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Psychological and Neurophysiological Investigations of Close Consumer-Brand Relationships

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer researchers have become increasingly interested in the concept of consumer-brand relationships. Myriad consumer-brand relationship constructs have been offered in the extant literature, including brand attachment (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005), brand commitment (Wang 2002; Warrington and Shim 2000), brand connectedness (Winterich 2007), brand devotion (Pichler and Hemetsberger 2007), and brand love (Ahuvia 2005; Albert, Merunka, and Valette-Florence 2008; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Fournier 1998). Research on these concepts has improved our understanding of the consequences of close consumer-brand relationships for various consumer behaviors, such as loyalty and positive word-of-mouth.

Little research, however, has focused on the underlying mechanisms that may explain consumer behaviors related to close brands. In particular, the motivational-emotional aspects associated with close brand relationships have not been fully explored. In general, why do people desire to enter and maintain relationships? And what is the emotional significance of such close relationships? Such questions are at the heart of the social-psychological self-expansion theory (Aron and Aron 1986), which has been applied extensively to human relationships (e.g., Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992; Aron et al. 1991; Aron et al. 2000; Aron, Paris, and Aron 1995), but not yet to brand relationships. In brief, self-expansion theory suggests that in early stages, close relationships are motivated by rapid self-expansion—the acquisition of resources, perspectives, and identities that enhance one's ability to accomplish goals—whereas in later stages, close relationships are associated with the inclusion of others in the self, i.e., people tend to consider the close other as part of themselves.

Conceptualization

Recently, Reimann and Aron (2009) suggested that these ideas may not only be relevant to interpersonal relationships, but also to consumers' close relationships with brands. It is well known that in addition to close relationships with persons, people also form a similar type of relationship with objects (Belk 1988). More than not, these objects are specific brands, which consumers relate to and use to identify their "selves" (Ahuvia 2005). Similar to loved others, brands can create a "warm feeling" among consumers, form a pleasurable experience of being cared for, and ultimately bond consumer in a close connection (Fournier 1998). Brands can give consumers "ideal selves" to aspire to, as the presentation of self through possessions allows consumers to differ from what may be their "real selves" (Goffman 1959). Given this resemblance, it seems feasible to apply theories on close interpersonal relationships to consumer-brand relationship. As mentioned above, the specific appeal of self-expansion theory for brand research lies in its motivational-emotional account. Additionally, it emphasizes the dynamic character of close relationships and allows for predictions on changes in motivations and emotions as the relationship matures. Thus, self-expansion theory promises a richer understanding of brand relationships at various points of the brand lifecycle and, thus, the development of relevant practical implications for brand image management.

In an effort to test self-expansion theory in the context of brand relationships, the contribution of this paper is to determine

(1) whether rapid self-expansion and inclusion in self are greater for close versus neutral brands and (2) whether levels of self-expansion and inclusion of close brands change over time. Using a multi-method approach, the present research adds both to knowledge of psychological and neurophysiological responses to brands as well as brain areas associated with close brand relationships.

Methods

The present research builds on self-expansion theory and applies the framework's key elements—rapid self-expansion and inclusion in the self—to consumers' close relationships with brands. To test self-expansion theory empirically in the context of consumer-brand relationships, a variety of psychological and neurophysiological methodologies, including self-reports, skin conductance recording, and functional magnetic resonance imaging, are drawn upon. Specifically, consumers' skin conductance responses (SCR), which measure the arousal dimension of emotion (Boucsein 1992), have the potential to shed new light on how consumers expand their "selves." A process tracing methodology, the recording of SCR helps provide novel insights on otherwise hidden processes in consumer judgments (Figner and Murphy 2010). For example, Damasio et al. (2000) were able to detect subtle differences in self-generated emotions by recording SCR, which would otherwise be hard to obtain. Additionally, by utilizing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), the analysis of neurophysiological mechanisms in the brain at the point in time when they take place, not in retrospective, becomes feasible (Shiv 2007; Shiv et al. 2005) because fMRI is not subject to cognitive processes overlapping actual emotional processes (Reimann et al. 2010). Participants do not have to remember how they relate to a brand as they do when they provide self-reports, so the fMRI process helps clarify how consumers include brands in their "selves."

Major Findings

In three experiments, this research provides novel insights into branding by studying the psychological and neurophysiological mechanisms of how consumers relate to their beloved brands. Building on self-expansion theory, the authors propose that self-expansion for a brand, operationalized in terms of emotional arousal, decreases over the brand relationship span, while inclusion of the brand in the self increases over time. In experiment 1, results indicate greater self-reported emotional arousal and inclusion for close versus neutral brands, as well as a decrease in emotional arousal and an increase in inclusion of close brands over time. Experiment 2 measures skin conductance responses to reveal increased emotional arousal, corroborating the results based on self-reported data. In experiment 3, a functional magnetic resonance imaging study reveals an association between long-term close consumer-brand relationships and activation of the insula, a brain area previously found to be a crucial mechanism in diverse, yet related psychological phenomena such as urging, addiction, loss aversion, and interpersonal love.

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