

## Customer Attitude and Dispositions Towards Customized Products: The Interaction Between Customization Model and Brand☆

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### Abstract

Despite increasing interest in customization-related topics, little is known about the relation between customization and brand. The authors identify two main archetypes of product customization based on the degrees of freedom given to the customer in the design process: *Combination-based Customization* (CbC), which is the selection of product modules provided by the company, and *Integration-based Customization* (IbC), which is product customization by means of signs and symbols provided by the customer. The authors propose that customer attitude and dispositions towards CbC and IbC depend on the presence/absence of a mass brand logo upon the product. Results of three studies, based on web toolkits for t-shirt and trolley bag customization, demonstrate that in the presence of a mass brand logo CbC shows higher customer attitude and dispositions than IbC. In the absence of a mass brand logo, the opposite pattern holds. Additional findings show, however, that the advantage of CbC over IbC for branded products disappears when there is high congruence between the customer self and the brand, and when creative brands are considered.

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### Introduction

Both academics and managers consider product customization (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004; Simonson 2005) to be a fundamental differentiation strategy for companies targeting consumers eager to affirm their identity and uniqueness. The Marketing Science Institute has included customization-related topics in its 2010–2012 research priorities, and the websites *configurator-database.com* and *milkorsugar.com* review hundreds of worldwide companies offering customized products in many categories (e.g., clothing, electronics, drinks). Indeed, the numbers of both academic papers (e.g., Franke, Keinz, and Steger

2009; Levav et al. 2007) and managerial applications of different customization approaches (e.g., *NikeID*, *MyJones Soda*) have dramatically increased in recent years.

Earlier research has proposed conceptual and empirical contributions on customization typologies, consumer evaluations of customized offerings, and psychological consequences of involving customers in product design (Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Dellaert and Stremersch 2005; Wind and Rangaswamy 2001). These studies classify customization models based on product variety and customer–firm interaction, and demonstrate how individuals prefer customized products to standard ones because of greater preference fit and feelings of accomplishment about being the product designer (Franke, Schreier, and Kaiser 2010).

In spite of such relevant advancements, the customization literature has largely neglected the role of the brand in affecting consumers' responses to customized offerings. This gap is surprising because customization models increasingly allow customers to manipulate elements of the product

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(e.g., colors, graphic patterns, pictures, text) that usually pertain to the domain of brand identity (Keller 1993). Moreover, in several consumption contexts, the customer uses both customization and brands to express her/his self-identity to relevant others (Escalas and Bettman 2005; Franke and Schreier 2008).

In the marketplace, different customization approaches are increasingly popular for both branded and unbranded products. On the one hand, among companies marking products with their logos, *Adidas* permits the customization of shoes and sportswear by means of module selection and combination, whereas customers of *Jones Soda* may customize bottles of soda with their own photos and quotes printed on labels. *Heineken* proposes a selection of predefined labels and backgrounds of beer bottles, as well as the inclusion of personal text and pictures. On the other hand, among companies adopting a no-logo strategy, *YouTailor* lets customers combine different variants of fabric, cuffs, buttons and collars of shirts, while *Snappfish* allows its customers to upload their own pictures and writing on t-shirts, sweatshirts, mugs, caps, and the like. *Snaptotes* permits the customization of bags by choosing among variants of exterior trims, top closures, and liner colors, as well as by integrating the product with pictures uploaded by the customer. Thus, for both branded and unbranded products, companies adopt diverse customization models based on a combination of modules provided by the firm and/or product integration with content provided by the customer.

Taken together, the aforementioned gap in the literature and the diffusion of different customization applications to branded/unbranded products suggest a relevant question: How do individuals eager to affirm their identity respond to customization of product elements traditionally connected to the brand domain in the presence or absence of the brand logo? We aim to answer this research question and to contribute to the interactive marketing literature by (1) analyzing the moderating role of the brand on the effect of the customization model on customer attitude and dispositions towards products customized in digital environments; and (2) identifying two boundary conditions of the emerging competition between symbols integrated into the product by the customer (i.e., self brands) and mass brands.

In the remainder of the paper, we first present our conceptual analysis and arguments supporting a set of hypotheses about the interaction between customization models and brands. Second, we report results of three experimental studies based on web toolkits for t-shirt and trolley bag customization. Finally, we discuss conceptual and managerial implications of the results, and emphasize limitations and directions for future research.

### Combination- and Integration-based Customization

Product customization has evolved in the last three decades as a differentiation strategy based on customer-tailored design of the firm's offering aimed to approximate the ideal product for each customer (Simonson 2005). Technological developments, concerning flexible manufacturing systems (Hayes and Pisano 1994) and interactive communication tools (Miceli, Ricotta, and Costabile 2007; Vesanen and Raulas 2006), have allowed for progressively sophisticated forms of customization.

In particular, the diffusion of customization practices has been boosted by the increasing application of *web toolkits*. Customization web toolkits consist of the sets of configurators, choice menus and design kits that allow the customer to interactively customize her/his own product (Franke, Schreier, and Kaiser 2010). In web-enabled customization approaches, the customer plays an active role in the product definition thanks to interactive and involving toolkits, which enhance preference fit and the customer feeling of being the designer of her/his customized product.

Based on such advancements, the interactive marketing literature has classified customization models based on the degrees of freedom allowed to customers in the design process. Some studies (Randall, Terwiesch, and Ulrich 2005; von Hippel and Katz 2002) have related design freedom to the potential combinations of product modules provided by the company to the customer. In addition, Franke, Schreier, and Kaiser (2010) have defined the degree of design freedom considering the opportunity for the customer to add content to the product beyond predefined modules. They apply to the customization context the concept of *consumption integration*, which has been proposed in the consumer behavior literature to indicate practices of product manipulation aimed at linking the self and the object (Holt 1995).

Building upon these studies, we propose that customization models can be described considering the degrees of freedom allowed to the customer in terms of: *i*) the combination of product modules provided by the company, and *ii*) the integration of the product with content provided by the customer. When taken together, these two dimensions determine a "customization space" (see Fig. 1), in which we identify two main archetypes of product customization, *Combination-based Customization* (CbC) and *Integration-based Customization* (IbC). While the customization space also includes their combined application and the case of standardization, we now focus on the distinctive characteristics of the two customization archetypes.

We consider CbC as the customization approach that allows customers to play an active role in defining the product form by selecting and combining modules (e.g., variants of product characteristics such as shape, materials, and colors) within a predefined array of options organized and provided by the firm (content provider). We consider IbC as the customization approach that allows customers to include into the product signs and symbols (e.g., pictures and text) provided by the customer herself/himself (content provider). In IbC practices, customers actively construct meanings by integrating into products a system of signs that are able to explicitly and clearly communicate personal symbols<sup>1</sup> to relevant others (McCracken 1986; Mick 1986).

<sup>1</sup> The semiotics literature proposes several definitions of sign and symbol. According to Peirce (1931–58), a sign is anything (words, images, sounds, odors, flavors, acts or objects) that stands for something. Such things have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning. A symbol is "a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the symbol to be interpreted as referring to that object" (Peirce, 1931–58, 2.249). For a more comprehensive discussion of semiotics see Mick (1986).

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