Democratic Brands: a Framework and Empirical Test

Neeru Paharia, Georgetown University, USA
Vanitha Swaminathan, University of Pittsburgh, USA

We investigate consumers’ preferences for “democratic brands” (those that welcome consumer input) and “undemocratic brands” (those who maintain control) considering the mediating role of warmth and competence, and the moderating role of social dominance orientation (SDO), an individual’s preference for hierarchy within a social system.

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The Complex Role of Brand Meanings in Shaping Consumers’ Responses to Brands

Chairs: Carlos J. Torelli, University of Minnesota, USA
Jennifer L. Stoner, University of Minnesota, USA

Paper #1: The Asymmetric Effect of Portfolio- and Image-Based Abstractness for Building and Protecting Brand Equity
Jennifer L. Stoner, University of Minnesota, USA
Carlos J. Torelli, University of Minnesota, USA
Alokparna (Sonica) Monga, University of South Carolina, USA

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Eda Sayin, Koc University, Turkey
Nilufer Z. Aydinoglu, Koc University, Turkey
Zeynep Gurhan-Canli, Koc University, Turkey

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Ji Kyung Park, University of Delaware, USA
Carlos J. Torelli, University of Minnesota, USA
Alokparna (Sonica) Monga, University of South Carolina, USA
Deborah Roedder John, University of Minnesota, USA

Paper #4: Democratic Brands: A Framework and Empirical Test
Neeru Paharia, Georgetown University, USA
Vanitha Swaminathan, University of Pittsburgh, USA

SESSION OVERVIEW

Creating distinctive, favorable brand meanings is at the heart of building brand equity—often defined as the differential effect that knowledge about brand meanings has on consumers’ responses to the marketing of the brand (Keller, 1993). In the hyper-competitive markets of the 21st century, brands need to go beyond functionality to deliver emotional and symbolic benefits via the embodiment of abstract brand meanings or concepts (Monga & John, 2010). Although there seems to be consensus on the notion that creating abstract brand meanings benefits brand performance, what factors are likely to facilitate (or impair) the translation of brand meaning creation into more favorable brand evaluations? The papers in this session unite under a common theme of identifying brand- and individual-level factors that moderate the extent to which the creation of abstract brand meanings is more or less favorably received by consumers.

Stoner and colleagues distinguish between abstract brand concepts created by diversifying the product portfolio in order to appeal to high-level needs of consumers, versus those created by establishing human-like motivational and emotional meanings that resonate with consumers’ self-defining values. They demonstrate that although both strategies drive favorable consumer attitudes, the latter strategy has a more favorable impact on brand evaluations, and shields the brand better from scandals.

Sayin and colleagues investigate how the level of consumer attachment impacts responses to extensions by brands with strong personalities. Findings from four studies show that, among highly attached consumers, brands with strong personalities experience greater dilution when extending to categories that are incongruent with their abstract brand meanings. These effects are driven by consumers’ feelings of betrayal by the brand. Furthermore, the effects are stronger among consumers with higher (vs. lower) self-enhancement needs.

Park and colleagues study ways to reduce the negative effect of promoting prosocial images (through CSR activities) for luxury brands. They show that although consumers with high (vs. low) self-enhancement motivation, who desire to achieve social status or wealth, view luxury brands using CSR appeals negatively, these negative effects can be attenuated via self-expansion (self-referencing, observing celebrities, or perspective taking), which induces the feeling that self-enhancement motives (associated with the luxury brand) and self-transcendence motives (triggered by CSR appeals) can be simultaneously pursued.

Finally, Paharia and Swaminathan investigate consumers’ preferences for democratic brands (those that welcome consumer input) and undemocratic brands (those who maintain control) as a function of their perceptions of warmth and competence as well as consumers’ social-dominance orientation (SDO). They demonstrate that greater preference for democratic brands is mediated by perceptions of warmth. However, for people high in SDO, or in situations where hierarchy is relevant, undemocratic brands are valued more, and this effect is mediated by perceptions of competence.

In keeping with the theme of the conference (“Back to Fun”), the papers in this special session uncover some of the factors that contribute to consumers’ enjoyment of the abstract meanings in brands. The findings in this session should appeal specifically to scholars interested in branding, new products, and negative publicity, and more generally to those interested in the psychological processes underlying product evaluations.

The Asymmetric Effect of Portfolio- and Image-Based Abstractness for Building and Protecting Brand Equity

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research shows that abstract brand concepts not only elicit more favorable consumer responses (Monga and John 2010), but also affect whether judgment revision occurs following a challenge to held beliefs (Pham and Muthukrishnan 2002). However, abstractness can come from two different brand strategies. A brand could diversify its product portfolio and push upward in defining itself in terms of a high-level product denomination (referred hereafter as portfolio abstractness) that is better positioned to satisfy high-level consumer needs (e.g., a railroad brand is not in the railroad business but in the transportation business, Levitt 1960). Or a brand could establish abstract brand concepts on the basis of human-like motivational and emotional meanings (referred hereafter as image abstractness) that resonate with consumers’ self-defining values (e.g., by imbuing brands with human values such as openness or self-enhancement, Torelli et al. 2012).

Surprisingly, research has yet to examine which approach is more favorable for boosting consumer evaluations and better at shielding from brand dilution in the face of a brand scandal. We draw on Action Identification Theory to demonstrate that abstract brand concepts can be identified at different levels (Vallacher and Wegner 1987) and argue that brands high in image abstractness are identified at a higher level than brands high in portfolio abstractness. Because higher levels of identification are more easily represented in terms of high-level, self-relevant values (Vallacher and Wegner 1989), we propose and find an asymmetric effect in that image abstractness boosts customer evaluations at any level of portfolio abstractness, while portfolio abstractness only helps brand concepts low in image abstractness.
If both strategies are successful at generating favorable consumer attitudes, does either have an edge in shielding the brand from dilution in the face of a brand scandal due to a new product failure? Counter to intuitions, we propose that increasing image (vs. portfolio) abstractness is a more effective strategy. Based on modern portfolio theory, one could speculate that increasing portfolio abstractness under a common thread should reduce the risk in any given product failure (Lubatkin and Chatterjee 1994). In contrast, we argue that when consumers are confronted with information about a new product failure, they are less likely to revise initially favorable brand judgments when the brands are high (vs. low) in image abstractness than when they are high (vs. low) in portfolio abstractness. This is driven by the lower level of commensurability between the more “concrete” new product failure information and the higher level identification of a brand that is high in image abstractness (vs. a brand that is high in portfolio abstractness), which in turn renders the negative information less diagnostic (Pham and Muthukrishnan, 2002).

In a pilot study we tested the theory that brands could be identified at different levels. Using a within subjects design, participants were presented with four real brands that varied on their level of image and portfolio abstractness. Results showed that brands higher in image abstractness were identified at a higher level than the brands high in portfolio abstractness, as well as the brands low in both types of abstractness (see table in Appendix for means and statistics).

In study 1, participants rated Interbrand’s Top 100 Global Brands on image and portfolio abstractness as well as reported their attitude toward the brand. Fitting these ratings to a linear model yielded significant coefficients for portfolio abstractness and image abstractness, suggesting a positive effect of both types of abstractness on brand evaluations. Additionally, the coefficient for the portfolio × image abstractness interaction was also significant. Compared to a baseline condition a brand strategy focused on heightening image abstractness had a more favorable impact on brand evaluation (F(23, 1222) = 21.50, p < .001, η2 = .29) than a brand strategy focused on heightening portfolio abstractness (F(24, 1222) = 2.94, p < .001, η2 = .06). See appendix for coefficients and means.

Study 2 used a 2 (portfolio abstractness: low/high) × 2 (image abstractness: low/high) between-subjects design using real technology brands. Participants reviewed information about one of the brands and then indicated their attitudes and opinions towards that brand. After a filler task, they were presented with negative information about a new product, and reported their attitudes and opinions again. Results not only displayed the same positive and asymmetric effect of portfolio and image abstractness on initial brand evaluations as found in study 1, but there was also a significant time of measure × portfolio abstractness × image abstractness interaction, F(1, 190) = 4.57, p < .05, η2 = .02 on brand attitude showing that this asymmetric effect carries over to post-exposure attitude. The favorable effect of portfolio abstractness at low levels of image abstractness completely dissipated after exposure to negative publicity about a new product failure. In contrast, image abstractness had a more favorable impact on brand evaluations both for brands low (F(1, 190) = 39.11, p < .001, η2 = .17) and high in portfolio abstractness (F(1, 190) = 23.84, p < .001, η2 = .11). See appendix for means.

Study 3 followed the same procedure in Study 2 but using a hypothetical automobile brand in a 2 (portfolio abstractness: low/high) × 2 (image abstractness: low/high) between-subjects design. In addition, this study investigated the mediating role of diagnosticity of the negative product information (measured via negativity of thoughts, Ahluwalia 2002). Results mirrored those of Study 2. Mediation analyses further suggested a significant shielding effect of image abstractness on posterior brand attitudes through negativity of thoughts.

When “My” Brand Extends to Incongruent Categories: Effect of Lack of Fidelity on Consumers’ Attitudes

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers choose to establish strong relationships with brands that they can use to create, express and differentiate their actual or aspired identities (Fournier, 1998). The literature suggests that highly attached consumers of a brand will engage in relationship sustaining behaviors, and hardly revise their attitudes toward these brands. Accordingly, highly attached consumers are targeted by brands as they are more forgiving in case of a negative event. We propose, on the other hand, that brands with strong meanings and dedicated customers may be more vulnerable if customers perceive them as exploiting their relationship.

Consumers use the meanings in brands to communicate their identities to others (Griskevicius et al., 2007). They create emotional and cognitive bonds (i.e., attachment) with brands and can even see them as extensions of the self (Park et al., 2009). Their cognitive bond leads them to allocate more social resources to defend their brands (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989) and even forego self-interest to sustain their relationship (Thomson, MacInnis, &Park, 2005). Additionally, their emotional bond (i.e., their prominent and positive feelings about a brand) inhibits recall of other feelings (Alba & Chattopadhyay, 1986). For example, Fedorikhin at al. (2008) demonstrate that highly attached consumers of a brand are willing to purchase and pay more for its extensions, even when there is only moderate fit between brand and extension. Their attachment to the brand attenuates the negative effect of the moderate fit.

We believe that consumers’ relationships with brands rely on the assumption that brands will continue to convey the same meaning and that this meaning will be transferred to consumers’ identities. They will choose “their” brand according to its meaning, symbolic value, and ability to express the right meaning about themselves to others. If a brand behaves incongruently with its meaning (e.g. brand extension incongruent to the meaning), meaning is diluted and cannot be transferred to consumers. When an individual has a great deal of self-concept wrapped up in a relationship, any potential problem with that relationship can cause negative feelings (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003). We propose that highly attached consumers will find a brand behavior that dilutes brand meaning as a breach to their relationship and will feel betrayed.

The more consumers feel attached, the more they feel betrayed, and the more negatively they react to the brand (H1), through the mediating effect of felt betrayal (H2). Additionally, consumers with high self-enhancement need will have greater tendency to use brands to establish more favorable self-identities. Their level of self-enhancement need will strengthen consumers’ negative reaction (H3), when meanings of such brands are diluted after incongruent extension decision.

In a series of five studies we test these effects. Study 1 demonstrates the effect of brand extension type (congruent vs. incongruent) and attachment level (high vs. low) on feelings of betrayal toward a fictitious beverage brand that extends into an incongruent product category. Results show that among highly attached participants feelings of betrayal are greater when the brand extends to an incongruent (vs. congruent) product category. These effects are absent among consumerslow in brand attachment (see table in the Appendix for means and statistics). Study 2 investigates the
effect of attachment level on feelings of betrayal and attitude change toward the parent brand (Mini Cooper) upon the introduction of an incongruent extension (station wagon—from pretests). An analysis of the indirect effect of attachment on attitude change toward the brand through feelings of betrayal, using PROCESS computational macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2012), shows significance for the indirect path (effect size = -.0777, CI: -.1754, -.0223). Thus, greater negative attitude change occurs as feelings of betrayal increase.

Using both fictitious and real brands, Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate that highly attached consumers react more negatively when brands extend to incongruent categories. In Study 3, we use the high-attachment brands reported by participants and investigate the moderating role of self-enhancement need. Participants report their self-enhancement needs and are asked to identify brands to which they are attached. After this, they are presented with brand extensions that are either congruent or incongruent using scenarios similar to those in the previous studies, and evaluate the brand. An analysis using the PROCESS computational macro (Hayes, 2012; model 8) reveals that the conditional indirect effect of brand extension type on brand attitude change is significant and in the expected direction, with effect sizes increasing with higher self-enhancement need. In Study 4, we examine the effect of attachment level and brand extension type (both manipulated) on willingness to purchase (WTP) for a fictitious clothing brand. An ANOVA shows significant main effect of brand extension type on WTP. Simple contrasts suggest that brand extension type has significant negative effect on WTP only when attachment toward the brand is high. This result suggests that highly attached consumers are more likely to revisit their purchase decision compared to consumers less attached to the brand. Additionally, inferential tests for the effect of brand extension type on WTP for different levels of self-enhancement need within the high brand attachment condition reveal that self-enhancement need strengthens the negative effect of brand extension on WTP.

Study 5 further shows that the past effects are driven not by incongruency per se but by incongruency with the reason for brand attachment. The design included an incongruent brand extension that dilutes (or not) consumers’ reason of attachment to the brand, and measured change in brand attitude. Results demonstrate that highly attached consumers react more negatively toward the brand when the brand extension dilutes (vs. not) the reason of attachment. Additionally, an analysis using the PROCESS computational macro (Hayes, 2012; model 8) reveals a significant indirect effect of incongruent extension on attitude change through perceived felt betrayal (for high attachment consumers), and effect sizes are increasing with higher self-enhancement need.

Our results demonstrate that having highly attached consumers is not always beneficiary for brands. If brands move away from their existing meaning, highly attached consumers may feel betrayed and react more negatively.

**Self-Expansion as a Way of Overcoming the Harmful Effects of Luxury-CSR Incongruity**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Recent research has shown that positioning a luxury brand on CSR can dilute its favorable brand image, particularly among self-enhancement oriented consumers—who are the luxury brand’s primary target market (Torelli, Monga and Kaikati 2012). They view such prosocial images as incompatible to their own motivations, thereby reducing brand evaluations. This phenomenon is a major obstacle for luxury brands engaging in CSR, and prior research offers little guidance on how to overcome such negative effects.

In our paper, we propose that self-expansion, which is a cognitive activity intended to grow and expand perspectives and identities (Aron, Norman and Aron 1998), can reduce the harmful effects of using CSR appeals for a luxury brand. Prior research has shown that self-expansion reduces incompatibilities between the self and others (Aron et al. 1991). In the beginning of a relationship, couples face challenges due to differences between the self and the partner. Thus, people, who desire to reduce this gap, incorporate aspects of their partner into the self, and such self-expanding activities lead to better relationship satisfaction (Graham 2008). Therefore, we propose that self-expanding opportunities will reduce the gap between consumers pursuing self-enhancement and a luxury brand engaging in CSR, thus mitigating the harmful effects of CSR appeals.

In study 1, we introduce a way to expand the self—self-referencing, which creates new linkages with aspects of the self (Burnkrant and Umann 1995). Participants read a CSR ad about a luxury brand, Cavalli. In the ad, consumers are told that the profits of Cavalli sunglasses will be used to provide glasses for people who cannot afford them (e.g., “You can bring the gift of sight to a young boy”). In the self-expansion (no expansion) condition, the copy used (did not use) self-relevant words, such as “you” to create linkages of self-transcendence to aspects of the self (Burnkrant and Umann 1995). The experimental procedure is the following. After receiving the self-enhancement motivation manipulation (Maio et al. 2009), participants read the CSR ad. Then, they were asked to write their thoughts about the ad and evaluated the Cavalli sunglasses. As expected, self-expansion through self-referencing mitigated the harmful effects of using the CSR appeal. Participants in the high self-enhancement motivation condition showed more favorable attitudes toward Cavalli sunglasses in the self-expansion (vs. no self-expansion) condition (M = 4.77 vs. M = 4.19). Participants in the low self-enhancement motivation condition did not show such a difference (M = 4.55 vs. M = 4.83). Further, the results from the mediation analysis showed that the positive effect of self-expansion on attitude toward Cavalli sunglasses was mediated by the number of positive thoughts participants generated about the CSR ad.

In study 2, we extend the findings of study 1 in three ways. First, we measured self-enhancement motivation (Schwartz 1992). Second, we used a fictitious brand “Bellavista” to rule out confounds associated with pre-existing brand attitude. Finally, we introduce another approach to expand the self—observing celebrities. Prior research shows that people incorporate aspects of others into the self, particularly when they feel psychologically close to them (Goldstein and Cialdini 2007). We used familiar celebrities well known to pursue self-enhancement and prosocial activities simultaneously, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. Participants in the self-expansion condition read a story listing the socially responsible actions of these very successful actors. Participants in the no self-expansion condition read a neutral story. The experimental procedure was the following. After completing the self-enhancement motivation measure, participants read the story of Pitt and Jolie. Then, they read a CSR ad about Bellavista. We used the no self-referencing CSR ad in study 1, but changed the brand name. Participants were then asked to evaluate the Bellavista sunglasses, and reported how important self-transcendence values were at that moment. Consistent with study 1, participants with high self-enhancement motivation showed more favorable attitudes toward Bellavista sunglasses in the self-expansion (vs. no self-expansion) condition (M = 4.63 vs. M = 4.15). Participants with low self-enhancement motivation did not show such a difference (M = 4.54 vs. M = 4.75). Further, the results from the mediation analysis showed that the positive effect of self-
expansion on attitude toward Bellavista sunglasses was mediated by enhanced importance of self-transcendence.

In study 3, we measured pre-existing brand preference, and tested it as a moderating variable. We thus used a well-established luxury brand, Rolex. Moreover, we introduce the third approach to expand the self—perspective taking. People can incorporate aspects of a stranger into the self if they take the perspective of the person (Davis et al. 1996). Thus, participants were asked to read a short description about person A, who is a successful business consultant, and engages in volunteering to serve the poor of New York. Participants in the self-expansion condition were asked to write an essay about a typical day of that person while imagining as if they were that individual. Participants in the no self-expansion condition were asked to write objectively without reflecting on their own life. The experimental procedure was the same as in study 2, except that we measured pre-existing brand preference. Those with high self-enhancement motivation showed more favorable attitudes toward Rolex watches in the self-expansion (vs. no self-expansion) condition ($M = 6.33$ vs. $M = 5.34$). However, such a positive effect of self-expansion was not found among consumers with high pre-existing brand preference. They showed positive attitudes toward Rolex watches, regardless of the self-expansion condition (overall mean = 6.7) because high brand loyalty buffered the harmful effects of the CSR appeal. Finally, the results from the mediation analysis showed that the positive effect of self-expansion on attitude toward Rolex watches was mediated by enhanced importance of self-transcendence.

Our findings offer different approaches to attenuate the negative effects of using CSR appeals for luxury brands, particularly when targeting consumers who pursue self-enhancement goals (who are the core customers of luxury brands). Companies can successfully use CSR appeals for luxury brands by providing self-expansion opportunities (self-referencing, observing celebrities, or perspective-taking), which helps incorporate self-transcendence into the self.

Democratic Brands: A Framework and Empirical Test

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

What do Wikipedia, Linux, and Firefox have in common? These ‘open-source’ brands are almost entirely manufactured, consumed, and distributed by consumers. For instance, Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia written collectively by anonymous Internet volunteers who write without pay. Other more traditional brands are also dabbling in “democracy”, allowing consumers to have greater power in product design, “hacking” their own products, and offering feedback to the brand through social networking sites. While some brands have been open to democracy, other brands, such as Microsoft and Apple, are notorious for being undemocratic, where they ruthlessly defend their brands and intellectual property against any consumer interaction. Despite the increasing importance of brands that either allow or disallow greater consumer participation, there is surprisingly little work on the topic. A recent exception is a paper by Fournier and Avery (2011), who articulate the notion of “open-source brands” and highlight the need for additional research on this topic. Related, recent work has explored the role of co-creation on consumers’ perceptions of products (e.g., Herd and Moreau 2010; Liu and Gal 2011; Moreau 2011; Fuchs et al. 2013).

In this research we investigate various moderating and mediating factors that lead to preferences for either democratic (inviting input from consumers) or undemocratic (completely controlled) brands. More specifically, we consider whether efforts to level the playing field between consumers and brands impacts (1) overall preference for a brand, (2) perceptions of the brand’s warmth and competence (Fiske et al. 2002), (3) whether warmth and competence mediates brand preferences, and (4) the moderating role of social dominance orientation (SDO) (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999), an individual’s preference for hierarchy within a social system. Democratic brands, organized with less hierarchy (where consumers and companies are equals), should appeal more to those who are low in SDO, whereas undemocratic brands, organized with more hierarchy (where the company controls the product), should appeal more to those who are high in SDO.

Across a series of five studies we tested the mediating role of warmth and competence for democratic and undemocratic brands, and the moderating role of SDO. In a pilot study, we first consider whether a number of well-known technology brands vary on whether they are perceived as democratic or undemocratic. We found that out of nine brands tested, Wikipedia was found to be the most democratic brand, whereas Microsoft was found to be the least democratic brand. Furthermore, Wikipedia was found to be significantly warmer than Microsoft however, the two brands did not vary on their level of perceived competence. Finally, being democratic mediated perceptions of warmth. In study 1, we extend the effect found in the pilot study with two hypothetical brands. In a between subjects design participants either read about a democratic brand, or an undemocratic brand. In the democratic condition participants read “Imagine that company A is a technology company. The company delivers an extremely high-quality product. To ensure the greatest quality, the company [has an open platform where it welcomes changes and new developments to its software from its community].” In the undemocratic condition, the text in brackets was replaced by: “maintains complete control over the product throughout the development process.” Participants preferred the democratic brand to the undemocratic brand. Furthermore, participants found the democratic brand to be higher in warmth than the undemocratic brand however, the two brands did not vary in competence. Finally, being warm mediated purchase intention (see table in the Appendix for means and statistics).

In study 2, our aim was to consider the moderating role of SDO. In this study, we used Wikipedia and Microsoft, which were the most and the least democratic brands found in our pilot study. In a between subjects design, participants indicated how often they used either brand. In addition participants indicated their level of SDO, an individual difference measuring their preference for hierarchy within a social system. While participants indicated that they used Wikipedia and Microsoft equally, we found a significant interaction with SDO. As SDO went higher, so did the use of Microsoft, while use of Wikipedia went lower.

In study 3, our aim was to replicate the effects of study 2 using hypothetical brands to control for confounds. We also considered a new product category, cheese. Between subjects, participants either read about a brand described as being democratic or undemocratic using similar narratives from study 1. Participants indicated a significantly higher purchase intention for the democratic cheese brand than the undemocratic cheese brand. Furthermore, we again found a significant interaction with SDO whereas preference for the undemocratic brand increased as SDO was higher, and preference for the democratic brand decreased.

In study 4, we replicated the moderating effects of SDO found in studies 2 and 3. In addition, though competence did not vary across the democratic and undemocratic brands, we did find a significant interaction in which those high in SDO found the undemocratic brand to be more competent. In a moderated mediation analysis, we
found that competence ratings mediated purchase intention for those who were higher in SDO.

Finally, in study 5, rather than consider SDO as an individual difference, we varied whether hierarchy was more salient in the situation (buying cheese for one’s boss) vs. less salient (buying cheese for oneself). We found a significant interaction in which participants were significantly more likely to choose the undemocratic brand when hierarchy was more salient than when it was not. However, we found no significant difference between conditions for the democratic brand.

Given increasing levels of interactivity between the consumer and the firm enabled by the internet, understanding how consumers relate to brands that are either democratic or undemocratic is increasingly important. We make four contributions to the literature: (1) we conceptualize and test the concept of democratic vs. undemocratic brands, (2) we show that preference for democratic brands is mediated through greater perceptions of warmth, (3) we show that for people who value hierarchies (high in SDO), in situations where hierarchy is relevant, democratic brands are valued less, and (4) we show that for those high in SDO, competence mediates preference for the democratic brands.

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