation, and therefore, is likely to be affected by whether consumers make SBC. Paper #3, by Forehand, Perkins, and Reed II, added another dimension of complexity to the relationship between the self-concept and consumer contexts by questioning whether consumers always bring their identities to the context. The authors presented evidence to show that social identities are automatically influenced by contextual information about others. Each paper moved away from the simple way in which researchers currently view the role of the self-concept in consumer contexts and provided empirical evidence to shed some light on the dynamic nature of this relationship (e.g., introduced moderators and challenged assumptions).

Together, these three papers provided a fresh perspective to study the relationship between the self and consumer contexts. The current view is that individuals’ self-concepts shape their consumer behavior. The emerging view from these papers is that while the self certainly drives consumption, it is more complicated than we think (as paper #1 suggests). Moreover, the directional relationship between the self and consumption may also be more complicated than we think (as paper #2 suggests). Finally, the self may not always drive consumption, but rather be driven by consumption (as paper #3 suggests). Each paper makes additional contributions. First, Escalas and Bettman provide an empirical demonstration of the ideas in McCracken’s (1989) theory of meaning movement by demonstrating that brands endorsed by celebrities are a source of symbolic brand meaning. In doing so, they provide additional evidence that consumers use brands to communicate their self-concept. Cheng et al., merged the brand extension/dilution and the self-concept literatures to show how SBC can have a feedback effect and influence brand evaluations. Forehand et al., contributed to the advertising literature by showing that ad exposure has a profound effect on not just changes in brand attitude or purchase intentions, but also social identities.

In summary, this session presented a dynamic view of the relationship between consumers’ self-concepts and consumption activities. That is, while consumers’ views of the self drive consumption, these views are also constantly being shaped by the consumption context itself. This perspective paves new avenues for research, such as the potential for consumption activities to transform consumers (via transformation of self-concept) and for contextual factors to determine the self-consumption relationship.

ABSTRACTS

“Celebrity Endorsement and Self-Brand Connections”
Jennifer Edson Escalas, Vanderbilt University
James R. Bettman, Duke University
We propose that consumers purchase brands in part to construct self-concepts and, in so doing, form self-brand connections. We focus on celebrity endorsements as a source of brand meaning. Results from our first experiment show that brands with images consistent with a celebrity endorser enhance self-brand connections for consumers when they like the celebrity, but harm them when consumers dislike the celebrity. A second study tests our prediction that the influence of celebrity endorsement will differ depending on whether the consumer has active self-enhancement goals, such that the influence of celebrities will be greater for higher self-enhancement needs.

“The Role of Self-Brand Connections in Brand Evaluations”
Shirley Y. Y. Cheng, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Tiffany Barnett White, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Lan Nguyen Chaplin, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
An impressive body of research demonstrates that individuals use products to create and communicate their self-concepts (e.g., Belk 1988; Sirgy 1982; Solomon 1986). Particularly interesting in this regard are consumer brands, which are ideally suited to this process given the wide availability of brands and the range of distinctive brand images they reflect (e.g., Fournier 1998; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Consumers can appropriate associations belonging to brands, such as user characteristics or personality traits, and incorporate them into their self-concepts, thereby forming self-brand connections (SBC) (Escalas and Bettman 2003).

The prevailing view of how brands are related to the self-concept is that consumers engage in a matching process to identify products or brands that are congruent with their self-images (Gardner and Levy 1955). Escalas and Bettman (2003) adopt a prototype matching view, where individuals imagine prototypical users of alternative brands and select ones that maximize similarity to their actual or desired self-concept, thereby forging a self-brand connection. In short, current research examines how brand evaluations affect whether consumers make SBC (i.e., Brand-evaluations→SBC). Is it possible that a feedback effect might be