Fostering and Leveraging Consumer-Brand Relationships: a Psychological Distance Perspective

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We demonstrate that brand relationships affect perceptions of a brand’s closeness to the self, resulting in mindset congruency effects when matched with an appropriate construal level. Brand relationships that are closer (distal) to the self yield improved evaluations when brand information is processed at a low (high) construal level.

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Bridging Brand and Interpersonal Relationship Research: How and When Is Our Connection to Brands Like Our Connection to People?

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Paper #1: Brand Communication on Social Media: Effects of Non-Persuasive Self-Disclosure on Consumer Perceptions
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Paper #2: Fostering and Leveraging Consumer-Brand Relationships: A Psychological Distance Perspective
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Paper #3: Warm Brands as Relationship Partners: The Dynamics of Social Exclusion, Brands, and Interpersonal Connection
Soyoung Kim, University of Alberta, Canada
Sarah Moore, University of Alberta, Canada
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Paper #4: Seeing Brands Through “Me” Colored Glasses: Effects of Self-Threat and Brand Attachment on Brand Evaluations
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SESSION OVERVIEW

Whether consumers relate to brands similarly to the way they relate to people has been a focus of consumer researchers and managers alike. For example, a substantial body of research has suggested that consumers’ responses to brands are cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally similar to their responses to people (Aggarwal 2004; Dunn and Hoegg 2014; Fournier 1998; Khamitov et al. 2016; Park et al. 2010; Sayin and Gürhan-Canli 2015; Thomson et al. 2005). However, other work has shown that the findings in the interpersonal domain do not frequently apply in the branding context (Whelan and Dawar 2014; Yoon et al. 2006). Similarly, marketing practitioners seem to exhibit a diversity of views – some document a consumer tendency to enliven brands and form emotional relationships with them (Cary 2000), while others doubt the existence of such relationships (Earls 2002). Thus, research that investigates conditions under which consumers’ interactions with brands are either similar to or different from their interactions with people would enhance our understanding of the nature of consumers’ connections with brands (Alvarez and Fournier 2016; Swaminathan and Dommer 2012). The aim of this session is to examine such consumer-brand connection processes. Specifically, the four papers in this session address the following questions: 1) under what conditions can brand and interpersonal relationships operate in parallel, and 2) how do these brand relationships impact and how are they impacted by interpersonal processes? Session attendees will learn about factors contributing to the similarities and differences between brand and interpersonal relationships and how these factors influence consumers’ judgments and behaviors.

The first two papers focus on when and how consumers’ interaction with brands are similar to interactions with people. Huang and Dou examine the effect of a brand’s self-disclosure (intimate vs. superficial) on brand perceptions as a function of anthropomorphism that activates interpersonal processes in brand relationships. They show that intimate brand disclosure increases brand closeness under high brand anthropomorphism, but does not increase desire for monetary exchange. Connors, Khamitov, Rotman, Thomson, and Perkins investigate how congruency between a brand’s psychological distance to the self and a construal mindset enhances brand evaluations, documenting the results analogous to the findings in the interpersonal domain.

The last two papers examine the social factors that change perceptions and evaluations of brand relationships. Kim, Moore, and Murray show that socially excluded consumers turn to warm brands as relationship partners, and beyond transient consumption, these brand relationships can alleviate the relative deprivation of and the subsequent need for human connections. Lastly, Danienta and White investigate the effect of self-threat coming from social comparisons on the self and the brand relationship, finding that following negative feedback, consumers evaluate a highly self-connected brand more negatively.

Taken together, this session provides multifaceted insights into when and how consumers’ responses to brands correspond to interactions between people. Exploring brands through potential extensions and limitations of interpersonal relationship theory can enrich our brand relationship theories. We expect this session to be of interest to researchers in the areas of brands, consumer-brand relationships and interpersonal relationships.

Brand Communication on Social Media: Effects of Non-Persuasive Self-Disclosure on Consumer Perceptions

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Since relationship closeness promises sales (Sela, Wheeler and Sarial-Abi 2012), increasingly, brands directly communicate with consumers via social media to forge intimate relationships (Neff 2014). They may share information not directly related to products (e.g., inspiring quotes, hobbies, anecdotes). For example, Planters claims that “I like to work out and take leisurely lunches in the park.” (Dahl 2014). While prior research emphasizes persuasive brand communications (e.g., Laran, Dalton, and Andrade 2011), non-persuasive tactics (i.e., self-disclosure) is less understood. In response to Brown (2010)’s call for more theoretical guidelines on social media communication, we explore how non-persuasive self-disclosure influences consumer perceptions.

Self-disclosure refers to the act of revealing personal information to initiate a more intimate relationship with the audiences (Collins and Miller 1994). In brand communication, this tactic may induce a priming effect as consumers behave in a manner implied by self-disclosure (Berger and Fitzsimons 2008). For example, the Walmart brand primes thriftiness in shoppers (Chartrand et al. 2008). Altman and Taylor (1973) state that intimate disclosures (e.g., hopes and fears) generate more intimate feelings than superficial disclosures (e.g., general interest). Further, people who share more intimate information are liked more (Collins and Miller 1994). Therefore, a brand disclosing personal information should be more effective in close relationship building than those acting “formal.”

However, we suggest that brand’s self-disclosure may cause a reverse priming effect.

Laran et al. (2011) show that seeing the Walmart slogan “Save Money, Live Better” increases subsequent spending because of the
undergraduates engaged in a 2 thinking (anthropomorphism vs. object) x 2 self-disclosures (intimate vs. superficial) between-subject study. We manipulated thinking style by asking the subjects to evaluate the brand by human personalities vs. object attributes (Chandler and Schwarz 2010). Then we tested the closeness, brand evaluation and willingness to pay. An ANOVA revealed a main effect of the disclosure (F(1,112) = 7.76, p < .01), the thinking style(F(1,112) = 32.6, p < .001), and their interaction (F(1,112) = 9.21, p < .01) on closeness. Closeness was higher in the intimate as compared to superficial disclosure under the anthropomorphic thinking while the reverse was true under the object thinking. Interestingly, while the brand evaluation replicated closeness patterns, WTP showed the opposite results. The results imply that intimate disclosure by anthropomorphized brand may enhance brand evaluation but decrease monetary exchange desires.

This research contributes to an understanding of the non-persuasive marketing communication effects and has important implications for brand’s marketing communication in the digital world.

Fostering and Leveraging Consumer-Brand Relationships: A Psychological Distance Perspective

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A substantial body of research has focused on understanding the various types of relationships that consumers form with brands (Fournier 1998; Miller, Fournier, and Allen 2012). However, less emphasis has been placed on identifying how managers can differentially leverage these brand relationships in order to facilitate more positive outcomes. To address this, the current research examines how the nature of brand relationships influence perceptions of a brand’s closeness to the self and, when matched with the appropriate construal level, can result in mindset congruency effects that positively impact consumers’ brand evaluations.

Extant research demonstrates that consumers’ brand relationships may parallel their interactions with other people (Fournier 1998; Aggarwal 2004). Drawing from the construal level theory of psychological distance (CLT: Trope and Liberman 2010), a key feature of interpersonal relationships is their ability to influence perceptions of the relationship partners’ closeness to the self. For example, one’s relationship with their sister is more psychologically proximal, whereas one’s relationship with a server at a restaurant is more distal. Similarly, extant branding literature shows that consumers can form strong connections between the brand and the self (Escalas and Bettman 2003; 2005), and that individual-level differences exist in the tendency to form such connections (Sprott et al. 2009). Synthesizing these literatures, we posit that brand relationships should impact perceptions of the brand’s closeness to the self, shedding light on important opportunities for marketers to better foster brand relationships and better leverage their value.

If brand relationships impact consumers’ perceptions of psychological distance, this subjective difference in closeness to the self should be directly related to one’s construal level when processing information pertaining to the brand. CLT states that objects that are psychologically distant to the individual are represented by high-level construal, whereas objects that are near to the individual are represented by low-level construal. As such, we posit that the nature of a brand relationship affects consumers’ perceptions of the brand’s closeness to the self resulting in congruency effects when matched with the appropriate construal level. Specifically, we show that when psychologically close (distant) brands are matched with a low-level (high-level) construal mindset, it results in a mindset congruency effect which facilitates more positive brand evaluations and influ-
ences actual consumer spending. Importantly, we demonstrate that this congruency effect is mediated by increased processing fluency (Lee and LaBarro 2004).

Study 1 manipulates brand relationship type (committed, secret affair) and construal level (high, low) to test the mindset congruency effect. Participants first nominated a brand that they felt matched the description of the target relationship type (Miller, Fournier, and Allen 2012). Construal level was manipulated by instructing participants to elaborate on either how (low-level) or why (high-level) they use the brand. Results support the hypothesized mindset congruency effect. Across three dependent variables (attitudes, trust, and relationship satisfaction) responses were more favorable when participants in the psychologically proximal ‘committed’ relationship condition were in a low-level construal mindset. In contrast, participants in the psychologically distal ‘secret affair’ condition displayed more favorable responses in a high-level construal mindset (p’s <.05).

Study 2 provides a conceptual replication of the mindset congruency effect using a direct manipulation of brand closeness, a subtler concreteness-based manipulation of construal level, and measures of behavioral intentions. The study was conducted under the guise that researchers were interested in testing a new online product quality rating system, International Standard, which compiles information from online sources (e.g. consumer reports, online product reviews, etc.) to evaluate the overall quality of a brand. Adapting the Inclusion of Other in Self scale (Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992) to manipulate brand closeness, participants provided the name of a brand that either had ‘very large’ self-overlap or was ‘separate’ from the self and were then instructed to wait while the system calculated a quality score for their brand. After a delay, the system informed participants that their brand had received a score of 9.2/10. Construal level was manipulated by providing participants with a list of the “top five factors that contributed to the International Standard score that the brand received” that varied based on how (concrete) or why (abstract) the brand received the score that it did. Results again provide evidence to support the pattern of the brand closeness-concreteness interaction across all three brand evaluation variables in addition to purchase intentions and word of mouth (p’s <.05).

Study 3 provides a conceptual replication of the effect and undertakes an empirical examination of the proposed fluency mediator. To manipulate closeness, participants nominated a brand that represented either a ‘committed’ (close) or ‘secret affair’ (distant) brand relationship. Participants’ brands were then used in the same International Standard manipulation of concreteness followed by measures of the fluency mediator and dependent variables. Significant and contrasting conditional indirect effects (Model 8; Hayes 2013) support the hypothesized mindset congruency effect being mediated by increased processing fluency across all three dependent variables used in study 1 (95% confidence intervals did not contain zero). Matching the psychological distance associated with a given brand relationship type with the appropriate construal level increases processing fluency leading to more favorable brand evaluations.

Study 4 embeds a concreteness manipulation within a co-branded charity appeal advertisement to demonstrate that the construal mindset congruency effect that arises when closeness is matched with an appropriate construal level carries over to impact the amount of money donated to a charity affiliated with the target brand. Results show that at higher (lower) levels of brand closeness, participants donated more when the charity advertisement appeal used concrete (abstract) language.

This research contributes to the branding literature by demonstrating that consumers view brands more favorably when they receive information that matches the construal level associated with the psychological closeness of the brand. This mindset congruency effect results in the information being processed more fluently, which facilitates more positive brand evaluations and intentions. Based on these findings, marketers are advised to match the concreteness of their marketing communications with the closeness associated with the types of relationships that the target market experiences with their brand.

Warm Brands as Relationship Partners: The Dynamics of Social Exclusion, Brands, and Interpersonal Connection

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People have a fundamental need to form positive and lasting relationships (Baumeister and Leary 1995). When people are socially excluded—that is, when they are isolated or excluded by groups or individuals (Williams 2007)—this disrupted social connectedness brings negative downstream consequences such as anxiety and depression (DeWall and Bushman 2011). Thus, excluded individuals engage in coping behaviors to alleviate this adverse state. Recent work has examined consumption as a coping behavior following social exclusion, such as engagement in strategic consumption for the purpose of social inclusion (Mead et al. 2011), conspicuous consumption (Lee and Shrum 2012) or nostalgic product consumption (Loveland, Smesters, and Mandel 2010). However, little is known about the implications of social exclusion for consumer-brand relationships and for the subsequent dynamics between brands and interpersonal relationships. Thus, this research investigates (1) whether consumption following social exclusion is transitory, that is, fades away once consumption is complete, or it can trigger brand attachment, leading to meaningful consumer-brand relationships and (2) how these brand relationships formed under social exclusion influence the subsequent need for social connections.

Warmth and competence are important dimensions that characterize consumers’ interactions with brands (Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs 2012; Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012). Warmth reflects consumers’ perceptions of brands’ intentions as positive or negative; brands perceived as friendly and sincere are seen as warm. Competence concerns brands’ abilities to carry out its intentions; brands that possess a skill set to execute functions successfully are perceived as competent (Bennett and Hill 2012). Existing research has presented competence as a main driver of consumers’ purchase intention (Aaker et al. 2010). However, in the context of social exclusion, we argue that the deprivation of social connection should lead consumers to attend to brands’ warmth, the image of which is akin to social closeness, more than brands’ competence. Such social closeness imbued in warm brands may have a powerful impact on consumers’ psychological attachment to warm brands similarly to the way sharing adversity with those present during a difficult time creates strong attachment to others (Sarnoff and Zimbardo 1961). Thus, we predict that when people are socially excluded, it will trigger emotional attachment to warm brands, thereby leading to continuous brand consumption. In addition, Foa (1993) argues that people deprived of the most needed resource tend to choose the resource similar to the deficient one. Along the line, we predict that in the context of social exclusion, warm brands will function as social resource, which is close to social warmth, creating relative abundance and thereby alleviating the deprivation of and the need for the social connectedness.

Prior to testing our predictions, we created and pre-tested two hypothetical brands: “Sammy (heart) Danny” as a warm brand and “Smith & Dent” as a competent brand. The results showed that the “Sammy (heart) Danny” brand was perceived as a warm but less
competent brand, while “Smith & Dent” as perceived as a competent but less warm brand (all $p < .005$; $N = 42, M_{we} = 31.9$).

In Study 1 we tested the effects of social exclusion on emotional brand attachment and brand short-term and long-term consumption. MTurk participants ($N = 121, M_{we} = 33.7$) completed a writing task in which they were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: (1) social exclusion and (2) no exclusion (Lee and Shrum 2012). Next, participants viewed both two laptop bags presented as either warm or competent (as pre-tested above) and indicated their purchase and repurchase intentions for the brand ($t = not at all, 7 = very much$). They also rated the extent to which they felt passionate, connected, and affectionate toward each brand (emotional brand attachment; Thomson et al. 2005). The repeated measure analysis revealed that when people were socially excluded, they were significantly more likely to purchase the warm than the competent brand ($F(1, 118) = 5.23, p = .024; = 5.31 vs. = 4.37$). Socially excluded participants were also marginally more willing to repurchase the warm than the competent brand ($F(1, 118) = 3.05, p = .08; = 5.39 vs. = 4.41$).

Bootstrapping analyses (Hayes 2013) showed that emotional brand attachment significantly mediated the effects of social exclusion on warm brand purchase and repurchase intentions (95% CI [0.0228, 1.1314] and 95% CI [0.005, 0.888] respectively).

Study 2 tested how social exclusion interacts with brand types to affect the state of deprivation and the need for social connection. Similar to Study 1, all MTurk participants ($N = 111, M_{we} = 40.35$) were asked to write about their social exclusion experience, and were randomly assigned to view (1) a warm brand, (2) a competent brand, or (3) no brand; in the no brand condition, participants did not see any brand and reported their deprivation of and need for social connection. The regression analysis showed that socially excluded participants were more emotionally attached to the warm brand ($t(72) = 4.54, p < .001$) and more likely to purchase ($t(72) = 2.36, p < .05$) and repurchase the warm brand ($t = 2.95, p < .01$), as compared to the competent brand. Importantly, participants in the warm brand condition were feeling less deprived of social connection ($t(108) = -2.04, p < .05$) and indicated a lower need for connection with people (than those in the competent brand condition ($t(108) = -2.04, p < .05$), while the differences between the competent and no brand conditions were not significant (all $p > .40$).

In conclusion, our findings contribute to an understanding of the relations between social adversity, brands, and human relationships: Not only do socially excluded consumers turn to warm brands, but, as a result, they feel less deprived of and less in need of human connections. By showing how brands can fill the social roles in thwarted social relationships, we hope that our work will interest researchers in the areas of social adversity, interpersonal and consumer-brand relationships.

Seeing Brands Through “Me” Colored Glasses: Effects of Self-Threat and Brand Attachment on Brand Evaluations

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

It is well documented that consumers use brands to shape and reflect who they are and want to be (e.g., Belk, 1988; Fournier 1998; Escalas and Bettman 2003). An important type of brand attachment can be referred to as a self-brand connection (SBC). A key premise of recent research on SBC is that, if it is possible that the brand concept (i.e., the way consumers think about the brand) can reflect consumers’ self-concept, then it is also possible that the brand concept can affect consumers’ self-concept. If so, consumers’ sense of self-worth may be adversely influenced by exposure to negative brand information. Indeed, research by Cheng, White and Chaplin (2012) confirms this possibility. Their research demonstrates that consumers with high SBC respond to negative brand information as they do to personal failure – they experience a threat to their positive self-view. These findings highlight important, yet unintended outcomes of consumer brand attachments.

In this research, we further explore consequences of SBC. Specifically, we examine the notion that if the brand concept can affect the self-concept of high SBC consumers, then the opposite might also be true. Is it possible that consumers’ beliefs about themselves influence their beliefs about the brands to which they feel connected? Is it possible that the experience of self-threat, which can make consumers feel worse about themselves, can also make them feel worse about their high SBC brands? We examine these questions in the context of brand evaluations. In three experiments, we demonstrate that self-threat decreases high (vs. low) SBC consumers’ brand trust judgments. Moreover, these effects extend to perceptions of brand competence and attractiveness.

Literature and Hypotheses

Self-affirmation theory posits that people are motivated maintain a positive self-concept (Steele 1988). Yet, individuals often experience incidents that threaten this belief. For example, consumers sometimes feel shame about their appearance when they view attractive models (Gulas and McKeeage 2000), or feel incompetent when they realize they paid more than others for an identical item (Argo, White, and Dahl 2006). In response to these incidents, individuals are often motivated to reduce self-threat and restore a positive self-view by derogating others (Campbell and Sedikides 1999) or by choosing products that bolster the threatened aspect of the self (Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009).

Consistent with prior research, we argue that, when consumers’ self concept is threatened, they experience a “shake” - a temporary decrement - to their self-confidence (Gao et al. 2009). However, we explore an important, yet largely unexplored, consequence of this “shake,” namely a marked decrease in consumers’ judgments of their own trustworthiness. Self-threat reflects a positive sense of one’s own motivations and values (Givord 1993). Lack of self-trust stems from a decreased confidence in one’s ability to meet expectations (Gambetta 2000). We argue that self-threats, particularly those resulting from negative feedback, decrease consumers’ self-trust and, therefore, their trust in highly connected brands.

Method and Results

Prior to Studies 1 and 2, SBC perceptions were measures for several brands using the scale developed by Escalas and Bettman (2003). Based on the results of the pretests, we selected exemplars of high and low SBC brands. For the sake of brevity, we only report findings from S2 and S3 below.

In S1, respondents were randomly assigned to either a high (Apple) or low (Blackberry) SBC condition. After reading an article about the correlation between IQ and success, participants completed a Remote Associates Task (RAT) (Mednick et al. 1964) and were randomly assigned to receive either negative performance feedback (i.e., scores in 23rd percentile on the RAT) or no feedback. Next, in an ostensibly unrelated task, respondents rated trusting beliefs about either Apple or Blackberry using measures by Schlosser, White, and Lloy (2006).

The procedure in S2 is similar to S1 except we used Nike and Reebok as exemplars of high versus low SBC brands, respectively. In addition to trust beliefs, we also measured respondents’ ratings of how smart they believe the brand to be. If receiving negative performance feedback adversely affects performance self-esteem
In study 3, we measured SBC for the focal brand, Gap. We also manipulated appearance threat (Park and Maner 2009). Finally, in addition to brand trust, we measured brand attractiveness. We regressed attractiveness ratings and trust judgments on SBC, appearance threat, and their interaction. As predicted, for attractiveness ratings, a significant SBC main effect was qualified by a significant SBC X Appearance Threat interaction (β = -.339; p < .05). Similarly, trust judgments were significantly affected by SBC as well as the SBC X Appearance Threat interaction (β = -.306; p < .05). For both DVs, high (but not low) SBC respondents’ ratings were significantly lower following negative feedback appearance threat.

A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for SBC (F (1, 84) = 11.46; p < .001) that was qualified by an SBC X Feedback interaction (F (1, 84) = 4.626; p < .05) for brand attractiveness ratings. As predicted, whereas feedback had no effect on perceived smartness for those in the low SBC conditions (M_control = 4.68; M_negative = 4.95; F (1, 84) = ns), smartness ratings were significantly lower following negative feedback for those in the high SBC conditions (M_control = 6.19; M_negative = 5.29; F (1, 84) = 19.790; p < .001). Similarly, planned contrast analyses of a marginally significant SBC X Feedback interaction (F (1, 84) = 2.960; p < .09) for trust ratings revealed that, although trust ratings did not depend upon feedback for those in the low SBC condition (M_control = 4.09; M_negative = 4.36; F (1, 84), ns), brand trust was significantly lower following negative feedback for high SBC respondents (M_control = 5.34; M_negative = 4.35; F (1, 84) = 9.143; p < .05).

In REFERENCES


