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Trait transference from brands to individuals: The impact of brand-behavior congruency[☆,☆☆]

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ABSTRACT

Consumers' strategic use of brands as a way of influencing the impressions others have about them is buttressed by research showing that brand personality traits may carry over and affect perceptions about their users or endorsers. However more often than not brand users engage in all sorts of trait-implying behaviors that may sometimes be in conflict with the brand personality. In two studies we explored how perceivers integrate these two sources of information when creating first impressions of brand users. Results indicated that when traits associated with brands and the users' trait-implying behaviors were in conflict, brand trait transferences were inhibited, whereas traits inferred from the behaviors were enhanced. These findings concerning *brand trait transference inhibition* and *trait inference enhancement* may provide new insights on how brand personality influences perceptions about their users, with distinctive consequences for marketing strategy.

1. Introduction

The brands people select and use provide powerful sources of information to form impressions of personality. Brands are part of people's lives and are often strategically used by consumers as a way of conveying a message about themselves to others. However, people do not passively use brands as mannequins do. Brand users engage in all sorts of trait-implying behaviors that also influence the perceivers' impressions of them. Although there is considerable work on the use of brands as a way to shape the self-concept and as a form of consumer self-expression, evidence that those efforts are effective in producing changes in how the user is perceived by others is still scant. Moreover, evidence concerning the interaction between users' behavior and the information brand conveys is inexistent to the best of our knowledge. The main goal of the present work is to better understand the extent with which the type of behaviors that people exhibit may amplify or suppress a brand's influence on the impression formation process, more specifically affecting the probability of people acquiring brand personality-traits.

1.1. *Forming impressions about consumers*

Preferences, interests, lifestyle, as well as personality traits, are often inferred from the products and services one uses (Arsena, Silvera, & Pandelaere, 2014, Experiment 1; Callison, Karrh, & Zillmann, 2002; Haire, 1950; Holman, 1980; Solomon, 1983; Vrij, 1997; see also Belk, 1978). It is not surprising that consumers tend to select and use brands as a way to reinforce, extend and express the self (Aaker, 1997, 1999; Belk, 1988; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993; Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982; see also Govers & Schoormans, 2005). Salient brand personality dimensions directly impact the identity and self-image of the brand users (e.g., Reed II, 2002). Also as shown by Fennis, Pruyn, and Maasland (2005), brands also influence the self-perception consumers have of their own personality traits. Specifically Fennis and al., instructed participants to imagine themselves in scenarios where brands with different personalities (e.g., sincerity) were incidentally presented. Results showed that participants' self-perception on related personality dimensions (e.g., agreeableness) was influenced in a congruent way by the brand's personality to which they were incidentally exposed to. Moreover, consumers may be intentionally selecting brands to make certain aspects of the consumer personality more visible to others and

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for impression management purposes (Aaker, 1999; Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988; Richins, 1994; see also Escalas & Bettman, 2005). This self-expression value of brands is likely to be an important driver for consumer's preferences and choices. Hence, finding out more on how brands actually impact the impressions that *others* form about the consumer is crucial for a better grasping of the psychological mechanisms underlying the influence of brands.

However, research directly addressing the impact of brands on the way consumers (brand users) are perceived is only emerging, and has yet to consider the influence of the consumer's own behavior while using a brand. This is important because brands associated with a consumer do not operate in a social vacuum. Consumer behavior is often a powerful source of trait inferences about a person (e.g., Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988; Heider, 1958; Winter & Uleman, 1984). These inferences may interact with brands personality (e.g., Aaker, 1997) to shape impressions about consumers. In fact, although impression formation may proceed with minimal information, all information available tends to combine into a coherent gestalt (e.g., Asch, 1946). Thus, inferences about a consumer based on the personality of the brands he or she uses, are likely to integrate with inferences from consumer's own actions (Belk, 1978; Fennis & Pruyn, 2007).

Next, we consider some developments on brand personality and implicit impression formation research that may help us shed some light on how brand and behavior interact in shaping impressions about consumers.

1.1.1. Spontaneous trait transference and brand trait transference

An interesting parallel may be drawn between the literature on brand personality and the research on person perception and impression formation. Firstly, not only people but also brands have relatively enduring personalities that represent a key factor in their identity and differentiation (Aaker, 1997; Johar, Sengupta, & Aaker, 2005). Secondly, when forming impressions about a person, other information present in the context is likely to play an important role. More specifically the contextual information could be either the behaviors of another person (e.g., Skowronski, Carlston, Mae, & Crawford, 1998) or the personality of a brand (Arsena et al., 2014; Das, Vermeulen, Laagland, & Postma, 2010; Fennis & Pruyn, 2007).

Research on first impressions has shown that trait-implying behaviors (e.g., *John won the science quiz*) lead to the spontaneous inference of the corresponding trait (e.g., John is *intelligent*) (see Uleman, Newman, & Moskowitz, 1996; Uleman, Saribay, & Gonzalez, 2008). While further investigating this phenomenon, called *spontaneous trait inference* (STI), an interesting communicator effect called *spontaneous trait transference* (STT) was also identified (Carlston, Skowronski, & Sparks, 1995; Mae, Carlston, & Skowronski, 1999; Skowronski et al., 1998). This effect essentially involves the tendency for communicators to be seen as possessing the traits they describe in others. For instance, if Mary describes an aggressive behavior of an acquaintance, she becomes associated with, and ultimately has attributed to her, the trait *aggressive*. STTs are also observed between actors of trait-implying behaviors and bystanders.[1] So, for instance, if Agnes behaves in an aggressive way and Mary is incidentally present in the same context, then Mary will be also perceived as *aggressive* (Skowronski et al., 1998).

Carlston and Mae (2007) further showed that associating trait-laden symbols to a person lead others to perceive that person as having the traits implied by the symbols (e.g., the trait *romantic* for the symbol of a rose). This effect was observed for logical person-symbol associations (i.e., the symbols were said to have been chosen by acquaintances to characterize the targets) as well as for incidental person-symbol associations (i.e., the symbols were randomly paired with the targets). Carlston and Mae interpreted this influence of symbols on impression formation as a reflection of STT processes, according to which person perception may be influenced by inferences made about different and even unrelated targets.

Similar psychological processes seem to be involved in trait transferences from a brand's personality to a person associated to the brand – a phenomenon that Arsena et al. (2014) dubbed *brand trait transference* (BTT). These authors illustrated this phenomenon by showing that a celebrity endorser of a brand that was advertised as a sincere brand was perceived as more sincere than the endorser of a neutral brand. However, this occurred only when the celebrity had no pre-existing strong negative associations with the trait in question (i.e., "sincerity"), which suggests that pre-existing traits of the endorser may interfere with BTT (see Arsena et al., 2014, Experiment 3).

Das et al. (2010) also provided evidence that brand personality is integrated with other sources of information about the brand owner. High versus moderately attractive female individuals were presented carrying a sophisticated or non-sophisticated branded product (iPod versus a generic MP3 player). The moderately attractive female was seen as more sophisticated when carrying the sophisticated brand product, but no effects were found for the highly attractive brand user.

In the same vein, individual targets wearing a "Boss" sweater (a brand strongly associated to the trait "competent") were perceived as more competent than individuals wearing an "Australian" sweater (a brand weakly associated with "competent"). This was mainly true when the targets appeared in a congruent (golf course) context rather than incongruent (camping site) one (Fennis & Pruyn, 2007).

In sum, not only salient brand personality traits incidentally affect person perception, but also impression formation processes integrate brand trait information with other sources of information. Indeed, the match or mismatch between pieces of relevant information seem to qualify (promote or constrain) the influence of the brand on the impressions formed.

However, the behavior of the person has not been considered so far in the context of BTT. This is unfortunate since consumers associated with certain brands are likely to engage in several behaviors, some of which have the potential to be powerful sources of personality trait inferences (e.g., Uleman et al., 1996). To change this state of affairs and clarify the conditions under which BTT operates, we propose a conceptual framework, inspired on the impression formation literature, wherein STI and BTT are studied within the same experimental paradigm, making it easier to evaluate the impact of the former on the latter (and vice-versa).

1.2. Conceptual framework

Trait inferences and first impressions of personality are quickly formed, with minimal information (e.g., Asch, 1946; Gilbert et al., 1988; Heider, 1958), little effort (Crawford, Skowronski, Stiff, & Scherer, 2007; Todorov & Uleman, 2003), and even in the absence of explicit impression formation goals (Winter & Uleman, 1984; Carlston & Skowronski, 1994; Todorov & Uleman, 2002; for reviews see Uleman et al., 1996; Uleman et al., 2008). When, however, several sources of information are available, they are integrated to form coherent impressions of personality (e.g., Asch, 1946; Hamilton, Katz, & Leirer, 1980a, 1980b; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996).

One critical challenge to the development of a coherent impression of personality occurs when several pieces of information about the target person are incongruent. The most studied case of this occurrence is when the person's behavior violates prior expectations about the person. Such incongruent expectations have been shown to inhibit spontaneous trait inferences (Wigboldus, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2003; see also Jerónimo, Garcia-Marques, Ferreira, &

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[1] STT is quite pervasive and observed even when the communicators are well known (Mae et al., 1999), when the pairings behavior-person are said to be random (Skowronski et al., 1998), when perceivers are requested to avoid it (Carlston & Skowronski, 2005), and even when the target of the transference is not a person but an object (Brown & Bassili, 2002). However, STT seems to be reduced or eliminated, when the actor of the behavior is presented along with the bystander (e.g., Crawford, Skowronski, & Stiff, 2007; Crawford, Skowronski, Stiff, & Leonards, 2008).

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