Do Their Values Fit in With Mine? Analyzing the Importance of Congruence Between Consumers’ and Retailers’ Values
Andrea Groeppel-Klein, Saarland University, Germany
Sarah Kobel, Saarland University, Germany

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“Value-oriented management” is a buzzword in Marketing. From a scientific perspective, self-congruency theory indicates: a fit between consumers’ and retailers’ values could enhance images and spending. But as people seem to expect different values from retailers than from themselves, it is important to know exactly which values should be attributed.

Values are crucial for explaining social and personal organization and change (Durkheim 1897/1964). According to Schwartz (2012), values are used to characterize cultural groups, societies and individuals as well as companies and brands. Values might also explain the motivational basis of consumer attitudes and behavior, elicit goals and guide actions (Verplanken and Holland 2002). Particularly recently, retailers have been endeavoring to communicate a value-based image and to underpin this communication policy with diverse actions, such as focusing on health by decreasing the amount of sugar in retail brands, caring for the environment by abolishing plastic bags or promoting locally grown food, or trying to communicate their value orientation via store design. Although substantial research deals with value congruence between consumers and brands (Tuškej, Golob, and Podnar 2013; or service brands, Zhang and Bloemer 2008), little research addresses whether a value-based image can influence consumer behavior only if there is a fit between values attributed to a retailer and consumers’ own values. Do retailers’ value-related efforts enhance consumers’ attitudes, and are there any economic consequences? There is a research gap particularly concerning whether there should be a match between values attributed to a retailer and personal values (proposed by self-congruency theory and similarity-attraction theory, claiming that people are more attracted to those similar to themselves, Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman and Johnson 2005; Zhang and Bloemer 2008). Beyond that – as people tend to apply double standards when it comes to self versus others (Wiedmann and Raffée 1986) – consumers may expect retailers to embody quite different values (for instance, a kind of “hypermorality”) from those they hold privately. Because of this potential discrepancy, it remains unclear whether a match of consumers’ and retailers’ values is necessary for improving images, or whether focusing on consumers’ personal values might be a more promising approach.

Our study contributes to value research in two ways: first, by testing three differing hypotheses, we consider whether such a match (the more retailers’ and consumers’ value orientations resemble each other with respect to all (H1) vs. most significant values, H2) is important or whether some crucial values must be fulfilled by retailers from a consumer’s point of view irrespective of the fact that these values are also essential in consumers’ personal lives. Second, we use an innovative approach for value measurement that allows intuitive attribution of values to self and to retailers without cognitive filtering (see below).

We test three hypotheses, differing in the above-mentioned operationalization of the predictor variable, to ascertain which form of value attribution contributes most to understanding the relationships between values, attitudes and behavioral intentions in a retailer context:

Hypothesis 1: The smaller the difference between personal value orientation and the values associated with a retailer, the more positive the attitude towards that retailer, which in turn positively influences consumers’ willingness to spend money (WTS) at this retailer (fit of consumers’ total value system with retailers’ values) versus

Hypothesis 2: The smaller the difference between consumers’ most relevant values and the retailers’ perceived positioning concerning these values, the more positive the attitude towards that retailer, which in turn positively influences consumers’ WTS at this retailer (fit of consumers’ most relevant values with retailers’ values) versus

Hypothesis 3: The stronger the attribution of purchase-relevant values to a retailer, the more positive the attitude towards that retailer, which in turn positively influences consumers’ WTS at this retailer (magnitudes of attribution of values to the retailer that are generally expected from retailers).

Empirical study: To test H1-H3, we conducted a study in four different German cities and interviewed participants (n = 398) of various ages (1/3: 18-30 years, 1/3: 31-50 years, 1/3: > 50 years). First, to ascertain consumers’ value orientation, participants were asked to attribute diverse values to themselves according to perceived relevance. Next, participants were asked to attribute the same values to three different grocery stores according to how strongly they perceived the retailers to represent these values.

We chose the picture-based scale for value measurement (Groeppel-Klein and Kobel 2017), which is based on Schwartz (1992) but portrays 26 subtle facets (i.e., according to Schwartz et al. 2012, p. 664, “a finer set of meaningful, conceptually distinct values”) instead of subordinate value categories and leads to less SDB than verbal scales. This picture scale was implemented via an intuitive touchscreen device to reduce cognitive filtering by obtaining more spontaneous reactions (supported by a pretest): participants expressed the relevance of each value by sliding the picture towards themselves (represented by a stick figure) if the value was important as a guiding principle in their life, or away from the figure if the value was not relevant. The software computed similarity-measures (metrical values ranging from 0 = not similar at all to 1 = total match) to convey the relevance of each value to the participant. The same technique was used for value-attribution to the retailers in the second part of the study.
The results show that values attributed to a retailer affect attitude and WTS (operationalized by asking participants to indicate how much of a voucher they would spend at retailer 1/2/3/others). However, they also reveal that the relationship between personal and retailer value orientation is not the most important; rather, the attribution of generally expected values from retailers has a stronger impact on consumers’ WTS (via attitude) than a match between personal and retailer values, as the size of the completely standardized indirect effect is highest (Hayes 2013, 187) within this case (Effect-Size$_{1\_indirect} = |-.1347|$, EffectSize$_{2\_indirect} = |-.1073|$, EffectSize$_{3\_indirect} = |.2094|) . People’s expectations towards retailers are decisive.

Our study contributes to a deeper understanding of the value-behavior relationship as the insights of self-image congruency can help explain the relevance of value-congruence in the retailer context. As self-congruency theory suggests, a match between consumers’ self-concept (including values) and retailers’ personality (expressed through value positioning) leads to benefits for retailers. However, more importantly, consumers appear to expect retailers to stand for ethical values, whereas these values are less relevant than others (e.g., friendship, trust) in consumers’ private lives.

**REFERENCES**


