Customization and Brand in Customer Identity Communication

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We distinguish Combination-based Customization (CbC) and Integration-based Customization (IbC), and propose that, in presence of the brand, CbC receives higher customer reactions than IbC. In absence of the brand, the opposite pattern holds. We identify two boundary conditions of the competition effect between IbC and brand. Results support our framework.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1014098/volumes/v10e/E-10

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CUSTOMIZATION AND BRAND IN CUSTOMER IDENTITY COMMUNICATION

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Despite its relevance in both consumer behavior and marketing literature (Belk, 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Franke and Schreier 2008), the interaction between customization models and brands in customer identity communication remains largely unexplored. This issue is relevant as customization models permit the customer to manipulate product elements (e.g., colors, pictures) that pertain to the domain of brand identity (Keller 1993).

In this paper, we identify two archetypes of product customization based on the degrees of freedom given to the customer in the design process: Combination-based Customization (CbC), which is based on selecting a combination of modules (e.g., shape and materials) provided by the company, and Integration-based Customization (IbC), which is based on including into the product signs and symbols (e.g., pictures and text) provided by the customer.

We propose that CbC allows the adaptation of product elements to express customer preference and style (Franke, Schreier, and Kaiser 2010), whereas IbC enables the customer to generate a set of signs to convey personal symbols, and thus to create a self-brand (Wind and Rangaswamy 2001). Moreover, we argue that while CbC leverages on elements (e.g., graphic patterns and colors) that may subtly or implicitly convey customer personality and values (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010), IbC uses the immediateness of pictures and texts to explicitly communicate self-identity (Berger and Heath 2007; Scott 1994).

Focusing on the case of a mass brand, that is, a brand whose identity is well-known to customers, we predict that, in presence of a mass brand, CbC generates better customer responses than IbC. Indeed, CbC and a mass brand, operating at different levels of communication, implicit and explicit respectively, complement each other, or at least do not compete with each other, in identity communication. Differently, IbC (i.e., self-brand) and a mass brand, operating at the same, explicit level of identity communication, may compete for transferring customer identity. In absence of a mass brand, IbC generates better customer responses than CbC. Indeed, IbC is characterized by a higher potential to communicate explicitly customer identity than CbC and, thus, should better satisfy individuals eager to transfer their identity when the brand is absent.

We also identify two boundary conditions of the competition effect between IbC (i.e., self-brand) and a mass brand. Under high levels of congruence between the self and the mass brand, it is likely that IbC conveys symbols consistent with the brand itself, thus eliminating the advantage of CbC over IbC for branded products. Moreover, compared to a more functional brand, a creative mass brand (which is perceived to be supportive of customer self-expression by means of personal content) and IbC (which allows customers to creatively construct symbols) would be congruent with each other, and therefore generate positive customer reactions.

We conducted three studies using a web customization toolkit. In study 1, concerning t-shirt, we adopted a 2 (customization model: CbC vs. IbC) by 2 (brand: present vs. absent) between-subjects design. The brand was Adidas. We measured preference fit, the “I designed it myself” effect, and identity communication potential, as well as congruence between the customer self and the brand. ANOVA on attitude revealed that, for branded t-shirts, IbC received higher scores than CbC (Attitude\textsubscript{CbC_Adidas} = 5.46; Attitude\textsubscript{IbC_Adidas} = 4.25; F(1,101) = 15.40, p < .001), whereas, for unbranded t-shirts, IbC received higher scores than CbC (Attitude\textsubscript{CbC_Unbranded} = 4.50; Attitude\textsubscript{IbC_Unbranded} = 5.69; F(1,101) = 15.20, p < .001). The same pattern holds for purchase intention and willingness to pay (WtP). Study 2 also showed that, for branded products, appreciation for CbC is (partially) mediated by preference fit and the “I designed it myself” effect, but not by identity communication potential. Differently, for unbranded products, appreciation for IbC is mainly mediated by identity communication potential and preference fit. Finally, moderated regressions showed that the advantage of CbC over IbC for branded products disappears if the brand is perceived to be highly congruent with the self. In study 2, also concerning t-shirt, we adopted a 2 (customization model: CbC vs. IbC) by 3 (brand: functional vs. creative vs. absent) between-subjects design. The brands were Adidas (functional) and Diesel (creative). ANOVA on attitude revealed that, for Adidas t-shirts, CbC received higher scores than IbC (Attitude\textsubscript{CbC_Adidas} = 5.50; Attitude\textsubscript{IbC_Adidas} = 4.20; F(1,118) = 14.10, p < .001), whereas, for unbranded t-shirts, IbC received higher scores than CbC (Attitude\textsubscript{CbC_Unbranded} = 4.68; Attitude\textsubscript{IbC_Unbranded} = 5.60; F(1,118) = 6.39, p < .05). As expected, for Diesel t-shirts we found no significant differences in attitude toward CbC and IbC (Attitude\textsubscript{CbC_Diesel} = 5.15; Attitude\textsubscript{IbC_Diesel} = 5.57; F(1,118) = 1.43, ns). The same pattern holds for purchase intention and WtP. In study 3, concerning trolley bag and including a both CbC and IbC condition, we adopted a 3 (customization model: CbC vs. IbC vs. CbC\&IbC) by 2 (brand: present vs. absent) between-subjects design. The brand was Samsonite. ANOVA on attitude revealed that, for Samsonite trolley bags, CbC received higher scores than IbC and CbC\&IbC (Attitude\textsubscript{CbC_Samsonite} = 5.41; Attitude\textsubscript{CbC\&IbC_Samsonite} = 4.69; Attitude\textsubscript{IbC_Samsonite} = 4.45; F(2,122) = 5.07, p < .01; t\textsubscript{IbC vs CbC\&IbC} (122) = 2.34, p < .05; t\textsubscript{IbC vs CbC\&IbC} (122) = 3.03, p < .01; t\textsubscript{CbC vs CbC\&IbC} (122) = .78, ns). Therefore, competition effect between personal symbols and brands exists irrespective of the additional chance to combine product modules. For unbranded trolley bags, IbC and CbC\&IbC received higher scores than CbC, while IbC and CbC\&IbC received similar scores (Attitude\textsubscript{CbC\&IbC_Unbranded} = 4.69; Attitude\textsubscript{CbC_Unbranded} = 5.40; Attitude\textsubscript{IbC\&IbC_Unbranded} = 5.45; F(2,122) = 3.27, p < .05; t\textsubscript{IbC\&IbC vs CbC\&IbC} (122) = -2.20, p < .05; t\textsubscript{CbC vs CbC\&IbC} (122) = -2.31, p < .05; t\textsubscript{IbC vs CbC\&IbC} (122) = .18, ns). Therefore, in absence of potential symbol competition, we did not observe better reactions to CbC\&IbC than IbC. The same pattern holds for purchase intention and WtP. Further analysis will be conducted on the content of IbC. We contribute to the marketing literature by analyzing the relation between customization models and brands, which may result in an unforeseen competition in companies’ marketing mix: That regarding customer personal symbols and brands.

REFERENCE LIST

Escalas and Bettman 2005