



A comparative study of creation of self-brand connection amongst well-liked, new, and unfavorable brands

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Self-brand connection
Brand attitude
Brand familiarity
Self-presentation
Brand knowledge
Structural equation modeling

ABSTRACT

Brand managers are wary of consumers who are either unaware of new brands or have an unfavorable attitude toward their brands. In this study, we investigate the creation of a self-brand connection with new and unfavorable brands in comparison to well-liked brands. Our empirical study reveals that consumers could form a self-brand connection with new and unfavorable brands when the brand serves as a self-presentational strategy—*self-presentation by brand*. In particular, first, we find that brand attitude predicts self-brand connection positively and significantly for a well-liked brand, but not for a new brand, and second, when consumers hold favorable (unfavorable) attitudes toward a familiar brand, the self-brand connection can exist (be diluted). Thus, the self-brand connection can vary depending upon consumers' favorability toward the brand. The current study suggests that one-on-one marketing, including customization and personalization, is relevant to new and unfavorable brands.

1. Introduction

A self-brand connection serves as an important element of the brand relationship as it refers to the way consumers establish a sense of oneness with a brand (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). Until recently, research on the self-brand connection has centered on well-liked brands (Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos, & Bourlakis, 2016; Merchant & Rose, 2013) and unfavorable brands (Ferraro, Kirmani, & Matherly, 2013). There is limited research on the linkage between the creation of self-brand connection and consumers' favorability toward the brand. To this end, Chatzipanagiotou, Veloutsou, and Christodoulides (2016) called for research focusing on a comparison between the well-liked and unfavorable brands to extend an understanding of a holistic brand relationship. In this study, we explore such a brand relationship in the context of the self-brand connection amongst well-liked, new, and unfavorable brands using theories from customer-based brand equity and *self-presentation by brand* (SPB).

Customer-based brand equity (CBBE) is defined as “the differential

effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (Keller, 1993, p. 8). Research on CBBE is essential in order to capture the self-brand connection, as consumer attitude toward the favorability, strength, and uniqueness of the brand moderates the creation of self-brand connection. Such favorable (unfavorable) consumer attitudes, in turn, establish a sense of oneness (discord) with a brand that is positively (negatively) linked to building the brand relationship (Escalas, 2004; Park et al., 2010). Given the importance of CBBE in understanding the brand relationship with the consumer, Keller (2016) called for an investigation of consumers' brand association with newly introduced brands with which consumers have little or no interest. Such an investigation will provide a comparative understanding of the brand relationship amongst a well-liked brand, an unfavorable brand, and a new brand.

A *well-liked brand* is defined as a brand that consumers have a positive feeling about or that they have had a positive experience with (Keller, 1993). An *unfavorable brand*¹ is viewed as a brand that consumers have a negative attitude toward, which results from dis-

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¹ An illustrative scenario of a brand relationship in the context of an unfavorable brand is as follows: David is a fashion designer. He holds an unfavorable attitude toward Microsoft products as his old Windows phone's screen often turned black after system updates, which caused him to be unable to use the phone several times during an emergency. However, David starts connecting himself with Microsoft brand after knowing the company has introduced Surface Studio and Surface Pro, which closely relate to his profession. He believes that using the Microsoft products could present him effectively to others as a contemporary designer.

satisfaction or fairness violations (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). A *new brand*² relates to a brand that consumers are not familiar with and thus have little knowledge with which to form either a favorable or an unfavorable association (Keller, 1993). As consumers have a certain level of familiarity and a favorable attitude toward a well-liked brand, then they become the drivers of the self-brand connection (Schmitt, 2012). However, the development of self-brand connection might be non-existent in the case of a new brand to which consumers have limited exposure (Park et al., 2010). If a brand is viewed unfavorably, consumers associate the brand with their negative attitude, making it irrelevant to try to develop a self-brand connection. In addition, a love-becomes-hate effect may exist when consumers start forming a negative attitude toward a familiar brand (Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009), and this effect may dilute the self-brand connection. For these reasons, it is essential to investigate the predictive value of brand attitude and brand familiarity regarding the self-brand connection with well-liked, new, and unfavorable brands.

SPB has been an important driver of self-brand connection, in addition to brand attitude and brand familiarity (Tan, Salo, Juntunen, & Kumar, 2017). The critical role of SPB is due to the fact that when consumers perceive a brand as an identity signal, the brand functions as a means of maintaining a positive impression in front of others and such symbolic benefits allow consumers to connect themselves with the brand. The literature on the relationship between SPB and self-brand connection is very scant. Therefore, in this study, we address the following research questions: How do well-liked, new, and unfavorable brands moderate the relationships of brand attitude, brand familiarity, SPB, and self-brand connection?

To address our research questions, we develop a conceptual framework for moderating the effects of well-liked, new, and unfavorable brands on brand attitude, brand familiarity, SPB, and self-brand connection. We empirically test our framework using clothing and consumer electronics product brands. Our findings reveal that brand attitude, brand familiarity, and SPB are relatively vital to the creation of self-brand connection for well-liked brands. However, if the brand is viewed unfavorably or if it is new, only SPB is found to have a positive effect on the self-brand connection. The current study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, we address the calls of Chatzipanagiotou et al. (2016) and Keller (2016) to extend research on the creation of self-brand connection by comparing new, unfavorable, and well-liked brands. Second, we integrated the consumer psychology model of brands (Schmitt, 2012) with SPB by testing its predictive ability for the self-brand connection. In the next section, we review the relevant literature used in developing our conceptual framework, followed by presenting two studies that test the hypotheses, and finally conclude with the current research's contributions, managerial implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. The consumer psychology model of brands

We draw from the literature on the consumer psychology model of brands (CPMB; Schmitt, 2012) to build our framework. The CPMB provides a theoretical underpinning for explaining a comprehensive framework for the psychology of brands. This framework focuses on the different levels of consumers' psychological engagement with brands and the underlying processes that drive consumers to relate themselves

to the brand. We adopted the CPMB as it discusses the constructs of our framework within the level of consumer engagement and the underlying processes, which include self-brand connection, brand attitude, and brand familiarity/awareness. It also highlights the importance of brand participation for a new brand and the possibility of an adverse brand relationship (i.e., unfavorable brand perception). Further, the CPMB categories self-brand connection (a component of brand attachment; Park et al., 2010) as a self-centered engagement construct, which provides a direction for this study that positions the self-brand connection as a dependent variable that is predicted by object-centered engagement constructs, such as brand attitude and brand familiarity.

Although the model has provided extensive coverage of how consumers relate themselves to a brand to signify their identity, it does not give a detailed discussion of how the signifying process could be related to self-presentation motivation, despite previous studies showing that self-brand connection involves the way in which consumers utilize brands as part of their self-presentational strategy (Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2009). Besides this, the model does not provide a rich understanding of how consumers perceive a new brand or an unfavorable brand in a brand relationship, which is related to a differing level of favorability, and this might have a different process to that found for a well-liked brand (Chatzipanagiotou et al., 2016; Keller, 2016). Therefore, our study fills such gaps in the literature.

2.2. Brand relationships: brand attitude, brand familiarity, SPB

Brand attitude refers to the consumer's overall evaluation of a brand that ranges from positive to negative valence (Albert, Ambroise, & Valette-Florence, 2017). It consists of all the relevant elements that are presented in the consumer's mind, such as experiences with the brand, packaging, advertisements, brand attributes, and the benefits of a brand (Langaro, Rita, & de Fátima Salgueiro, 2018). *Brand familiarity* is defined as the level of a consumer's experience and information about a brand (Gretry, Horváth, Belei, & van Riel, 2017). Drawing from the associative network memory model (Keller, 1993), brand familiarity represents a cognitive structure in the consumer's memory, which allows the consumer to differentiate a familiar brand from an unfamiliar brand and thus pay more attention to the familiar brand (Boronczyk, Rumpf, & Breuer, 2018).

SPB refers to how consumers perceive how others view them while presenting themselves with a brand, which in turn relates to impression motivation and impression construction (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). SPB is distinct from self-brand connection in three ways. First, self-brand connection is influenced by whether the brand is associated with an in-group or an out-group, which results in self-brand linkage or self-brand separation that involve complex feelings about the brand, and thus they relate to the *subjective* sense of brand evaluation (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Park et al., 2010). SPB is associated with the *objective* sense of judgment that evaluates whether a brand has efficiently presented the consumer's self to others. Second, self-brand connection is considered a long-term construct as establishing a sense of oneness with a brand is mostly time-dependent (Escalas & Bettman, 2009). SPB is not necessarily time dependent as it evaluates whether the brand serves as a means of self-presentational strategy and it can be formed instantly using a self-customization procedure (Tan et al., 2017). Third, self-brand connection is an attachment-based brand relationship (Park et al., 2010), which explains the bond between a brand and the consumer. Contrarily, SPB emphasizes the signifying ability of a brand (Schmitt, 2012) and thus is related to the fit of the brand's personality and the consumer's self (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017).

2.3. Hypothesis development

We add to the CPMB (Schmitt, 2012) by proposing that SPB results from self-centered engagement with brands. It engages the consumer with a brand by involving signifying processes. Previous studies show

² An illustrative scenario of a brand relationship in the context of a new brand is as follows: You and your friend have never heard about the Dsquared² brand. After she tried on a few pairs of Dsquared² mid-rise jeans at the Woodbury Common Premium Outlets, she starts connecting to Dsquared² as she looked great with the jeans on and perceived the brand could help her to give a positive impression of herself when in public.

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