



Me, my brand and I: Consumer responses to luxury brand rejection



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ABSTRACT

Integrating the social rejection and brand threat literatures, this research examines how consumers respond when the luxury brand they identify with is rejected by their social peers. Across two studies, it is observed that, consumers who identify with a brand, a threat to the brand elicit defensive behavioral response whether it's stemming from an in-group or an out-group. However, consumers who dis-identify with the brand only adopt defensive behaviour when the brand is rejected by an out-group. High brand identifiers report higher need for belonging and negative affect following threat while brand dis-identifiers are not affected. The findings further delineate consumer responses to luxury brand related rejection in reflexive and reflective stages of rejection. The study extends previous work on rejection and offers a number of managerial implications.

1. Introduction

The need to belong is deeply rooted in human nature. Therefore, people constantly strive to maintain positive social relationships (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), as a lack of these can lead to physical and psychological suffering (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). One of the prominent strategies people employ to foster affiliation is through their consumption behaviour (Belk, 1988). For instance, studies indicate that individuals seek to acquire the brands, and especially luxury brands, used by their membership groups as well as their aspirational groups (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Shukla, 2011), while tending to avoid brands associated with out-groups (Berger & Heath, 2007; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). The associations and meanings attached by reference groups can help individual members to create their identities (McCracken, 1989) by integrating these brands into their self-concepts.

In addition, prior research indicates that consumers can use their consumption to defend the self against rejection (Lee & Shrum, 2012). Rejection, which entails being ignored or excluded, is a fundamental threat to social survival which can manifest in explicit or implicit forms (Williams, 2009), such as being rejected by a romantic partner or simply being ignored during a conversation (Lee & Shrum, 2012). Williams (2009) offers a temporal model of responses to rejection involving two stages, the reflexive and the reflective. The reflexive stage is an immediate reaction to rejection which results in painful responses such as threatened basic needs and negative affect (Wirth & Williams, 2011). The threatened needs at the reflexive stage direct the individual's attention to reflect on the meaning and importance of the rejection episode, which is termed the reflective stage. In this stage,

individuals adopt behavioral responses aimed at fortifying the threatened needs. Such responses may be either prosocial or aggressive (Williams, 2009).

Recent research (Cheng, White, & Chaplin, 2012; Lisjak, Lee, & Gardner, 2012) indicates that when brands are intertwined into consumers' self-concepts, a threat to the brand is experienced as a personal failure, and therefore results in similar defensive responses to those initiated by personal threats. The current study builds on this stream of research by applying the theoretical foundation of rejection literature to a brand level, and in so doing offers the first integrative account of brand threat and rejection responses. Specifically, the study seeks to investigate consumer responses to luxury brand-related rejection during the reflexive and reflective stages. Brand-related rejection can manifest as instances in which the brand used by the consumer is explicitly rejected by others within their social context. In addition, the study seeks to test the moderating role of brand identification, a process which entails the integration of the brand identity into a person's identity to symbolically represent the self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). High levels of brand identification result in brand defence by an individual as a way to defend their identity (Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012). Previous studies provide ample evidence that the basis of brand identification stems from reference groups associations (Berger & Heath, 2007; Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2005). However, it is unclear how consumers are likely to respond in instances of conflict between their social groups and brand identity, as in situations in which an individual's in-group rejects the brand they highly identify with. Indeed, the existing literature provides two contradictory predictions of how consumers are likely to respond, as research from the social

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identity threat literature proposes that individuals always conform to their in-groups even at the expense of their own interests (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Van Vugt & Hart, 2004), while the rejection and brand threat literatures suggest that people are more likely to defend their threatened identity when they highly identify with it (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012) regardless of the source of rejection (Williams, 2009). Therefore, in order to reconcile these opposing views, this study seeks to investigate the role of the source of rejection (in-group vs. an out-group) in moderating consumer responses to brand-related rejection. By integrating the rejection and branding literatures, the findings further extend each discipline. For instance, the study adds to the rejection literature by investigating whether instances of rejection directed at the brand level of the self are likely to evoke similar reactions to interpersonal rejection. Furthermore, it extends the brand threat literature by investigating the impact of new types of brand threats on consumer responses during the reflexive and reflective stages.

2. Literature review

2.1. Rejection and brand threat

Rejection is a common yet painful social experience representing a fundamental threat to social survival which leads to severe negative consequences (Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn, & Vohs, 2011; Williams, 2009). Due to the importance of actual or possible social rejection, even the slightest form of manipulation can still evoke the detection of rejection, leading to negative consequences (Williams, 2009). The behavioral responses to personal rejection can manifest in either positive responses such as fostering affiliation, or negative responses such as aggression (Lee & Shrum, 2012). For example, rejected individuals are found to be willing to tailor their spending preferences to gain acceptance from new social partners (Mead et al., 2011), or to self-indulge in conspicuous consumption (Lee & Shrum, 2012).

Just as individuals are vulnerable to threats to their personal self, research suggests that they are also vulnerable to threats to “the physical, social, and symbolic aspects of the self” (Burriss & Rempel, 2004, p. 21). For instance, when the brands integrated into the self-concept are threatened, consumers are likely to show similar defensive responses to those which arise from personal threats (Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012). Brand threats are unexpected, widely-spread negative brand occurrences that thwart consumers' expected benefits from the brand (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Dutta & Pullig, 2011). They are quite common in the marketplace, and bring adverse effects on brand reputations and brand equity (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). A robust finding in the literature relates to the buffering effect of brand identification by stimulating brand defence in the face of brand threats (Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012). Consumers who highly identify with the brand experience brand threat as a personal failure, and brand defence is resultantly stimulated by a desire to protect the self rather than the brand. For instance, Cheng et al. (2012) argue that consumers with strong self-brand connections (SBC) view the brand as part of the self, and therefore perceive negative brand information as a personal failure (Trump, 2014).

Additionally, Lisjak et al. (2012) indicate that people defend the brands they identify with when under threat to protect the integrity of the self. Building on these ideas, the current study seeks to widen the scope of the research on brand threats, which to date has predominantly focused on brand threats arising from product defects or ethical scandals (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Dutta & Pullig, 2011), by applying the theoretical foundation of personal rejection to the brand literature. This study therefore proposes a new framework that predicts consumers' affective and behavioral responses to brand threats during the reflexive and reflective rejection stages. In doing so, it extends the rejection literature by elaborating that rejection occurring at the brand level of the self creates similar reflexive and reflective reactions to any

other kind of personal rejection. Thus, this research promotes the notion that a brand threat is perceived and responded to as a personal threat. For example, a person may find themselves in a situation where s/he faces explicit rejection by others for wearing a certain brand in public (e.g. when Burberry was banned in UK pubs and clubs in the early 2000s). Such rejection may threaten an individual's need for belonging (i.e. a reflexive reaction), and consequently, the individual may evaluate the brand negatively (i.e. a reflective response).

Moreover, the present study highlights some of the individual trait factors and situational variables that moderate consumer responses. In particular, the role of brand identification and the source of rejection are examined. Contextually, the investigation examines the brand threats targeting luxury fashion brands, thus extending the scope of the previous research that has been limited to functional products into the hedonic goods arena. For instance, the categories of products for which relationship strength was measured in previous studies has been limited to consumer electronics (Cheng et al., 2012; Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007), food (Roehm & Brady, 2007), beverages (Lisjak et al., 2012) and jeans (Huber et al., 2010). While consumers do build relationships with these functional products, hedonic goods such as luxury fashion brands help consumers to express their actual and/or ideal self-concepts (Shukla, Singh, & Banerjee, 2015), increasing the likelihood of a stronger consumer brand relationship (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Therefore, luxury fashion brands represent an appropriate context for the investigation of identity threats.

2.2. Hypothesis development

Rejection is a form of self-directed threat that thwarts individuals' need for belonging (Lee & Shrum, 2012). In his model of the effects of ostracism, Williams (2009) elaborates that at the reflexive stage, individuals experience psychological pain, negative emotional responses as well as threats to their fundamental needs including their need to belong. When ostracized, the individual no longer feels connected to the group or other group members, and hence, their need to belong is threatened. This study posits that similar reflexive reactions arise in response to brand-related rejection, depending on consumers' level of brand identification.

High brand identifiers integrate the brand into their self-concepts (Cheng et al., 2012; Lisjak et al., 2012) and use the brand for self-expression (Swaminathan et al., 2007), so for them, brand-rejection can be perceived as a form of personal rejection. However, consumers who dis-identify with the brand hold extremely negative brand attitudes (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins, 2006) and are less likely to use the brand to express their self or communicate their social affiliations. Therefore, brand rejection does not personally affect them. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H1. During the reflexive stage, consumers with high brand identification will report higher need for belonging and negative affect following brand-related rejection, while brand dis-identifiers will not be affected.

Following the reflexive stage, individuals tend to behave in ways intended to fortify the threatened needs during the reflective stage. Previous studies on brand threats elaborate the role of brand identification in moderating responses to brand threats (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Cheng et al., 2012; Einwiller et al., 2006; Lisjak et al., 2012). As opposed to low brand identifiers, high brand identifiers maintain favourable brand attitudes and purchase intentions after exposure to brand threat (Cheng et al., 2012; Einwiller et al., 2006; Lisjak et al., 2012; Swaminathan et al., 2007). Therefore, this study suggests that high brand identifiers will maintain their brand evaluation following an instance of brand-related rejection. However, prior research indicates that consumers' tendency to identify with brands stems from their desire to associate with their in-groups and dissociate from out-groups (Berger & Heath, 2007; Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2005). Consequently,

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