The Effect of Brand Personality on Evaluations of Utilitarian Product Benefits

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This study explores the effect of brand personality on evaluations of utilitarian benefits. More than 30 studies have empirically explored the effects of brand personality on attitudes towards a brand. However, the vast majority of these studies have explored the effect on attitudes that serve social identity functions. This study investigates the effect of brand personality on evaluations of utilitarian brand benefits. Results show that under conditions of high perceived risk, brand personality affects evaluations of utilitarian benefits, and that this effect is moderated by the perceived relevance of brand personality information.

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themselves with models in an advertisement. The second study will seek to determine if individuals from different cultures vary in the manner in which social comparisons are made.

The first study will attempt to determine if individuals from collectivist and individualistic cultures process social comparison information differently in terms of how an advertisement’s content is used to make a comparison. The research of Miller (1984) and Shweder and Bourne (1983) has suggested that individuals from collectivist cultures process information about themselves and others differently than persons from individualistic cultures. Individuals from a collectivist culture are more apt to hold an interdependent view of self and others. By definition, an interdependent view of self is based on a conception of self that is defined relative to one’s membership in a collective. As a result, an individual’s self-conception is inextricably tied to social roles and functions as well as to the moral responsibilities owed the group. Conversely, in individualistic cultures persons are more apt to hold an independent view of self and others. An independent construal of self is founded on the belief that the self is a unique, autonomous being that maintains an existence outside of the social environment in which it operates. Thus, a person from an individualistic culture is more apt to conceive of self with respect to personal thoughts, feelings, attitudes, etc. In a similar vein, this same individual is likely to conceive of others relative to their unique attributes, characteristics, feelings, etc. Thus, based on an independent view of self, the person is abstracted from social roles and moral responsibilities. Consequently, persons in individualistic cultures typically view the world from a personal vantage point and are more likely to rely on dispositional-based casual explanations. Therefore, unlike collectivists who describe and compare persons by reference to actions, individualists describe and compare persons primarily through means of personality traits (e.g., he is a very mean person.).

Based on the above cultural differences in person and self-conception, there are important implications for how an individual will process information in an advertisement when asked to make a social comparison with the content (i.e. model/models, background setting, product) of an advertisement. We hypothesize that H1) individuals from a collectivist culture will process contextual and relational aspects of an advertisement when making a social comparison with greater frequency than individuals from an individualistic culture; and H2) individuals from an individualistic culture will process trait and dispositional aspects of an advertisement when making a social comparison with greater frequency than individuals from a collectivist culture.

The purpose of the second study is to determine if individuals from different cultures vary in the manner in which social comparisons are made. Based on Festinger’s theory, it is being argued that a micro-level theory (i.e. at the individual level of psychological functioning) be extended to incorporate macro-sources of influences (i.e. cultural influences as they are mediated through the social structure’s definition of the in-group. Thus, in making the above arguments for cultural differences in self-construals based on variations in the meaning and significance attached to the in-group, there is expected to be cultural variations in the definition of what constitutes a “similar other.” Thus, it is likewise anticipated that there will be variations in the amount of attention paid to various sources of social comparison data. Hence, when an individual is exposed to both a culturally-congruous and culturally-incongruous advertisement, the following hypothesis are proposed with respect to attention to social comparison information:

**H3:** Individuals with an interdependent construal of self will pay overall less attention to social comparison information when exposed to both culturally-congruous and culturally-incongruous advertisements.

**H3a:** Individuals with an interdependent construal of self will pay more attention to social comparison information when exposed to a culturally-congruous advertisement.

**H3b:** Individuals with an interdependent construal of self will pay less attention to social comparison information when exposed to a culturally-incongruous advertisement.

**H4:** Individuals with an independent construal of self will pay overall more attention to social comparison information when exposed to both culturally-congruous and culturally-incongruous advertisements.

**H4a:** Individuals with an independent construal of self will pay more attention to social comparison information when exposed to a culturally-congruous advertisement.

**H4b:** Individuals with an independent construal of self will pay more attention to social comparison information when exposed to a culturally-incongruous advertisement.

The two studies will be implemented with participants from collectivist and individualist cultures respectively. The extent to which attention is paid to social comparison information will be gauged using the Attention to Social Comparison Information (ATSCI) instrument constructed by Lennox and Wolfe (1984). The extent to which a person is motivated by an external versus internal source of influence while engaged in the social comparison process will be measured by assessing internal versus external locus of control.

This paper represents an initial inquiry into how differences in culture impact the manner in which individuals engage in processes of social comparison with advertisements. Results from this research will help further the understanding of the interactions of cultural influences, self-evaluations and information processing.

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Since Aaker’s (1997) article, more than 30 studies have empirically explored the effects of brand personality on attitudes towards a brand (e.g. Johar, Sengupta and Aaker 2005; Batra and Miles Homer 2004; Aaker 1999; etc). However, most studies have explored the effects on attitudes that serve social identity functions. Some studies have included products that primarily serve utilitarian functions, but none have explicitly explored the indirect influence of brand personality on brand attitudes via evaluations of utilitarian benefits.
Brand personality associations may include dimensions such as Sincerity and Competence (identified as first and third in terms of importance in Aaker’s 1997 study), that are not typically relevant for social identity brand concepts. Rather, these dimensions may be perceived as diagnostic (Feldman and Lynch 1988) for evaluating product functionality, in particular at higher levels of perceived risk.

When consumers feel that uncertainty about whether a product will deliver the expected utility is high–perceived risk increases (Bettman 1973, Dowling and Staelin 1994). Utilitarian products that have significant credence qualities (Darby and Karni 1973) are associated with higher levels of perceived risk. We suggest that under such conditions, consumers may perceive certain brand personality dimensions as diagnostic for evaluating expected utilitarian benefits—specifically those that invoke perceptions of expertise and/or trustworthiness: Competence and Sincerity.

**H1:** In conditions of high (but not low) perceived risk, brand personality affects evaluations of utilitarian brand benefits.

We further suggest that the degree to which consumers find brand personality information relevant will moderate the effect of brand personality on evaluations of utilitarian benefits.

**H2:** The effect of brand personality on evaluations of utilitarian brand benefits is moderated by the perceived relevance of brand personality information.

**Method**

115 undergraduate students were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (perceived risk: high or low) x 2 (strength of brand personality associations: strong or weak) between-subjects design. Subjects were told they would be evaluating a new consumer magazine (fictitious).

The uncertainty manipulation was incorporated into an excerpt from this magazine as a product category review. After reading about the magazine and the example product review, subjects viewed an ad containing descriptions of product attributes and the brand personality manipulation.

Based on pretests, electric toothbrushes were selected, as this product was rated as primarily utilitarian, and average on the level of credence involved (3.35 on scale from 1= no uncertainty to 7=great uncertainty).

For the uncertainty manipulation, subjects received one of two product category reviews stating either that i) all electric toothbrushes perform equally well (low uncertainty) or, ii) there are great differences between brands, with some causing serious wear on teeth and gums.

The brand personality dimension Competence was manipulated in an ad for the Dentox (fictitious) electric toothbrush. In addition to (typical) product attributes the ads contained a statement informing subjects either that the electric toothbrush was developed by the highly qualified team of researchers at Dentox (strong condition), or that the electric toothbrush was developed by a team at Dentox (weak condition).

**Dependent variables.** Subjects rated the product’s utilitarian benefits on three scales (7-point) anchored by very good/very bad, very effective/not very effective, and very gentle/not very gentle. These items were averaged to form an index (α=.72).

**Independent variables and moderator variable.** Subjects reported perceived uncertainty involved with purchase of an electric toothbrush on a 3-item scale adopted from Dowling and Staelin (1994) index (α=.77). Brand personality (competence) was rated on a nine-item (5-point Likert scale) scale adapted from the Aaker scale. Perceived relevance of brand personality was rated on a single item using a 7-point Likert scale (very relevant—not at all relevant).

Factor analysis of the items used to measure competence revealed that five of the items loaded on a factor closely resembling personal competence, so these five were kept for further analysis as an index of competence. Notably, the four items that were dropped are linked to technical expertise, and had no effect on evaluations.

**Results**

**Manipulation checks.** An ANOVA on the perceived uncertainty index showed a main effect of level of uncertainty (F(1, 113)=36.12, p<.001). An ANOVA on the brand personality index showed a main effect of strength of brand personality (F(1, 113)=7.99, p<.01).

**Test of H1.** The two-way interaction between perceived uncertainty and strength of brand personality associations on evaluation of utilitarian benefits was significant (F(1, 113)=4.57, p<.05). In high risk conditions, evaluations of product functionality were more favorable in response to strong (versus weak) brand personality associations (Ms=4.9 versus 3.9; F(1, 56)=31.26, p<.01). In low risk conditions evaluations of utilitarian benefits did not vary significantly as a function of brand personality information (Ms=4.9 versus 4.5). Thus support is found for H1: brand personality affects evaluations of utilitarian brand benefits under conditions of high perceived risk.

**Moderation analysis**

Performing separate analysis of low versus high conditions of uncertainty, we (1) regressed the evaluations of utilitarian benefits on the index of brand personality; (2) regressed the evaluation of utilitarian benefits on the index of brand personality and the perceived relevance of brand personality; and (3) regressed the evaluation of utilitarian benefits on the index of brand personality, the perceived relevance of brand personality, and the interaction between these two (Baron and Kenny 1986). Under conditions of low uncertainty, relevance of brand personality had no significant effect (standardized coefficients; all relevant p-values>.1) However, under conditions of high uncertainty the perceived relevance of brand personality significantly moderated the effect of brand personality on evaluations of utilitarian brand benefits (standardized coefficients; all relevant p-values<.05). Thus support is found for H2.

**Limitations**

This study extends research on brand personality by identifying conditions under which brand personality may indirectly affect consumer attitude via utilitarian benefits. However, to improve the generalizability of our findings, further work is needed to identify the potential impact of other brand personality dimensions—e.g. Sincerity. Moreover, overall brand attitude should be included in future research in order to examine both indirect effects and potential direct effects of brand personality.