When the Ingroup Fails to Indicate Brand Meaning: Exploring the Role of Identity Centrality in Self-Brand Connections

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The results from a quasi-experimental design study revealed that identity centrality was a positive moderator of the relationship between reference group brand associations and self-brand connections. This moderating influence led to a significant difference in self-brand connections between reference group members who rated their identity as low in centrality compared to those who rated their identity as high in centrality. Identity centrality did not significantly impact self-brand connections when self-construal and brand symbolism were taken into account.

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Self-brand connections are defined as the degree to which a consumer has incorporated the brand into their self-concept (Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005). Escalas and Bettman (2005) found that brand associations consistent with an ingroup led to stronger self-brand connections compared to brand associations inconsistent with an ingroup. This is because brands become more meaningful the more closely they are linked to an individual’s identity. But what happens to this relationship if another identity other than the ingroup identity is associated with the brand? Or how are self-brand connections influenced if the reference group is associated with multiple brands? This study seeks to address the former question by examining the nature of multiple identities in the formation of self-brand connections.

Markus and Kunda (1986) put forth the term “malleable” (or working) self-concept to refer to an individual’s various self-conceptions (e.g. ideal self, perceived self, social self) which function to provide an interpretative and evaluative context for the overall view of the self (Markus and Wurf 1987). To date the consideration of multiple selves has been omitted from research linking reference group influence to self-brand connections (Escalas and Bettman 2005; Chaplin and Roedder-John 2005). This omission leads to questions surrounding the differential attitudes and cognitions within the perceived reference group. This is supported by literature in social psychology which suggests individuals assign a level of significance to their identities which directly impacts group driven attitudes, behaviors, and cognitions (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, and Scabini 2006; Settles 2004; Stryker and Serpe 1994). It is argued that because individuals possess multiple identities, an individual’s self-brand connection should be reflective of the identity that is most central to the brand. In simpler terms, if the brand is associated with a particular ingroup, then the ingroup identity should carry the most psychological importance in interactions with the brand.

Identity centrality, defined as the psychological importance one places on a given identity (Settles 2004) can aid in explaining how individuals negotiate multiple identities exacerbating one and buffering others. Identity centrality requires conscious awareness and is usually measured by asking individuals to rank different identities according to their importance (Rane and McBride 2000). Self-brand connections are likely to be enhanced when an ingroup identity is central to the brand compared to when it is not. This research shows that the differential self-brand connections within the ingroup are due to the lack of value expressive influence by other reference group members when centrality is taken into consideration.

Methodology

The procedure was a replication of that used by Escalas and Bettman (2005). Changes dealt with the order of measures and the incorporation of the identity centrality measure.

Results

The consideration of identity centrality in this study was based on the expectation that ingroup members will form differential self-brand connections for the brand image match condition. Extending these findings, identity centrality positively moderated self-brand connections for the ingroup. This result is significant in that it reveals the significance of centrality in examining self-brand interactions. It is not enough to say that an identity is salient to a particular brand. As evidenced in the results, identity centrality leads to stronger self-brand connections in the brand image does match condition. This difference among ingroup members indicates there is varying levels of importance within the group. From a marketer’s standpoint this could mean the difference in message effectiveness. Salience may be sufficient enough to encourage an individual to attend to a particular message. But is it enough to create an emotional bond? Is it enough to get the consumer to buy the product? It is argued that centrality is true a catalyst for self-brand connections.

The moderating influences of identity centrality on outgroup brand associations was insignificant. It difficult to hypothesize the directional influence of identity centrality in outgroup effects due to various meanings associated with outgroups. Identity importance can be hypothesized to influence the outgroup but it will vary depending on the desired degree of divergence from the outgroup. For instance, an individual may declare an outgroup but may desire to eventually become one its members (e.g. fraternities and sororities). Or perhaps an individual may have some level of similarity with the outgroup. These scenarios make it difficult to predict how identity centrality will influence self-brand connections.

Brand associations not matching the image of the outgroup were lower for individuals with an independent self-construal compared to interdependent self-construal. This finding was consistent with Escalas and Bettman’s (2005) results. They reasoned that outgroup brand associations will have the greatest effect on participants with independent self construals due to their strong differentiation needs. This was evidenced in this study as well.

Identity centrality moderated the influence of self-construal such that the degree of self-brand connections for independent versus interdependent self-construal was reversed. Interdependents formed lower self-brand connections than independents. Interdependents were thought to shift their focus from outgroup differentiation to ingroup differentiation, leading to lower self-brand connections. By doing this they are attempting to show ingroup favoritism and seeking distinctiveness from the outgroup. Lower self-brand connections for individuals with interdependent self-construals is more in line with the self-construal research which views interdependents are more collectivist in nature (Singelis 1994). The contrast in findings due to identity centrality may be worth investigating the continued use of the self-construal to examine individual differences in self-brand connections.

Overall, the pattern of results supports the general idea proposed in this essay: individuals use brands to create or communicate their self-concept partly in an effort to meet certain identity goals (e.g. self-verification, self-enhancement) and do it more so when a particular identity is central.