Understanding the Role of Brand Personality Fit and the Moderating Effect of Self-Connection in Brand Extension Evaluations

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This research is to explicate why some brands with strong brand personality are easier to extend to dissimilar categories. Such brand extensions serve for the specific group of consumers who have perception of brand personality fit, which is supposed to be a dimension of perceived fit and is accessible when the individual is emotionally connected to the brand. Preliminary empirical results reveal the significant relationship between brand personality fit and consumer brand extension evaluations as well as the moderating effect of self-connection upon this relationship.

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Brand extension has become an increasingly critical research issue as the scope, stretchability or extension potential determines the boundary of a brand (Ahluvalia 2008; Meyvis and Janiszewski 2004). Prior research asserts that fit or perceived fit between original category and the brand extension serves as an important antecedent of consumer brand extension evaluations (Aaker and Keller 1990; Park et al. 1991). In marketing practice, however, more and more brands extend to apparently unfit or dissimilar categories. Successful examples include Pepsi music, BMW sportswear, and Virgin airlines, media, cola and mobile. We can find that all these brands are embedded with a distinct brand personality. Although they are not necessarily accepted by all the consumers, these brand extensions are favoured by a specific group of consumers, who love and are emotionally connected to the brand. Such brand extensions based on personality are beyond existing understanding of perceived fit. In this research, therefore, it is proposed that brand personality fit, which is supposed to be another dimension of perceived fit and refers to the consistency of consumer brand personality perceptions before and after brand extension, influences consumer brand extension evaluations, and that this brand personality fit is more easily accessible when an individual has self-connection with the brand.

To explore whether a brand with unique brand personality is easier to extend to dissimilar categories, we need to understand the role of brand personality fit. A large amount of literature in brand extension argues that “fit” or “perceived fit” affects consumer brand extension evaluations (e.g., Aaker and Keller 1990; Boush and Loken 1991; Broniarzcyz and Alba 1994; Park et al. 1991). In terms of balance theory (Heider 1958), a consumer tends to support a brand extension if he or she has favorable attitude toward the parent brand and perceives fit between core category and the brand extension. Three types of perceived fit can be concluded from prior research. First, category-based fit assumes that feature similarity is the basis of categorization (Tversky 1977) therefore similar category or feature (e.g., white appliance) leads to a favorable brand extension (Boush and Loken 1991). Next, further research finds consumers evaluate fit with a specific benefit or goal (Broniarzcyz and Alba 1994; Martin and Stewart 2001). Specifically, similar context of usage aiming at a benefit (e.g., toothbrush and toothpaste for the benefit of dental health) increases perceived fit (Joiner 2006; Ratneshwar and Shocker 1991). Third, brand-based fit theory underlies the fit of brand image or brand concept (Park et al. 1991), which is accessible when consumers evaluate symbolic brand extensions. Here, brand-based fit is a relatively broad concept (Czellar 2003) so that brand personality fit can be viewed as a critical facet of it. Thus, brand personality fit is hypothesized to positively influence consumer brand extension attitude.

However, not all of the consumers achieve the understanding of brand personality fit, which is retrievable when the consumer is emotionally self-connected to the brand. Generally, we can view the process of fit as a cognitive evaluation process, after which brand extension evaluation process can be an affective process, i.e. parent brand attitude can be directly transferred to brand extension evaluations (e.g., Aaker and Keller 1990; Boush and Loken 1991; Broniarzcyz and Alba 1994; Park et al. 1991). In terms of balance theory (Heider 1958), a consumer tends to support a brand extension if he or she has favorable attitude toward the parent brand and perceives fit between core category and the brand extension. Three types of perceived fit can be concluded from prior research. First, category-based fit assumes that feature similarity is the basis of categorization (Tversky 1977) therefore similar category or feature (e.g., white appliance) leads to a favorable brand extension (Boush and Loken 1991). Next, further research finds consumers evaluate fit with a specific benefit or goal (Broniarzcyz and Alba 1994; Martin and Stewart 2001). Specifically, similar context of usage aiming at a benefit (e.g., toothbrush and toothpaste for the benefit of dental health) increases perceived fit (Joiner 2006; Ratneshwar and Shocker 1991). Third, brand-based fit theory underlies the fit of brand image or brand concept (Park et al. 1991), which is accessible when consumers evaluate symbolic brand extensions. Here, brand-based fit is a relatively broad concept (Czellar 2003) so that brand personality fit can be viewed as a critical facet of it. Thus, brand personality fit is hypothesized to positively influence consumer brand extension attitude.

A main study with three steps of analysis is designed to investigate these effects. Two pretests were conducted to test brand personality (Aaker 1997) and select fictitious brand extensions before the 2 (brands)x2 (medium category fit vs. unfit)x2 (brand personality fit vs. unfit) main study. We collected data in China. Two well-known telecommunication brands under China Mobile were selected: M-zone with unique brand personality of excitement and G-tone with unique brand personality of competence. Digital products (PDA and MP3) represented medium category-fit extensions, while wristwatch represented unfit extensions. G-tone PDA, M-zone MP3, G-tone dress watch, M-zone sports watch represented brand-personality-fit extensions, while G-tone MP3, M-zone PDA, G-tone sports watch and M-zone dress watch were brand-personality-unfit extensions. Respondents were asked to report their attitude and purchase intention toward these extensions. Perceived fit (category-based fit, benefit-based fit and brand personality fit), core brand attitude, self-connection were also measured in the questionnaire. The first step of analysis is aimed to investigate the effect of brand personality fit on brand extension evaluation. Results indicate that personality fit brand extensions have significantly higher evaluations than personality unfit ones, while there is no significant difference between the first category fit and unfit extensions. In the second step of analysis, we testify a general model, in which perceived fit, including the dimension of brand personality fit, has significant influence on brand extension attitude. In the third step of analysis, we split the samples in terms of self-connection and compare the models by means of grouped structural equation modeling. It is found that the influence of brand personality fit on brand extension attitude differs significantly between the two models. Consumers of highly self-connection yield greater influences than those of low self-connection, which supports the moderating effect of self-connection.
References

Once Bitten, Twice Shy: Differences in Social Efficacy Affect the Perceived Efficacy of Anthropomorphizable Products
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Anthropomorphism as a marketing practitioners’ technique of imbuing brands and products with human-like qualities such as faces, names, and intentions, has longtime been used, and has proven to be efficient in the development of brand personality (Aaker 1997) and the building of brand relationships (Fournier 1998). Consumer literature has mainly dealt with the effectiveness of anthropomorphism as a practitioners’ technique in influencing brand perceptions. The work by Aggarwal and McGill (2007) signals a recent shift in attention from brands towards anthropomorphic products, showing that a fit between the imbued human scheme and the nature of the products helps in anthropomorphizing the product, and that affect towards the evoked human scheme influences the evaluation of the product. A more fundamental shift is that lately, anthropomorphism—the evocation of the human scheme by means of the design or qualities of an object—has been studied from a more phenomenological stance. Instead of studying the anthropomorphic objects, research has turned its attention to the human mind where the anthropomorphization of the product takes place. This shift also comprises interest in the dispositional and situational drivers of anthropomorphization (Epley et al. 2008a; Epley et al. 2008b; Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007), and ultimately might allow us to understand some human reactions and behavior towards non-human objects in terms of their interpersonal correlates—think of irrational anger towards a failing tool or machine.

Epley and colleagues have conceived a three factor model of anthropomorphization, in which sociality motivations are one of the driving factors (Epley et al. 2007). When people are lonely, they seek human company, and this increases their susceptibility to anthropomorphization of non-human entities, like alarm clocks and pets (Epley et al. 2008a). This might lead to the inference that lonely people are more prone to anthropomorphization in consumer settings, and therefore unambiguously prone to preferring and seeking out products that are easy to anthropomorphize.

However, loneliness can be a result of difficulties in maintaining satisfactory social contact with other humans. Loneliness is usually considered to be co-driven by personal factors and circumstances (Jones, Freemon, and Goswick 1981; Leary 2001). Indeed, loneliness can be the result of social exclusion (Gardner et al. 2005; Leary 1990), rejection (Boivin, Hymel, and Bukowski 1995) and ostracism (Cacioppo and Hawkley 2005; Zadro, Williams, and Richardson 2004). Although people may want to reconnect to others to compensate