I Don’t Care If You’re Committed, But “We” Do: How Group Brand Connections Affect Access-Based Brand Extension Evaluations

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The present paper extends prior brand extension research by exploring how evaluations differ when extension users do not own the extension. Observers with group brand connection evaluate extensions that allow users to access (vs. own) the brand based on its users’ perceived commitment, not fit with the parent brand.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Analysts expect the sharing economy’s revenue potential to reach $300B by 2025 (Geron 2013; Price Waterhouse Cooper 2015). To leverage this growing trend, many firms have begun to extend their brands into sharing spaces by introducing brand extensions that offer consumers access to, but not complete ownership of, their goods and services (i.e., access-based brand extensions). Examples include manufacturer-based car-sharing offerings (e.g., Ford2go; Baumeister, Scherer, and Wangenheim 2015) and online degree programs from physical universities (e.g., online MBA).

Among other factors (most notably, the perceived fit or similarity between the parent and the extended brand; Aaker and Keller 1990; Park, Milberg, and Lawson 1991), the success of brand extensions also depends on the nature of the consumer brand relationship. Not surprisingly, brand attachment has been linked to more favorable reactions to brand extensions (Fedorikhin, Park, and Thomson 2008; Kirmani, Sood, and Bridges 1999; Park and Kim 2001), even when the extension is unsuccessful (Cheng, White and Chaplin 2012, Swaminathan, Page and Gurhan-Canli 2007).

This research builds upon prior research, but offers two important points of departure. First, we theoretically differentiate access-based brand extensions (hereafter ABE) from traditional brand extensions (TBE) and, in so doing, highlight why the nature of consumers’ prior brand connections may differentially influence (and, specifically, lower) their evaluations of ABEs versus TBEs. Second, we examine the impact of group-brand connections (hereafter GBC). In so doing, we acknowledge that brands can be instrumental in helping consumers shape and reflect who they are as individuals (e.g., a savvy Apple owner), but also as members of important groups (e.g., a fiercely loyal member of the Chicago Cubs fan club). Indeed, a person’s group identities reflect a fundamental need to affiliate with others. For example, when others were made salient in participants’ shared identity, brand attachments that are based on a brand’s perceived ability to shape and reflect consumers’ individual identities (e.g., self-brand connections (SBC); Escalas and Bettman 2005, Fournier 1988), relatively less is known about group-brand connections (GBC), those that are based on a brand’s perceived ability to facilitate and reflect a consumer’s identity as a member of a group (e.g., country-of-origin connections; Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran 2000, Swaminathan, Page and Gurhan-Canli 2007).

Using the sharing economy as our context, we theorize and find that when consumers believe that a brand is instrumental in reflecting or facilitating their connection with an important group (i.e., high GBC consumers), they are more likely to: a) negatively evaluate those who use that brand’s ABEs (hereafter “accessors”) based on commitment perceptions and b) rate ABEs less favorably than TBEs.

Theoretical Framework

We define an ABE as a type of brand extension in which a firm offers modified goods or services that limit the user’s ownership. Our conceptualization of ABEs includes offerings that either limit consumers’ ownership of the good entirely (e.g., short-term car rentals; Baumeister et al. 2015) or limit ownership of some integral product attribute (e.g., forgoing the on-campus experience when earning an online degree). Thus, whereas TBEs typically involve stretching the parent brand by introducing an innovation or extending into a new product category, ABEs extend the brand into a new business model in which consumers have access to, but not complete ownership of, their branded products or services. We argue that this distinction is associated with fundamental differences in user imagery (Keller 1993), or consumers’ beliefs about the typical user, of ABEs vs TBEs and, therefore, their evaluations of these extensions.

We propose that perceived commitment is the critical element of user imagery comparison between owners versus accessors. Commitment is commonly defined as the degree to which an individual views a relationship from a long-term perspective even when things are difficult (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2000; Drigotas and Rusbult 1992). Prior research has associated ownership with commitment to the owned object (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Palmar, Le, and Friedman 2012). Additional work found that consumers use perceived differences in commitment among other users to make overall evaluations (Love, Staton, and Rotman 2015; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Moreover, accessors in the sharing economy have acknowledged lower personal commitment toward objects that they access versus those that they own (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). Taken together, these findings suggest that commitment perceptions may comprise an unexplored, but important part of user imagery in brand extensions. Next, we discuss for whom commitment perceptions are most likely to matter.

From social identity theory, we know that the self can be conceptualized as composed of personal and group identities (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Just as material possessions can help owners express group identity (Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995; Wallendorf and Arnold 1988), brands can also facilitate this expression. Thus, group-brand connection (GBC) is the extent to which a brand is used to express one’s social identity. Prior work suggests that GBC may influence attitudes when there is greater focus on relationships with others. For example, when others were made salient in participants’ construal of self (Markus and Kitayama 1991), Swaminathan and colleagues (2007) found that attitude change depended on GBC (e.g., brand country-of-origin), not SBC. According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), people are more attentive and sensitive to the norms and expectations of the in-group when others are salient. In the current work, we suggest that the fundamental differences in user imagery make others more salient when evaluating ABEs and TBEs. Building on these findings, we expect observers’ GBC to determine the extent to which evaluations differ between ABEs and TBEs. Specifically, we expect high (vs. low) GBC consumers’ attitudes to reflect a concern with others’ adherence to group norms and expectations when a brand extension (i.e., an ABE) allows users to access the brand without commitment.

In summary, our prior arguments imply that attitudes toward accessors and owners should vary based on consumers’ GBC, such that high GBC consumers evaluate accessors (vs. owners) less favorably because of lower commitment perceptions. In contrast, low GBC consumers should be less sensitive to accessors’ commitment-norm violation and evaluate them similarly to owners. Prior work has found that user imagery influences extension evaluations (Desai and Keller 2002; Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2013; Keller 2003),

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hence we expect commitment perceptions to mediate high GBC consumers’ ABE (vs. TBE) evaluations.

**Study 1**

204 adults (51% male, Mage = 36) were recruited from MTurk to participate in a brand extension type (TBE vs. ABE) × group-brand connection (measured) experiment for money. Participants indicated their GBC on three items (α = .88; Swaminathan et al. 2007) and their self-concept connection on two items (r = .86; Fournier 1994; Kleine et al. 1995). After the short survey, participants saw descriptions of one of two Chevrolet brand extensions. The ABE was a car-sharing program called Chevy2go and the TBE was a Chevrolet Bike. Participants evaluated the extension, the users’ perceived commitment, and general user imagery on 3-item, 7-point scales. Participants then completed a manipulation check measure, indicated their perceived similarity with the users (single item), and whether they currently owned a Chevrolet vehicle. We analyzed the data from the 172 non-owners to rule out ownership effects (Kirmani et al. 1999). Note: We measure and control for perceived user similarity in this study and all subsequent studies and manipulation checks were successful in all studies.

**Results**

A regression model that included brand extension type (dummy coded), GBC (mean-centered) and their interaction revealed a main effect of GBC that was qualified by the predicted extension type × GBC interaction (β = .26, se = .12, p = .03). Spotlight analysis revealed that when GBC to Chevy was 1SD above the mean, participants evaluated the ABE (M = 5.1) less favorably than the TBE (M = 5.7; β = -.61, se = .24, p = .01). In contrast, evaluations did not differ when GBC to Chevy was 1SD below the mean (M_ABE = 5.2, M_TBE = 5.1, p = .62). Notably, there were no significant effects when we used self-concept connection instead of GBC (t < 1, p = .35).

**Mediation analyses.** We tested whether commitment perceptions mediated evaluations when GBC was high (vs. low) using bias-corrected moderated mediation analysis (model 7, Hayes 2013). The results confirmed our predictions, revealing a significant indirect effect of commitment perceptions when GBC was high (β = -.21, Boot SE = .14, 95% CI: -.59, -.0092), but not when it was low (β = -.11, Boot SE = .10, 95% CI: -.30, .08). We also conducted a serial mediation analysis to confirm our expectation that commitment perceptions influence overall user imagery and ultimately extension evaluations. In support of our hypothesized process, this serial mediation was significant (β = -.09, Boot SE = .05, 95% CI: -.23, -.01). These results suggest that commitment perceptions are the critical aspect of general user imagery that mediates the accessor effect.

**Study 2: Priming Group Connection**

203 adults (Mage = 36) participated in a 2 (extension type: TBE vs. ABE) × 2 (GBC: high vs. low) between-subjects factorial design. Group connection was manipulated by adapting a procedure from prior brand country-of-origin and self-construal research (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Swaminathan et al. 2007). Participants in the high (low) GBC condition were asked to write about how they were similar to (different from) Chevrolet owners. A separate pretest with 50 adults confirmed the success of our manipulation (M_high = 4.0, M_low = 2.6, M_correct = 2.7; F(2, 47) = 3.9, p < .05). After the priming procedure, the study continued as in Study 1.

**Results and Discussion**

We analyzed the data using a two-way ANCOVA. We found the predicted brand extension type × GBC interaction (F(1, 198) = 3.5, p = .06). Specifically, participants in the high GBC condition evaluated the ABE (M = 5.0) less favorably than the TBE (M = 5.5, p < .05). However, no differences emerged among participants in the low GBC condition (M_ABE = 5.5, M_TBE = 5.4, F < 1, ns).

The results from moderated mediation analysis again confirmed our predictions, revealing a significant indirect effect of commitment perceptions in the high GBC condition (β = -.13, Boot SE = .07, 95% CI: -.30, -.03), but not in the low condition (β = -.09, Boot SE = .07, 95% CI: -.29, .02). The serial mediation analysis also replicated prior results such that commitment perceptions influenced overall user imagery and ultimately extension evaluations (β = -.11, Boot SE = .05, 95% CI: -.21, -.03). Using a priming paradigm, this study replicated the findings obtained with the Chevrolet extensions in Study 1.

**Study 3: Ruling Out Fit Perceptions**

Study 3 was designed to replicate the accessor effect and examine the extent to which user imagery affects extension evaluations over and above fit perceptions. We operationalized GBC via brand country-of-origin, by sampling participants who owned two brands: Ford and Toyota. Pretest results confirmed that Ford (vs. Toyota) owners felt a higher brand country-of-origin connection.

114 Ford and Toyota owners completed the online survey for monetary compensation (M = 35). Participants were randomly assigned to an ABE or TBE condition. Participants in the ABE (TBE) conditions read about Ford2go (Ford Flex eBike) or Toyota2go (Toyota Prius Bike). Extensions and the users were evaluated as in Studies 1 & 2. Respondents also rated perceived fit between the extension and parent brand.

**Results**

We analyzed an extension type × GBC ANCOVA. Moreover, a significant effect of extension type was qualified by a group connection × extension type interaction (ρ < .01). Ford owners’ evaluations in the ABE (M = 4.0) were higher than the TBE (M = 6.2, p < .001). In contrast, Toyota owners’ responses were statistically similar in both conditions (Ms = 5.7).

**Mediation analyses.** To reveal the unique effects of perceived commitment over fit, we simultaneously tested both potential mediators in a single model. Using the procedure developed by Preacher and Hayes (2008), we bootstrapped the indirect effects of brand extension type on evaluation through both mediators. Taken together as a set, fit and commitment perception did mediate the link between extension type and evaluations (β = -.41, 95% CI: -.76, -.07). However, the specific indirect effects indicated that only perceived commitment was a unique mediator (β = -.48, 95% CI: -.76, -.24); fit with the parent brand did not contribute to the indirect effect above and beyond perceived commitment (β = .07, 95% CI: -.04, .24). The results from moderated mediation analysis again confirmed our predictions, revealing a significant indirect effect of commitment perceptions when group connection was high (Ford owners; β = -.10, 95% CI: -.5, -.56), but not low (Toyota owners; β = -.28, 95% CI: -.65, -.08). Finally, results from the serial mediation analysis were again significant (β = -.22, Boot SE = .10, 95% CI: -.47, -.08), supporting our conceptualization.

**Study 4: Ruling Out Self-Implications**

Prior work has found that out-groups influence consumer behavior through self-presentation concerns (Escalas and Bettman 2005; White and Dahl 2006, 2007). However, we proposed that when consumers have a GBC, relatively less focus is placed on preserving self-identity. Thus, we expect the accessor effect to persist even when consumers have the opportunity to repair their self-concept (e.g., self-affirm). We tested this proposition in Study 4. We used university affiliation to manipulate GBC. 193 undergradu-
ates (42% female) participated in a 2 (brand extension type: ABE vs. TBE) x 2 (GBC: high vs. low) x 2 (self-affirmation: present vs. absent) between-subjects experiment. We found a significant brand extension type x GBC interaction that was not further moderated by self-affirmation (F < 1, p > .65). These findings demonstrate the robustness of the accessor effect and rule out self-identity threat as alternative mechanism for the accessor effect.

Summary
This research provides a framework for understanding when and which consumers’ brand evaluations will be differentially sensitive to (and adversely affected by) the perceived commitment of other brand users. Compared to TBE users, ABE users are perceived to be less committed to the brands they access, and this lack of commitment is associated with lower user and brand extension evaluations for consumers with a high (vs. low) GBC. These effects occur over and above those associated with brand extension fit or self-identity threat. Results provide insights into important boundary conditions of consumers’ brand attachments.

REFERENCES