Research Dialogue

Brands as intentional agents framework: How perceived intentions and ability can map brand perception

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Abstract

Building on the Stereotype Content Model, this paper introduces and tests the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework. A growing body of research suggests that consumers have relationships with brands that resemble relations between people. We propose that consumers perceive brands in the same way they perceive people. This approach allows us to explore how social perception theories and processes can predict brand purchase interest and loyalty. Brands as Intentional Agents Framework is based on a well-established social perception approach: the Stereotype Content Model. Two studies support the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework prediction that consumers assess a brand's perceived intentions and ability and that these perceptions elicit distinct emotions and drive differential brand behaviors. The research shows that human social interaction relationships translate to consumer–brand interactions in ways that are useful to inform brand positioning and brand communications.
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Introduction

Arguably, people relate to brands in many ways similarly to how they relate to people (Fournier, 2009). Inspired by the introduction of human relationship theory and thinking into the branding literature and marketing practice (Fournier, 1998, 2009; Mark & Pearson, 2001), we propose that understanding how consumers perceive and relate to brands can profit from models of social perception developed in social psychology and specifically from the well established Stereotype Content Model (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Research on brand perception has shown that consumers not only care about a brand's features and benefits but also about a relational aspect of brand perception (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Fournier, 2009; see MacInnis, Park, & Priester, 2009, for a review) as well as an emotional part (Ahuvia, 2005; Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2010; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). So not only does a brand's delivery, its perceived ability or competence, matter but also its perceived intentions or warmth affect how the way consumers perceive, feel, and behave toward that brand. This article presents a well-established social perception model, the Stereotype Content Model, and explores its usefulness in predicting how consumers perceive, feel, and behave toward brands.

As we will review, different elements composing the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF) already demonstrably apply both to social and brand perception. The added value of the proposed BIAF is that it integrates the two dimensions (intentions and ability) and the three aspects of brand perception, from evaluative dimensions to emotional reaction to behavior, and thus it provides a more comprehensive model building on the strengths of each dimensions and type of analysis taken separately. We will start by reviewing the Stereotype Content model, the social perception model that serves as the template for our BIAF. Then we will present existing evidence for treating brand perception as similar to social perception before introducing the BIAF itself and testing it.

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The stereotype content model

Over the last decade, social psychologists (Asbrock, 2010; Asbrock, Nieuwoudt, Duckitt, & Sibley, 2011; Caprariello, Cuddy, & Fiske, 2009; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Cuddy et al., 2009; Fiske et al., 2002; Russell & Fiske, 2008) have proposed, tested, and validated a model of social perception called the Stereotype Content Model. The Stereotype Content Model maps out how people perceive social groups on the two dimensions of social perception: Warmth and Competence. The Stereotype Content Model is based on the idea that two dimensions of competence and warmth organize the way people perceive the social world around them. The Stereotype Content Model posits that people quickly assess two fundamental dimensions—warmth and competence—to guide their decisions about and interactions with other people and social groups. Simply put, warmth perception answers the question, "What are this other's intentions toward me?" Another (person or group) with positive, cooperative intentions appears warm, whereas another with negative, competitive, or exploitative intentions seems cold. The second question is, "Is that other able to carry out its intentions?" Another able to implement intentions is perceived as competent. And another perceived as unable to do so is perceived as incompetent. Warmth thus includes helpfulness, sincerity, friendliness, and trustworthiness, whereas competence includes efficiency, intelligence, conscientiousness, and skill.

In the initial, studies Fiske et al. (2002) first asked respondents to list "what various types of people do you think today's society categorizes into groups" and then selected the 23 groups that were listed by 15% or more of the respondents. They then presented these 23 groups to different samples of respondents (including middle-aged and elderly samples) and asked them to rate each group on several items of competence (competent, confident, capable, efficient, intelligent, skillful) and on several items of warmth (friendly, well-intentioned, trustworthy, warm, good-natured, sincere). The major outcome of these studies was to show that the meaningful social groups spread out across the space created by crossing the two dimensions of warmth and competence. And in that two dimensional space, the different groups were most often organized into four clusters, each cluster located in one of the quadrants obtained by crossing the two dimensions: the warm–competent quadrant, the warm–incompetent quadrant, the cold–competent quadrant, and the cold–incompetent quadrant.

In a more recent study replicating and extending Fiske et al. (2002) on a U.S. representative sample, Cuddy et al. (2007) collected warmth and competence ratings of 20 social groups. In the results, a cluster analysis showed that these 20 groups organized into four groupings that correspond to the four quadrants obtained when crossing the warmth and the competence dimensions (see Fig. 1). One cluster contained the groups rated as warm and competent that Fiske et al. (2002) called the reference groups (Americans, Middle-class). A second cluster comprised the groups perceived as cold and incompetent, the most derogated groups (welfare recipients, poor people). A third cluster comprised groups rated as warm and incompetent, the paternalized groups (elderly, disabled). The remaining cluster
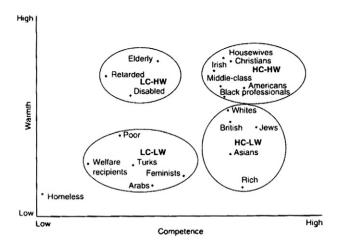

Fig. 1. Distribution of social groups on the competence and warmth dimension in the Stereotype Content Model (Cuddy et al., 2007).NB: Group labels were provided by pretest participants in another study; the specific labels are not endorsed by the authors.

included the groups perceived as competent and cold, the envied groups (Asians, rich). These results thus showed that negative stereotypes can have important differences in content and that stereotypes about discriminated groups are not necessarily completely negative but often mix positive and negative content.

The difference between the warm–competent quadrant and the cold–incompetent quadrant is obvious; a clear valence difference separates the two on both dimensions. Essentially, a wholly positive evaluation of the groups characterizes the warm–competent cluster and a wholly negative evaluation of the groups characterizes the cold–incompetent cluster. One innovation of the model is to identify the two mixed-impressions quadrants, namely, the paternalistic quadrant and the envied quadrant. Indeed, the difference between the two mixed-impressions quadrants is more subtle because each contains both positive and negative impressions that coexist, yet the two overall impressions differ a great deal. For instance, paternalized groups such as the elderly are scorned because they are perceived as being well intentioned but lacking the ability to enact those intentions. On the other hand, envied groups such as rich people are perceived as having negative intentions but also as being able to reach their goals. So the two fundamental dimensions of social perception together make sense of the different impressions about these four quadrants.

Using survey data (Cuddy et al., 2007; Fiske et al., 2002) and experimental data (Caprariello et al., 2009), researchers identified specific emotions elicited by the 4 different combinations of warmth and competence. Groups perceived as warm and competent, such as middle class, Christians, and Americans (for U.S. participants), elicit admiration. Groups seen as warm and incompetent, such as elderly and disabled people, elicit pity. Groups perceived as cold and competent, such as rich people, Asians, and Jews, elicit envy. And derogated groups seen as cold and incompetent, such as undocumented immigrants, homeless, and welfare recipients, elicit contempt. The perception of a social group in the Stereotype Content Model is thus