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Beyond brand attitude: Individual drivers of purchase for symbolic cobranded products☆

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ABSTRACT

Cobranding, or the use of two brand names on a single product, generally coincides with higher purchase intentions. Prior research focuses on ingredient co-branding and suggests that attitude toward both the primary and the secondary brands and congruence between the brands are important drivers of cobranded products' success. This research shows that self-congruity with the secondary brand and need for uniqueness have significant positive impacts on symbolic co-branding purchase, in addition to perceived congruence and attitude toward the primary brand. In contrast, attitude toward the secondary brand does not relate to purchase of symbolic cobranded products. Therefore, managers should rely on self-congruity, instead of attitude toward the secondary brand, when choosing a partner for symbolic cobranded products. Moreover, product category involvement enhances the impact of self-congruity on purchase intent.

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1. Introduction

An increasing number of companies use co-branding, which pairs two brands to form a separate, unique product, to generate sales. The literature distinguishes two types of co-branding: symbolic co-branding and ingredient co-branding (Cegarra & Michel, 2001; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2010). This research focuses on symbolic co-branding which "consists in associating to the host brand a second brand that will give it symbolic additional attributes" (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2010, p. 23). For a cobranded mobile phone that features both Samsung and Hugo Boss for example, Samsung represents the host or primary brand (PB), and Hugo Boss is the secondary brand (SB). This symbolic cobranding aims to enhance both symbolic and self-expressive associations for the cobranded product, through associations linked to the Hugo Boss brand. Some of the symbolic associations are well known (such as the Lagerfeld — Coca-Cola light), while others go unnoticed (like the Aston Martin — Nokia mobile phone). Symbolic co-branding has become increasingly prevalent for several reasons. Symbolic cobranded products appeal to new target segments by featuring a secondary partner's brand equity (Park, Jun, & Shocker, 1996), and through their association, partner brands can borrow the equity of other entities in the form of transfers of attitudes, thoughts, images, feelings, awareness and experience (Keller, 2003). A signaling perspective also suggests that the combination of two brands provides greater assurance about product quality than can a single-branded product (Rao, Qu, & Rueckert, 1999). Furthermore, symbolic cobranded products may increase usage among consumers, by providing new products that appeal to consumers' need for uniqueness (Bloch, 1995).

To ensure the effectiveness of their cobranding strategies, marketers need to know what drives cobranded product purchase. Surprisingly, prior research studying the conditions in which cobranding is effective focuses on ingredient branding, which incorporates functional attributes of one brand into an existing, dominant brand as an ingredient (Helmig, Huber, & Leeflang, 2008). For example, Simonin and Ruth (1998) study a partnership between a car brand and an ingredient microprocessor brand, and Helmig, Huber, and Leeflang (2007) use a hypothetical fruity quark/pudding. These studies show that prior attitudes toward both partner brands and congruence between the brands are critical drivers of ingredient co-branding effectiveness (Helmig et al., 2007; Simonin & Ruth, 1998). Specific research focusing on symbolic cobranding is necessary, because symbolic attributes and functional attributes do not influence consumer behavior in the same way (Gill, 2008; Luo, Kannan, & Ratchford, 2008). Symbolic features fulfill consumers' social identity-related motivations, whereas functional features relate more to utilitarian motivations (Maehle & Supphellen, 2011). Moreover, drivers of symbolic consumption are ambiguous and need clarification (Aaker, 1999; Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Park, MacInnis, & Priester, 2009; Stern, 2006). This research stresses the role of self-congruity in symbolic consumption. Self-congruity theory advocates

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that consumers behave according to the match between brands' symbolic attributes and consumers' own self-concept (Sirgy, 1985). Prior research suggests that self-congruity is a critical factor in symbolic consumption because symbolic products, such as luxury products, facilitate the expression of the consumer's internal self (Mason, 1981; Tsai, 2005). Moreover, symbolic co-branding is usually associated with SB that few consumers have ever used or experienced. Prior research suggests that brand attitude is a poor predictor of consumer behavior when consumers have never used the brand (Bird, Channon, & Ehrenberg, 1970), whereas self-congruity with a brand influences consumer behavior even if consumers have never used it (Park & John, 2010). Therefore, this research posits that self-congruity is a key predictor of symbolic co-branding purchase intent. In addition to self-congruity, the current study combines constructs from different streams of literature into an integrative model to improve understanding of symbolic cobranding consumption and to answer the managerial questions: How to select symbolic co-branding partners? And who to target with symbolic co-branded products? The findings make several contributions to research and practice.

First, this investigation extends the generalizability of Helmig et al.'s (2007) model by validating it for symbolic cobranding. It confirms the importance of perceived fit between the two brands (PB and SB). More importantly, the findings demonstrate that self-congruity with the secondary brand is a better driver of purchase intentions toward symbolic co-branded products than is attitude. Second, this study identifies need for uniqueness as another original explanatory variable of symbolic cobranded product purchase intentions in the case of symbolic consumption, indicating that cobranded products are a means for consumers to differentiate themselves from others. Third, results indicate that product category involvement not only affects product purchase intentions directly but also strengthens the role of self-congruity in symbolic cobranding consumption. Therefore, marketers should select partners for symbolic co-branding strategies according to the level of self-congruity of their target with the potential secondary brands, and the level of perceived fit between the two brands. Moreover, managers should use symbolic co-branding strategies to target first and foremost highly-involved consumers in the product category with positive attitudes toward branding, and who need to show their uniqueness.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

Extensive research examines the potential positive and negative effects of ingredient cobranding on attitudes or behaviors toward cobranded products (Norris, 1992; Simonin & Ruth, 1998; for an extensive review, see Helmig et al., 2008). The focus here is on ingredient branding, which incorporates functional attributes of the secondary brand into the primary one. Cobranding may also be designed to transfer symbolic attributes from the secondary brand into the cobranded product in order to enhance its symbolic consumption experience (Keller, 2003). Because symbolic consumption relies on different underlying motives than functional consumption (Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Park et al., 2009), the purpose of this research is to develop and validate a comprehensive model based on both established relationships in ingredient branding literature and novel relationships relevant to symbolic cobranding. In particular, this research introduces two concepts linked to symbolic consumption behavior: self-congruity with the secondary brand and need for uniqueness.

Mason (1981) suggests that self-concept is a central driver of symbolic consumption, because consumers use value-expressive symbolic products to create and maintain their sense of self. Consumers often purchase goods to express their identity and evaluate brands according to the match between their symbolic attributes and the person's self-concept (Aaker, 1999). This matching process is referred to as *self-congruity*, and it plays an important role in both pre- and post-purchase behaviors (Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Sirgy, 1985). According to this process, a match between the brand and the consumer's self-image arises when a value-expressive brand triggers the consumer's self-schema, which contains self-knowledge related to the product's perceived image (Sirgy, 1985). Self-congruity reflects the consumer's perceived fit of the brand with both consumer's actual and ideal selves (Aaker, 1999). In the case of symbolic cobranded products, secondary brands are often luxury or status brands (for instance the mobile phones: LG–Prada, Sharp–McLaren) or famous events (for examples the mobile phones: Sagem–Roland Garros, Samsung–Olympic Games) and primary brands often belong to product categories associated with strong social meanings (like cars and mobile phones). The purpose of the SB is to enhance the symbolic aspects of the product. Therefore symbolic co-branding represents an opportunity to study the role of self-congruity in symbolic consumption.

H1. Self-congruity with the secondary brand relates positively to purchase intent of symbolic cobranded products.

Ingredient branding research indicates that attitude toward the SB also drives behavioral intentions toward cobranded products (Helmig et al., 2007; Simonin & Ruth, 1998). However, because symbolic SBs are usually brands that few consumers likely have experienced directly (i.e., prestigious brands or events), attitude toward the SB, even if positive, might be weak. Whether brand experience is direct (purchase or possession) or indirect (exposure to communications or information) strongly influences the link between attitude and behavior (Fazio & Zanna, 1978). A direct experience reinforces the link between attitude and behavior; indirect experience weakens it. Direct experience also implies more confidence in the judgment, higher attitude accessibility and more available information (Fazio & Zanna, 1978; Fazio, Zanna, & Cooper, 1978). Thus, direct experience positively influences attitude strength, which then positively moderates the link between attitude and behavior (Chaiken & Baldwin, 1981; Krosnick, Boninger, Chuang, Berent, & Carnot, 1993). When indirect experience is the only type available, consumers should have a weak attitude toward the SB. In symbolic cobranding, SBs may be prestigious brands (e.g., Prada associated with LG) or famous events (e.g., the Roland Garros Grand Slam tennis tournament associated with Sagem, or the Olympic Games associated with Samsung). Few consumers actually attend these events or buy the luxury brands directly, so the strength of attitude toward the SB likely is weak and may have a limited impact on behavior.

In contrast, brands with appealing personalities attract consumers with no prior brand usage, because consumers may enhance their sense of self (Swaminathan, Stilley, & Ahluwalia, 2009). Park and John (2010) show that consumers may perceive themselves as more good-looking and glamorous after using a Victoria's Secret shopping bag, and more intelligent and leader-like after using an MIT pen. In line with Park and John (2010), self-congruity with the SB may be a better predictor of consumer choice than brand attitude toward the SB, especially if consumers have never or rarely used the brand or have no intention of purchasing the SB itself.

H2. Self-congruity with the secondary brand has a stronger effect on purchase intent than attitude toward the secondary brand.

Self-congruity theory also proposes that consumers behave according to the match between a brand's symbolic attributes and their self-concepts (Aaker, 1999; Sirgy, 1985). If people attempt to construct, express and enhance their self-image through consumption, the impact of self-congruity on consumer behavior likely is most prominent in value-expressive consumption activities, which are driven by symbolic or self-expressive product features (Mason, 1981). According to Bloch (1982, p. 416), “being highly involved with a product that carries an appropriate symbolic meaning provides a way to project and enhance part of one's self-image”. Information regarding the self probably is not activated when consumers encounter less involving products (Barone, Shimp, & Sprott, 1999), such that they may be influenced less by self-congruity than by functional congruity (Johar & Sirgy, 1991). In contrast,

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