



Consumer–brand relationship quality: When and how it helps brand extensions [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Two studies demonstrate that strong brand relationship quality (BRQ) enhances consumer judgments about brand extensions. Different methods (survey vs. experiment), participants (real consumers vs. college students), and cultural contexts (Korea vs. Canada) demonstrate that this effect generalizes. Study results suggest that this effect only occurs for two moderately-low-fit extensions: the extension and the parent are similar product categories with inconsistent attributes, or dissimilar product categories with consistent attributes. Two different cognitive processes underlie the BRQ effects depending on these conditions.

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1. Introduction

Prior research emphasizes long-term relationships' importance in business settings (e.g., Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Consumer researchers support extending the relationship construct, primarily as consumer–brand relationships (e.g., Fournier, 1998), but relatively limited research informs this topic and most work is qualitative (Fournier, 1998; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), with a few exceptions (cf., Aggarwal, 2004; Park & Kim, 2001; Park, Kim, & Kim, 2002). The present research provides empirical evidence for the positive effect of strong consumer–brand relationship or brand relationship quality (BRQ) on consumers' evaluation of a brand extension (Fournier, 1998). Two studies identify underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions for the effect to occur.

The two studies differ in terms of method (survey vs. experiment), participants (real consumers vs. college students), and culture (Korea vs. Canada). They demonstrate that strong BRQ influences brand extension judgments positively; however, two extension characteristics, product category similarity and attribute consistency, moderate the effect. Further, the research identifies two different cognitive processes that underlie the effect. Results show that the positive effect of

BRQ on extension judgments occurs only when the overall parent–extension fit is moderately low: when the extension and the parent are *either* similar product categories with inconsistent attributes *or* dissimilar product categories with consistent attributes.

2. Theoretical considerations and hypothesis developments

2.1. Brand extension judgments

Over the past two decades, an important research focus involves factors influencing consumer judgment about brand extensions. Researchers propose many factors that may influence consumers' acceptance of extensions. Most research focuses on the fit between a brand extension and parent brand (Keller, 2003), demonstrating product category similarity is important (e.g., Aaker & Keller, 1990; Ahluwalia, 2008; Völckner & Sattler, 2007). This category-similarity effect often results from a category-based judgment process. That is, when a brand extension is similar to the parent brand category, consumers base the extension evaluations on the brand category's favorableness (Boush & Loken, 1991; Milberg, Park, & McCarthy, 1997).

Prior research also investigates more specific brand extension characteristics as determinants of extension judgments. For example, evidence shows consumers likely evaluate a brand extension more favorably when specific parent brand associations or attributes are highly relevant (e.g., Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994). Concept consistency between the general image of the extension category and the parent's brand concept (functional vs. symbolic) increases the favorable judgment (Park, Milberg, & Lawson, 1991). Individuals evaluate an extension more favorably when accompanied with another complementary extension than when introduced alone (Shine, Park, & Wyer, 2007).

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Other research examines contextual and individual factors that might affect extension judgments such as mood state (Barone, Miniard, & Romeo, 2000), rational/holistic versus analytic processing (Ahluwalia, 2008; Monga & John, 2007), and construal level (Kim & John, 2008).

Most investigations focus on cognitive factors, mainly emanating from the stimuli or contexts. Surprisingly, little is known about motivational factors (see Maoz & Tybout, 2002; Park et al., 2002; Yeo & Park, 2006 for exceptions). The present research proposes the consumer–brand relationship quality (BRQ), also reflects consumers' strong motivation toward the brand (Fournier, 1998), strongly influences extension judgments, and identifies the boundary conditions and mediation processes for the BRQ effect to occur.

2.2. Brand relationship quality (BRQ)

Brand researchers traditionally assess how consumers perceive and evaluate brands examining brand attitudes, brand evaluations, or perceived brand quality (Keller, 2003). More recently, researchers note that consumers differ not only in brand perception, but also how they *relate* to brands (Fournier, 1998; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). For example, consumers often do not distinguish between brands and brand manufacturers or representatives. Further, marketers often attempt to induce consumers to think of their brands as a living by employing personification, animism, and anthropomorphosis as well as using human characters and other attributes (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Moon, 2000). Brand associations with human qualities lead people to develop emotional attachments similar to relationships they form with other people. In fact, motivations and norms governing interpersonal relationships likely guide people's interactions with brands (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004) and consumers describe their relationships with brands in social relationship terms (e.g., Coke Classic relationships as “best friendships” and shampoo relationships as “flings”) (Fournier, 1998).

Conceptually, consumer–brand relationship or brand relationship quality (BRQ) is much richer than overall brand evaluations or behavioral intentions. BRQ further reflects a strong emotional and motivational tie with a brand. Specifically, researchers conceptualize BRQ as multifaceted, including several relationship components such as affective and socio-motive attachments (e.g., love/passion, self-connection, and nostalgia), behavioral ties (e.g., interdependence and commitment), and supportive cognitive beliefs (e.g., trust, intimacy, and brand partner quality) (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Fournier, 1994, 1998; Park et al., 2002). Combining these components yields strong and durable consumer–brand relationships.

2.3. Implications for BRQ effects on brand extension evaluations

People with a strong relationship tend to hold relationship components firmly in memory as a form of relational schema. These components activate spontaneously upon the encounter with the relationship partner, guiding individuals' subsequent judgments and behaviors about the partner (e.g., Baldwin, 1992). People with strong versus weak or no brand relationships might interpret the relationship partner's acts more favorably, particularly when the act evaluation is ambiguous (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). This positive bias sometimes occurs, even if a relationship partner commits a transgression which violates the implicit or explicit rules guiding relationship performance and evaluation (Metts, 1994; Wiseman, 1986). A longitudinal investigation of evolving relationships between consumers and brands shows that consumers maintain the relationships even during transgression acts, depending on the nature of existing brand relationships (Aaker et al., 2004). Analogically, consumers with strong brand relationships view extensions as an act committed by a brand partner and the aforementioned positive bias of strong relationship likely occurs. In other words, BRQ positively influences evaluations of the brand's act (i.e., a brand extension) and consumers with a

strong BRQ versus weak BRQ likely evaluate the brand extension more favorably.

However, the degree of an extension–parent fit likely moderates the BRQ effect as it affects consumers' categorization processes and their motivation to engage in elaborate processing for judgments (Boush & Loken, 1991). When an extension closely fits with the parent, consumers rapidly categorize the extension as belonging to the parent category and their motivation to carefully examine the extension's quality is low. In this case, consumers would evaluate the extension favorably on the basis of this high fit. On the other hand, low-fit extensions instantly cause consumers to classify the extension as *not* belonging to the parent brand, and consumers would evaluate these low-fit extensions unfavorably. Thus, the positive BRQ effect unlikely occurs for either very high- or very low-fit extensions. This proposition is consistent with the previous research suggesting that consumers typically evaluate high-fit extensions favorably and low-fit extensions unfavorably and other contextual or individual factors do not easily affect these judgments (Ahluwalia, 2008; Barone et al., 2000; Monga & John, 2007).

On the other hand, contextual and individual factors seemingly influence consumers' evaluations of a moderately low-fit extension. For example, individuals' positive mood enhances extension judgments only for moderately low-fit extensions (Barone et al., 2000). Holistic or relational processing (Ahluwalia, 2008; Monga & John, 2007) appear to enhance extension judgments, but the effect less likely occurs for unambiguously high- or low-fit extensions. These observations suggest that the positive BRQ effect likely operates only in situations in which the extension's characteristics have an ambiguous fit with the parent (i.e., when an extension exhibits a moderately low fit).

Brand extension research typically examines the fit between an extension and parent based on either product–category similarity (Aaker & Keller, 1990) or attribute–level consistency (Loken & John, 1993), but studies rarely consider both. Typically, communication about new consumer products contains information about both the product category and key benefits/attributes. In this case, both product category and key attributes combine to produce the perception of an overall extension–parent fit. That is, an extension exhibits a high fit if the product category is similar to and the attribute is consistent with the parent's; a low fit impression forms if the product category is dissimilar and the attribute is inconsistent; and a moderately low fit occurs if the product category is similar but the attribute is consistent or vice-versa. The category similarity and attribute consistency in combination suggest unique implications for the BRQ effect. Therefore, the present research considers both factors in a single study by asking participants to evaluate either a categorically similar or dissimilar extension product while mentioning the key attribute, which is either consistent or inconsistent with the key association of the parent brand. In this case, BRQ likely influences only two moderately low-fit conditions—the extension and the parent are similar categories but inconsistent attributes, or they are dissimilar categories but consistent attributes.

H1. Strong BRQ consumers evaluate moderately low fit extensions more positively than weak BRQ consumers. This effect will be less evident, however, when an extension has either a very high fit or a very low fit.

2.4. Mediation processes

Considering both category similarity and attribute consistency, at least two mediating processes seem to underlie the influence of BRQ. First, BRQ may increase individuals' perceptions of the overall extension–parent fit and enhance extension judgments (“perceived-fit” process). Second, BRQ may enhance consumers' extension judgments via first increasing their subjective beliefs in the extension's attribute

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