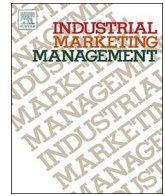




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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Industrial Marketing Management

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

Target and position article

Influence of interfirm brand values congruence on relationship qualities in B2B contexts

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Brand values
 Brand identification
 Brand sensitivity
 Brand trust
 Word of mouth
 Value co-creation

ABSTRACT

Adopting a new perspective of brand values, this study explores the influence of brand values congruence between buyers and sellers on relationship qualities in B2B contexts. To expand knowledge on this issue, the authors introduce the construct of brand identification to explain how brand values congruence exerts influence. The results show that self-enhancement congruence and self-transcendence congruence positively affect brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation through the mediating role of brand identification. In addition, brand sensitivity positively moderates the effect of self-enhancement congruence on brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation through brand identification. However, the mediated moderation effect disappears in self-transcendence congruence. On the basis of these findings, the authors present implications for B2B companies with regard to developing effective branding strategies in accordance with brand values.

1. Introduction

In exceedingly competitive business environments, brand emotional benefits can lead to high satisfaction (Candi & Kahn, 2016; He & Wang, 2014) because commercial buyers are claimed to value the emotional security offered by a brand with a strong, positive image (Roper & Davies, 2010). In practice, B2B marketers have gradually realized the importance of brand information in clients' purchasing choices and thus, invest considerable resources to create unique brand values and establish differentiated brand images. Accordingly, in academics, a small number of studies have also shown that endowing a brand with human characteristics can create positive emotional associations and bring additional value to companies (Herbst & Merz, 2011; Veloutsou & Taylor, 2012). However, on the whole, the emotional benefits of B2B branding have not aroused sufficient academic attention (Candi & Kahn, 2016). Our comprehensive review of relevant extant literature reveals three important gaps that warrant further investigations.

First, to the best of our knowledge, no study incorporates human values into brand concepts and analyzes emotional benefits from the perspective of brand values in the B2B domain. It is noteworthy that as one of core constructs in brand personification, brand personality developed by Aaker (1997) represents an important early effort in analyzing emotional benefits and has been commonly adopted by scholars in the B2B domain as a theoretical basis for research (Herbst & Merz, 2011; Rojas-Méndez, Erenchun-Podlech, & Silva-Olave, 2004;

Veloutsou & Taylor, 2012). However, this abstract trait-based construct lacks generalizability in cross-cultural settings (Aaker, Benet-Martínez, & Garolera, 2001; Sung & Tinkham, 2005; Torelli, Monga, and Kaikati, 2012), which limits its usefulness in representing B2B brand concepts and in serving as a brand positioning strategy framework in the context of globalization. In contrast, brand values are motivation-based and driven by human needs. These values have shared meanings across different cultures and thus, can be universally understood (Torelli, Monga, et al., 2012). Therefore, we try to extend human values to B2B brand concepts and provide new insights for B2B companies on their brand positioning strategies.

Second, relationship marketing (RM), as one of the dominant mantras in business strategy circles, has garnered extensive attention from both academics and practitioners (Hibbard, Brunel, Dant, & Dawn, 2001; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006; Samaha, Beck, & Palmatier, 2014). So far, few B2B studies have examined RM from the perspective of brand values and explored how similar brand values affect the outcome of RM efforts. Notably, although shared values (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), similarity (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Palmatier et al., 2006), and salesperson similarity (Doney & Cannon, 1997) have been studied to emphasize the importance of similar interests, lifestyle, and socioeconomic status in building, developing, and maintaining relationships, these studies are yet to address the two following issues. First, they focus on short-term interpersonal-level commonality, rather than long-term interfirm-level commonality, thus

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0019-8501/ © 2018 Published by Elsevier Inc.

ignoring the strategic orientation of values in RM. Second, they pay little attention to the mutual recognition of corporate brand similarity that may pave a way to interfirm relationships. Accordingly, this study reconsiders RM from brand values perspective and attempts to reveal how interfirm-level corporate brand values congruence (BVC) exerts influence on buyer-seller relationships.

Third, despite growing empirical evidence suggesting brands do matter in organizational buying decisions, little is known about the extent to which a buying center intends to rely on emotional benefits for decision-making purposes and which kind of emotional benefits is more influential. Given the conventional view being that the organizational decision-making process is rational (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012), studies in the B2B domain largely investigate the relationship between brand sensitivity and more functional or less emotional benefits (Brown, Zablah, Bellenger, & Donthu, 2012; Brown, Zablah, Bellenger, & Johnston, 2011; Hutton, 1997). However, B2C-based studies reveal that brand sensitivity is closely related with emotional benefits (Beaudoin & Lachance, 2006; Lachance, Beaudoin, & Robitaille, 2003; Workman & Lee, 2013). Then, what about the relationship between brand sensitivity and emotional benefits in B2B contexts? It remains unclear whether brand sensitivity can affect the influence exerted by emotional benefits.

In this article, we propose a new perspective of abstract brand concepts based on human values to analyze emotional benefits in B2B contexts. Based on Schwartz and Boehnke (2004) and Torelli, Monga, et al. (2012), we extend the concept of brand values in the B2C domain to the B2B domain and explore how BVC between companies affect relationship qualities, including brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation. In addition, since the importance of brand information in the purchasing process varies by companies, we adopt brand sensitivity as a moderator to analyze the differentiated influence of BVC on outcome variables. In sum, this study addresses the following three questions. First, how and why does BVC influence relationship qualities between companies? Second, how does brand sensitivity moderate the influence of BVC on relationship qualities? Third, will there be any difference if different dimensions of values are examined?

In examining the relationship between BVC and relationship qualities, this study represents an important first step toward a better understanding of how, why, and the extent to which brand values are relevant in business contexts. It is the first to propose an alternative perspective of abstract brand concepts based on human values to explore the effects of emotional benefits in the B2B domain. This study also contributes to the RM literature in two ways. First, unlike previous studies (Crosby et al., 1990; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Palmatier et al., 2006), it focuses on interfirm-level, not interpersonal-level, similarity. Second, it concentrates on corporate brand similarity, which has received little attention in extant RM literature. Furthermore, our study provides insights on distinguishing differentiated roles “within” emotional benefits (self-enhancement vs. self-transcendence) in relationship qualities in terms of brand sensitivity, which is a supplement to “between” emotional benefits and rational benefits discussed in existing studies (Candi & Kahn, 2016; Leek & Christodoulides, 2012; Persson, 2010).

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, we begin with a background section, which includes (1) the theoretical background of brand values, and (2) more details about pivotal brand values in B2B contexts, that is, self-enhancement and self-transcendence. Then, we advance the conceptual framework and develop relevant hypotheses. Next, the methodological approach and hypotheses tests are reported. We conclude with a discussion, theoretical contributions, and managerial implications, followed by suggestions for further research.

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

2.1. Brand values

2.1.1. Theoretical background

According to consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), firms often use brands as symbolic resources from which consumers can construct their unique identities in ways that are meaningful, not merely utilitarian. Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone (2012) argue that people tend to relate to brands in ways that are similar to how they relate to people. One way brands can bear cultural significance is by imbuing brands with human values. In line with this thinking, brand values can be viewed as abstract brand concepts that are representations of human values Torelli, Monga, et al., 2012, thus making brands function as human.

Brand values originate from the general human values system proposed by Schwartz and his colleagues (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004). Schwartz (1992) suggests that values represent abstract representations of desired end-states that guide people in their pursuit of human needs for living, including individualistic needs and collective needs. He and his colleague (2004) further classify human values into 11 categories—power, achievement, stimulation, self-direction, social concerns, concerns with nature, benevolence, tradition, conformity, security, and hedonism—and verify a quasi-circumplex structure of this values system, wherein values are arranged continuously. Adjacent values in this structure are compatible (i.e., individuals can pursue these values simultaneously), while values located opposite to each other are incompatible (i.e., individuals cannot pursue these values simultaneously) (Torelli, Monga, et al., 2012). In line with this compatibility and incompatibility, these values can be further summarized into four higher-order value domains, forming two basic, bipolar dimensions. The first dimension includes two incompatible higher-order values: openness to change (including stimulation and self-direction) and conservation (including security, conformity, and tradition).¹ The second dimension includes the other two higher-order values: self-enhancement (including power and achievement) and self-transcendence (including social concerns, concerns with nature, and benevolence).

2.1.2. The values of self-enhancement and self-transcendence in B2B contexts

This study focuses on the second dimension of self-enhancement and self-transcendence—the paired values are contrasting, but of particular relevance in B2B contexts.

Self-enhancement is in accordance with individual concerns, while self-transcendence aligns with collective ones, that is, the former focuses on personal welfare, and the latter on social welfare (Steenkamp & Jong, 2010). To elaborate further, self-enhancement refers to people's pursuit of personal benefits, including social status, authority, and personal fulfillment. Self-transcendence, on the other hand, represents people's transcendence of personal benefits and caring for social development, justice, and the environment (Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004). Extending these meanings to B2B contexts, on the one hand, many studies have shown that market position, market power, and market performance can effectively improve companies' competencies in B2B markets (Keller, 2013; Kotler & Keller, 2015; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Such abilities are embodied in self-enhancement, which constitutes companies' core competitiveness. When imbued with human values of self-enhancement, a company can be perceived analogously to an ambitious person who pursues power and capability. For example, *Microsoft* and *Oracle* can be considered “pioneers” (Keller, 2013). On the other hand, Kotler and Keller (2015) highlight that social responsibility

¹ Hedonism is a separate values located between openness to change and self-enhancement.

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