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Aaron Ahuvia

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Existing Products and Brand Extension Judgments: Does Brand Category Context Matter?

Christopher Joiner, George Mason University

ABSTRACT

This research highlights how less accessible individual products and associations that are part of a brand category can influence consumers’ brand-related judgments. Altering the brand category context in which a brand extension is introduced can increase the salience of these less accessible products and associations. In situations where this information is diagnostic, individuals base their extension judgments on a different set of dimensions than they would if the extension had been presented in the context of just the brand name. The data collected provided evidence that these brand context changes affected the temporary representations used to judge a new extension.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980’s, the idea of leveraging brand associations through a variety of strategies (e.g., brand and line extensions, licensing, etc.) has received a great deal of attention (see e.g., Broniarczyk and Alba 1994; Keller 1993). As many companies have pursued active brand leveraging strategies, it is increasingly common to observe a series of products that are on the market under a single brand name (Dacin and Smith 1994). This market phenomenon suggests that one of the ways that consumers’ product information is likely to be organized is as brand categories (Boush 1993; Boush and Loken 1991; Dawar and Anderson 1994). There are clearly other possible organizations of consumer knowledge (e.g., by product categories, consideration sets, usage situations) however, brand categories are of growing importance. As a result, consumers are likely to consider the overall brand category when evaluating new products introduced with an existing brand.

Previous research in marketing has applied concepts from categorization to understand product categories (Loken and Ward 1990), brand categories (Boush and Loken 1991), and brand extensions (Dawar and Anderson 1994). Mixed-representation conceptualizations of categorical information include abstract, category level associations, as well as individual member, or exemplar, information (Sherman and Klein 1994). Although many brand category representations are influenced more by their most typical products, a wide range of exemplars and associations in the category may also influence consumers’ information processing and judgments.

BRAND CATEGORY STRUCTURE AND BRAND EXTENSIONS

One area in which brand category structure is particularly relevant is consumers’ evaluations and processing of brand extensions (Boush and Loken 1991; Dacin and Smith 1994). The relationship between an existing brand category and a new extension clearly influences perceptions and evaluations of the extension (e.g., Aaker and Keller 1990; Bottomley and Holden 2001; Boush and Loken 1991; Zhang and Sood 2004).

Recent research suggests that judgments of a brand extension may be influenced by whether different members of the brand category are made salient, or more accessible, during presentation of the extension. Changing individuals’ temporary representations of the brand category, by increasing the accessibility of existing products in a brand category, may have an effect on subsequent brand-related judgments (Chakravarti, MacInnis and Nakamoto 1990; Lord et al. 2004).

Brand Extension Evaluation and “Fit”

A starting point for many conceptualizations of how consumers evaluate brand extensions is that brand affect and brand extension “fit” play important roles (Broniarczyk and Alba 1994; Dawar and Anderson 1994). In the brand extension literature there is a rather loose application of terms such as “similarity,” “typicality (goodness-of-example),” “coherence,” “relatedness,” and “fit” (e.g., Aaker and Keller 1990; Boush and Loken 1991; Broniarczyk and Alba 1994; Dacin and Smith 1994; Dawar and Anderson 1994; Smith and Park 1992). A broader view, based on psychological research on similarity and categorization (e.g., Heit and Rubinstein 1994; Medin, Goldstone and Gentner 1993), suggests that fit is a more global measure that may be based on a variety of dimensions, and the specific context of the judgment may drive which of these are salient (Chakravarti, MacInnis and Nakamoto 1990).

Mixed-representation models of brand categories would suggest that it might be important to consider the role individual exemplars and the breadth of the category (Boush and Loken 1991; Meyvis and Janiszewski 2004) have on consumers’ fit judgments and evaluations of brand extensions. If consumers consider the entire brand category, a different, broader, set of potential fit bases may be salient than would be otherwise, and these, in turn, are likely to influence consumers’ judgments.

Flexible Category Representations

Category judgments are dependent upon the subset of relevant exemplars that happen to be momentarily salient or activated at the time a judgment is made (e.g., Bodenhausen et al. 1995; Lord et al. 2004; Sia et al. 1997; Smith and Zarate 1992). Because the subset of activated exemplars can change across time and situations, judgments of the same stimulus can change correspondingly (Bodenhausen et al. 1995; Lord et al. 2004; Sia et al. 1997). This suggests that different, specific individual products, as well as, or instead of, brand names, may play a role in brand extension judgment. Consistent with the notion of graded structure in a brand category, some exemplars and associations are likely to be more accessible than others when the brand is considered. When consumers make judgments about brand extensions, there are likely to be differences in the extent to which various products and associations are retrieved and used.

Typical Products, Context-Independence & Accessibility in Brand Category Representations

Previous category research suggests that many brand category representations are dominated by, and disproportionately reflect, the characteristics of the most typical product in the brand category (Rothbart and Lewis 1988; Smith and Zarate 1992). In many situations consumers give greater weight to prototypically good exemplars when making judgments about the brand category as a whole (Rothbart and Lewis 1988), and particularly, when judging or evaluating new instances of the category. Certain typical products in a brand category, as well as some of their stronger, more accessible associations, are relatively context independent (CI) when consumers consider the brand name. Other, less typical, products and associations may be more context dependent, only becoming salient in certain situations or contexts or when explicitly made salient.

1This conceptualization of context independence is closely related to the notion of accessibility in Feldman and Lynch’s (1988) accessibility-diagnosticsity framework and to the work of a number of attitude researchers (e.g., Hodges and Wilson 1993).
As a result, brand category representations may be less likely to represent the true breadth, or variability, that exists in the brand category in terms of both products and associations. Consumers may rely on a form of "prototype heuristic" (Cherniak 1984; Smith and Park 1992) in evaluating a new extension which may negatively impact those that are somewhat dissimilar from the typical exemplar(s). In many cases only a subset of the information available in a brand category’s knowledge base is used in a concept representation (Barsalou 1982; Sadler and Shoben 1993) for making related judgments. However, recent research on context effects suggests that in the case of multiple product brand categories temporarily salient exemplars and associations may influence consumers’ judgments (Boush 1993; Dawar and Anderson 1994).

**Brand Breadth and Individual Product Accessibility**

At issue are two types of information that may be made accessible by having consumers consider the entire brand category, each of which may influence brand extension judgments.

**Brand Category Breadth.** First, when all of the products in the brand category are considered, the true breadth of the brand category is made salient. If this information is seen as diagnostic, consumers should base their judgments on a broader conceptualization of the brand category. In general, wider categories allow for inclusion of a wider range of information than narrower categories (Meyvis and Janiszewski 2002; Park and Hastie 1987; Schwarz 1995). Including both typical and less typical products in the representation of the brand category should influence the standard against which the extension is judged. Recent brand extension research has found mixed evidence for the greater acceptability of brand extensions for broad brands versus narrow brands (Boush and Loken 1991; Dacin and Smith 1994; Meyvis and Janiszewski 2004; Sheinin and Schmitt 1994). However, the focus of this research is on examining judgments of the same extension from the same brand in different brand category context conditions.

**Individual Product Salience.** The second factor influencing perceptions of the extension is the relative salience of the brand’s less typical products. When the brand category is highlighted, less typical exemplars are available to play a more significant role in judgments of the new extension (Heit 1992; Whittleslea 1987). In most situations, the brand name or the prototypical products, and their associations are likely to be most salient and to influence brand extension judgments. In this case the first sufficiently diagnostic information retrieved is used for the judgment (Feldman and Lynch 1988). However, as an individual encounters the full range of products in the brand category, they are more likely to consider less context independent individual products and associations which are now more salient (e.g., Barsalou 1986; Lord et al. 2004).

**Relevance/Diagnosticity of the Brand Category Context**

The perceived diagnosticity, or relevance, of this new information must be considered as well (Broniarczyk and Alba 1994; Feldman and Lynch 1988). The brand category context should be seen as diagnostic for consumers’ judgments and processing when there is a discernible link between the extension and the brand category. In this context, it is the presence of some perceived similarity between the extension and an existing product in the brand category that is hypothesized to be the determining factor. Without this connection to the brand category, the extension should not benefit from the increased accessibility of either the category’s breadth or of its less typical products and associations.

We focus on moderately atypical, or poor fitting, extensions that are not similar to any of the brand’s typical products. In most situations, the typical products are the ones which influence brand-related thinking, and the extension would be viewed as a poor fit and evaluated relatively poorly. Having consumers consider the entire brand category is expected to change these judgments.

**Hypotheses.** The previous sections suggest that an extension will be judged differently across different brand category contexts. **Fit.** Consumers’ fit judgments of an extension with a link to the brand category are expected to be influenced by expanded brand category contexts, highlighting either a single atypical member of the brand category or the entire brand category. The extension should be rated higher with respect to fit in these contexts than in the context where just the brand name is present. Each of these contexts emphasizes one of the conceptual factors (brand breadth or individual product salience) to a greater extent than the other. When the entire brand category is highlighted (all-brand-products condition), the breadth of the brand category will likely be most salient, although the similarity between the extension and the similar atypical existing product in the brand category is likely to be salient as well. When just the atypical existing product is highlighted (atypical-product condition), the similarity between it and the extension is likely to be most salient, although this context may also increase perceptions of the breadth of the brand category. Although it is difficult to make predictions about which factor may be stronger, the effects on judgments are expected to be greater when the full brand category is presented.

H1:(a) Fit judgments for a brand extension with a link to the brand category will be greater when the full brand category is made salient than when either a single atypical product or no brand category elements are highlighted. (b) Fit judgments for a brand extension with a link to the brand category will be greater when a similar atypical product is made salient than when no brand category elements are highlighted.

Fit ratings for an extension without this explicit link to the category should not be affected by any of these expanded information contexts, since with no link to the brand category, the more salient information should not be seen as diagnostic for fit judgments.

H2: Fit judgments for a brand extension without a link to the brand category will be no different when the full brand category is made salient versus when a similar atypical product is made salient or when no brand category elements are highlighted.

**Evaluation.** Past research suggests that typical category members are linked more closely to the affect of the category (cf. Barsalou 1983; Loken and Ward 1990). As a result, extension evaluations should follow a pattern similar to the one described above for the fit measures.

H3:(a) Evaluations of a brand extension with a link to the brand category will be greater when the full brand category is made salient than when either a similar atypical product or no brand category elements are highlighted. (b) Evaluations of a brand extension with a link to the brand category will be greater when a single atypical product is made salient than when no brand category elements are highlighted.

H4: Evaluations of a brand extension without a link to the brand category will be no different when the full brand category is made salient versus when a similar atypical product is made salient or when no brand category elements are highlighted.
STUDY & EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Two brand categories (Haagen-Dazs and Levi’s) were selected through a series of preliminary pretests. In order to test the hypotheses presented above, the study made use of a 2 X 3 X 2 factorial design. The first factor was the type of extension. Pretests were used to develop two extensions which differed in one critical respect. One extension was chosen to have a link, or connection, to the brand category by being similar to an atypical existing product in the brand category (linked extension). The second extension was not seen as being similar to any existing product in the brand category (non-linked extension). For the second factor, the brand extensions were presented (between-subjects) in one of three different brand category information contexts. In the brand-name-only condition, the brand extensions were presented with only the brand name mentioned. This context acts as a control condition against which the other conditions can be compared. In the all-brand-products condition, the extensions were described in the context of all of the existing products in the brand category. The extensions were also presented in an atypical-product condition which mentioned the brand name and a single atypical existing product. Finally, the last factor in the design was brand category replicate presentation order. The two brand categories were used as within-subjects replicates in this study.

Pretests. In order to develop the stimuli for this study, a series of three pretests were carried out.

Pretest 1 and 2. In the first pretest, 24 subjects generated a list of potential brand extensions for use in the remaining pretests. The purpose of the second pretest (N=19) was to find two extensions for each of the brand names. Eight extensions were tested for each brand. Subjects rated each extension’s similarity to each of the existing products in the two brand categories on a scale from 0 (very dissimilar to) to 10 (very similar to). The Haagen-Dazs linked extension was flavored coffee (similar to Haagen-Dazs liqueur, M=6.11) and the non-linked extension was hot chocolate mix. The Levi’s linked extension was shoes (similar to Levi’s socks, M=6.47) and the non-linked extension was cologne. The two pairs of extensions were equally evaluated and were seen as equally poor fitting extensions. The Levi’s brand was associated with a broader set of products (6.89 vs. 4.47, t(18)=3.26, p<.005) on an 11-point scale rating the perceived number of items available under the brand name (Brand X offers only one product-Brand X offers a wide variety of products; cf. Sheinin and Schmitt 1994).

Pretest 3. A final group (N=41) rated the perceived breadth of the brand categories after reading one of two descriptions of the brand: with all of the products mentioned or with the single, atypical, product mentioned. Although, the full brand category description lead to greater brand category breadth perceptions, this measure was included in the main study as a check on this in the context of the different brand extension announcements. Finally, subjects rated the stimuli to be used in the main study on four 7-point scales. The stimuli were rated as simple, easy to understand, believable, and clear for both brand categories (Ms=5.76 to 6.00).

Experimental Procedure. Undergraduate students (N=193) participated in the study during class time and were randomly assigned to the same experimental condition in both brand category replicates. The study used mock-ups of new product announcements from The Wall Street Journal, introducing the extension in one of the three contexts described above. Subjects were asked to “form an overall opinion of the new product, the brand and its existing products, and the announcement.” Both the new product information and the brand category context were included in the new product announcements which focused on introducing the new product and presented a minimal amount of neutral product information.

Dependent Variables. Existing measures of similarity (overall), typicality, fit, and coherence were used to measure consumers’ judgments of the “fit” of the brand extensions. Evaluations of the extension were measured on three 0-10 semantic differential scales (unfavorable/favorable, very negative/very positive, poor/excellent). Respondents were asked a series of closed-end questions, ranging from 0 (disagree) to 10 (agree) regarding the process they used in evaluating the extensions, e.g., “In evaluating the new brand extension I compared it with Levi’s jeans” (Wansink and Ray 1996). Perceptions of the breadth of the brand category were measured on the scales from Pretest 2. Finally, respondents also rated each new product announcement on the four scales described in Pretest 3. The non-summed, individual fit items were analyzed using a principal components factor analysis with a varimax rotation. For both brand categories, all six of the items loaded on a single factor (all loadings>.632). Correlations among the six revealed an extremely close relation between the items, and the coefficient alpha for a measure summing the six individual items was above .93 for both brands. As a result, analyses were conducted on this composite fit measure (FITCOMP).

Believability Screening. The new product announcements were seen as simple, easy to understand, and clear for the Levi’s replicate (Ms=5.73, 5.84, 5.69) and for the Haagen-Dazs replicate (Ms=5.83, 5.82, 5.70). The product announcements were rated as believable in both brand categories (Levi’s M=5.66; Haagen-Dazs M=5.67). However, in spite of the high overall means, there were individual respondents who did not find the announcements believable. For these respondents, the entire survey was likely to be suspect so this question was used as a screening device. There were no significant differences in the number of screened respondents across the 12 experimental conditions in the two brand replicates and cell sizes ranged from 21 to 27.

Order Effects. Order main effects and interactions were not significant in either brand category replicate and the data was collapsed across order conditions.

Category Breadth Ratings. Changes in category breadth perceptions were central in the conceptual development of the hypotheses; however, it was unclear whether presenting a brand extension in the context of the full brand category would have the same impact on brand breadth perceptions as presenting the extension in the context of a single, atypical, existing product. Both the brand category and atypical product contexts were expected to increase ratings versus the brand name only condition. For the linked extension Levi’s brand breadth judgments were not significantly different in the all-brand-products (M=7.14) and atypical-product contexts (M=7.29; t(44)<1) though both were significantly greater than in the brand-name-only context (M=5.50; t(42)=2.28, p=.026 and t(44)=2.55, p=.013 respectively). For the non-linked extension the results were somewhat different. Once again breadth ratings in the all-brand-products (M=6.86) and atypical-product (M=5.92) contexts were not significantly different (t(44)=1.29, however, although the breadth ratings were higher in both these contexts than in the brand-name-only context (M=5.71), only the increase in the former approached significance (t(41)=1.53, p=.133).

Why were these breadth effects different for the two Levi’s extensions? It seems as if the nature of the extension itself may have some influence on breadth perceptions. It is possible that the cologne extension was viewed as different (more so than the linked shoe extension) from the Levi’s brand category. In this situation, since its

2Although in Pretest 2 both the shoes and cologne extension typicality ratings were moderate, and equivalent, in the main study brand-name-only (i.e., control) conditions, shoes were rated as a marginally better fit (M=5.39) than cologne (M=4.25, t(41)=1.96, p=.057).
introduction already represents a broadening of the category, it may have overwhelmed the presented brand category or atypical product context information.²

For the Haagen-Dazs linked extension, brand breadth judgments were significantly greater in the all-brand-products (M=6.43) than in the atypical-products context (M=3.80; t(44)=3.13, p<.01) and both were greater than in the brand-name-only context (M=2.39; t(42)=5.21, p<.001 and t(46)=1.90, p=.062). For the non-linked extension, although the breadth ratings were higher in the all-brand-products (M=6.36) and atypical-products contexts (M=4.91) than in the brand-name-only context (M=4.88), only the increase in the all-brand-products context was significant (t(44)=2.05, p=.044). In contrast to the Levi’s condition, the all-brand-products context increased breadth perceptions even for the non-linked extension. Haagen-Dazs hot chocolate mix may not have been seen as different from the Haagen-Dazs brand as cologne was for the Levi’s brand.³ As a result it may not have overwhelmed the additional product information to the same extent.

Hypotheses Testing. In order to test the hypotheses, a series of planned comparisons between the two expanded brand category context conditions and the brand-name-only context were conducted.

FITCOMP. In the Levi’s brand replicate, although the results were directionally as expected, there was only partial support for H1(a): the linked extension’s fit was significantly greater in the all-brand-products condition (M=6.51) than in the brand-name-only condition (M=5.39, p=.043), however, it was not significantly greater than in the atypical-product condition (M=6.00). The Haagen-Dazs data did not support H1(a): the linked extension’s fit was not significantly greater in the all-brand-products condition (M=5.04) than in either the brand-name-only condition (M=5.08) or in the atypical-product condition (M=5.51). H1(b) was not supported in either brand replicate, since fit judgments in the atypical-product condition were not significantly greater than in the brand-name-only condition.

H2 predicts that there would be no differences in fit judgments of a non-linked extension across any information contexts. In support of H2, none of the mean fit judgments for the Levi’s extension (M=4.02, 4.07, 4.25 for the all-brand-products, atypical-product, and brand-name-only conditions respectively) or the Haagen-Dazs extension (M=5.61, 6.52, 6.17 respectively) were significantly different.

Fit Measure Summary. There was a noticeable difference between the results for the two brand replicates. In spite of the fact that the Haagen-Dazs brand was perceived as being broader in the two expanded contexts there were no effects of these “expanded” contexts on the linked extension fit judgments. The closed-end processing responses were examined. Acknowledging that retrospective processing question have limitations, the data provide some interesting insights into the observed fit results. There were very few differences in the responses to any of these questions across the three brand extension information conditions for either the non-linked extension or for the linked extension. This was to be expected for the non-linked extension since the information about the products in the brand category was not expected to be diagnostic. Unexpectedly, there was only one significant and one marginally significant increase for the linked extension. Subjects reported comparing this extension marginally more often to “liqueur” in the all-brand-products context (M=2.81) than in the brand-name-only context (M=1.26; t(42)=1.69, p<.10). They also reported comparing the extension to “all Haagen-Dazs products” more often (M=4.52 vs 2.44; t(42)=2.09, p<.05). These processing results while consistent with our conceptual perspective, show that the context had little impact on processing of the extension. One possible explanation for this focuses on the nature of the products in the Haagen-Dazs brand category. All of the products in this brand category, with the single exception of the atypical product, liqueur, are frozen desserts. It is possible that presenting the entire brand category simply reinforced the association consumers have between Haagen-Dazs and “frozen desserts”. In the all-brand-products context, consumers may have acknowledged that Haagen-Dazs made more products than they usually thought, but since they were all frozen desserts, this information may not have “helped” judgments of the extension. This would suggest that the extension should have been seen as a better fit in the atypical-product context than in the all-brand-products context, since the “frozen dessert” associations may not have been as salient. In fact, the means were consistent with this line of reasoning, although not significantly so.

The Levi’s results were much more consistent with the two fit judgment hypotheses. Again, the results of the closed-end processing questions provide some additional insight into these effects. As conceptualized, for the linked extension there was a significant increase in reported comparisons to “socks” (i.e., the atypical existing product), to “a different Levi’s product (other than jeans or socks),” or to “all Levi’s products” in both the all-brand-products and atypical-product conditions when compared to the brand-name-only condition. Despite the fact that additional information about existing products in the brand category was presented, the lack of a link between cologne and the brand category caused the information to be seen as less diagnostic. For the non-linked extension, no piece of information was used significantly more in either expanded condition. Fit judgments of the Levi’s linked extension were greater when presented in the all-brand-products condition as compared to the brand-name-only condition. However, there was no significant difference between extension fit judgments in the all-brand-products and atypical-product conditions and breadth judgments in both conditions were virtually indistinguishable. This raises the question of whether there are any differences between the all-brand-products and atypical-product contexts. In spite of the equal breadth judgments, there is evidence that something may be changed when all the products are presented. According to the processing questions, subjects compared the linked extension to “a different Levi’s product (other than jeans or socks)” and to “all Levi’s products” to a greater extent in the all-brand-products condition than in the atypical-product condition. These data suggest that factors other than breadth may be influencing brand extension fit judgments. Broader categories tend to be more flexible, allowing less typical exemplars to be considered better members of the category than they would be in a narrower category (Honeck and Firment 1989). The all-brand-products context also provides explicit information about all the specific products that make up the brand category. This information about the entire distribution of products in the brand category may provide additional flexibility with respect to acceptance of a new extension above and beyond the information provided in the atypical-product context.

Brand Extension Evaluations. For both brand replicates, neither H3(a) nor 3(b) are supported. No differences in evaluations for the linked extension were observed across any of the information contexts (Levi’s Ms=6.83, 6.46, 6.44 and Haagen-Dazs Ms=5.97, 6.18, 5.86 for the all-brand-products, atypical-product, and brand-name-only conditions). In both replicates, and consistent with H4, no differences in extension evaluations were found between any of the information contexts for the non-linked extension (Levi’s Ms=5.18, 5.08, 5.29 and Haagen-Dazs’s Ms=6.65, 7.15, 6.89).

³In the brand-name-only condition, Levi’s cologne was seen as a poorer fit (M=4.25) than Haagen-Dazs hot chocolate mix (M=6.17; t(43)=3.11, p<.05).
Extension Evaluation Summary. The main evaluation effect was not supported in either brand replicate. It is possible that evaluation effects are more distal, occurring gradually after fit judgments have already been influenced. Over time, extension evaluations might reveal the same effects. It is also conceivable, however, that the magnitude of the fit judgment effects observed in this study were not large enough to produce changes in extension evaluations. A final possibility is that extension evaluation effects may be limited to situations where extensions are evaluated more poorly to begin with. In the Levi’s replicate, both the non-linked extension ($M=5.29$) and the linked extension ($M=6.44$) were evaluated above the scale midpoint in the control conditions. It may be that if an extension is already evaluated somewhat positively improvements in fit perceptions do not carry over to extension evaluations. In these situations, other factors, like direct experience, may be required to change extension evaluations.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Overall, the results of the study provide moderate support for the influence that different brand category contexts have on consumers’ brand extension judgments. There are a few themes which emerge from the results.

Brand Category Replicates. As previously reported, there was a different pattern of results for the two brand category replicates. The results for the Levi’s brand replicate were more consistent with the hypotheses. These differences suggest that other important brand category-specific factors may exist that can influence the extent to which different contexts influence brand-related judgments. Investigating these additional factors is an important future research topic.

Linked vs. Unlinked Extensions: Brand Category Relevance. The strongest results in the Levi’s brand replicate were the differences in the effects the various brand category contexts had on judgments of the two types of extensions examined. Only the linked extension was affected by changes to the context in which the extension was introduced. The processing questions provided further evidence of this difference. These differences did not carry over to extension evaluations in contrast with the prediction made by H3.

All-Brand-Products vs. Atypical-Product Contexts. It was hypothesized that the effects of changing the brand category context would be greater in the all-brand-products context than in the context where a single atypical product was mentioned. The data addressing this distinction were somewhat unclear. Supplemental processing measures provided some evidence that the all-brand-products context had a greater impact on brand-related judgments, but the evidence is certainly not conclusive on this issue.

This research takes an important step in acknowledging the role of individual products, the relative salience and accessibility of these products, and individuals’ temporary brand representations, in brand-related information processing, all of which have been previously under-examined aspects of brand research.

**REFERENCES**


