



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

IJRM

International Journal of Research in Marketing

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijresmar

Full Length Article

When brand anthropomorphism alters perceptions of justice: The moderating role of self-construal

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

First received on October 28, 2015 and was under review for 8 1/2 months
Available online 3 May 2017

Senior Editor: Zeynep Gurhan-Canli

Keywords:

Brand anthropomorphism
Self-construal
Distributive justice
Procedural justice

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the interplay between brand anthropomorphism and self-construal on evaluations of distributive and procedural justice. We show that consumers with independent self-construal, who value equitable exchanges in their relationships with others, react more negatively to instances of distributive injustice when a brand is anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized). In contrast, we find that consumers with interdependent self-construal, who focus on the needs of others, react less negatively to situations of distributive injustice when a brand is anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized). However, because fair procedures signal acceptance by others, we show that interdependents evaluate procedural injustice particularly negatively in the instances of brand anthropomorphism. We offer in-depth insights into the interplay between brand anthropomorphism and self-construal in situations where distributive and procedural types of justice interact with each other. Finally, this research provides critical managerial evidence showing that marketers can strategically embed cues within their marketing communications that activate either an independent or an interdependent self-construal in order to manage consumer reactions to perceived marketplace injustice when a brand is anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized).

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1. Introduction

People anticipate “fair” exchanges in their relationships with others. Fairness, or justice, ranks high in the hierarchy of human values because it serves fundamental psychological needs for people to control their environment, to sustain positive self-esteem, and to acquire long-term economic benefits (Liao, 2007). In the marketplace, consumer perceptions of injustice can bring crucial consequences for a firm, such as diminished customer satisfaction and repurchase intentions (Liao, 2007), lower levels of firm trust and commitment (Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998), as well as reduced firm profits (Homburg, Hoyer, & Koschate, 2005). Given the significance of consumer perceptions of justice for firm performance, academic research has examined the detailed workings of various firm-level factors, such as complaint handling features, firms’ motives, the magnitude of failure and its attributes (Homburg et al., 2005; Liao, 2007; Patterson, Cowley, & Prasongsukarn, 2006; Vaidyanathan & Aggarwal, 2003), and customer-level factors, including gender and cultural orientation, among others (Holmvall & Bobocel, 2008; Sweeney & McFarlin, 1997) on consumer perceptions of justice. However, to the best of our knowledge, there is a lack of academic studies investigating the interplay between brand positioning strategies and individual difference factors in consumer judgments of justice. The

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examination of branding strategies in terms of justice perceptions is crucial because it enhances marketers' understanding of how firms can strategically position their brands in a manner that insulates them from negative consequences of unfairness or, in contrast, how such positioning can exacerbate negative outcomes of injustice. In particular, here we introduce a specific brand positioning strategy, brand anthropomorphism, that interacts with consumers' self-construal (independent vs. interdependent) in influencing consumer perceptions of two types of justice (distributive vs. procedural).

Brand anthropomorphism refers to a brand positioning strategy of using humanlike visual and verbal elements to enhance consumer attributions of human characteristics to a brand (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). Marketers frequently use anthropomorphic advertising imagery (e.g., Joe Camel) metaphorically to represent a product as exhibiting human actions, or they adopt first-person communications to foster a brand's meaning as humanlike (Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011; Puzakova, Kwak, and Rocereto 2013). Overall, prior research in marketing is concordant with the view that anthropomorphism creates positive branding outcomes, such as greater comprehension of brand personality, enhanced positive affective reactions to a brand, and product liking (Delbaere et al., 2011). However, recent research has uncovered negative sides of this phenomenon, such as less favorable product evaluations when negative human schemas are activated (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007), greater psychological resistance to personalized advertising (Puzakova, Rocereto, and Kwak 2013), and decreased perceptions of risk from a risk-bearing entity (Kim & McGill, 2011).

In this research, we demonstrate that the differential effects of brand anthropomorphism on judgments of two types of justice in the marketplace (distributive vs. procedural) depend on consumers' views of the self (i.e., interdependent vs. independent self-construal; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In developing our arguments, we rely on two important premises: a) self-construal determines consumers' relational expectations (Bresnahan, Chiu, & Levine, 2004; Kühnen, Hannover, & Schubert, 2001) and thus reactions to (in)justice (Clayton & Opatow, 2003; Skitka, 2003), and b) consumers apply their beliefs about the social world when judging anthropomorphized agents to a greater extent than when evaluating non-anthropomorphized entities (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Kim & McGill, 2011). For example, we argue that because independents expect equitable exchanges in their relationships with others (Sweeney & McFarlin, 1997), they apply these expectations to an anthropomorphized brand and view situations of distributive injustice (e.g., lack of compensation for a defective product) as more unfair when a brand is humanized (vs. nonhumanized). On the other hand, we argue that because interdependents are concerned about the needs and interests of others in relational exchanges (Bresnahan et al., 2004), they are less likely to rely on distributive rules in relationships and, in contrast, assign greater psychological significance to fair procedures and treatment. Hence, interdependents are more likely to view an instance of distributive injustice as less unfair and a situation involving procedural injustice as more unfair when a brand is anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized). Further, we explore the dyadic nature of distributive and procedural justice in the context of brand anthropomorphism for consumers with different self-construals. For instance, our research delivers compelling insights that, for interdependent consumers, unfair firm procedures used in conflict resolution lower perceptions of both procedural and distributive justice, as well as diminish purchase intentions when a brand is anthropomorphized (vs. non-anthropomorphized).

Finally, relying on prior literature suggesting that self-construal can be activated by marketing communications (Aaker & Lee, 2001; Aaker & Williams, 1998), we present critical evidence that shows how marketing practitioners can effectively implement marketing communication strategies that trigger consumers' independent vs. interdependent self-construals when the brands are humanized. For example, this research reveals that when firms plan price increases (an instance of distributional injustice) for their humanized brands, they should strategically design marketing communication materials introducing a price increase (e.g., via retail website layout) that activate an interdependent self-construal in order to lessen consumers' negative perceptions of distributive injustice. Overall, the current research shows that a clear understanding of the role of consumer self-construal along with a brand anthropomorphism positioning strategy allows practitioners to exert greater control over consumers' reactions to injustices that frequently occur in the marketplace.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

2.1. Distributive and procedural justice

Justice is generally defined as an abstract system of knowledge structures and standards endorsed by a society that specify appropriate relationships between people and regulate certain behaviors (Clayton & Opatow, 2003). In this research, we focus on two important dimensions of justice: distributive and procedural. Distributive justice is defined as the fairness of the allocation of socially valued outcomes and resources between the parties in an exchange. In turn, procedural justice refers to the fairness of the procedures and processes used by an entity in allocating valuable outcomes and resources (Fields, Pang, & Chiu, 2000). For example, price increases or compensation following a service failure influence overall distributive justice perceptions because consumers believe that they did not receive fair outcomes in exchange for their inputs, whereas a failure to respond to a customer complaint promptly or not allowing customers to voice their concerns can affect interpretations of procedural justice due to consumer perceptions of unfairness of the procedures used by a firm in a conflict resolution (Patterson et al., 2006).

Early theories of justice, such as equity theory (Adams, 1965) and social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), hypothesized that justice is viewed in terms of self-interest and the goals related to maximizing one's outcomes. However, the relational models of justice have shifted away from examining justice solely from the perspective of the equitable allocation of resources and have focused instead on the characteristics of the procedures used to make allocation decisions (Folger, 1977; Greenberg, 1987). The major premise of relational models of justice is that people's reactions to (un)fairness are predominantly determined by

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