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The impact of construal level on brand preferences: Ad metaphors and brand biography as moderators

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ABSTRACT

This research attempts to explore the moderating roles of ad metaphors and brand biography in the impact of consumers' construal level on brand preferences. This article was designed to examine the main effects and the interaction effects of consumers' construal level, ad metaphor and brand biography on brand preferences. Results indicate that, low-level construal consumers are likely to engender stronger brand preferences for brands accompanied with no brand biography than those with brand biography; conversely, high-level construal consumers are likely to engender stronger brand preferences for brands with brand biography than those with no brand biography. Moreover, low-level construal consumers are likely to engender stronger brand preferences for brands advocated by low metaphorical ads than highly metaphorical ads; in contrast, high-level construal consumers are likely to engender stronger brand preferences for brands advocated by highly metaphorical ads than low metaphorical ads. Furthermore, when the ad is low metaphorical, low-level construal consumers are likely to engender stronger brand preferences for brands with no brand biography than those with brand biography. In contrast, when the ad is highly metaphorical, low-level construal consumers are likely to engender no differential brand preferences for brands with brand biography over those with no brand biography. Moreover, when the ad is low metaphorical, high-level construal consumers are likely to engender no differential brand preferences for brands with brand biography over those with no brand biography. Lastly, when the ad is highly metaphorical, high-level construal consumers are likely to engender stronger brand preferences for brands with brand biography than those with no brand biography.

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1. Introduction

For brand marketing, brand story-telling has been pervasively applied as an effective approach to communicate with consumers and create the brand's competitive advantages. An inspiring brand story or brand biography contributes to the audience's comprehension of the brand's origins, product/service characteristics and mission statements, as well as helping the brand build psychological connections to consumers.

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From a practical viewpoint, the more important issues regarding brand biography include how brand sponsors (or advertisers) can devise strategies of brand biographies to touch the hearts of customers, which customers are susceptible to brand biographies or brand stories and which internal or external factors can moderate the effect of brand biography. Though for the practical importance, scant research has explored the effect of brand biography in consumer psychology and marketing literature. In addition, recent research has indicated the importance of consumers' construal level, such as its impact on advertising messages (Hernandez, Wright, & Filipe, 2015), decision making (Han, Duhachek, & Agrawal, 2014), and price discrepancy (Irmak, Wakslak, & Trope, 2013). However, scant research has examined the impact of consumers' construal level on consumers' brand preferences. To fill the gap between academic and practical intelligence, this research applies consumers' construal level and ad metaphor to examine

whether the availability of brand biography can increase or decrease brand preferences.

2. Theoretical development

2.1. Brand biography

Since brand advertising is crafted for building and nurturing emotional connections between the brand and customers, story-branding increasingly becomes an effective approach to communicate with audiences and further enhances ad effectiveness. It appears that the information in brand stories or brand biographies is more humane-oriented and affection-based than other information in a form of technical specifications (Mattila, 2000).

The ingredients of brand biography include the concepts of product design, the origin of brand and the memorial stories during the initial stage (Parahia, Keinan, Avery, & Schor, 2011). Put another way, these “brand biographies” apply personal narratives to depict a historical context of the events that have delivered the brand, chronicling its origins, life experiences, and evolution through mass media, social networking sites (such as Facebook and Twitter) and their official websites to narrate the biographical stories of brands (Parahia et al., 2011).

However, Escalas (2004) proposes that traditional brand stories, which focus on goals, actions, and outcomes, are likely to be self-related, and need to be forged between brands in an ad story to achieve the brand synergy. A smart brand has to include a self-brand connection, which is based on perceived psychological benefits, in its brand biography. In this way, good brand biographies are expected to invoke a range of consumer values, such as authenticity, artisanship, and heritage.

Based upon the story-telling style, brand biography can be dichotomized into underdog and top dog ones. Generally, the underdog brand biographies narrate brand stories regarding the humble origins of entrepreneurs, who struggled to defeat the odds and crafted their brands and businesses through indomitable will and determination, despite the scarcity of external resources in relation to their well-resourced competitors. In contrast, the top dog brand biographies narrate brand stories regarding the smooth starts of the entrepreneurs, who did not suffer from hardship during their brand-building process, as well as the abundance of internal and external resources, as compared with their unrivaled competitors.

2.2. Construal level

Construal Level Theory (CLT) posits that objects, events, or individuals can be perceived as being either psychologically close or distant along various dimensions, such as spatial, temporal, and social distance (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). CLT argues that psychologically distant objects, events, or individuals are usually represented as abstract or high-level construals (e.g., Förster, Friedman, & Liberman, 2004), which require more on generalized schemas than on specific details for comprehension. Conversely, psychologically close objects, events, or individuals are represented as concrete (e.g., Förster et al., 2004; Liberman & Trope, 1998) or low-level construals, which require more on specific details than on generalized schemas for comprehension (Yan & Sengupta, 2011).

In addition, Trope and Liberman (2000) argue that people may construe information in memory either at an abstract level (high-level construal) or at a concrete level (low-level construal). High-level construal individuals rely more on the primary features (Trope & Liberman, 2000) and the desirability of outcomes for decision-making (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Sagristano, Trope, & Liberman, 2002), as well as generate more support arguments

for an action (Eyal, Liberman, Trope, & Walther, 2004); in contrast, low-level construal individuals rely more on peripheral features and the feasibility of outcomes for decision-making, as well as generate more support arguments for an action. Specifically, high-level construal individuals mainly apply the abstract information received to form attitudes, whereas low-level construal individuals mainly use the concrete information received to form attitudes.

As aforementioned, it can be inferred that low-construal level individuals tend to have more motivations to process information represented as concrete, whereas high-construal level individuals tend to have more motivations to process information represented as abstract. In the perspective of construal level theory, a good brand story or brand biography is usually featured as emotion-based, and consists of abstract thoughts. Brand ads accompanied with brand biographies are likely to impede the attention focus of low-level construal consumers, who have few motivations to process the abstract information in the brand biographies. Instead, when the ad copy is not accompanied with any brand biography, those low-level construal consumers can focus on seeking the concrete information in the ad appeals. Therefore, low-construal level individuals, who prefer concrete information to abstract information, are likely to engender stronger brand preferences for brands with no brand biographies. On the contrary, high-construal level individuals, who prefer abstract information to concrete information, are likely to engender stronger brand preferences for brands with brand biographies.

H1: *Low-level construal consumers are likely to engender stronger brand preferences for brands accompanied with no brand biographies than those with brand biographies; in contrast, high-level construal consumers are likely to engender stronger brand preferences for brands accompanied with brand biographies than those without brand biographies.*

2.3. Ad metaphors

Metaphorical expressions are increasingly conceived as an effective approach of richly textured communication. Metaphors express “visual and tactual imagery that adds a more vivid level of understanding. Due to the different layers of sensory and informational meanings, metaphors are more likely to evoke an experiential response in the listener than the relaying of an adjective alone... at times, metaphors can more accurately capture the quality of an emotion than an adjective or an emotional label” (see Levitt, Korman, & Angus, 2000, p. 23). Considered in this way, metaphors can be perceived as abstract, experience-based, emotion-based, and can be judged subjectively.

When metaphors are applied in text or images in an advertisement, they are considered rhetorical figures (Lagerwerf & Meijers, 2008). Verbal and visual metaphors are increasingly common in print advertisements. Compared with verbal metaphors, visual metaphors are more open to interpretation (Eco, 1976) and may elicit more meanings as they express the ad claim implicitly (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005). Specifically, visual metaphor leaves more room for consumers to invest more cognitive effort in the ad appeals than verbal metaphor.

As Ang and Lim (2006) contended, “a metaphor asserts a similarity between two objects that one does not expect to be associated; in contrast, a non-metaphor describes the world literally”. Clearly, metaphors are linguistically defined as two distinct concepts presented as similar (Lagerwerf & Meijers, 2008). Put another way, conceptual similarity refers to the extent of relatedness between the two metaphorical objects and is about the semantic proximity of these objects in the audience’s mind. For example, a

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