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Research trends on branding in consumer psychology

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Brands have received much research attention from consumer psychologists, as brands serve as the embodiment of a firm within the lives of consumers. This work has relied upon a variety of well-established psychological theories (e.g., Big Five human personality dimensions, associative network theory, attachment theory, self-concept) to explore the strong influence that brands can have on consumers. Recent research has focused particular attention on how consumers respond to brand name linguistics, luxury brands, brand extensions, and on the application of psychological theories to brands. Variability in these trends suggests the need for a research agenda to guide brand research by consumer psychologists.

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A brand represents one of the most valuable assets a firm can possess due to its ability to differentiate a good or service from others and to embody the firm in the marketplace. Given their role and importance in consumers' lives, it is perhaps unsurprising that brands generate an abundance of research within the fields of marketing and consumer psychology. Though the value of brand research is clear from a firm's point-of-view, such as understanding the strategic dimensions of positioning [1], it is just as crucial, if not more so, to understand the psychological underpinnings of brands for consumers.

Consumer psychologists have illustrated various effects of brands on consumers; for example, a strong brand can enhance evaluations [2,3] and lead to a willingness to pay higher prices [4,5]. Insights on such processes are often provided by associative network theory whereby brand memory associations (formed from experiences with or the marketing of a brand) can guide a variety of consumer processes (such as consideration set formation, brand evaluation, and choice; [6]). Beyond memory-based processes, researchers have applied various psychological theories to understand brands, such as brand attachment [7] on the basis of attachment theory [8], and a brand's relation to the self-concept (e.g., the tendency to use important brands to define one's self) [9], built on self-schema research [10,11]. Four recent trends in the brand literature reviewed in the present article include brand name linguistics, brand luxury, brand extensions, and the application of psychological theories to brands (readers should also consider the accompanying review on consumers' relationships with brands in this issue [12]).

Brand name linguistics

A brand's name is a key element consumers use to anchor brand associations in memory, thereby enabling them to recognize and respond to a brand [6,13]. Because of the critical role of a brand's name, consumer researchers have shown considerable interest in brand name linguistics. Early research examined the impact of letter sounds on brand meaning. For example, consumers' meaning of brand names can be influenced by something as simple as the first letter of the name itself [14].

Consumer psychologists continue to examine brand name linguistics including the effect of sound repetition in brand names (e.g., Coca-Cola, Jelly Belly). In this research, sound repetition spoken aloud (e.g., with fake brand names such as 'sepsop' versus 'sepfut') was shown to result in positive affect and more favorable brand evaluations [15•]. Other research has investigated alphanumeric brand names (e.g., Audi A3, A4) on consumers' responses to a brand. In particular, Gunasti and colleagues have demonstrated that alphanumeric brand names with higher numbers are more often selected, especially by consumers with a lower need for cognition; a finding that supports their proposed 'the higher, the better' heuristic [16,17]. Other work has shown that implicit egoism leads to a preference for brand names with letters from consumers' own names [18], with recent research showing this effect to be attenuated when consumers are under low cognitive load and the brand is negatively valenced [19]. Finally, brand names with a foreign association, such as foreign letters, spelling, or symbols, may lead consumers to make country-of-origin (COO) assumptions that result in higher quality perceptions (e.g., an Asian perfume using a French name) [20]. More recent research, however, has shown that if consumers find a mismatch between a brand name and its COO, then purchase intentions will decrease due to the incongruence between the inferred foreign associations and actual country-of-origin [21••].

Luxury brands

Research on luxury brands has also grown along with the gaining importance of these brands in the market [22]. Luxury brands provide consumers with a sense of status and exclusivity beyond the functional aspects of non-luxury brands [23]. While early luxury brands were often out of reach for most consumers [24], this is hardly the case today with many luxury brands being readily accessible (and affordable) to most middle-class market segments [25]). As some have argued, luxury brands have been democraticized [26].

Research by Han *et al.* [27] provides a model that further substantiates the notion that luxury brands have psychological implications for a larger audience. These researchers proposed four distinct types of consumers (along the dimensions of wealth and need for status) that differ on the basis of the extent to which consumers want others to notice their luxury brand usage. Specifically, 'parvenus,' are wealthy consumers who prefer loud signals (e.g., larger brand logos) whereas 'patricians' are wealthy consumers who are drawn to inconspicuous signals (e.g., smaller brand logos) Moreover, the less wealthy 'proletarians' and 'poseurs' include consumers who are more (or less) interested in signaling about the brand.

More recently, researchers have examined how situational factors can influence consumers' responses to luxury brands. In particular, a luxury brand positioned as a self-enhancing brand (i.e., one with status due to symbolism) which also touts its corporate social responsibility activities resulted in lower evaluations due to confusion over the luxury brand's motivation [28••]. Also, a product developed by a user, opposed to one developed by the brand itself (e.g., Rolex unveiling a new watch designed by its customers), was perceived to be lower in quality, and therefore, unable to provide consumers an increased sense of status [29••]. A subsequent study by Fuchs and colleagues, however, revealed that lower quality perceptions of a consumer-generated luxury brand were attenuated when the product category did not provide a sense of status. Lastly, Geiger-Oneto *et al.* [30] showed that consumers, who possess greater occupational prestige with an educational degree earned by few people (e.g., a CPA or PhD), are more likely to prefer non-luxury (versus luxury) brands due to having fulfilled their need for status through their profession.

Brand extensions

A long-standing area of research interest is the brand extension, whereby an existing brand (often called the parent) 'extends' itself into a new product category or a variant of an existing product [6,31]. By leveraging the parent brand's equity, the extension may more readily gain acceptance by consumers (an important consideration given that most new products fail) [32]. Much of the research on brand extensions has focused on consumers' perception of fit between the parent and extension and how fit impacts responses to the new product. Fit has been viewed in various ways, but most often as it relates to the parent brand's product category [33,34] or image [35,36]. Research generally finds that higher perceived fit leads to more favorable evaluations of the extension [37].

Recently, researchers have taken a different approach with perceived fit by examining factors that influence the importance of this construct. These studies show that extensions positioned against an unfamiliar competing brand lead to the conventional influence of fit (i.e., more favorable evaluations for higher versus lower fitting extensions), results that did not emerge when those same extensions were positioned alongside familiar competitors [38]. Furthermore, Spiggle *et al.* [39••] introduce a new construct regarding brand extension success that provides a counterpoint to perceived fit. These researchers conceptualize brand extension authenticity (BEA) as the legitimacy of a brand extension along four dimensions, including upholding a brand's standards, heritage, and essence, along with avoiding the perception that the brand extension is simply a means of maximizing profits. Discriminant validity studies by Spiggle and colleagues reveal that BEA is distinct from perceived fit, and is more important than fit for consumers who are more likely to incorporate brands within the self.

Other research has recently shown that presenting a competing brand with an extension focuses consumer attention on the objective quality of the parent brand rather than the subjective perceptions of fit between the parent and extension [40]. This particular line of research suggests that beyond fit, other moderating variables are worthy of exploration. For example, when participants are primed with a mating mind-set (e.g., imagining dinner with a romantic interest as opposed to a friend), males (versus females) reported greater fit between the parent brand and the extension due to increased feelings of creativity [41]. Moreover, if one's sense of control is taken away (e.g., when a tragedy occurs), then consumers are more likely to perceive reduced fit for an already poor-fitting brand extension, especially when not provided with the means to regain stability [42•].

Application of psychological theories to brands

Psychological theories have had a strong influence on brand research. As noted earlier, researchers have applied associative network theory to explain how consumers recognize brands and form brand associations in memory [6], while others have taken an affective approach to understand bonds between consumers and brands via attachment theory [7]. One of the clearest examples of psychology's influence is Aaker's [43] application of psychology's 'Big Five' personality research to how consumers perceive brands. Prior to Aaker's [43] seminal work

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