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The consumer psychology of brands ☆

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Abstract

This article presents a consumer-psychology model of brands that integrates empirical studies and individual constructs (such as brand categorization, brand affect, brand personality, brand symbolism and brand attachment, among others) into a comprehensive framework. The model distinguishes three levels of consumer engagement (object-centered, self-centered and social) and five processes (identifying, experiencing, integrating, signifying and connecting). Pertinent psychological constructs and empirical findings are presented for the constructs within each process. The article concludes with research ideas to test the model using both standard and consumer-neuroscience methods.

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Over the past two decades, we have learned a lot about the consumer judgments of brands and the processes that underlie specific brand-related phenomena, from brand extensions to global branding to brand equity. The empirical literature on brands is vast and detailed, demonstrating and testing highly domain-specific effects. But we have neglected investigating "the big picture"—identifying how specific empirical findings add up to a broader understanding of how consumers perceive brands. To be sure, domain-specific theorizing and testing is valuable and should continue. However, research on brands may benefit from a broader perspective that integrates various empirical findings into a comprehensive framework on the psychology of brands.

Consider the domain of brand extensions. The literature on brand extensions alone has amassed more than a hundred studies in leading journals and has identified numerous factors that affect how consumers feel toward a given brand extension. These factors have included: overall fit (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Bottomley & Holden, 2001; Milberg, Sinn, & Goodstein, 2010); type of brand (e.g., prestige or functional) (Monga & John, 2010); brand knowledge (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994); the presence of explanatory links (Bridges, Keller, & Sood, 2000); parent-brand memory structures (Morrin, 1999); the strength of association between the brand's parent category and the extension category (Herr, Farquhar, & Fazio, 1996); degree of congruence (Maoz & Tybout, 2002; Sood & Dreze, 2006); relatedness of the categories (Herr et al., 1996); sub-branding (Milberg, Park, & McCarthy, 1997); brand name suggestiveness (Sen, 1999); brand breadth (Sheinin & Schmitt, 1994); brand specific associations (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994); brand extension typicality (Boush & Loken, 1991); intervening extensions (Keller & Aaker, 1992); positive affect (Adaval, 2003); brand attachment (Fedorikhin, Park, & Thomson, 2008); mood (Barone, Miniard, & Romeo, 2000); and involvement (Barone, 2005). What is missing from the literature is an analysis of how brand extension research contributes to our overall understanding of the consumer psychology of brands.

Not all of our research has been narrow and purely empirically-focused. We have also been quite inventive in generating new constructs—for example, brand personality (Aaker, 1997), brand relationships (Fournier, 1998), brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), self-brand connections (Escalas, 2004), brand attachment (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005), and brand experience (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009).

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We have created scales to measure these constructs and others, such as brand trust (Delgado-B, Munuera-Aleman, & Yagoe-Guillin, 2003) and brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Yet, it is not clear how these constructs relate to each other and what specific role they play in the overall consumer psychology of brands.

Finally, several reviews and summaries of our research have been conducted. For example, Keller (2002) provided an exhaustive review of the literature on brands and brand equity. Keller and Lehman (2006) also reviewed the research and listed a large number of potential new research questions on brand positioning, brand personality, brand relationships, brand experience, corporate image and reputation, the integration of brand elements, channels and communications, company-controlled and external events, brand performance assessment and brand strategy issues (including brand extensions, brand architecture, co-branding, global branding, and branding and social welfare). Because we lack a general framework on the consumer psychology of brands, however, we do not know how answers to these empirical questions would enrich our understanding of brands significantly beyond what we know already.

My goal in this article is to move beyond domain-specific findings and individual brand constructs. I will identify the key brand constructs related to consumer psychology and integrate them into a comprehensive model. This consumer-psychology model of brands does not focus on brand outcomes, such as brand choice, purchase, or loyalty, but on the underlying psychological constructs and processes that contribute to such outcomes.

Comprehensive brand models and higher-level brand frameworks have been presented before in managerial articles, in textbooks and in trade books. Indeed, many important conceptual ideas were proposed first, or developed significantly, in such writings—for example, brand concept-image management (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986), brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993); brand architecture and portfolio management (Aaker, 1996; 2004); and customer experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999; 2003). Most of these models, however, do not take a consumer psychology angle. They present strategic typologies rather than conceptual frameworks rooted in consumer psychology. These models target marketing managers and not consumer psychologists, who I consider to be the prime audience of this journal and this article.

A consumer-psychology model of brands

The model presented here addresses consumer perceptions and judgments and their underlying processes *as they relate to brands*. Fig. 1 shows the model.

In contrast to general information processing models, the consumer-psychology model of brands focuses specifically on the unique characteristics of brands. One brand, for example, can span across various products and product categories. Brand information is conveyed frequently through multi-sensory stimulation. Brands can form relations with other brands. Brands can be anthropomorphized, and many of them are appreciated as cultural symbols. Finally, consumers can organize communities around brands. Consumers know and experience these characteristics about brands and respond to them. The model presented here accounts for these essential characteristics of brands.

The structure of the model also reflects an understanding that consumers have different levels of psychological engagement with brands because of different needs, motives and goals. These levels of engagement are represented in the model by three layers. The innermost layer represents object-centered, functionally-driven engagement; that is, the consumer acquires information about the brand with the goal of receiving utilitarian benefits from the brand. The middle layer represents a self-centered engagement; the brand is seen as personally relevant to the consumer. Finally, the outer layer represents social engagement with the brand; the brand is viewed from an interpersonal and socio-cultural perspective, and provides a sense of community. As we move from the inner to the outer layer, the brand becomes increasingly meaningful to the consumer.

Most importantly, the model distinguishes five brand-related processes: identifying, experiencing, integrating, signaling and connecting with the brand. As part of *identifying*, a consumer identifies the brand and its category, forms associations, and compares the relations between brands. *Experiencing* refers to sensory, affective and participatory experiences that a consumer has with a brand. *Integrating* means combining brand information into an overall brand concept, personality and relationship with the brand. *Signifying* refers to using the brand as an informational cue, identity signal and cultural symbol. Finally, *connecting* with the brand includes forming an attitude toward the brand, becoming personally attached to it and connecting with the brand in a brand community. These processes are not necessarily one-directional and linear, in the way that information processing is presented from encoding to choice. As will be discussed in more detail at the end of this article, processes may occur in different orders. Moreover, while each construct is assumed to be conceptually distinct, a given construct may overlap, to some degree, with another construct, and different constructs may interact.

Let's look at the constructs within each process in more detail. What happens during the processes of identifying, experiencing, integrating, signifying and connecting?

Identifying

The process of identifying refers to searching for, being exposed to and collecting information about the brand, its category and related brands. Depending on a consumer's level of psychological engagement, the identification process concerns primarily categorization, associations with the brand, or inter-brand relations.

Brand categorization

When consumers engage with a brand in an object-centered way, they are mostly concerned with the brand, its product category and how the two are related. The primary task is linking a brand (its name and logo) to a product category, or, for corporate brands, industry category. Stimulus or memory-based categorization is a prerequisite for pursuing a brand-related goal (Alba, Hutchinson, & Lynch, 1991); that is, a consumer must

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