

Research Article

Consumers' implicit theories about personality influence their brand personality judgments

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Abstract

Three studies document that consumers' implicit theories about the fixedness/malleability of personality guide brand personality updating in a brand extension context. The first two studies show that extension fit with the parent brand impacts brand personality updating only for incremental (vs. entity theorists). Specifically, for incremental theorists, brand personality is enhanced (vs. diluted) when extension fit is poor (vs. good), and only when brand personality is salient. The third study identifies conditions under which entity theorists focus on brand personality. Interestingly, overall evaluations of the parent brand and extension vary only with extension fit. Implications of our research are discussed.

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Introduction

Brand personality refers to the “set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997). For example, consumers associate the Cheerios brand with personality dimensions such as sincerity and competence but not with other dimensions such as sophistication and ruggedness. The kinds of personality dimensions attributed to a brand are important because they can influence the evaluation and consumption of products (Swaminathan, Page, & Gurhan-Canli, 2007). These downstream effects warrant an understanding of when consumers' perceptions of a brand's personality change.

Whereas changing consumers' perceptions of a brand's personality might seem fairly simple and easy to accomplish, this may not always be the case, as some consumers may be more willing to update their personality impressions while others may be more resistant. Specifically, those who have the implicit

theory that human personality is malleable (incremental theorists) seem more likely to change their beliefs about brand personality compared to those who have the implicit theory that human personality is fixed (entity theorists). We show that the differences in consumers' implicit personality theories affect brand personality judgments within the important context of brand extensions. Previous research suggests that consumers' implicit theories about the malleability of personality influence their acceptance of brand extensions (Yorkston, Nunes, & Matta, 2010). Our research builds on this line of research by investigating the effect of consumers' implicit personality theories when the parent brand and the new extension category fit well and when they fit poorly. For instance, extending the Cheerio brand to granola is a good fit because it is similar to cereal, but extending the Cheerio brand to frozen dinners is a poor fit because it is dissimilar. Rather than considering whether brand personality influences perceived fit (as do Yorkston et al., 2010), we investigate the effects of the fit between a parent brand and an extension (e.g., Cheerio's fit with frozen dinners) on changes in the parent brand's perceived personality (e.g., on Cheerio's perceived sincerity). Our research shows that fit influences the parent brand's personality beliefs of incremental

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theorists but not entity theorists. Further, we identify the underlying mechanism. Incremental theorists are more process driven than entity theorists, so perceptions of effort expended by the parent brand to develop and introduce the extension mediate the effect on their brand personality judgments.

Importantly, we investigate the effects of an extension to a new category on consumers' overall evaluation of the parent brand (e.g., whether extending Cheerios to granola enhances the overall positive evaluations of Cheerios more than extending Cheerios to frozen dinners). One might suppose that further strengthening of a brand's personality would enhance consumers' overall evaluation of the parent brand (e.g., that consumers who believe Cheerios is now even more sincere would evaluate Cheerios as a brand even more positively). However, new information does not always influence evaluations of the parent brand and brand personality inferences the same way (Johar, Sengupta, & Aaker, 2005). We show that these can be independent judgments. These differences reveal important limits on the effects of consumers' implicit theories on overall evaluations. Specifically, our research shows that only the extension's perceived fit influences the brand's overall evaluation, and not consumers' implicit theories. In sum, our research provides insights into how consumers varying in their implicit theories of personality change their perceptions of a parent brand's personality as well as its evaluations when exposed to extensions varying in fit with the parent brand.

The effect of consumer implicit theory on brand personality

Implicit theories of personality malleability

A significant body of social psychology research has found that individuals maintain systematically different 'implicit theories' about the world around them as evidenced by either a belief in the fixedness or immutability of personality, characterized by an *entity theory* orientation, or a belief in the changeability or malleability of personality, characterized by an *incremental theory* orientation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Implicit theories guide social interaction and information processing, and individuals rely on these theories to interpret and predict a variety of phenomena. These theories affect how individuals judge themselves, others, and objects (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). In particular, entity (vs. incremental) theorists have been observed to draw more personality inferences from behavior and focus more on performance goals, leading to a focus on outcome. Incremental theorists in contrast attribute behavior to situational factors and focus more on learning goals, emphasizing effort and mediating processes (Molden & Dweck, 2006). Recent consumer research has shown that implicit theories of human personality are also used to interpret information about marketing activity (Jain, Mathur, & Maheswaran, 2009; Park & John, 2011; Yorkston et al., 2010). For instance, consumers' implicit theories influence their acceptance of brand extensions, i.e., when brands launch new products under the existing brand name (Yorkston et al., 2010). Our research builds on these findings by examining the effect of consumers' implicit theories when the parent brand and the new extension category are

similar to each other (extensions with a good fit) and when they are dissimilar to each other (extensions with a poor fit; Park, Milberg, & Lawson, 1991).

Brand personality

Brand personality results from the endowment of human characteristics and traits to brands (Aaker, 1997) allowing consumers to have relationships with brands similar to those observed in social contexts (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004), and has been posited to be of relevance in the evaluation and consumption of brands (Swaminathan et al., 2007). Brand personality may develop based on consumers' direct and indirect interactions with the brand, as well as from the marketing efforts of firms (e.g., Fitzsimons, Chartrand, & Fitzsimons, 2008; Johar et al., 2005). In this research, we suggest that when the parent brand launches a brand extension, the extent to which parent brand personality is revised will be impacted by consumers' implicit theory of personality malleability. Specifically, we suggest that in processing brand extension information, incremental theorists will rely on their belief in the malleability of personality and update parent brand personality impressions, whereas entity theorists will focus on their belief in the fixedness of personality and will not infer personality implications of brand extensions.

Brand extension fit and effort perceptions

Past research has shown that consumers relate extension fit and brand effort related to developing and introducing the extension. Extensions with good fit are considered "easy" and involve "low effort" for brands due to the ease of transferability of parent brand values and attributes. In contrast, extensions with poor fit are considered "difficult" and involve "high effort" due to the increased risk of establishing the brand in a new and distant category (Ahluwalia & Gurhan-Canli, 2000). Similarly, Aaker and Keller (1990) have identified perceived difficulty of "designing or making the extension product" as a factor determining extension evaluations. The belief that extensions with poor (vs. good) fit relate to high (vs. low) effort will have differential implications for the way incremental and entity theorists judge parent brand personality. Past research has shown that while incremental theorists focus on process, entity theorists focus on the outcome (Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998). Because they focus on the high effort process, incremental theorists will appreciate extensions with poor fit. Therefore, for incremental theorists, these favorable effort perceptions associated with introducing poor fit extensions will have positive implications and will lead to an enhancement in parent brand personality impressions. In contrast, extensions with good fit will represent an easy and low effort activity for the parent brand (Ahluwalia & Gurhan-Canli, 2000) and will fail to meet the incremental theorists' effort and learning expectations, thereby leading to a dilution of parent brand personality impressions. In contrast, entity theorists, because of their focus on performance goals, which elicits an emphasis on outcomes instead of effort and process (Levy et al., 1998), will be unaffected by

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