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Meaning threats heighten consumer attachment: implications for global brand management

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ABSTRACT

Global brand consumers have become more prone to engage in variety-seeking and loyalty-switching behavior, so global brand managers are in urgent need to develop effective strategies to reinforce brand loyalty and lower the propensity of consumer defection. As a growing body of research indicates, consumer attachment and brand loyalty are closely correlated. The current study, linking the concepts of fluid meaning compensation and consumer attachment, unravels a novel loyalty-reinforcing avenue. Three experiments, manipulating scenarios of meaning threats commonly seen in everyday life (sense of absurdity, anxious uncertainty and social exclusion) on global brand consumers, verify that meaning threats heighten attachment of consumers toward their most attached brands. More importantly, this finding applies to global brand consumers across product or service brand categories with luxury or non-luxury brand positions. Hence, maximizing the fluid meaning compensation function of attached brands is conducive to reinforcement of global brand loyalty. Academic and strategic implications are gleaned from the research result for global brand management.

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Introduction

Accelerated trade liberalization leads to an enormous proliferation of new entrants in the global brand market, drastically augmenting the multiplicity of brand choices. Consequently, global brand consumers have become more prone to engage in variety-seeking and loyalty-switching behavior (Baumann, Elliott, & Hamin, 2011; Kaltcheva, Winsor, & Parasuraman, 2010; Reimann, Castaño, Zaichkowsky & Bechara, 2012). Nokia, the mobile phone brand that used to dominate the market with solid base of loyal consumers for nearly a decade, now is outperformed by such global brands as Apple, Samsung and Sony to whom large proportion of its loyal consumers defected.

As a matter of fact, the substantial decline in brand competitiveness due to massive consumer defection is rather prevalent in today's global business environment (Hansen, 2012; Lam, Ahearne, Hu, & Schillewaert, 2010). Therefore, global brand managers are in urgent need to lower the propensity of consumer defection by developing effective strategies to reinforce brand loyalty (Homburg, Fürst, Ehrmann, & Scheinker, 2013). In response to this need, the current study unravels a novel loyalty-reinforcing avenue for global brand management based on the link between fluid meaning compensation and consumer attachment.

As a growing body of research indicates, consumer attachment and brand loyalty are closely correlated (e.g., Albert & Merunka, 2013; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Fedorikhin, Park, & Thomson, 2008; Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013; Loureiro, Hans Ruediger, & Demetris, 2012; Tsai, 2011). Characteristic of strong and enduring consumer-brand psychological bonds, consumer attachment induces the positive emotions of security, trust, confidence, attractiveness, cheerfulness and identification (Iglesias et al., 2013; Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011; Tsai, 2011). Besides, if attached brands are unavailable in the market consumers may feel separation anxiety and distress, akin to the negative emotions felt in the situation where a person is out of touch with his/her loved ones (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Batra et al., 2012; Loureiro et al., 2012; Tsai, 2011). Thus, the brand that commands elevated consumer attachment usually enjoy more favorable consumer-brand relationship and higher level of brand loyalty (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Batra et al., 2012; Iglesias et al., 2013; Kadirov & Varey, 2011; Loureiro et al., 2012).

Although brand management researchers assign consumer attachment the preeminent role in reinforcing brand loyalty, relevant empirical studies tend to revolve around the antecedents and consequence of consumer attachment in the consumption context (e.g., Kadirov & Varey, 2011; Malär et al., 2011; Parish & Holloway, 2010). Theoretically, the benefits that consumers gain from their attached brands should extend to other contexts, particularly the social psychological context. For example, in a study examining brand choice behavior, Sivanathan and Pettit (2010) found some

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consumers attaching to the brand that reduces their sense of meaninglessness caused by lack of social approval and self-esteem damage. This finding points to the potentiality of attached brands to provide psychological benefit in the social psychological context.

However, the above-depicted psychological benefit of attached brands does not necessarily restrict to the occasion of self-esteem damage. It may apply to diverse occasions in the light of theorization elucidated by scholars of Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM). According to MMM, people under varied meaning threats are supposed to try to reaffirm meaning frameworks embedded in significant sources to compensate for meaning loss (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Hirsh, Mar, & Peterson, 2012; Proulx, Heine, & Vohs, 2010; Proulx, Inzlicht, & Harmon-Jones, 2012). Noteworthy, the fundamental premise of MMM emphasizes that different meaning frameworks may compensate for each other, regardless of mutual relevance. As long as the meaning framework is embedded in such significant sources as committed beliefs, favorite objects, widely accepted social norms or memorable events, it may compensate for any kind of meaning loss (Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010; Hirsh et al., 2012; Norton & Francesca, 2013; Proulx et al., 2012; Randles, Proulx, & Heine, 2011; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Wesseling, & Van Koningsbruggen, 2011; van Tongreen & Green, 2010). This phenomenon, called *fluid meaning compensation*, takes place quite often in everyday life (Proulx et al., 2012).

Take the meaning threat of absurdity, for example; experiment participants who read an illogical and incoherent story that made them feel threatened by absurdity expressed greater extent of identification with their national culture. Reaffirmation of the meaning framework embedded in national culture, which is not relevant to the meaning threat resultant from exposure to an illogical and incoherent story, countervails the meaning threat of absurdity (Proulx et al., 2010).

Combining the concepts of fluid meaning compensation and consumer attachment with the self-categorization theory (Aguirre, Rodriguez, & Simmers, 2011; Rico & Jennings, 2012; Wyer, 2010; Zhang & Reid, 2013) and the psychological defense theory (Aldao, 2013; Hart, 2014; Mitrousi, Travlos, Koukia, & Zyga, 2013; Selcuk, Zayas, Günaydin, Hazan, & Kross, 2012), there emerges the possibility that a special pattern of brand meaning transfer may actualize due to the impact of fluid meaning compensation on consumer attachment. Specifically, consumers encountering meaning threats in diverse occasions are assumed to turn automatically to their most attached brands to compensate for meaning loss. This assumption resides in the theoretical rationales that attached brands comprise psychological significances of target consumers, facilitate the solidification of their self-categorization and exert greater influence than other sources of fluid meaning compensation in soothing their meaning loss distress.

The assumed link between fluid meaning compensation and consumer attachment to actualize brand meaning transfer unfolds a novel strategic approach for global brand management. Target consumers may gain benefits from the fluid meaning compensation function of attached brands to fulfill the social psychological requirement of meaning maintenance. If maximized by proper management practices, such function is transformable into a powerful enhancer of consumer attachment and brand loyalty. Recognizing the severity of consumer defection in the global brand market, the researcher of the current study attempts to verify the impact of fluid meaning compensation on consumer attachment. Hopefully, the research result will yield insightful information enabling global brands to formulate more effective strategies to retain loyal consumers.

In the following sections, the researcher first elucidates the concepts of fluid meaning compensation and consumer attachment as well as theories relevant to these concepts. Afterwards, result of three experiments is reported alongside detailed discussion of academic and strategic implications gleaned from the result.

Theoretical background

Fluid meaning compensation

People have to deal with meaning threats in everyday life, which is an important issue extensively explored by social psychologists. In order to address this issue with more elaborateness, the Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM) has developed within social psychology gearing toward thorough explication of behavior caused by meaning threats across diverse occasions (e.g., Heine et al., 2006; Hicks et al., 2010; Norton & Francesca, 2013; Proulx & Heine, 2009; Proulx et al., 2010; van Dijk et al., 2011; van Tongreen & Green, 2010). MMM researchers, first resorting to the self-affirmation theory, argue that mental representations of expected associations and related propositions in the visual, auditory and verbal stimuli provide an integral whole of self-concept, laying the foundation upon which meaning frameworks are constructed. The coherence and consistency in the web of meaning frameworks help to imbue human existence with value and purpose (e.g., Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009; Sherman & Cohen, 2002). Disruption of a particular meaning framework, threatening existential value and purpose, prompts the individual to reaffirm another meaning framework to restore equilibrium in the web of meaning frameworks (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009).

Overall, the MMM revolves around the basic premise that all individuals like to perceive the world as meaningful, predictable and purposeful. Absurdity, violation of expectation, logical inconsistency or uncertainty in both physical settings (e.g., an originally beautiful landscape transfiguring into a dingy slum) and social interactions (e.g., an originally warm and kind friend turning out to be an irresponsible stranger) cause the meaning-threatening psychological state of aversion. This state urges people to engage in pursuit of meaning compensation, with the objective to achieve meaning maintenance (Heine et al., 2006; Hicks et al., 2010; Hirsh et al., 2012; Norton & Francesca, 2013; Proulx & Heine, 2009; Proulx et al., 2012; van Dijk et al., 2011). Generally, meaning compensation strategies include: (1) finding out well-rounded order and structure and draw definite conclusions; (2) assuring self-efficacy and self-worth; affiliate closely with other people; (3) cultivating a feeling of symbolic immortality through the pursuit of high-profile causes (Proulx et al., 2012).

Noteworthy, MMM theorists further expand on the self-affirmation theory, positing that the threat to one meaning framework can be compensated by reaffirmation of other meaning frameworks regardless of mutual relevance between the reaffirmed and threatened meanings. Put differently, no matter whether the reaffirmed meaning shares any substantively similar content with the threatened meaning, it facilitates maintenance of equilibrium in the web of meaning frameworks as long as it is embedded in committed beliefs, favorable objects, widely accepted social norms or memorable events (Hicks et al., 2010; Hirsh et al., 2012; Norton & Francesca, 2013; Proulx et al., 2012). Such phenomenon is called *fluid meaning compensation*, alluding to the flexible and compensatory substitutability of meaning frameworks in diverse occasions to serve the purpose of countervailing meaning threats (Heine et al., 2006; Hicks et al., 2010; Hirsh et al., 2012; Norton & Francesca, 2013; Proulx et al., 2012; van Dijk et al., 2011).

For example, a group of experiment participants, who played blackjack with a deck of cards with mismatched colors and then sensed a meaning threat attributable to the violation of color arrangement rule, became much more sticking with the moral principle of illegal prostitution prohibition than those who were not exposed to mismatched card colors. The meaning framework embedded in the moral principle, entirely unrelated to the violation of card color arrangement rule, served the purpose of

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