Got to Get You Into My Life: Do Brand Personalities Rub Off on Consumers?

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When consumers use brands with appealing personalities, does the brand’s personality “rub off” on them? We propose that this effect is limited to consumers who hold certain implicit beliefs about their personality.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers often use brands as an instrument to create a more positive self-image. In particular, brands with appealing personalities, such as Cartier (sophisticated) and Harley-Davidson (adventurous), are particularly useful for consumers wanting to enhance a self-image in line with a brand’s personality (Escalas and Bettman 2003). In this research, we ask the question, “Does using a brand with an appealing personality enhance the way consumers view themselves?” Prior research documents that consumers often prefer and choose brands in an effort to affirm and enhance their sense of self, but what happens when consumers actually have an opportunity to use these brands?

We propose that only consumers with certain implicit theories view brand experiences as opportunities to signal that they possess the same appealing traits as the brand, and only these consumers actually perceive themselves more positively after a brand experience. Implicit self-theories are lay beliefs people hold about the malleability of their personalities. Two types have been identified: entity versus incremental theory (Dweck 2000). Individuals who endorse incremental theory (“incremental theorists”) view their personal qualities as something they can enhance through their own direct efforts at self-improvement. In contrast, individuals who endorse entity theory (“entity theorists”) view their personal qualities as something they cannot improve through their own direct efforts. Instead, they seek out opportunities to signal their positive qualities to the self or others. We predict and find that entity theorists (not incremental theorists) are responsive to the signaling value of brands with appealing personalities. They use a brand associated with an appealing personality to signal that they possess the same appealing personality as the brand, resulting in more positive self-perceptions.

Study 1: Does Victoria’s Secret Make You Feel Better-Looking?
Consumers at a local shopping mall were asked to use a Victoria’s Secret shopping bag (brand experience) or a plain pink shopping bag (no brand experience) during their shopping trip. This setting provided an initial test of our proposition in a natural environment where consumers could experience the signaling value of a brand through a common activity of carrying a shopping bag. Victoria’s Secret was selected because of its appealing brand personality, associated with traits such as good-looking, feminine, and glamorous. Implicit beliefs about personality were measured (Implicit Persons Theory Measure: Levy et. al. 1998) prior to the shopping trip, with self-perceptions regarding personality traits (including those associated with Victoria’s Secret) measured after the shopping trip.

After carrying the Victoria’s Secret shopping bag (vs. plain pink shopping bag), entity theorists perceived themselves to be better-looking, more feminine, and more glamorous. Incremental theorists were not influenced by their brand experience. Differences between these groups were not evident for personality traits unconnected to the Victoria’s Secret brand, which rules out response biases, general affective states, and contextual factors as possible alternative explanations.

Study 2: Why Are Entity Theorists More Affected by Brand Personalities?
Study 2 extends prior findings by: (1) manipulating implicit self-theories to rule out the possibility that individuals who endorse entity or incremental theories may also vary on other dimensions that influence response to brand experiences; and (2) examining the mediating process for why entity theorists, but not incremental theorists, are affected by brand experiences. Female undergraduate students were asked to participate in a treasure hunt. To collect items during the treasure hunt, they used a Victoria’s Secret shopping bag or a plain pink shopping bag. After using the shopping bag, participants were asked about their self-perceptions on traits associated with Victoria’s Secret, and were also asked how much they used Victoria’s Secret as signals of one’s identity.

The results replicated the findings from study 1. Further, a mediation analysis revealed that relative to incremental theorists, entity theorists are more responsive to the signaling value of the Victoria’s Secret brand experience and this difference mediates the influence of implicit self-theory on self-perceptions.

Study 3: Can Entity Theorists Recover From Self-threats Using Brand Personalities?
Entity theorists view personal qualities as something that they cannot directly improve through their own direct efforts. Dweck and her colleagues suggest that such pessimistic thinking about self-improvement reduces emotional and psychological resources available to cope with negative feedback on personal qualities. In study 3, we examined whether or not entity theorists can recover a threatened self through experiences with a brand associated with an appealing personality in a threat-related domain. After receiving negative feedback on a GRE test, participants were asked to use either a MIT pen or a regular pen, and then completed the self-perception measure.

The results showed that entity theorists recovered negative self-views after brand experiences; they perceived themselves to be more intelligent, harder-working, and more of a leader after using the MIT pen (vs. the regular pen).

Summary
We identify implicit self-theories as an important moderator of the influence of brand experiences on consumer self-perceptions. Only entity theorists view use a brand associated with an appealing personality to signal that they possess the same appealing personality as the brand, resulting in more positive self-perceptions.

REFERENCES