Self-Relevant Brand Alliances: When Do Consumers (Not) Fit?

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Successful brand alliances possess high fit between brands forming the alliance. However, many brand alliances contain elements relevant to consumers’ identities. Two studies demonstrate that regardless of fit between the parent brands, if one brand is low in fit with the consumer’s identity, the brand alliance is perceived poorly. Thus, current conceptualizations of brand alliances need to be broadened to include consumers and their identities. By considering the target market’s conception of each brand, and how each is self relevant to the target, it is possible to build a more comprehensive and accurate representation of successful brand alliances.

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The pattern of results cannot be attributed to emotional intensity. Thus the boomerang effect did not result from increased emotional intensity but instead increased motivation through personal responsibility. That is, regret, when the task is difficulty forces individuals to be more determined enhancing perceptions of personal responsibility (M=7.4 vs. 8.4) and therefore self-efficacy and behavioral intentions.

In conclusion, as predicted by PMT for traditional fear appeals increasing task difficulty result in minimal self protection behavior. As predicted by emotion research regret results in strong self-protection behaviors. Importantly however, perceptions of self-responsibility override even perceptions of task difficulty, resulting in a boomerang effect and enhanced self-efficacy and behavioral intentions. This research illustrates the power of regret to promote self-protective behaviors even when the behaviors are difficult.

* For space reasons the term significant is only used when p<.05.

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Abstract
Successful brand alliances possess high fit between brands forming the alliance. However, many brand alliances contain elements relevant to consumers’ identities. Two studies demonstrate that regardless of fit between the parent brands, if one brand is low in fit with the consumer’s identity, the brand alliance is perceived poorly. Thus, current conceptualizations of brand alliances need to be broadened to include consumers and their identities. By considering the target market’s conception of each brand, and how each is self relevant to the target, it is possible to build a more comprehensive and accurate representation of successful brand alliances.

During the mega-merger boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s, joint branding flourished in the marketplace. Consumers are now accustomed to seeing ingredient branding (NutraSweet in Diet Coke), co-branding (Frito-Lay chips with KC Masterpiece barbeque sauce), and other forms of branding alliances. Despite this abundance, empirical research on how consumers perceive these co-brands is still in its infancy, and what determines a successful brand alliance remains unclear.

The purpose of the current research is to demonstrate the need for a wider view when considering the role of fit in brand alliances. Specifically, we suggest that there are three connections that need to be high in fit for a brand alliance to have the highest probability of success (positive attitudes, purchase intention, choice). These three connections are the link between the two brands, which is commonly examined in brand alliance research, and the two links between each parent brand and the consumer. By including the consumer in our conceptualization of fit, researchers on brand alliances will better understand the mechanisms driving attitude transfer and, ultimately, choice.

Research on effective brand alliances has grown out of the brand extension literature. In this way, many similar factors reappear—specifically the question of fit: do these two brands fit? Because the most prevalent comparison in brand alliances is one brand with another, fit is often conceptualized as complementary product attributes, functions or uses (Park, Jun and Shocker 1996; Samu, Krishnan and Smith 1999). Complementarity can be defined as the requirement of one product for the use or operation of the second product (Samu et al. 1999). And, as with brand extensions, the degree of complementarity is related to the ability of activation to spread from one product to the other. The point of difference is that with brand alliances researchers examine the transfer of attitude from two branded products to a new concept.

In the attitude literature, there is an associated stream of literature regarding consumers’ social identity-based attitudes (e.g., Reed 2004). Brands that are strongly connected to a consumer’s identity allow people to express themselves, and have been shown to be more resistant to counterpersuasion tactics than less identity-relevant brands (Bolton and Reed 2004). These papers suggest that incorporating the fit (conceptualized as identity relevance) between each of the two parent brands and the consumer will enhance our understanding of successful brand alliances.

This paper incorporates the theoretical approaches of both the brand extension and social identity-based attitude literatures to test whether higher fit between a consumer and the two parent brands may enhance attitudes toward the brand alliance. A set of two experiments test the hypothesis that low fit between consumer and either parent brand will result in lower attitudes toward the brand alliance. Fit is manipulated through priming participants with either high-fit or low-fit identities, or by manipulating the brands involved in the brand alliance effort. All other aspects of the stimuli are the same between conditions. Participants were exposed to an advertisement, and then subsequently asked for evaluations of the alliance.

Study 1A primed three different identities that consumers can possess: athlete, student and fashionista. After increasing the salience of one identity, participants were asked to evaluate a current brand alliance, Nike+ iPod, indicating their perceptions if inter-brand fit and attitude toward the alliance. Systematic differences were found across the three identities, such that those participants viewing the advertisement through the lens of their stylish identity expressed more positive attitudes and perceived greater fit than the participants with athlete or student identity primed (attitude: F(2, 63)=4.972, p<.01; fit: F(2, 63)=6.136, p<.01). While this data demonstrates that a salient identity can influence consumers’ attitudes, it remained unclear whether this was due to the stylish identity or to the hypothesized match between perceptions of the shoe (its relative fashion versus functionality) and the relative identity.

Study 1B sought to demonstrate that it is the match between the values of the salient identity (functionality for runners versus fashion for stylist identities) and perceptions of the product that drive the change in perceived fit and attitude. To this end, a more specific identity (runner) was primed in order to focus on the functionality of the shoe, and different sneaker brands were used to manipulate the perceived deliverables of the product. Specifically, we hypothesized that runners would perceive higher fit and possess a more positive attitude toward brand alliances containing shoe brands perceived as highly functional (Mizuno, New Balance) versus highly stylish brands (Nike, Adidas). The converse would be true for the participants with fashionista identity activated. The interaction of shoe brand and identity...