Sharing the Reward Or Blaming the Failure: the Moderating Role of Self-Brand Connection on Attitude Towards the Brand

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Purchase decisions may be prompt by the need to self-gratify (self-compensate) some positive (negative) feeling about the self caused by extraordinary achievement (failure). By illustrating that these different psychological contexts affect the attitude towards brands consumers feel connected to, this research provides a greater understanding of how brands are related to the self concept.

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Study 1 was designed to test if brands associated with specific traits can influence both self-trait perceptions and downstream behaviors, even when the respondent does not possess chronicity for the given trait. Respondents participated in a 3(brand: Calvin Klein, Gap, Timberland) x 2(time: pre and post brand exposure) mixed design study. Brands were pre-tested for associated traits: Calvin Klein: up-to-date, successful, and upper class; Gap: down to earth, honest, and reliable; Timberland: outdoorsy, tough, and rugged. Respondents first filled out a self-reported personality trait index adapted from Aaker’s brand personality scale (1997); then they began an ostensibly unrelated study, guised with the intent to “Get to know the undergraduate student.” Respondents imagined that they were planning to get dressed for the day and were shown a picture of a closet from which they would take their clothes; their clothes for the day were a t-shirt and jeans branded with Calvin Klein, Gap, or Timberland depending upon the experimental condition. Subjects then indicated their plans to engage in various activities including pro-social behaviors and, finally, completed the self-reported personality trait scale again.

Analysis revealed that, as expected, brand consumption significantly impacted downstream behavioral intentions. Respondents were asked to indicate the activities that they were likely to engage in from a diverse list which included pro-social behaviors (volunteering, community service), prestigious behaviors (shopping in prominent neighborhoods, vacationing in exclusive places), daring behaviors (bungee jumping), and everyday behaviors (spending time with family, cleaning). Importantly, significant results were concentrated in the area of pro-social activities.

After imagining the consumption of Calvin Klein and Timberland (versus Gap), respondents rated themselves significantly more likely to engage in behaviors such as volunteering (Calvin Klein: $p<.05$; Timberland: $p<.01$) and performing community service (Calvin Klein: $p<.05$). Respondents’ increased likelihood of engaging in pro-social behaviors suggests that trait adoption has ramifications beyond the consumption domain and reveals an alternative way of influencing consumers to adopt pro-social behaviors. While neither Calvin Klein nor Timberland actively promote community service or volunteering, respondents were significantly more likely to do so after consuming these brands versus Gap, a brand that does engage in social marketing.

Study 2 was designed to illuminate the process by which downstream behavioral intentions are influenced (as shown in Study 1) and to establish that consumers can be influenced by negative traits. We offer evidence that impact on downstream behaviors is due to trait priming and not goal-activation due to the undesirable outcomes elicited by negative trait influence. Respondents participated in a 4(brand: Calvin Klein, Timberland, Everlast, Abercrombie) x 2(time: pre and post brand exposure) mixed design study. The two negative brands introduced in this study were pretested for trait associations. Everlast: lethargic, old-fashioned; Abercrombie: arrogant, deceptive. The procedure was identical to that of Study 1.

Analysis illustrated that consumers can be influenced by negative traits and that they may elicit undesirable downstream behaviors. After imagining consumption of Abercrombie, Everlast, or Timberland, subjects were significantly more likely than those who consumed Calvin Klein to joke about someone’s appearance (Abercrombie: $p<.01$; Everlast: $p<.05$, Timberland: $p<.01$), to make fun of others (Abercrombie: $p<.05$), to skip school (Abercrombie: $p<.05$), and to lay on the couch all day (Abercrombie: $p<.05$). Of further interest, the measure of several self-reported negative personality traits (deceptive, lazy, selfish) varied between pre and post brand exposure such that respondent’s rated themselves significantly lower post exposure. We expect that this is due to social desirability effects. We plan to run Study 3 to address this issue.

A proposed Study 3 will be nearly identical to Study 2, with the addition of a cognitive load task after the pre-exposure personality trait inventory. We expect that in the cognitive load condition, respondents’ ability to adjust their self-reported negative traits post-brand exposure will be diminished, resulting in post-trait that may be consistent with behavioral intentions, thereby supporting our process.

In three studies, we expect to demonstrate that consumers may be influenced by brands that have both positive and negative trait associations and that these associations may result in important downstream behaviors. Our work aims to add to the growing understanding on how incidental brand influences alter human behavior.

References

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Extended Abstract
Imagine that Susan and Jenny would like to purchase a Gucci handbag. Susan has just received a job promotion and decides to reward herself shopping. Jenny, instead, has just learned that the promotion she was hoping to have didn’t go through; to cheer herself up, she decides to do some shopping. Will these differences in the psychological contexts that prompt the purchase decision be reflected in Susan and Jenny’s attitude towards Gucci? Will it vary depending on the extent to which they feel connected to the brand? The purpose...
of this research is to address these questions by exploring how the psychological context in which attitude towards a brand is solicited may affect the way consumers evaluate such brand.

Self-Brand Connection (SBC) represents the extent to which individuals have incorporated brands into their self-concept (Escalas and Bettman 2003). Research suggests that increasing one’s feeling that a brand is “me” will lead to more favorable attitude towards that brand (Mogliner and Aaker, 2009). The assumption is that individuals are motivated to view themselves favorably (Allport 1961; Taylor and Brown 1988). Consequently, people hold positive automatic associations with almost anything that is associated with themselves (Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Hettis, Sakuma, and Pelham, 1999). This might explain why when individuals feel that they had achieved some extraordinary work, a need to gratify the self prompts towards the consumption of products that would reward such feeling (Kivetz and Zheng 2006), likely those that consumers feel connected to. Hence, it is expected that the positive associations that consumers hold about themselves should transfer to such “reward” brands by means of self-connection. Simply put, when self-brand connection is high, consumers seeking to gratify the self are likely to exhibit positive post-purchase evaluations, such as attitude towards the brand.

The abovementioned effects would suggest that when individuals instead view themselves unfavorably, negative associations to the self tend to transfer to anything individuals feel connected to, and thus decrease the attitude towards a brand they feel connected to. Interestingly, however, research has shown that the act of purchasing a product might on the contrary be prompt by the need to compensate for some bad feeling about the self (Tice, Bratslavsky, and Baumeister 2001). For example, the inability to make the self perform or monitor specific actions may motivate individuals towards some immediate pleasure (i.e., purchase) that could compensate for such bad feeling (Baumeister 2002). I expect that purchases made as self-compensation will reflect such negative feelings about the self in less favorable post-purchase attitudes. These effects, however, should only happen when consumers feel connected to the brand. The case of “prestige possessions”, such as designer jeans or handbags, appears to be particularly interesting since they are a category of goods where spending a large amount of money on the products reflects one’s identity (Bearden and Etzel 1982).

Study 1 examines whether purchases made as self-gratification (self-compensation) will evoke more (less) favorable post-purchase attitudes as opposed to a control condition. Further, I expect that such effects arise only in the case of high self-brand connection.

Study 1

Method. Eighty-two undergraduate students participated in the study. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (Motivation to purchase: self-gratification vs. self-compensation vs. control). Then, participants were asked to list the brand that they had considered in the purchase scenario. Next, participants’ feelings of self-brand connection were measured by adapting Escalas and Bettman’s (2003) scale. Next, subjects reported their attitudes towards the brand using a two item 7-point scale (Like/Good), anchored at “not at all” and “very much so”. Manipulation checks followed. Also, measures of self-esteem and of involvement with the product category were taken to avoid potential confounds (Escalas and Bettman 2003).

Participants in the self-gratification [self compensation] condition read the following scenario: “It is the end of the semester. You just got your grades and learned that you received an A [C] in your marketing course. This was really exciting [devastating] because you worked really hard all semester. To reward yourself [compensate] for this good [bad] grade you decide to go out and buy yourself a pair of designer jeans. Even though you don’t need them, you decide to buy them anyway to reward yourself [make up] for the A [C] grade”. In the control condition there was no mention of the class grade.

Results. Findings showed that the manipulation worked successfully. The key dependent variable was attitude towards the brand. Motivation to purchase, mean-centered SBC, and the interaction between motivation to purchase and SBC were included as independent variables. As expected, results showed a significant interaction of motivation to purchase and SBC. To explore the nature of the interaction, I compared whether there were significant differences across motivation to purchase conditions at both low and high levels of SBC. As SBC is a continuous measure, I performed a spotlight analysis at plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of SBC (Aiken and West 1991; Fitzsimons 2008). The planned contrasts revealed that for low SBC, individuals’ attitudes towards the brand do not significantly vary across motivation to purchase conditions (p>.1). However, as hypothesized, for those individuals who hold high levels of SBC, attitude towards the brand significantly differs across motivation to purchase conditions (p <0.05). No other measures (i.e., self-esteem and product category involvement) varied significantly across conditions (p>.1).

Discussion

By illustrating how individuals’ feelings about the self may affect post purchase evaluations for brands they feel connected to, this research develops a greater understanding of how brands are related to the self concept. In study 2 I want to explore whether the different psychological contexts that solicit attitude may also directly influence consumers’ brand choice. Consumers might be very strategic in their choices when there is some asset they feel should be protected (Zauberman, Ratner, and Kim 2009). This suggests that individuals might decide to preserve their favorite brand from the negative feelings associated with the choice they are about to do. On the contrary, consumers might be “strategically” motivated to choose their favorite brand when such brand is going to be associated with the positive feelings about the self and the reward achieved.

References
Determinants of Consumer-Brand Reunion After a Break-up
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Extended Abstract
This research uses a framework of consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998) and extends the work into consumer-brand ‘break-ups’ (Fajer and Schouten 1995; Mai and Canti 2008) by examining which factors influence consumers to restore relationships with previously abandoned brands.

Breaking up with a brand could be a significant event in consumers’ lives (Fajer and Schouten 1995; Mai and Canti 2008). Terminating brand relationships can take a lot of consumers’ time, resources and emotions (Keaveney 1995). Therefore, the break-up experience might have a strong impact on consumers’ future decisions, in particular, whether to deal with the same brand again (Stauss and Friege 1999). Consequently, it is important to understand the effects circumstances prior, during and following a consumer-brand break-up have on consumers’ future propensities to revive those relationships.

Only a few academic studies have directly examined the notion of lost customers’ reunion with their former brands (Homburg, Hoyer, and Stock 2007; Stauss and Friege 1999; Thomas, Blatberg, and Fox 2004; Tokman, Davis, and Lemon 2007). Stauss and Friege (1999) presented a conceptual base for profitable regain management and segmentation of lost customers. Thomas et al. (2004) proposed an optimal pricing strategy for winback offers. Homburg et al (2007) focused on factors during a revival process that increase the winback propensity. Finally, Tokman et al. (2007) proposed a model of the perceived value of winback offer. Principally, these studies examined the issue from the brand’s perspective, assessing what managers can do to lure lost customers back. However, there is a need for a study that looks into the focal issue from the consumers’ perspective, taking into account the dynamic nature of the consumer-brand break-up process.

Firstly, it is important to understand the relationship consumers held with a brand before the break-up (Fajer and Schouten 1995). Focusing on more objective determinants (such as facts of prior behaviour) avoids potential bias in consumers’ post-termination responses (as per Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger 1957)). The first determinant of prior relationship is its length before termination (Thomas et al. 2004). Another determinant is consumer loyalty or disloyalty to the brand, in a form of variety-seeking behaviour (Givon 1984) that results in sole or multiple brand usage (Bird, Channon, and Ehrenberg 1970).

The next set of items describes the process of relationship termination. Attribution Theory (Weiner 2000) suggests that depending on whom consumers hold responsible for the break-up (the brand itself, attraction of competition or themselves-in case of changes in personal circumstances), it will affect how consumers evaluate the experience. Indeed, the reasons for defection were found to have a strong impact on the likelihood of winning back lost customers (Stauss and Friege 1999; Tokman et al. 2007). In a multi-product financial relationship, complete or partial termination could also describe the nature of a break-up.

Finally, factors occurring after the break-up include consumers’ post-defection opinions of the former brand, in the form of positive or negative associations and overall evaluations (Bogomolova and Romaniuk 2009). The time lapse since the event has also been described as an important moderator of consumers’ opinions (for example, due to the Cognitive Dissonance Adjustment (Festinger 1957)). Additionally, consumers’ demographic characteristics are also believed to have an impact on consumer decisions (Homburg et al. 2007; Tokman et al. 2007).

This research used the context of financial service relationships, which is typically characterised with high involvement (both financial and emotional), long-term (due to its subscription nature) and multi-product relationships, with personal interaction components (Berry 2000). Customers who have terminated relationships with a financial service provider were identified using the provider’s records. They were approached by phone for a 15-minute interview, achieving a 30% response rate. The demographic profile of the final sample (141 respondents) was similar to the profile of all provider’s lost customers. A hierarchical regression model estimated the relative impact of each factor on the propensity of consumers who have previously terminated relationships to return to their former provider (measured by an 11-point Juster probability scale (Juster 1966)). The factors were inputted in four consecutive models, starting with demographic characteristics, followed by groups of factors occurring before, during and after the termination.

The results showed that the following five (out of eleven) factors significantly contributed to the propensity of lost customers’ reunion with the former brand. First, the higher was the number of positive attributes associated with the former brand (ß=0.26, p<.01) and the...