Transferring Meaning From Cultural Entities to Brands

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Marketers often pair brands with cultural entities such as people, places, images, events, and other brands in order to transfer associations from the cultural entity to the brand (McCracken 1986). In a preliminary experiment, we investigate the process of meaning transfer from a celebrity to a fictional watch brand. We also explore whether the inferred motivation of the endorser moderates the transfer of meaning. Our results suggest that personality traits originally associated with an endorser can transfer to a brand even when consumers infer that the celebrity’s endorsement is commercially motivated.

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Because of their implications for marketplace success, brand personality and equity are highly important issues for marketing researchers and practitioners. Researchers from varying theoretical backgrounds suggest that brands can gain meaning from the cultural entities—e.g., people, places, images, words, events, and other brands—with which they are associated (e.g., Keller 1993, 2003; McCracken 1986, 1989). However, while this idea is well-accepted, surprisingly little research has investigated how and when meaning transfers from a cultural entity to a brand. In particular, questions remain as to whether meaning transfer depends on the conditions under which the brand is paired with the cultural entity.

Although consumers accept brand meaning, they often actively participate in the negotiation or formation of the meaning for a brand (e.g., Allen, Fournier, and Miller forthcoming). Research on the persuasion knowledge model, attribution theory, and consumer resistance suggests that the transfer of meaning from a cultural entity (CE) to a brand may depend on consumers’ inferences of why the CE is paired with the brand (Friedstad and Wright 1994; Holt 2002). If consumers believe that a marketer is pairing a CE and a brand as a commercial tactic, consumers may resist or discount meaning that they feel is inauthentic or forced upon the brand. Hence, meaning transfer may be inhibited if consumers perceive a co-occurrence of brand and cultural entity as commercially “contaminated” (Grayson and Martinec 2004).

This research explores the transfer of meaning associated with a CE to a new brand. Importantly, we also investigate the extent to which the pairing of the CE and the product seems authentic versus commercially-motivated influences the transfer of associations from the CE to the brand. Whereas the research cited above suggests that inferences of commercial intent would inhibit meaning transfer, work on memory suggests that transfer may occur from the pairing, regardless of such inferences.

Method

This study manipulated the cultural entity paired with a new brand to explore the transfer of meaning. The study also manipulated the implied motivation for the pairing. Since brand personality traits are one facet of a brand’s meaning that may readily transfer from a brand’s user to the brand itself (Aaker 1997; Keller 1993), we selected two celebrities with distinctive and strongly associated personality traits to be paired with the brand (pretests indicated that Clint Eastwood and Jessica Simpson have relatively low personality overlap, with Eastwood more rugged and tough, and Simpson “ditsy” and young (p-values<.001)). We manipulated which celebrity was described as wearing the brand, and the extent to which inferences of motive were activated, and then assessed the extent to which the personality traits originally associated with the celebrity endorser were transferred to the brand.

Students at the University of Colorado (147) were randomly assigned to a 2 (celebrity: Clint Eastwood or Jessica Simpson) x 2 (endorser motivation: genuine interest or paid sponsorship) between subjects design. Participants first completed a study in which they read a series of three brief fashion articles. The second article was one of four versions that contained the celebrity pairing and the endorser motivation manipulations.

Two purportedly independent studies followed: a five-minute distracter task and a “brand personality survey” in which participants rated Slade watches plus three filler brands (counterbalanced) on a series of personality traits. The brands were rated on seven-point, “disagree” and “agree” scales for intelligent, strong, young, sexy, honest, ditsy, dull, tough, exciting, rugged, attractive, foolish, old, and sincere (e.g., Aaker 1997).

Results

A 2 x 2 ANOVA revealed a main effect of celebrity on the following personality traits: tough, rugged, strong, old, young, and ditsy. Slade watches were seen as significantly tougher (t=4.47, p<.0001), more rugged (t=4.70, p<.0001), stronger (t=-1.91, p=.058), older (t=-3.10, p=.002), less young (t=2.59, p=.01), and less ditsy (t=4.12, p<.0001) when participants read about Clint Eastwood wearing the watch versus Jessica Simpson. The endorser motivation manipulation did not have a significant main effect on any of these trait ratings. There was only one significant interaction effect. The effect of celebrity on ratings of “old” interacted with the endorser motivation such that Slade was perceived as significantly older when paired with Clint Eastwood in the genuine interest condition versus the paid sponsorship condition (t=2.38, p=.02). Other than this one case, the effect of celebrity pairing was not influenced by the endorser motivation, even though a check showed that the manipulation resulted in significantly more inferences of commercial motive in the paid sponsorship than the genuine interest condition.

Discussion

Our data provides some of the first evidence in a controlled experimental setting showing that meaning transfers from a celebrity to a brand. Interestingly, we did not find evidence that meaning transfer is attenuated when participants infer that a celebrity endorses a brand because of a financial incentive rather than a genuine interest in or liking for the brand. Although there are many possible explanations for a null result, the absence of an effect of the endorser motive is somewhat surprising. Given that our endorser motivation manipulation check succeeded, these results suggest that meaning transfer resulting from pairing a cultural entity to a brand may be fairly robust. At a minimum, the results suggest that even when consumers think about the marketing intent behind a cultural entity-brand pairing, they may learn the presented brand meanings.

Our first experiment documents a main effect of meaning transfer from a cultural entity to a brand. While evidence of an effect is a first step, we propose to investigate the specific processes that mediate and factors that moderate meaning transfer. A better understanding of meaning transfer will help marketers more efficiently construct desired brand identities, consumers better resist undesired marketer influences, and public policy makers formulate more informed decisions concerning marketing practices such as celebrity endorsement, product placement etc. that attempt to create brand meaning through the co-occurrence of cultural entities and brands.