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It is not always about brand: Design-driven consumers and their self-expression

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ABSTRACT

Consumers often utilize product design as one of the central means for expressing identity. However, few studies have investigated how consumers leverage product design for self-expression, and how a dominant design preference can influence consumers' self-expression through brands. Drawing upon identity theory, this study examines how design-driven consumers express their personal and social identities. The results suggest that design-dominance among consumers leverages their need-for-uniqueness as a conduit for social identity expression. For consumers with a clear self-concept, expressing uniqueness through product design is weaker. The results also demonstrate that when design-dominance is strong, consumer exhibit a reduced reliance on brands to express their social identity, thus weakening brand loyalty.

1. Introduction

In the retail environment both in-store and online, consumers are exposed to a limited assortment of design cues. Design elements associated with the physical space and the online store influence consumers' perception of, and loyalty to, a retailer (Murray et al., 2017), as well as the products the retailer offers (Kahn, 2017). Design elements associated with the products being offered attract consumers and enhance their experiences with and enjoyment of the product (Bloch, 1995). These benefits accrue to consumers whether the design is associated with a national or private label brand (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004). As consumers often leverage product design as a central means for expressing their identity (Giese et al., 2014), it is important for store managers to stock, and web designers to highlight, products with aesthetic designs that attract and retain customers. For example, Benetton enjoyed great international success in the 1980's, but then lost a substantial base of brand favorable customers in the 1990's as it failed to keep up with the consumers' changing fashion tastes (Edmondson, 2003).

The literature suggests that when consumers are able to procure and display their preferred design aesthetics, it results in enhanced self-esteem, self-oriented value, and/or self-affirmation (Kumar et al., 2015; Kumar and Noble, 2016). The benefits of self-expression through design accrue even when consumers indicate that aesthetics plays no role in their purchase decisions (Bloch et al., 2003; Townsend and Sood, 2012). Conventional wisdom is that design aesthetics rarely stand alone as most if not all products are also brand identified. However, when consumers encounter an unfamiliar brand or choose from many differing product designs within a brand, the role and value of the brand becomes less clear. The situational complexity in product selection adds uncertainty into the brand value equation which provides the opportunity for product design to play a major role in consumers' self-expression. Acknowledging the importance that design aesthetics have in the purchase decision, there has nevertheless been little research devoted to investigating how product design facilitates consumers' self-expression. Perhaps more importantly, how a product design may impact a consumer differently than the reliance on brand. Thus, this study examines how design-driven consumers express their personal and social identities through design. Further, what role design-dominance plays in reinforcing consumer self-expression at the expense of brand centricity and loyalty is investigated.

This study contributes to retailing literature by illustrating the relationships among design preference, self-expression, and brand loyalty. First, the authors introduce a mechanism through which consumers can express their personal and social identities via product design. We introduce a concept of design-dominance, which reflects the consumers' psychological attachment to product design aesthetics instead of brand. Second, we seek to demonstrate the resulting dilution effect design-dominance has on brand loyalty. This is a result of a design-driven consumer's desire to satisfy their need-for-uniqueness with a specific aesthetic regardless of brand. Managerially, we emphasize that significant changes to product designs within a brand either private label or national should not be undertaken without a deep understanding of the target consumers' design orientation.

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The study is organized in the following order. First, the study develops a conceptual framework grounded in identity theory. Second, the hypotheses testing and results follow. Finally, a general discussion explores the findings and their theoretical and managerial implications addressing study limitations and future research topics.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Self-expression and need-for-uniqueness

Self-expression is an important driver of consumer preference and choice (Aaker, 1999; Belk, 1988; Richins, 1994). This study adopts the integrated perspective or global sense of the self, which is comprised of role, social, and personal identity (Kleine et al., 1993; Hitlin, 2003; Schwartz et al., 2008; Stets and Burke, 2000). Within the self, personal identity is represented as 'ego identity' (Erikson, 1968), or 'person identity' (Stets and Burke, 2000). Individuals who are driven by their personal identity tend to have a set of goals, values, and beliefs which form a coherent sense of self across a variety of social roles such as work, home, and social events (Cross et al., 2003; Schwartz et al., 2008; Suh, 2002). This is different from social identity, which is more fluid situationally in relation to interactions with others. The multifaceted nature of social identity allows for varied responses depending on the changes from situational social roles and/or social cues (Hogg, 1996; Hogg et al., 1995; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Although personal and social identity expression work in concert for a given occasion (Hitlin, 2003), consumers may strive for reducing any incongruence between the two (Hillenbrand and Money, 2015) or express one identity at the expense of another (Thompson and Loveland, 2015).

Consumption behaviors are used for fulfilling their psychological needs like expressing identity (Thompson and Loveland, 2015) or demonstrating their uniqueness or differentiation from others (e.g, Tian et al., 2001). In particular, possessing a nice-looking product makes consumers feel more attractive to others and similarly boosts their sense of self (Townsend and Sood, 2012). Thus, this study suggests that product design provides a medium for expressing the consumer's identity, personal or social, while need-for-uniqueness mediates the relationships between identity expression and design-dominance. Fig. 1 shows a conceptual model of the study.

2.2. Design-dominance

One of the main components of product design is design aesthetics (Bloch, 1995). Design aesthetics is defined as visually appealing design elements of a product (Hagtvedt and Patrick, 2014). From the aspect of product evaluation, design aesthetics bring positive perceptions on functionality (Norman, 2004), overall product judgment (Raghubir and Greenleaf, 2006), and/or price expectation (Orth et al., 2010). Psychologically, design aesthetics provide emotional and social value which can enhance self-esteem (Townsend and Sood, 2012), representing intrinsic personal values (Vernon and Allport, 1931). Accordingly, individuals assign different levels of importance to the visual design of a product (Bloch et al., 2003). That is, the preference for beauty or the appreciation of a particular aesthetic represents and strengthens an intrinsic personal value (Townsend and Sood, 2012; Vernon and Allport, 1931).

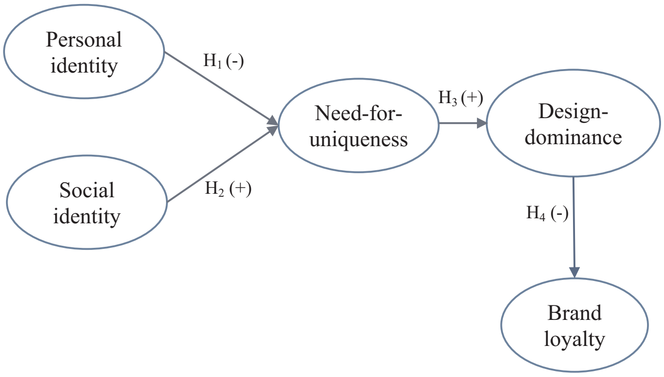

Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

This study suggests a concept of design-dominance, such that product design provides more value to a consumer relative to any value attributed to a brand. Consumers with high levels of design-dominance are psychologically predisposed to place more personal value on product design than brand when making purchase decisions. The power of design-dominance is such that the consumer is compelled to satisfy their aesthetic selection even if it means sacrificing any previous loyalty they may have held toward a particular brand. As a result, these design-driven consumers will remain loyal to their design preferences and therefore be more willing to purchase from a variety of brands in an effort to support their preferred aesthetics. Since the preference for beauty is an intrinsic personal value (Vernon and Allport, 1931), we suggest that design-dominance is an individual trait that is stable and relatively consistent in different situations and an outcome of consumers' efforts to satisfy their need to be unique as an individual (Bloch et al., 2003). Then, the adherence to their particular aesthetic results in purchases which are generally distinct from mainstream brand selections (Chan et al., 2012) so that selected designs can differentiate themselves from others (Tian et al., 2001).

However, the need-for-uniqueness does not always link both social and personal identity to need-for-uniqueness in the same way. Gao et al. (2009) show that an expression of personal identity, which is consistent across social occasions, can result in depressing consumer need-for-uniqueness to minimize self-conflict. That is, when personal identity is clear, consumers might not feel the need-for-uniqueness and vice versa. Meanwhile, consumers who want to communicate social identity compatibility select a choice strongly related to a group (e.g., luxury brands) (Han et al., 2010). When a consumer desires for alignment with a particular social group they will express their social identity in a manner they believe will generate high levels of intra-group similarity. Meanwhile, when they want to differentiate themselves from others within the group, they seek designs that can communicate their own status or uniqueness relative to others in-group members (Berger and Ward, 2010). As a result, when their need-for-uniqueness is influenced more positively by social identity than personal identity, consumers pursuing uniqueness within a group may choose options that are less compatible than traditional within-group selections (Chan et al., 2012). Based on the literature the following hypotheses are offered:

H1:. The expression of consumer's personal identity will have a significant and negative influence on need-for-uniqueness.

H2:. The expression of consumer's social identity will have a significant and positive influence on need-for-uniqueness.

H3:. Need-for-uniqueness will have a significant and positive influence on consumers' design-dominance.

2.3. Dilution of brand loyalty

Design-driven consumers pursue intrinsic personal value in their preference of beauty or the appreciation of particular aesthetics (Townsend and Sood, 2012; Vernon and Allport, 1931). That is, design-driven consumers focus more on design aesthetics regardless of product category as design-dominance is relatively stable individual personal trait. As uniqueness often drives variety seeking (e.g., Drolet, 2002), highly design-driven consumers are more likely to pursue design options from a variety of brands. Thus, design-dominance allows consumers to be less reliant on brand popularity or brand reputation. The social meaning shared among specific brand users relative to designs

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