Shared Brand Consumption and Relational Brand Connections

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This research examines how married consumers form relational brand connection. Findings contribute to extant work on brand connections by showcasing how shared brand consumption and marital satisfaction influence the nature of the consumer’s connection to the brand and the perceived importance of the brand to the marital relationship.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Marketing campaigns often encourage consumers to share their consumption with close others. For example, Nutella recently promoted its “rise and shine” campaign that encourages families to have breakfast together, and to consume Nutella as a part of that familial breakfast experience. The idea that brands may benefit from shared consumption is intuitively appealing because brands are part of consumers’ identity narratives (Escalas 2004; Fournier 1998) and identities are shaped by the relationships forged with others (Andersen and Chen 2002; Aron et al. 1992). Thus, it is plausible consumers may form particularly strong relationships with brands that they consume together with people they love and care for.

This research examines how married individuals form connections with brands that they consume together with their spouses. Previous research has shown that the social context is central to the development of brand connections (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2003). However, brand consumption has mostly been considered in relation to a given social context, without consideration of how brands become part of a social entity. Extant work supports that when an individual establishes a romantic relationship, he or she expands the self-concept to include the relational partner (Aron and Aron 1986) and marriage, in particular, involves the construction of a relational identity (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Fincham et al. 1997). Importantly, engaging in shared experiences, such as recreational activities, has been shown to improve marital satisfaction (Orthner and Mancini 1990), in part because when couples engage in such activities, they are “reinforcing a sense of interdependence and closeness” (Aron et al. 2000, 274). Thus, shared brand consumption is likely to facilitate relational interconnectedness.

In line with extant research on marriage and self-expansion, we hypothesize that a married individual who consumes a brand with his/her spouse forms a brand connection that is anchored in the relational identity (H1). Such a relational brand connection increases the perceived importance of the brand to the marital relationship (H3) which, in turn, influences the consumer’s attitudes, purchase intentions, affect, and estimated separation distress experienced if the brand is discontinued (H5a-d). Moreover, as shared experiences have been shown to facilitate relational identity construction (Fincham et al. 1997) and improve marital satisfaction (Hill 1988; Orthner and Mancini 1990), we expect the effect of shared brand consumption on formation of relational brand connections to be stronger for those with high marital satisfaction (H2) and the effect of the relational brand connection on the perceived importance of the brand to be stronger for individuals with high marital satisfaction (H4). Finally, as the marital “utility” derived from shared experiences may differ depending on the nature of shared experiences that spouses engage in (Freeman and Zabriskie 2003), we hypothesize that shared brand consumption defined as “special” should be more important for formation of relational brand connections than shared “mundane” brand consumption (H6).

The purpose of Study 1 was to test hypothesis 1 to 5. Data was collected on MTurk using survey method. The final sample included 582 respondents who confirmed that were married (51% female, 51% married less than 5 years). Each respondent rated their marital satisfaction and then listed a brand that they consume with their spouse. All brand related measures (i.e., shared use, relational importance, attitudes, purchase intentions, affect, and separation distress) pertained to the selected brand. Confirmatory factor analysis was utilized to estimate the measurement model in AMOS. The measurement model had an acceptable fit. All factor loadings were positive and significant ($p < .01$) and all construct reliabilities ranged from .80 to .98. The structural model had acceptable fit and all paths were significant in support of the main-effect hypotheses (1, 3 and 5). We ran multi-group analysis to explore the moderating effect of marital satisfaction. In support of H2 and H4 higher levels of marital satisfaction led to stronger influence of shared use on relational brand connection and stronger influence of relational brand connection on the perceived importance of the brand to the marital relationship.

Study 2 built on study 1 to examine how the nature of shared brand consumption influences the formation of a relational brand connection (H6). Hence, we ran a 2 condition (Type of shared brand consumption: Special vs. Mundane) between subjects experiment. Data was collected using MTurk and each participant was randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. We found no interaction between the conditions and marital satisfaction ($F(1, 576) = .02$, $p > .8$) and thus we included marital satisfaction in the structural model to examine the effect of “special” use after controlling for the effect of marital satisfaction on relational brand connections. This structural model had an acceptable fit and all paths were significant. In support of H6, after controlling for the effect of marital satisfaction, the differential effect of experiential vs. mundane shared consumption on relational brand connections was significant. Specifically, shared special, compared to mundane, brand consumption had higher levels of relational brand connections, after controlling for marital satisfaction.

Our research makes several important contributions to the literature on brands and interpersonal consumption. First, we showcase how relational aspects of identities influence the formation of brand connections. Second, we show how the nature of the consumption context (i.e., mundane vs. special shared brand consumption) influences relational brand connections. Finally, we contribute to interpersonal consumption research by examining how marriage satisfaction influences the formation of relational brand connections; thus showcasing how interpersonal relationships may influence brand relationships.

REFERENCES


