Lifestyle Brands: the Elephant in the Room

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Lifestyle branding is very popular with CMOs and has been widely covered in the business/popular press, yet the most highly respected academic marketing journals have ignored this brand typology. Using extant academic research, we devise a theory-in-use to define and support the essential attributes of lifestyle brands.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1015440/volumes/v41/NA-41

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“An ‘elephant in the room’ is an obvious truth that’s either being ignored or going unaddressed.”
-Jeff Inman, ACR 2012

Lifestyle brands (LBs) address consumers’ core values through both their tangible and symbolic qualities. In using them, consumers hope to possess and project the values and qualities that these brands represent (Helman and de Chernatony 1999). Lifestyle branding (LBg) led to success in the United States and abroad (Danziger 2009; Lamb 2011; Sauer 2012; Birkner 2011; Menkes 1997). Top consumer brands are identified as LBs, including Nike (Klein 1999), Starbucks (Sauer 2012), and Apple (Cuneo 2003). LBg seems ubiquitous in the practitioner’s world (Geskens 2012), with a dizzying array of brands claiming lifestyle brand (LB) (Kiley 2005).

This research highlights an academic-practitioner divide regarding LBs, namely, an almost absolute lack of discussion of LBs in the most highly respected academic marketing journals. While LBg has been touched on in some academic articles (Helman and de Chernatony 1999; Fernie et al. 1997), we do not believe anyone has formally operationalized the concept of LBg beyond a very brief definition. We contribute to marketing theory and practice by identifying the essential elements of LBg and providing a comprehensive definition of the term.

In a literature review we found a single top-tier marketing journal article with the words “LB” or “LBg” in the title (Chernev, Hamilton, and Gal 2011). Yet the words “LBg” appear only in the “managerial implications” section. The article’s focus is consumer self-expression through brands, and while theoretically and practically useful, LBg is left wholly unexamined. Only one article with the words “LB” or “LBg” was discovered in the Journal of Marketing Research; they do not appear at all in the Journal of Consumer Research.

Top-tier marketing journals regularly decry the academic-practitioner divide including Reibstein, Day and Wind (2009), Lilien (2011), Hunt (2002), and Stanton (2006). Bridging the divide will happen only if marketing academia addresses topics of great interest to practitioners, including LBg.

We take a theory-in-use approach (Zaltman 1982) to understanding LBg, examining its practical definitions, identifying its essential theoretical elements, and providing a comprehensive definition of the concept useful for both theoretical and practical approaches to marketing.

Some business writers have attempted to define what these brands actually mean. Edery (2006) argues that properly defining an LB is not simple, and even identifying which brands are and are not LBs can be controversial. LiBrandi (2012) agrees with Edery’s assessment, positing that there are five core attributes central to LBs:

1. Authenticity
2. Use of “halo effect to extend beyond core
3. Selectivity (not all things to all people)
4. Focus on sense of community, not 4P’s
5. “Work[ing] harder” than non-lifestyle brands

Defining Attributes of Lifestyle Brands: Finding the Theory-in-use

In the academic world, Jung and Merlin (2002-2003) are among the few scholars who attempt to provide a definition for an LB, stating that it “provides consumers with an emotional attachment to an identifiable lifestyle” (40), and arguing that LBs work “building and sustaining a strong, emotional and long-term bond with consumers” (40). Relying on emotion as the crucial factor in defining LBs is overly simplistic; modern branding strategy generally emphasizes emotional connections through the creation of brand personalities (Aaker 1997), and by encouraging consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998).

Based on widespread understanding and use of the term “LB” and the extant theoretical branding literature, we propose that the notable presence of all ten attributes below is what sets LBs apart from others:

1. Association: linking to other people, places, organizations, activities, events, issues, other brands or images (cf. Berger and Heath 2007; Keller 2003; Watts and Dodds 2007)
2. Quality/excellence: superiority or excellence on key attributes (cf. Bhattacharya and Sen 2003)
3. Sensory appeal: attractiveness or artistic value, or qualities related to the way its products look, feel, taste, smell or sound (cf. Simonson and Nowlis 2000)
4. Sign value: how conspicuously the brand is displayed by the user, and is congruent with the user’s self-identity (cf. Escalas and Bettman 2005, Sirgy 1982)
5. Personification: a personality that resembles human characteristics (cf. Aaker 1997)
6. Interactivity: engaging consumers, requiring or inviting them to exert mental or emotional energy on its behalf (cf. Austin et al. 2007, Bruns 2005)
7. Facilitation: the ability to help the user engage in preferred behaviors or attain important personal goals (cf. Fournier 1998, Solomon 1983)
10. Values: ability to communicate a set of core values that are important to its employees, and the consumer (cf. Harris and de Chernatony 2001, Sen and Bhattacharya 2001)

The first 7 of these attributes are either adapted or come directly from Charles Martin (1998). Item 8 comes from Guidry, Zinkhan, and Tam (2008). We have added the last two attributes, following Martin’s guidelines and basing them on the extant self-expressive branding literature, as key qualities of LBs.

We offer then the following definition: LBs 1) reflect and facilitate people’s ways of living, and enable key aspects of their consumers’ behavior, ranging from core users, who help define the brands’ meanings, to those for whom the lifestyle is aspirational; 2) utilize multifaceted marketing mixes appealing to more than a single aspect of their customers’ interests, feelings and needs; 3) offering high quality products; 4) authentically and consistently espouse a set of essential values that resonate deeply with their consumer base; and 4) consciously embrace multi-directional relationship marketing (Zinkhan 2002, Lacey and Morgan 2007).
Implications for Theory and Practice

We have two major goals: firstly, to refine academics’ and practitioners’ understanding of LBg by creating a functional framework for the concept; secondarily to support this framework with theoretical foundations, giving this structure explanatory and predictive power.

It is time for the academy to conduct rigorous research to better understand this brand typology, furthering the interests of academics and practitioners alike.

REFERENCES


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