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Using brand alliances with artists to expand retail brand personality☆

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ABSTRACT

Fashion retailers are increasingly entering into brand alliances with visual artists, but the conditions under which such alliances are most effective are not clear. Drawing on brand personality and implicit personality theory, we used two experimental studies to show both negative (dilution of retailer's original personality) and positive (expansion of personality) effects. Study 1 demonstrated that retail brand personality was diluted when the visual artist had a strongly incongruent personality, while it was expanded when the artist had a personality moderately incongruent to the retailer's brand, but only for consumers who hold an incremental theorist view of personality. Study 2 showed that consumers' implicit theory beliefs can be primed to design the intended personality of retail brands through artist partnerships. Our findings suggest visual artists are an untapped source of value that retailers can exploit to create differentiated brand personalities as a way to gain a greater market appeal.

1. Introduction

Since the 1930s, when Italian fashion designer Elsa Schiparelli collaborated with Salvador Dali to design a gown, there have been collaborations between visual artists and fashion designers. As artists have emerged as brands themselves, they have collaborated with fashion designers in ways that have expanded the reach of the artists while enhancing the personalities of the fashion brands they work with (Gregory, 2014). These collaborations hold immense promise for both parties as they may help reshape consumers' views of their brands, but they are also fraught with dangers as both fashion retailers and visual artists have small fortunes invested in their brands. On one hand, Takashi Murakami's collaboration with Louis Vuitton is credited with significantly building his reputation. On the other hand, such a collaboration may “make the artist feel her work is compromised and sometimes, the retailer is afraid that its core users won't ‘get’ an artistic endeavor or that the work might be controversial (Riahi, 2014, para 1).”

Consumers view retail brands as having distinct personalities such as excitement and sincerity (Zentes, Morschett, & Schramm-Klein, 2008) that are similar to the set of human personality characteristics (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004). Similarly, the success of visual artists is dependent on their creation of a well-developed unique style and personality (Holmes, 2007; Thomson, 2006). This is an untapped source of value that retailers can draw on to create distinct and differentiated personalities in the minds of consumers as a clearly defined retail brand personality has a positive effect on store loyalty (Das, 2014). Exactly how merging these personalities can affect consumer perceptions of retailers has not been widely examined in the literature (Das, 2015). Store ambiance, environment, and design are the most important antecedents to retail brand personality perceptions (Brengman & Willems, 2009) and this fact suggests that the potential impact of integrating the styles of unique visual artists on retail brand personality is significant.

The vast literature on brand personality has focused on product brands even though some research has shown that retail brands are different from product brands because of their multi-sensory nature (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004). When a visual artist has a personality that differs from the fashion retailer's personality, it is not always clear how successful the partnership will be when consumers experience the alliance. For example, Takashi Murakami, an iconic artist who represents excitement with his bright, bold, and fun artwork, was involved in creating a marketing mix for Louis Vuitton who historically has represented the personality trait of sophistication (Smith, 2008). By incorporating Murakami's exciting personality, Louis Vuitton was able to attract young consumers who otherwise might have a low attachment to the retailer's original sophisticated trait. Yet, it is possible that

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collaborations with “pop artists” like Murakami and Yayoi Kusama could have alienated Louis Vuitton's core consumers and diluted their “sophisticated” personality to cause long run damage to the brand. Even a more benign consumer reaction where the alliance fails to change consumers' perceptions of the Louis Vuitton brand could be regarded as an expensive failure. Not all consumers may be willing to accept an alteration to the personality profiles of their favorite retail brands and understanding how consumers react to changing personalities is important to ensure artist-retailer alliances are effective. Despite some evidence that retailers can use personality perceptions effectively to create a unique selling proposition (Willems et al., 2012), limited research has examined how consumers respond to alliances between artists and retail brands.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the emerging industry phenomenon in which visual artists engage in brand alliances with fashion retailers to take advantage of existing positive associations with each of the brands. The study focuses on two research questions designed to advance our understanding of artist-retailer brand alliances. First, we examine the conditions under which such alliances expand or dilute the personality of the retailer brand. Second, we examine a mechanism by which retailers can prime consumers to be more accepting of such alliances to expand their brand personalities most effectively.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Brand personality integration and schema (in)congruence

Brand personality refers to the set of human traits that consumers associate with a brand (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality has generally been studied in terms of five dimensions: sincerity, competence, excitement, sophistication, and ruggedness. When consumers perceive brands as having a distinct personality, they benefit from being able to use the brand for self-expression (Belk, 1988). The retailer benefits through improved brand equity (Keller, 2007) and store loyalty (Das, 2014). Therefore, when brands partner, the broad goal is to integrate the personality dimensions of brands in the alliance (James, Lyman, & Foreman, 2006; Simonin & Ruth, 1998). The brand alliance operates via a spill-over mechanism, transferring a personality trait of the partnering brand onto the host brand to re-conceptualize its personality representation (Desai & Keller, 2002).

Brand schemata refers to the cognitive structures that represent one's current perception of or expectations about a given product or brand (Bettman, 1979). Brand schema (in)congruence in the context of a brand alliance can be referred to as the extent of discrepancy between a newly-created brand schema and the prior established schema (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989). It indicates the extent of structural correspondence achieved between the newly projected perception impacted by the partnering brand's attributes compared to existing perceptions of the host brand. The extent of schema (in)congruity can be categorized as follows: 1) congruous—where the brand personalities of the partners are similar to each other so there is a predictable conformation to the expectation that causes no changes in current knowledge structure; 2) moderate incongruity—where there is some deviation from expectation between the perceptions of the two brands, yet within the boundaries in which the incongruity can be understood and resolved; and 3) strong incongruity—where the partnership results in a drastic deviation from consumers expectations, in which incongruity cannot be resolved without fundamental cognitive restructuring (Mandler, 1982).

Brand personality is one key construct constituting brand schema and different levels of (in)congruence in personality attributes among allying brands trigger different cognitive processing, and subsequently result in different brand knowledge restructuring. Brand alliances where the two allying brands own congruent personality traits, impose no structural changes in a current host brand schema. In this case, congruency does not conflict with the existing host brand schema, thus does not require any changes in processing. However, processing of moderately incongruent attributes of the allying brand results in consumers assimilating the new attributes into the host brand schema (Desai & Keller, 2002). The existing memory representation first integrates that portion of the attributes that are consistent with the schemata, and then assimilates the residual incongruent information through the formation of a unique tag (Sujan & Bettman, 1989). A consumer's perceptions of a brand's personality consist of a series of objects connected in a causal network and some of these objects that make up the brand's personality “essence” are more important than others. Changing a central feature that defines a brand's personality will have a larger effect on consumer perceptions than a secondary feature (Van Rekom, Jacobs, & Verlegh, 2006). Thus, when the partnering brand does not conflict with the core essence of the host brand, the moderately incongruent information does not completely transform the prior knowledge structure (Sjödin & Törn, 2006), but instead functions to expand the characterization of the brand, without compromising the existing brand personality.

The processing of strongly incongruent attributes of an allying brand, on the other hand, first initiates deeper cognitive elaboration on the part of consumers as they attempt to resolve the discrepancy. However, conflict in resolving the inconsistency results in the need to create a new knowledge structure (Desai & Keller, 2002; Sujan & Bettman, 1989). Often, the attempt to resolve the strong discrepancy induces a sense of overwhelming helplessness (Mandler, 1982), in which case, a stress and subsequent failure in cognitive elaboration only distorts the current knowledge structure. The result is that the host brand's core personality is diluted without the partnering brand's personality being integrated into the schema.

2.2. Implicit theories of personality

The self serves as a lens through which the consumer interprets the personality of other individuals or brands. Our perceptions of brands are affected by the similarities between our own personalities and those of the brand (Wolter, Brach, Cronin, & Bonn, 2016). A consumer may view the self to be complex and multifaceted, and when this lens is activated, he/she tends to prefer cobrands with dual (versus single) personalities (Monga & Lau-Gesk, 2007) to be consistent with the self. Individuals also generally have implicit theories about the malleability of personality traits (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; Dweck & Leggett, 1988), and either are *entity theorists*, who perceive personality traits as fixed and dispositional, or *incremental theorists*, who see personality traits as dynamic, malleable and context dependent (Dweck et al., 1995). Not only do these implicit theories affect how we see others' personalities, but marketing messages can also prime an entity or incremental mindset. Research has shown that consumers are much more likely to accept a brand extension that departed moderately from the parent brand's personality if they were incremental, rather than entity theorists (Yorkston, Nunes, & Matta, 2010). However, even among incremental theorists, priming did not promote the acceptance of a brand extension that involved an extreme departure from the parent brand's personality, due to violation of the latitude of acceptability. It is clear, therefore, that consumers' perceptions of the personalities of complex brand alliances are evaluated in terms of their own naïve views of personality.

2.3. The special case of visual artist-retailer alliances

Given visual artists represent a unique human brand that vividly signal distinct persona through artwork (Holmes, 2007; Thomson, 2006), integrating their style into a fashion retail environment is intended to benefit from the spill-over of the artist's persona onto the symbolic properties of the retail brand. While most of the research on brand personality focuses on brands with a single dominant personality,

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