The Impact of Employee Behavior on Brand Personality Impressions: the Moderating Effect of Pseudorelevant Information

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When sales employees interact with consumers, they often disclose personal information that is irrelevant to the interaction itself but is indicative of their more general interests, plans, and experiences. We propose that such personal, yet irrelevant (i.e., pseudorelevant) information affects the personality impressions that consumers form of the brand. Specifically, our findings show that consumers do not generalize an employee's behavior to the brand personality to the full extent if the employee discloses pseudorelevant information. We demonstrate that these effects occur because consumers are motivated to form an accurate impression of the employee, as a result of which they disassociate the employee from the brand after receiving pseudorelevant information.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Sales employees frequently disclose personal information to consumers in order to gain their trust and to improve the course of an interaction (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990). A salesperson at an Apple store, for instance, may tell a customer who is looking to buy an iPod that she owns a particular model herself and uses it when she goes running on the weekends. The information that is disclosed on such occasions may be irrelevant for the final outcome of the interaction and for judging whether the salesperson has successfully performed her prescribed role. Information of this kind, however, may be indicative of the salesperson’s general character, for which reason such pieces of rich, nondiagnostic information are referred to as “pseudorelevant” information (Hilton and Fein 1989). Even though the disclosure of pseudorelevant information should be a common occurrence in many sales interactions, there are no studies that have investigated how such information influences brand personality impressions. In this research, we propose that pseudorelevant information affects the extent to which consumers update their existing brand personality impressions after interacting with an employee whose behavior is consistent or inconsistent with these impressions.

To develop our predictions, we draw on studies that have been conducted in the area of stereotyping theory. The disclosure of pseudorelevant information during a sales interaction may determine how typical the employee is considered to be. This, in turn, can affect the extent to which the employee’s behavior is generalized to the brand personality. When an employee does not disclose any pseudorelevant information, customers are likely to stereotype the employee and should regard him or her as a typical representative of the brand (Matta and Folkes 2005). When, however, pseudorelevant information has been disclosed, consumers may dissociate the employee from the brand and should consider the employee as a relatively unique, less typical member of the brand. This process is referred to as “fencing off” or subtyping (Kunda and Oleson 1995; Yzerbyt, Coull, and Roche 1999). Stereotyping and subtyping processes should also determine to what extent an employee affects brand personality impressions. Because people produce less generalization from atypical than from typical group members (Rothbart and Lewis 1988), consumers’ brand personality impressions should not be affected as strongly by the employee’s behavior when they have received pseudorelevant information during the interaction. Two studies were conducted to test this prediction.

In the first study, participants read a scenario that depicted an interaction between a customer and an employee of a fictitious biking brand. In these scenarios, the employee’s behavior was either consistent or inconsistent with the brand’s personality. In addition, the amount of pseudorelevant information was varied through a conversation that took place between the customer and the employee. The results showed a significant interaction between the consistency of the employee’s behavior and the disclosure of pseudorelevant information. When participants did not receive pseudorelevant information, their brand personality impressions were strongly influenced by the employee’s behavior. That is, consistent behavior strengthened brand personality impressions, whereas inconsistent behavior weakened them. When participants received pseudorelevant information, however, they subtyped the employee. As a consequence, they transferred the employee’s behavior to a lesser extent to the brand.

The second study extended these findings and showed that the impact of pseudorelevant information is moderated by accuracy motivation. More specifically, the second study manipulated the availability of pseudorelevant information and the degree to which participants were motivated to form an accurate impression of the employee. The analyses revealed a significant interaction between these two variables. When accuracy motivation was high, brand personality impressions were less strongly affected by the employee’s behavior if participants had received pseudorelevant information. When accuracy motivation was low, however, brand personality impressions did not differ as a function of the information that had been disclosed. These results show that pseudorelevant information can block generalization because consumers are motivated to arrive at an accurate impression of the employee they are interacting with.

These results have implications for the literature on self-disclosure by showing that disclosing personal information can affect the extent to which consumers generalize an employee’s behavior. This may entail positive as well as negative implications. On the one hand, the brand is not harmed as badly when the employee’s behavior is inconsistent with the brand personality; on the other hand, the brand does not benefit as strongly when the behavior is consistent. Furthermore, our findings also contribute to research on the formation and updating of brand personality impressions (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Johar, Sengupta, and Aaker 2005). Earlier studies have suggested that personality traits come to be associated with a brand in a direct way by the company’s employees. Our results indicate that the strength of this association depends on the information that consumers possess about an employee and their accuracy motivation. In fact, without knowing how the employee is perceived, it may be impossible to predict how brand personality impressions are affected by an employee’s behavior.

REFERENCES
Matta, Shashi and Valerie S. Folkes (2005), “Inferences About the Brand from Counterstereotypical Service Providers,” Journal of Consumer Research, 32 (September), 196-206.