Celebrity Endorsement and Self-Brand Connections

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We propose that consumers purchase brands in part to construct their self-concepts and, in so doing, form self-brand connections. We focus on celebrity endorsements as a source of brand meaning. Results from our first study show that brands with images consistent with a celebrity endorser enhance self-brand connections for consumers when they like the celebrity, but harm them when consumers dislike the celebrity. Our second experiment finds that the degree to which a brand is symbolic, i.e., able to communicate something about the user, moderates this effect, with more symbolic brands having stronger effects than less symbolic brands. Our third study finds that the effect of celebrity endorsement on self-brand connections is augmented when consumer’s self-esteem is threatened.

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Symposium Summary

An Examination of the Complex Relationship Between the Self and Consumer Contexts

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Session Overview

Objective, Topics, and General Orientation

The objective of the proposed symposium is to stimulate discussion and encourage research on the dynamic relationship between the self and consumer contexts. Researchers have argued that consumers evaluate and choose brands on the basis of whether they express aspects of the self to others, or fulfill some self-enhancement or self-verification goal. Although research has clearly shown that consumers evaluate and choose brands based on these self-related motivations (thereby forming self-brand connections [SBC]), several research questions remain unanswered—are there important moderators to consider that would further illuminate the relationship between the self and consumption? Additionally, research has explored the influence of brand evaluations on SBC, but to what extent might SBC affect brand evaluations? Finally, a major assumption is that consumers bring salient and relevant self concepts to the brand consumption context, however to what extent might the consumption context influence consumers’ self concepts? The aim of this session is to shed some light on these research questions.

Paper #1, by Escalas and Bettman, questions the simple manner in which researchers currently view how consumers’ views of the self drive consumption and present findings on how self-enhancement goals and brand symbolism moderate the influence of brand meaning on self-brand connections. Paper #2, by Cheng, White and Chaplin, challenges the unidirectional assumption that brand evaluations/attitudes determine SBC, and present results that suggest a feedback effect. Specifically, the authors suggest that when consumers make a SBC, brand-evaluation will become an important component of self-evaluation, and therefore, is likely to be affected by whether consumers make SBC. Paper #3, by Forehand, Perkins, and Reed II, add another dimension of complexity to the relationship between the self-concept and consumer contexts by questioning whether consumers always bring their identities to the context. The authors present evidence to show that social identities are automatically influenced by contextual information about others. Each paper moves away from the simple way in which researchers currently view the role of the self-concept in consumer contexts and provides empirical evidence to shed some light on the dynamic nature of this relationship (e.g., introducing moderators and challenging assumptions).

In summary, this session presents a dynamic view of the relationship between consumers’ self-concepts and consumption activities. That is, while consumers’ views of the self drive consumption, these views are also constantly being shaped by the consumption context itself. This perspective paves new avenues for research, such as the potential for consumption activities to transform consumers (via transformation of self-concept) and for contextual factors to determine the self-consumption relationship. The proposed session will serve as a good platform for researchers who are interested in the relationship between the self-concept and consumption as well as those interested in advertising and branding, to communicate and develop possible future research.

Theoretical Contribution

Together, these three papers provide a fresh perspective to study the relationship between the self and consumer contexts. The current view is that individuals’ self-concepts shape their consumer behavior. The emerging view from these papers is that while the self certainly drives consumption, it is more complicated than we think (as paper #1 suggests). Moreover, the directional relationship between the self and consumption may also be more complicated than we think (as paper #2 suggests). Finally, the self may not always drive consumption, but rather be driven by consumption (as paper #3 suggests). Each paper makes additional contributions. First, Escalas and Bettman provide an empirical demonstration of the ideas in McCracken’s (1989) theory of meaning movement by demonstrating that brands endorsed by celebrities are a source of symbolic brand meaning. In doing so, they provide additional evidence that consumers use brands to communicate their self-concept. Cheng et al., merge the brand extension/dilution and the self-concept literatures to show how SBC can have a feedback effect and influence brand evaluations. Forehand et al., contribute to the advertising literature by showing that ad exposure has a profound effect on not just changes in brand attitude or purchase intentions, but also social identities.

Extended Abstracts

“Celebrity Endorsement and Self-Brand Connections”

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People engage in consumption behavior in part to construct their self-concepts and to create their personal identities (Richins 1994; McCracken 1989; Belk 1988). We examine one aspect of this construction process, namely the appropriation of the symbolic meanings of brands derived from celebrity endorsement. Building on McCracken’s (1989) theory of meaning movement, we propose that the symbolic properties of the celebrity become associated with the brands the celebrity endorses. These symbolic meanings can then be transferred from the celebrity to consumers as they select brands with meanings congruent with their self-concept. When the symbolic properties associated with brands via celebrities are used to construct the self or to communicate the self-concept to others, a connection is formed with the brand. Our first study provides empirical support for the notion that brands endorsed by celebrities are connected to consumers’ self-concepts as they use these brands to define and create themselves. Our second study supports the hypothesis that the self-construction process is moderated by brand symbolism, that is, the degree to which the brand communicates something about its user. Our third study is designed to test the hypothesis that the self-construction process is driven by self-enhancement motivations in consumers (cf. Escalas and Bettman 2003).

Our paper provides an empirical demonstration of the ideas in McCracken’s (1989) theory of meaning movement by demonstrating that brands endorsed by celebrities are a source of symbolic brand meaning. Consumers form associations between the symbolism associated with the celebrity and the brands they endorse. These meanings are in turn transferred from the brand to the consumer as consumers actively construct themselves by selecting brands with meanings relevant to an aspect of their self-concept. Consumers form connections to brands that become meaningful through this process, and self-brand connections are intended to measure the extent to which individuals have incorporated brands into their self-
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A critical distinction in terms of such construction processes is that between brand associations derived from celebrities with whom consumers identify or feel an affinity and associations derived from celebrities that consumers do not like or do not perceive as being similar to themselves. Consumers are likely to accept meanings from brands associated or consistent with a celebrity whom they perceive as similar to themselves or whom they aspire to be and to reject meanings associated or consistent with a celebrity who does not represent either who they are or who they would like to become. We propose that when consumers appropriate or distance themselves from brand associations based on celebrity endorsement, they do so in a manner that is consistent with self-related needs, such as self-enhancement (Escalas and Bettman 2003).

Results from our first experiment show that the degree to which celebrity usage influences self-brand connections is contingent on an individual’s perceived similarity with a celebrity. In this study, we measured the extent to which 52 undergraduate student participants felt that seven popular celebrities were likely to use the product they endorsed and the extent to which the participants perceived themselves to be similar to the seven celebrities (both averaged multi-item scales, with continuous variables used in the within subjects analyses). We find a significant celebrity-use by similarity-to-celebrity interaction ($F(1, 1194)=7.61, p<.01$), where there is a stronger positive influence of celebrity endorsement when the participants perceive themselves to be similar to the celebrity.

Results from our second study, run with 361 eLab participants, replicate the finding that the degree to which celebrity endorsement influences self-brand connections is contingent on celebrity type (here, operationalized as most vs. least favorite celebrity) and match between celebrity and brand image, with a significant celebrity-type by image-match interaction ($F(1, 318)=10.31, p<.01$). Furthermore, we find this effect is moderated by the degree to which the brand is symbolic, i.e., able to communicate something about the user, with more symbolic brands having stronger effects than less symbolic brands (Escalas and Bettman 2005). We find a significant three way interaction, with steeper slopes for symbolic brands ($F(1, 314)=4.76, p<.03$). The positive effect of celebrity endorsement on self-brand connections is stronger for brands that are perceived to communicate something symbolic about the brand’s user compared to brands that do not. On the other hand, symbolic brands are more likely to be rejected when endorsed by non-similar, disliked celebrities.

Our third study, run with 311 eLab participants, examines whether self-enhancement needs moderate the influence of celebrity endorsement on self-brand connections. Research on reference groups has found that consumers with strong self-enhancement goals tend to form self-brand connections to brands used by aspiration groups, that is, groups for which the consumer wishes to become a member (Escalas and Bettman 2003). We find a similar process is at work with celebrity endorsement. In this study, we threaten self-esteem for half the participants, thus activating self-enhancement motivations drive the process by which consumers build connections to favorable celebrity images or distance themselves from unfavorable celebrity images.

References


“When Poor Brand Extensions Result in Favorable Brand Evaluations”

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An impressive body of research demonstrates that individuals use products to create and communicate their self-concepts (e.g., Belk 1988; Sirgy 1982; Solomon 1986). Particularly interesting in this regard are consumer brands, which are ideally suited to this process given the wide availability of brands and the range of distinctive brand images they reflect (e.g., Fournier 1998; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Consumers can appropriate associations belonging to brands, such as user characteristics or personality traits, and incorporate them into their self-concepts, thereby forming self-brand connections (SBC; Escalas and Bettman 2003).

The prevailing view of how brands are related to the self-concept is that consumers have certain beliefs and evaluation of a brand, which affect whether consumers make SBC (i.e., Brand-evaluations → SBC). Is it possible that a feedback effect might be operative (i.e., SBC → Brand-evaluations)? In other words, once consumers have made a SBC, how resilient are their brand evaluations when, for example, the brand’s favorable image becomes questionable? Are consumers likely to defend their brand-evaluations given their strong SBC? Or, are they likely to change their brand-evaluations given the obvious challenges to the brand’s image? More research is needed to address questions of this nature.

This research investigates the role that self-brand connections play in brand evaluations. Of particular interest is the question of how high SBC consumers evaluate the parent brand when it launches a poor brand extension. To date, the brand extension literature has found that the effect of extension performance on parent brand evaluations depends upon the perceived typicality of the extension. Negative performance of a typical brand extension leads to brand dilution but negative performance of an atypical brand extension does not (Loken and John 1993). Our research investigates how this process could be moderated by consumers’ existing SBC. We argue that when consumers make a SBC, brand evaluation becomes an important component of self-evaluation. We know from the psychology literature that individuals are
predisposed to try to maintain positive self-evaluation (Tesser 2000; Brown, Collins and Schmidt 1988). Therefore, in order to maintain a positive self-evaluation and avoid a potential threat to the self, it is likely that consumers with high versus low SBC will evaluate the parent brand favorably, even when the brand extension is objectively poor on multiple dimensions.

In study 1, we test the effects of extension typicality and extension performance on brand evaluations for consumers with high versus low SBC. We successfully replicated the typicality effect on brand dilution for those with low SBC. Specifically, we found a significant typicality by performance interaction on brand evaluation. In face of negative extension performance, low-SBC participants evaluated Apple (i.e., the target brand) less favorably when the extension is a printer (i.e., typical) than when it is a watch (i.e., atypical). As predicted, however, this effect was attenuated for high-SBC participants—parent brand evaluations were equally favorable regardless of extension typicality. As previously alluded to, we suggest that two factors set the stage for this effect. First, individuals are predisposed to maintain positive self-evaluation. Second, when consumers make SBC, brand-evaluations contribute to self-evaluations. Consequently, high-SBC consumers view poor extensions as a threat to their self and therefore evaluate poor extensions favorably in order to maintain a positive self-evaluation.

To further explore this account, we look to Tesser’s (2000) study, which showed that when the self is threatened, people seek to self-affirm. Following this notion, we should expect the effect of SBC on brand-evaluation to be attenuated when consumers are given the opportunity to self-affirm.

In study 2 we test whether self-affirmation attenuates the effects shown in study 1 in a 2 (SBC: high versus low) x 2 (Self Affirmation Task: Present vs. Absent) factorial. Our results show that the otherwise positive influence of high SBC on parent brand evaluations was indeed eliminated when respondents were given the opportunity to self-affirm in another domain. After completing a task in which participants described the values that are most important to them, high SBC participants evaluated the parent brand less favorably than high SBC participants who do not self-affirm, and equally favorable as those low in SBC. Studies 3 and 4 further explore the proposed mechanism and rule out important alternative explanations for the SBC effect. Study 3 demonstrates that negative brand extensions more adversely affect high versus low SBC participants. High SBC participants exhibited a greater need to self-affirm than low SBC participants. In Study 4, we directly measure negative feelings generated in response to negative brand extension performance and show that high SBC participants report significantly more negative feelings than do low SBC participants. However, as expected, this difference is attenuated when high SBC participants are able to self-affirm in another domain.

Taken together, these results provide mounting evidence in support of our account of why and how SBC affect brand evaluations. In so doing, we augment existing literature on the influence of SBC as well as research in the brand extensions literature, which has not examined the influence of SBC on parent brand dilution.

Selected References

“The Shaping of Social Identity: Assimilation/Contrast Responses to Ad Exposure”
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Social identity has been found to influence a wide variety of consumer behaviors and attitudes. Consumer social identity is especially powerful to the extent that the identity is salient in the immediate social or contextual environment. In these situations, the activation of a social identity motivates the consumer to actively engage in social comparison, to express identity-consistent beliefs, and to select products that reinforce the desired social identity. Although understanding the influence of social identity on consumer behavior is clearly important, the extant research within consumer behavior has largely studied the phenomenon as a unidirectional process. That is, research has started with the belief that consumers bring certain social identities to consumption contexts and that these identities influence judgment to the extent that they are salient and relevant. Although it is certainly true that consumers do bring a variety of social identities with them into consumer contexts, past research downplays the dynamic nature of social identity. Social identities do not spontaneously appear within consumers—rather, they are shaped by a lifetime of experience, social interaction, and self-expression. Research on this phenomenon has largely argued that consumers choose brands in an attempt to express aspects of the self to others, or fulfill some self-enhancement or self-verification goal. Although these motivations do drive much of consumer social identity-formation, it is also clear that social identities are automatically influenced by contextual information about others. It is this latter automatic influence on consumer social identity that we focus on in this project. Specifically, we explore the influence of advertising exposure on the association strength between depicted social identities and the consumer’s sense of self, independent of any explicit attempt at self-presentation. We argue that the influence of advertising exposure on consumer social identity is greatest when the advertising makes direct use of identity-relevant cues or generally targets specific identity groups. Exposure to such advertising can activate the relevant social identity dimension in a consumer’s self-concept, and this activation can lead to either assimilation toward or contrast with the depicted identity.

Following an assimilation/contrast model, we assess the extent to which ad exposure directly influences the strength of association of basic social identity dimensions in the self-concept. Moreover, we identify two factors that determined whether consumer self-concept shifted toward the presented user imagery (assimilation) or away from the presented user imagery (contrast): (1) the discrepancy between the objective age of the characters in the advertisement and the consumer’s own chronological age, and (2) the relevance of this self vs. user imagery comparison. It was hypothesized that assimilation is the likely response to others that are moderately discrepant and contrast is the likely response to others that are extremely discrepant, but that these effects would only occur when the comparison was deemed relevant.
To test the effects of self-concept discrepancy and relevance on consumer assimilation/contrast responses to advertising, three experiments were conducted. In experiment 1, consumers were exposed to advertising that featured individuals who were either similar in age (college-age users), moderately older (30-something users), or extremely older (senior citizen users) than the consumers themselves. After viewing this focal age-targeted advertisement, half of the participants then evaluated the advertising and how targeted they felt while the other half evaluated the advertising but not how targeted they felt. It was hypothesized that the evaluation of targeting status would increase the relevance of the user imagery as a comparison standard. Finally, participants completed an Implicit Association Test (IAT) that measured how strongly they self-identified with youth as part of their self-concept. Consistent with this hypothesized pattern of results, an interaction of ad type and target market evaluation was observed on subsequent self-youth association: subjects assimilated their self-concepts toward the moderately discrepant targets, but contrasted away from the extremely discrepant targets. In addition, these assimilation and contrast responses only occurred when comparison relevance was high (when the consumers initially assessed their target market status).

Experiments 2 and 3 investigated the process underlying the comparison relevance moderation effect in experiment 1. Instructions to evaluate target status were expected to heighten comparison relevance by drawing attention to characteristics that might make one a member of the target market. This proposed process was tested in experiment 2 by adding a manipulation of whether participants evaluated their similarities or dissimilarities to the presented user imagery. To simplify the design, experiment 2 only included congruent user imagery (college-age users) or extremely discrepant users (senior citizens). As in experiment 1, a significant self-concept contrast effect was observed when participants evaluated their target market status or when they evaluated their similarity to the depicted users. However, when participants evaluated their dissimilarity to the user imagery and did not evaluate their target status, no contrast effect was observed. Experiment 3 extended the findings of experiment 2 by demonstrating that the elicited effects of user imagery on the self-concept carried over to the evaluation of subsequent age-targeted stimuli. Specifically, participants with heightened self-youth associations reported more favorable attitudes toward youth-targeted films than did participants with unaffected self-youth associations.