Journal of Business Research 84 (2018) 89–99

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research

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

Power distance belief and brand personality evaluations[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Power distance belief
Brand personality
Brand social categorization tendency
Temporal distance

ABSTRACT

This article explores the influence of power distance belief (PDB) on the evaluations of brand personality traits. It proposes that high PDB polarizes the brand personality evaluations of ingroup and outgroup brands. Specifically, results show that individuals with high PDB tend to evaluate an ingroup brand more positively and an outgroup brand more negatively than those with low PDB do. More importantly, brand social categorization tendency mediates the effect of PDB on brand personality evaluations of ingroup and outgroup brands. Furthermore, we find that temporal distance (near vs. distant buying conditions) moderates the effect of PDB on brand personality evaluations. Theoretical contributions and managerial implications are also discussed.

1. Introduction

Brand personality refers to “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). Brands, as consumption symbols, not only can help consumers express their various self-concepts but also can represent the values and beliefs of a culture. For example, Aaker, Benet-Martínez, and Garolera (2001) find that Japan and the United States share a certain set of brand personality dimensions, including sincerity, excitement, competence, and sophistication, but also have culture-specific Japanese (peacefulness) and American (ruggedness) dimensions. By asking consumers to rate a set of global brands on the same personality attributes in Korea and the United States, Sung and Tinkham (2005) identify six common brand personality traits (i.e., likeableness, trendiness, competence, sophistication, traditionalism, and ruggedness). More importantly, they also find two culture-specific attributes (i.e., passive likeableness and ascendancy) in Korea and two unique attributes (white collar and androgyny) in the United States, indicating that cultural meaning is embedded in brand personality structure. Indeed, cultural values and beliefs change consumer brand personality perceptions. It is thus desirable and important to examine how cultural beliefs influence evaluations of brand personality.

Traditionally, cross-cultural researchers have studied extensively the influence of individualism/collectivism (or independent/interdependent self-construal at the individual level) on brand meanings (e.g., Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). For example, Escalas and Bettman (2005) observe that all consumers have high self-brand connections for ingroup brands, but for outgroup brands, independents have lower self-brand connections than interdependents do. However, limited research attention has been paid to power distance belief (PDB), the first cultural dimension studied by Hofstede (2001, p. 79), and its influence on consumer perceptions and behavior. Hofstede (2001, p. 83) states that PDB refers to the extent to which people “accept and expect that power is distributed unequally” throughout society. Although within a culture and also across cultures human inequality in power, wealth, and prestige is ubiquitous in social societies, only recently has the topic of how PDB influences consumers' attitudes and behavior gradually gained attention. To date, a handful of studies have examined the effect of PDB on impulsive buying (Zhang, Winterich, & Mittal, 2010), charitable donations (Winterich & Zhang, 2011), price-quality judgments (Lalwani & Forcum, 2016), status consumption (Gao, Winterich, & Zhang, 2016; Kim & Zhang, 2014), and life insurance consumption (Chui & Kwok, 2008). Various theoretical mechanisms have been proposed to account for the effects of PDB. For example, Zhang et al. (2010) suggest that high PDB activates greater self-control, which in turn reduces impulsive buying. Winterich and Zhang (2011) argue that high PDB triggers low perceived responsibility, which leads to low charity donations. Most recently, Lalwani and Forcum (2016) show that consumers with high PDB have a higher need for structure, which results in a greater tendency to use price to judge quality.

[☆] The authors gratefully acknowledge financial support from the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant Numbers: 71302077, 71772108, 70872068, and 71272014) and Spears School of Business, Oklahoma State University.

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.11.011
Received 10 March 2017; Received in revised form 6 November 2017; Accepted 8 November 2017
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In this article, we extend the current stream of research on PDB to brand personality evaluations, and we identify a unique underlying mechanism for the effects of PDB. Specifically, we adopt the social categorization theory (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Brewer & Silver, 1978) and apply it to the context of brand society by introducing the important concept of brand social categorization tendency. We propose that individuals will categorize brands into different groups (ingroup vs. outgroup) on the basis of their own unique images or associations, just as they categorize other people into different social groups and/or hierarchical orders. Ingroup and outgroup brands serve as important reference groups that are associated with consumer self-brand connections (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

We further argue that an individual's brand social categorization tendency will mediate the effect of PDB on brand personality evaluations. Individuals with high PDB will show a greater brand social categorization tendency, which in turn enhances their brand personality evaluations of their ingroup brands (ingroup favoritism) and lessens their evaluations of outgroup brands (outgroup negativity). Our theoretical framework offers new insights into understanding the underlying mechanism of PDB in brand personality evaluations.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. PDB and evaluations of brand personality

Brands possess important symbolic and expressive values to individuals. One important facet of the relationship between brands and human beings is brand personality attributes (Aaker et al., 2001). Brand personality is a multidimensional and multifaceted construct. It varies across cultures, primarily because individuals differ in terms of expressing their needs, wants, and self-views (Kim & Markus, 1999; Sweeney & Brandon, 2006). For instance, although Japan and the United States are found to share a certain set of brand personality dimensions, including sincerity, excitement, competence, and sophistication, they also have culture-specific Japanese dimensions (e.g., peacefulness) and American dimensions (e.g., ruggedness) (Aaker et al., 2001). In another cross-cultural study, Chu and Sung (2011) find that in China, three brand personality dimensions (competence, excitement, and sophistication) are consistent with those found in the U.S., whereas three other dimensions (traditionalism, joyfulness, and trendiness) carry culture-specific meaning that is uniquely associated with Chinese culture, due to "the coexistence of traditional and changing cultural values in contemporary Chinese society" (p. 163).

We focus on the first cultural dimension studied by Hofstede (2001), i.e., PDB, to study how it affects people's evaluations of brand personality. Human inequality in power, wealth, and prestige exists everywhere. PDB addresses the issue of how various societies respond differently to human inequality (Randall, 1993). PDB does not capture the actual power that an individual has but instead represents the extent to which a society accepts the disparity and views it as inevitable or functional (Hofstede, 2001; Oyserman, 2006; Soares, Farhangmehr, & Shoham, 2007). Previous research points out that an individual can learn cultural beliefs and their associated thoughts and behaviors, even if he or she does not actually live in and experience that culture (Oyserman & Lee, 2007). Consumers, no matter whether they live in a high- or low-PDB culture, can learn power distance beliefs and the associated concepts. For example, in a high-PDB culture, people watch TV programs on democracy and equality in which PDB is low, and thus they learn about that association. Therefore, as Zhang et al. (2010) point out, even within the same culture there are people with high PDB and people with low PDB. For example, even though the U.S. culture overall has a relatively low PDB score (40; Hofstede, 1984), people in United States military institutions tend to accept a high degree of inequality more willingly. Because cultural or subcultural meanings reside in brands' symbolic or value-expressive functions (i.e., representations and attributes of brand personality), and those functions are important for an individual to possess in order to express him/herself (Shavitt, 1990), PDB should influence people's perceptions of a brand's personality.

2.2. Brand social categorization tendency

Brands can be classified into ingroup and outgroup brands (White & Dahl, 2007), with the concepts of ingroup and outgroup borrowed from social identity literature. An ingroup refers to a group to which an individual feels he or she belongs, whereas an outgroup is defined as a group to which an individual does not feel he or she belongs (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). According to social identity theory, people often categorize themselves on the basis of how much they are similar to or different from other groups of people (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social categories are represented as prototypes, which consist of fuzzy attributes such as attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions (Hogg, 2001). Prototypes make groups distinctive (i.e., ingroup similarities and outgroup differences). When a particular categorization is salient, people will categorize themselves, think, and behave in terms of the category that they belong to—that is, the ingroup. As a result, the ingroup prototype or descriptions will govern people's self-perception and behavior. Therefore, self-categorization explains ingroup identification and intergroup thoughts and behavior. As Brewer and Brown (1998, p. 579) illustrate, "The role of cognitive representations of the contact situation is a critical factor determining the outcome of intergroup interactions."

The mere categorization of people into two social groups is sufficient to elicit intergroup discrimination (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Rabbie and Horwitz (1969) find that even a chance win or loss from simply flipping a coin is sufficient to arouse ingroup-outgroup bias. Ingroup formation involves the social differentiation of people into those that are considered to be "us" and those that are acknowledged to fall outside that boundary (Allport, 1954). Because ingroups require certain boundaries or demarcations between "in" and "out," by definition the existence of ingroups implies the existence of outgroups (Brewer, 1999). According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), people's need for self-esteem induces them to favor their ingroups and devalue outgroups. Social categorization can produce within-group similarity (Doise, Deschamps, & Meyer, 1978), ingroup favoritism, and outgroup negativity (Brewer & Silver, 1978). Preferential positivity toward ingroups will result in ingroup favoritism (e.g., more rewards and helpful behavior to ingroup members) and outgroup negativity (Brewer, 1999; Sherif, 1966; Sumner, 1906; Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel et al., 1971). Ingroup love is characterized by the perceived superiority of ingroup members, loyalty to the group, and brotherhood, whereas outgroup negativity involves less positivity toward outgroup members, indifference, disdain, or even hatred (Brewer, 1999).

Prior literature suggests that, in the same vein, consumers categorize brands into ingroups and outgroups (e.g., White & Dahl, 2007), but their tendency to categorize, or the extent to which they categorize, depends on how they view the society in terms of hierarchy and structure. Brand social categorization tendency in this article is defined as the extent to which people categorize brands into different groups (i.e., ingroups and outgroups). People in high-PDB cultures are more aware of the social hierarchy differences and thus desire to move upward in the social structure so as to enhance their social identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Gao et al. (2016) also find that high-PDB consumers will engage in greater status consumption to signal their social identity than do low-PDB consumers, although this effect only occurs when others' status is similar or inferior to their own. Therefore, people with high PDB expect to view unequal power distribution in a society as being inevitable and legitimate and are more aware of the differences among the various classes of the social hierarchy (Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman, & Anastasio, 1994) and between the ingroup and the outgroup. As a result, they cognitively develop a high tendency toward categorizing social objects, such as brands, accordingly. Thus, we argue that individuals with high PDB are more cognizant of the

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