ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

Brand Complexity'S Impact on Product Liking and Consumer'S Sense of Self

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We explore brand complexity—the extent to which a brand embodies multiple human traits and values—as a new construct and find evidence that it positively impacts brand liking and ultimately connections to the brand. We find that this effect is driven by consumers' self-expansion and moderated by self-concept clarity.

On the Unique Effects of Self-Connected Brands

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Paper #1: When Ignorance is No Longer Bliss: Seeking Threatening Information About Self-Relevant Brands

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Paper #2: Brand Complexity's Impact on Product Liking and Consumer's Sense of Self

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Paper #3: The Influence of Incidental Tokenism on Attitudes Toward Stereotype-Typifying Products

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Paper #4: Brands as Mitigators of Physical Pain: The Mediating Role of Social Connectedness

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Consumer self-connections to brands have been the focus of extensive research over the last few decades. During this time, it has been well documented that consumers view brands that have been integrated into their self-concept (i.e. self-brand connection [SBC], Escalas and Bettman 2003) differently than well liked brands that are not identity-connected. Such brands can help consumers construct self-identities (McCracken 1989), and symbolize their values and goals (Fournier 1998). Brands that are closely linked to the self are seen as more meaningful than those without an identity-link, and consumers are more likely to form self-brand connections to brands that communicate something meaningful about the self (i.e., are symbolic) than to brands that don't (Escalas and Bettman 2005; 2009).

The current session further explores the idea that self-connected brands are different from those that are not. Each of the four papers provides a unique demonstration of a distinctive effect of self-connected brands, that would not be predicted for well-liked but identity irrelevant brands. For example, people should avoid negative information about well-liked brands, but this effect reverses for high SBC brands (paper 1). Similarly, paper 2 shows that although brand complexity is not always a positive attribute, strongly self-connected brands benefit from being complex. Moreover, brands linked to a tokenized-aspect of identity become devalued (paper 3) and high self-connected brands can actually provide pain insulation (paper 4). The intensive perspective afforded by the current session expands the investigation of identity in brand relationships by demonstrating how the presence of an identity-brand link can result in unexpected and important outcomes. This unique focus on the importance of self-connection to brands encourages interesting, in depth future research questions. For example, panelists may be inspired to ask (1) how increasing customization of products that helps to promote self-brand connections may produce similar effects as presented, and (2) what happens when there is an interaction between multiple self- and brand-identities.

Thus, a wide range of un expected outcomes – information choice, brand evaluations, and experience of pain – are demonstrated to surface when brands and identity(ies) interact. Overall, it seems that when brands are more self-connected, behavior toward the brands are more consistent with the maintenance of a positive self-concept. Whether the behavior be to seek negative, self-relevant information about the brand in order to defend against it (paper 1), to provide better evaluations of brands that enhance (paper 2) versus worse evaluations of brand that threaten (paper 3) positive aspects of the self-concept, or to use self-connected brands to construct a social self-concept as insulation from pain (paper 4), consumer interactions with self-connected brands produce a consistent pattern of self-enhancement outcomes.

Together the four papers in this session will extend and deepen our understanding of the importance of self-connected brands. A focused session such as this, where a broad range of findings support a similar research question, is one of the most effective ways of encouraging diverse thinking as a strategy to solve an interesting question from many sides.

When Ignorance is No Longer Bliss: Seeking Threatening Information About Self-Relevant Brands

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People often choose to avoid negative information for reasons such as mood maintenance and the protection of self-beliefs, or simply to allow themselves plausible deniability (Golman, Hagmann, and Loewenstein 2016). This avoidant behavior extends to self-relevant negative or threatening information about important matters such as health, finances, and romantic partners (for review see Golman, Hagmann, and Loewenstein 2016; Sweeny et al. 2010). Theorists attribute such avoidant actions to people's desire to avoid information that may require a change in beliefs, demand an undesired action, or prompt unpleasant emotions (Sweeny et al. 2010). Consumers are especially likely to avoid negative information if it elicits negative affect (Luce, Payne, and Bettman 1999). For example, negative emotions were found to drive avoidance of product information even among people who value the information (Ehrich and Irwin 2005). Research has likewise found that consumers distance themselves from brands when they are threatened with negative information about the brand (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004).

In the current research we propose that the opposite pattern may also occur. When the negative information is about brands with which consumers have a strong self-brand connection, they tend to seek, rather than avoid, that negative information, even though the same self-protection motivations exist. This occurs because when a consumer has a high self-brand connection, the negative information about the brand becomes a potential identity threat that the individual is motivated to deal with. To develop this prediction, we build on prior literature that indicates the need to address an identity threat is more important than other considerations (Aronson 1968). Thus, people are less likely to ignore negative information about a high SBC brand, because that information may threaten their personal identity. This proposal builds on the ideas that people are highly motivated to protect the self (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Sheldon, and Solomon 1986), but cannot choose an avoidant coping strategy because the information is widely known or available to others (Kunda

1990). Therefore, when dealing with negative brand information that may represent an identity threat, consumers are more likely to choose to try to defend their self-identity by counter arguing the information (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2000).

Consequently, we propose that when a consumer has incorporated a brand into their self-identity, resolution of the identity-threat becomes more important than protecting one's mood. Therefore, when people are strongly connected to a brand, (i.e. high SBC) they will seek out negative information about that brand, rather than avoid that negative information. This effect attenuates for low SBC brands. We test this proposal in three experiments.

Overview of experiments: In all studies participants first completed SBC scales (Escalas, 2004) for several brands. They were then presented with a set of article headlines, and told they would have to pick one of the articles to read in depth. One of the headlines always included negative information about the focal brand, and the other articles varied based on study and experimental condition. When the participant chose to read a negative article about the focal brand, we say they are seeking negative information about the focal brand. In study 1, the other articles in the choice set were also negative headlines, but about different brands. In studies 2 and 3, the other articles included a positive headline about the focal brand, and a positive, and negative headline about a neutral brand.

Study 1 investigated the proposed main effect – that degree of SBC will predict choice of negative information about a brand, compared to negative information about other brands. In this study, fifty-three MTurk workers chose one out of three articles with headlines indicating negative information about three different brands for which they had previously completed SBC measures – Nike, Apple, and Lululemon. As predicted, SBC significantly predicted information choice β = .56 (.18), p = .002). When someone had a higher SBC score for a brand, they were more likely to choose to read the negative information about that brand, rather than another brand to which they were less connected.

Study 2 tested if SBC predicts negative information seeking even when people can choose to read positive information about the focal brand. Specifically, we investigated whether the choice in study 1 resulted from participants wanting to read any information about their high SBC brand, positive or negative. One hundred and sixty-eight undergraduates chose one out of four articles: two about the brand that had received their highest SBC score and two about a pretested neutral (high liking, low SBC) brand. Even when they had the option to read about their high SBC brand without incurring a mood cost, participants chose to read negative information about the brand for which they had the highest SBC score (high SBC, negative information = 47.85%, high SBC, positive = 33.45%, low SBC, negative = 4.45%, low SBC, positive = 14.05%). Looking only at people who read about their focal brand, participants were more likely to choose a negative, rather than a positive article, ($X^2(1, N = 117) = 3.8$, $p = .052$).

Study 3 examined our predictions using an experimental design and explored the proposed counterarguing process. 195 undergraduates were randomly assigned to see a set of headlines that included positive and negative articles about either their highest or lowest SBC brand as well as positive and negative articles about the control brand from study 2. After choosing which article to read they wrote a few sentences about their choice article. Results revealed that participants who saw their high SBC brand were more likely to choose the negative information about their target brand compared to participants who were choosing from a set that included articles about their low SBC brand. Further analyses revealed that those

who chose the negative article were more likely to counterargue the information after reading it.

In sum, these findings support the notion that resolution of the identity-threat by seeking information becomes more important than preserving mood when negative information has a self-identity component.

Brand Complexity's Impact on Product Liking and Consumer's Sense of Self

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The marketing literature describes many ways to design strong brands (Aaker, 2012; Keller, 2001). Many brands have been designed around functional features, such as reliability and safety. But, brands are increasingly designed with more abstract and symbolic meanings. For example, brands are designed with personalities (e.g., Jeep is adventurous while BMW is upscale) and values (e.g., Patagonia is environmentally conscious while Ben & Jerry's is politically active). As a result, many brands that used to be simple in design (Coca-Cola: refreshing taste) are now more complex (Coca-Cola: refreshing, happy, exciting, cool).

The problem is that most marketing managers have been taught to design brands that are relatively simple and unidimensional in design, and that brands need a "unique selling proposition" to be successful. Brand management textbooks provide one identity or trait for which a particular brand stands when talking about successful brands (Keller, 2007). Thus, there is some resistance to building brands that are more complex and incorporate many different functional, abstract, and symbolic meanings.

This leads to our research question: Are complex brands more or less effective in the marketplace? Prior marketing theory would predict that more complex brands would be less effective. In contrast, we predict that more complex brands are more effective. We propose that consumers evaluate complex brands more favorably, and we find that this is because they are particularly good at helping consumers expand their identity.

The objective of study 1 was to explore whether there is a relationship between brand complexity and brand liking. To do so, we selected 2 brands from 3 categories which were similar in most domains (e.g., type of product, price level, country of origin, familiarity), but which differed in their level of liking, using Brand Asset Value (BAV, as measured by Y&R) as a proxy. We measured brand complexity by asking participants to select all of the brand traits and valued that applied to the brand in question, so that the more items selected, the more complex the brand. We also measured brand liking. Separate regression analyses with BAV and brand liking as the dependent measures revealed brand complexity as a significant predictor (b's > .2, p's < .001).

Past research has shown that brands serve as a way for consumers to construct, clarify, and/or project their identity or self-concept (Ball & Tasaki, 1992; Belk, 1988; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). As such, we propose that complex brands are especially helpful in this regard, given the multiple traits and values they embody, from which consumers can draw from in order to build their self-concept. One way in which the process of building one's identity manifest itself is by the expansion of one's concept of self (Aron, Lewandowski Jr, Mashek, & Aron, 2013), so we specifically predict that complex brands will lead to a greater expansion of the self-concept than less complex ones.

In order to test our predictions, we conducted two additional studies with participants recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. In both studies we manipulated the perceptions of brand complex-

ity by presenting all participants with a list of eight brand traits and values, and asked them to pick four, elaborating why they did so. In the control condition the traits and values belonged to one dimension (e.g., excitement), whereas in the experimental condition they belonged to multiple dimensions (e.g., excitement, sincere, environmental concern).

In study 2, participants evaluated a familiar car brand (Toyota). We found a positive effect of brand complexity on brand evaluation, $F(1,64) = 4.0$, $p = .05$. Additionally, we measured participants' self-expansion with a widely used measure, where participants are asked "Who are you today?" and the number of descriptors they write is used as a measure of self-expansion (Aron et al., 2013). We found that participants in the complex condition had a more expanded self and that this self-expansion mediates the effect of brand complexity on brand liking (mediated effect = .16, SE = .1, 95% CI = .02 to .43).

Recent research has found that experiencing lower self-concept clarity (SCC) predicts less interest in self-expansion (Emery, Walsh, & Slotter, 2015). If too many traits are added to the self-concept too quickly, people's understanding of the self could become unstable. Thus, people with low SCC will be less likely to self-expand, because they risk exhausting an already limited supply of self-clarity. Thus, study 3's objective was to explore SCC as a moderator of the effect of brand complexity on brand liking. To do so, we asked participants to evaluate a familiar soft drink brand (Fanta) and we measured their SCC (i.e., their need to expand their self-concept) as an individual difference. We again found a positive effect of brand complexity on brand evaluation, $F(1,99) = 4.58$, $p = .04$. Furthermore, we found a significant interaction between SCC and brand complexity (b = .56, p = .02). The effect of brand complexity is stronger for those individuals with a higher SCC (+1SD) who thus have a greater need to expand their self-concept (moderating effect = .1.04, t = 3.26, p < .005).

From a theoretical standpoint, this research makes significant contributions to the extant body of literature that examines how consumers use brands to help build their identity. Past research suggests that consumers form relationships with brands in order to satisfy their identity needs (e.g., Fournier, 1998). In our research, we uncover a novel brand building tactic that best serves this consumer need, while strengthening the brand. Specifically, we find evidence that, contrary to marketers' wisdom, designing a brand to be multifaceted and thus more complex is particularly helpful in aiding consumers build their identity. This is due to the multiple symbolic meanings, such as traits and values, consumers can draw from when forming connections to these brands. While there is limited research that explores the brand characteristics that are conducive to consumers using brands to help build their identities, none of this past research explores specific actions marketers can take to best serve this purpose.

The Influence of Incidental Tokenism on Attitudes Toward Stereotype-Typifying Products

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism suggests that individuals whose social identity represents less than 15% of the overall number of people in a group will face negative experiences such as increased visibility and social isolation, which can reduce motivation and performance on tasks. The negative effects of tokenism have been primarily studied in the context of formal organizations where the inclusion of a token may be attributed to higher level symbolic gestures or social pressures (King et al. 2009). However, consumers often find themselves as a token in incidental consumer groups (e.g., the one woman in a group of mostly men in a restaurant). Being

an incidental token in such transient consumer groups cannot be attributed to any kind of intentional planning from a higher authority.

The current research extends tokenism to these less formal and less intentional (i.e., incidental) group contexts, which we refer to as *incidental tokenism*. We propose that being an incidental token makes salient to the consumer the negative stereotypes chronically associated with the tokenized social identity. Since one's own correspondence with negative stereotypes can engender negative affect (Fiske 1982), tokens are expected to report less favorable attitudes toward products that typify negative stereotypes of their tokenized identity in an attempt to avoid conforming to those negative stereotypes.

In study 1, MTurk participants indicated their gender and read that they would be placed into an online group with other MTurk workers. In the token condition all other members of the 10-person group were of the opposite gender of the participant. In the nontoken condition eight members were of the same gender and one was of the opposite gender. In actuality there were no other group members and we displayed fictitious responses to various "getting to know you" questions for each group member. Participants then read brief descriptions of two novels (which were pretested to ensure they corresponded with negative female-gender stereotypes) and subsequently evaluated the books. Participants were explicitly told that these ratings would be confidential and anonymous. As expected, female participants evaluated the romance novels significantly less positively when they believed themselves to be a token versus nontoken group member (M_{token} = 3.35 vs. $M_{nontoken}$ = 4.23; $F(1, 104)$ = 8.11, $p < .005$). No effect was found for males, as should be the case since the novels did not correspond with negative stereotypes of their male identity.

Study 2 used the same token and nontoken manipulations, but with age (40+ vs. under-40) as the primary identity. Participation was restricted to individuals 40 years of age or older. After the token/nontoken manipulation, participants evaluated the *Buick Lucerne* automobile, which a pretest found to be strongly associated with the negative stereotypes of older individuals. As expected, 40+ year old participants evaluated the *Buick Lucerne* significantly less positively when they believed themselves to be a token versus nontoken (M_{token} = 5.49 vs. $M_{nontoken}$ = 6.54; $F(1, 54)$ = 8.35, $p < .02$).

Study 3 served two purposes. First, we sought evidence of negative stereotype activation as the process for our effect. Second, we wanted to rule out the possibility that our results could be due to the token identity increasing in salience as a result of being a token. Study 3 used a 3 (Group: gender prime vs. token vs. negative stereotype activation) x 2 (Product: identity vs. non-identity relevant) between-subjects design. Only female participants were used in this study. Gender-prime participants were asked to write about how their gender influenced their decision making and interpersonal relationships. Negative-stereotype participants were asked to describe negative stereotypes associated with their gender. The token manipulation was identical that in studies 1 and 2. Participants then evaluated either one of the books used in study 1 (identity product condition) or a book that was not linked to the female identity (non-identity product). An ANOVA revealed a main effect of product ($p < .001$) and a significant interaction between group and product ($p < .02$). Planned contrasts revealed that participants in the token (M_{token} = 3.37 vs. $M_{gender prime}$ = 4.57; $F(1, 108)$ = 11.04, $p < .01$) and negative-stereotype ($M_{negative stereotype}$ = 3.59 vs. $M_{gender prime}$ = 4.57; $F(1, 119)$ = 7.51, $p < .007$) conditions rated the identity-relevant book significantly less favorably than those in the gender-prime condition. There was no significant difference between the token condition and negative-stereotype activation condition ($F(1, 101)$ = .59; $p > .05$). No significant differences were found for the non-identity linked book, as expected.

Study 4 examined the moderating role of self-affirmation. Consistent with research showing that individuals overcome stereotype threats when self-affirmed (Aronson, Fried & Good, 2002), self-affirmation moderated the effect of tokenism on product attitudes. Planned comparisons revealed that in the *no affirmation* condition, token participants evaluated the *Buick Lucerne* significantly less favorable (M_{token} = 6.07 vs. $M_{nontoken}$ = 6.80; $F(1,104)$ = 4.09, $p < .04$). Most importantly, in the *affirmation* condition, there was no significant difference between the token vs. nontoken condition (M_{token} = 6.68 vs. $M_{nontoken}$ = 6.10; $F(1, 93)$ = 2.27 $p > .05$).

Study 5 found that incidental tokenism on has a negative impact on product evaluations for products that typify the negative stereotypes of the identity as opposed to all identity-related products. Token (nontoken) participants were asked evaluate two identity-linked books—one that typified the negative stereotypes of the identity and one which did not. Results revealed that token participants evaluated the first negative-stereotype-typifying book significantly less favorably than nontoken participants (M_{token} = 3.89 vs. $M_{nontoken}$ = 4.59; $F(1, 270)$ = 10.45, $p < .001$). There was no effect for the book that did not typify negative stereotypes.

In sum, across multiple identities and multiple goods, we find that incidental tokens report less favorable attitudes toward products that typify negative stereotypes of their tokenized identity. This decrease in attitudes does not extend to products unassociated with one's identity or identity-linked products that do not correspond to negative stereotypes, and is eliminated when consumers are offered an opportunity to affirm the self prior to giving their attitudes.

Brands as Mitigators of Physical Pain: The Mediating Role of Social Connectedness

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Why can loved brands mitigate physical pain consumers experience in the lives? Using an experimental-causal-chain design in two separate experiments, this work highlights that feelings of social connectedness explain why loved brands help consumers cope with pain.

Experiment 1

The goal of Experiment 1 was to manipulate close brand relationships and observe the effect on a measure of feelings of social connectedness, attempting to provide the first link of the experimental-causal-chain (Spencer, Zanna, and Fong 2005). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Participants in the *close brand relationship condition* were asked to self-generate and write about a brand that they loved. Participants in the *control condition* were given a filler task in which they were asked to solve one-digit addition and subtraction problems. Then, participants were exposed to a psychological pain scenario (loss of a loved one) and reported their overall pain on an established six-point scale (Hicks et al. 2001). In between pain measurements, participants were shown their loved brand (or not) and then rated their pain again. To measure feelings of social connectedness, we utilized an established 20-item scale (Russell 1996). A repeated-measures analysis of variance with condition (close brand relationship, control) as between-subjects independent variable, time (T1, T2) as within-subjects independent variable, and pain as dependent variable found a significant interaction effect between time and condition on pain, $F(1, 709)$ = 80.78, $p < .001$, η_p^2 = .10. Both the direct effect of time on pain, $F(1, 709)$ = 611.74, $p < .001$, η_p^2 = .46, and the direct effect of condition on pain, $F(1, 709)$ = 48.82, $p < .001$, η_p^2 = .06, were significant. Independent-samples t-tests revealed that participants in the close brand relationship con-

dition exhibited a significantly greater decrease in pain between T1 and T2 (Δ = -2.29) than did participants in the control condition (Δ = -1.06; $p < .001$, d = -.68).

Experiment 2

The goal of Experiment 2 was to manipulate feelings of social connectedness and observe the effect on pain, attempting to provide the second link of the experimental-causal chain (mediator ⟶ dependent variable) (Spencer et al. 2005). We applied an established self-construal manipulation in which the self is defined in terms of social connectedness after either being or not being interdependently construed (Cross, Morris, and Gore 2002). We thus follow extant research that defines the self as an affectively-charged mental representation (Higgins et al. 1986; Markus 1977; Mikulincer 1995), which is why we expected the self-construal manipulation to be a valid proxy for manipulating feelings of social connectedness. Prior to participants' arrival at the lab, we set up the cold pressor apparatus and a laptop with the experimental stimuli. The cold pressor apparatus consisted of a small ice chest filled with water, a small pond pump for water circulation, and two thermometers. The water temperature was monitored constantly and was kept at $6 \pm .5°$ C by regularly refilling the ice chest with ice cubes. Upon arrival at the lab, participants were randomly assigned to either the interdependent or the independent self-construal condition. We followed pertinent instructions on two self-construal manipulations established in social psychology (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Trafimow, Triandis, and Goto 1991) and widely applied in consumer research (e.g., Loveland, Smeesters, and Mandel 2010; Mandel 2003). We used both manipulations in sequence, as has been done previously (Krishna, Zhou, and Zhang 2008). In the *interdependent self-construal* condition, participants read the story about the Sumerian warrior Sostoras, whose choice would bring *prestige to his family* (cf. Trafimow et al. 1991), and were then asked whether they admired Sostoras (yes, no, not sure). Participants then proofread someone's travel report to France in which all pronouns were plural (e.g., *we, our*) and were asked to count the pronouns (adapted from Brewer and Gardner 1996). Participants then proceeded to the cold pressor task. Participants were then asked to place their left hand in the water for one minute and to keep their eyes on the screen for the duration of the experiment. Immediately after taking their hand out of the water, they were asked to rate their overall pain as was described under Experiment 1. In between pain measurements, participants read the sentence "*We had a great time in France!*" on the laptop screen in front of them. In the *independent self-construal* condition, participants followed the same procedure, except that Sostoras' choice would bring *prestige to himself* and all pronouns in the travel report were singular (e.g., *I, my*). In between pain measurements, participants instead read the sentence "*I had a great time in France!*" A repeated-measures analysis of variance with self-construal (interdependent, dependent) as between-subjects variable, time (T1, T2) as within-subjects independent variable and pain as dependent variable found a significant interaction effect between time and condition on pain, $F(1, 116)$ = 5.27, $p < .05$, η_p^2 = .04. The direct effect of time on pain was significant, $F(1, 116)$ = 161.76, $p < .001$, η_p^2 = .58, while the direct effect of condition on pain was nonsignificant ($p = .931$). Independent-samples t-tests revealed that participants in the interdependent self-construal condition exhibited a significantly greater decrease in pain between T1 and T2 (Δ = -1.90) than did participants in the independent self-construal condition (Δ = -1.32; $p = .024$, d = -.42).

Discussion

This work contributes to work on the association between *self–brand connections and social inclusion*. In a two-study, multi-

method approach, we reveal that close brand relationships lead to *feelings of social connectedness*, which in turn provide pain insulation. This finding contributes to and extends prior research arguing that consumers are more likely to develop self–brand connections if strong associations exist between the brand, a reference group, and the consumer's self-concept (Escalas and Bettman 2003). We also expand on work that revealed that lonely consumers establish a goal to belong (Loveland et al. 2010) and magnify research showing that socially isolated consumers (vs. control) are more likely to purchase products symbolic of group membership (Mead et al. 2011).

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