Value integration effects on evaluations of retro brands

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1. Value integration

An individual’s value set helps form a specific identity (Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002) and influences affect, cognition, and behavior. Such sets contain a variety of values, some of which may be conflicting (Pouliasi & Verkuyten, 2007; Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012; Verkuyten & Pouliasi, 2006). For instance, a value set might contain the opposing values of modernism and traditionalism. An individual might select one of these opposing values depending on the context. Alternatively, individuals may find some reconciliation that allows them to blend the values in unique ways. This blending or amalgamation of seemingly opposing values is called value integration (VI), which is the degree to which an individual perceives two opposing values as compatible versus oppositional (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). VI can differ across individuals. High-VI individuals find commonality in modernism and traditionalism (Inglehart & Baker, 2000) and easily form cognitive links between the different and “conflicting” values. For high-VI individuals, the seemingly opposite values peacefully co-exist. Conversely, low-VIs compartmentalize modernism and traditionalism, continuously trying to keep them separate (i.e., they select one value or the other depending on context).

While there is extant research on the effect of VI on bicultural identity integration (e.g., Antioco, Vanhamme, Hardy, & Bernardin, 2012; Benet-Martinez et al., 2002; Reed et al., 2012), there is not much literature on the effect of VI on brand evaluations. We study VI in the context of brands. Just like individuals, brands are endowed with certain values (e.g., Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012). Literature suggests that consumers tend to choose brands that are congruent with their values (McCracken, 1986; Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz, 1994). We suggest that it is not just the congruency of brand values, but also an individual’s level of VI and contextual cues that explain brand related outcomes such as evaluation and choice.

Previous research claims that low-VI individuals experience little or no overlap between the two distinct value systems and show a “behavioral reactance” similar to contrast effect or reverse priming (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002). Specifically, when individuals with low VI are presented with value-related cues, they show behaviors incongruent with the external cues. In the domain of brands, we expect to observe similar incongruent reactions to external cues, whereby receiving modern cues will make consumers rate classic brands more favorably, and classical cues will make consumers rate modern brands more favorably.

On the other hand, high-VI individuals can relate to either value system (modern or traditional), and contextual cues do not help them make a choice between value-related behaviors. Specifically, when high VIs are presented with value related cues (modern or classic), they will not have a clear preference for either value-related (modern vs. classic) brand (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002; Zou, Morris, & Benet-Martinez, 2008). Taken together, we expect to replicate the effect of VI in the domain of brands under different levels of contextual (modern versus traditional) cues. More formally stated, our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1. The effect of value integration on brand choice is moderated by
contextual cues.

H1a: When individuals who are low on VI are exposed to modern or traditional cues, they are more likely to choose the brand opposite of those cues.

H1b: When individuals who are high on VI are exposed to modern or traditional cues, it will have no effect on their brand choice.

While certain brands carry either modern or classic values, retro brands embody both modernism and traditionalism, which simultaneously convey seemingly opposing values. In the next section, we discuss how retro brands are evaluated in relation to the VI levels of consumers.

2. Blending modern and classic: retro brands

One common technique to differentiate brands in marketing is to tag them as “modern” or “classic”. Modern brands position themselves as contemporary, new, exciting, forward-looking, and with cutting-edge features/technology (De Chernatony & Cottom, 2006). For example, Apple ads focus on its products’ efficiency, sleek design, and speed. Gap (the clothing brand), or Knoll (the furniture brand), emphasizes cool and modern designs. In contrast, classic (traditional) brands focus on their strong connections with the past and convey permanence, stability, nostalgia, heritage, and “... are rich with both personal and communal associations” (Brown, Sherry, & Kozinets, 2003, p. 20; Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994). For example, Coca-Cola ads focus on regional traditions and Macy’s communications emphasize strong connections with the past. Such brands position themselves as traditional, established, and long honored. That does not mean that classic brands never change. They do naturally evolve and adapt to ever changing market conditions. However, their core remains the same. For example, to keep up with recent trends in sustainable consumption, in 2009, the Coca-Cola Company (2014) began using 100% recyclable bottles made partially from plant-based materials; however, its logo, can and bottle design, and taste have remained much the same.

Certain brands (i.e., retro brands) blend the seemingly opposing values of modern and classic. A retro brand is an authentic reproduction of a past brand that blends modern and updated features and classic and traditional elements (Holak, Matveev, & Havlena, 2007; Thompson & Arsel, 2004). Retro brands are characterized by scientific and future-looking themes, while bringing about a sense of connection with past times (Brown et al., 2003). Various authors describe retro brands as a harmony of past and present (Brown, 1995, 1999, 2001; Hightower, Brady, & Baker, 2002), a re-packaging of past times (Holak et al., 2007; Thompson & Arsel, 2004) and brand resurrections with invented traditions (Beverland & Luxton, 2005; Brown et al., 2003; Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006). Consider the TAG Heuer Targa Florio watch, inspired by the Heuer Flieger watches of the 1930s. The TAG Heuer watch draws its look from the 1930s original but has been updated with state-of-the-art technology (Chalmers, 2010). With its perfect melding of classic and modern elements, the TAG Heuer watch serves as an ideal example of a retro brand (Brown et al., 2003).

3. Understanding retro brands through the lens of value integration

By combining incompatible elements (modern and classic), retro brands may suggest an unnatural association, a kind of Jekyll-and-Hyde product with two conflicting personalities simultaneously subsisting in one body. Prior research indicates that consumer evaluations of retro brands are varied (e.g., Brown et al., 2003). Sometimes we find retro brands viewed as an uneasy balance between seemingly opposing elements such as the past and the future, the old and the new, creating consumer confusion. Other times retro brands are viewed as an equilibrium between the opposing elements. No study has empirically examined the factors that might explain such conflicting findings.

We suggest that people with different levels of VI view retro brands differently because such brands are inherently paradoxical (Beverland & Luxton, 2005; Brown et al., 2003; Leigh et al., 2006). We expect that high-VI individuals, for whom contradictory values peacefully co-exist, should welcome retro brands. As high-VI individuals are able to form cognitive links between different and conflicting values, retro brands pose less tension and should be more favorably evaluated. On the other hand, because low-VI individuals compartmentalize such values and continuously try to keep them separate, they should evaluate retro brands less favorably. Thus, we predict the following:

H2. High-VI consumers will have more favorable evaluations of retro brands than low-VI consumers.

4. The mediating role of processing fluency

Processing fluency captures the subjective feelings of ease or difficulty with which individuals process external information (Schwarz, 2004). Fluency is linked to either the physical characteristics of an item, such as its shape (perceptual fluency), or the meaning of a stimulus (conceptual fluency, Lee & Labroo, 2004). If a brand is conceptually fluent, brand-related associations come to mind more easily (Sirianni, Bitter, Brown, & Mandel, 2013). The cognitive resources required when assessing a product are lower when processing fluency is high, and fluency is highest when the product best matches the specific processing demands required by the context. By combining incompatible elements, retro brands suggest an unnatural association which consumers may have difficulty processing. Both the physical characteristics of the product (perceptual fluency) and the meanings the product conveys (conceptual fluency) are at odds in a retro brand. This inherent paradox is more pronounced for low-VI individuals, who already have a compartmentalized view of the values of traditionalism and modernism. Owing to their fragmented sense of values, low VIs have difficulty processing the retro brand information. Research shows that processing fluency is positively related to product evaluations (Shen, Jiang, & Adaval, 2010) and brand attitudes (Lee & Aaker, 2004). Thus, for low-VI consumers processing fluency difficulties should lead to unfavorable retro brand evaluations. Conversely, for high-VI consumers, a brand that combines traditionalism and modernism will not pose any processing challenge. Thus, we predict the following:

H3. Processing fluency mediates the relationship between value integration and retro brand evaluations.

To summarize, the main goal of this paper is to examine how retro brands are evaluated based on the levels of VI. Processing fluency is considered as an underlying mechanism that explains the effect of VI on retro brand evaluations. Fig. 1 summarizes the theoretical framework. Our predictions are tested using a series of experiments. Study 1 examines how VI affects consumer choice of traditional and modern brands under value-related cues. This study validates our assumption that VI is applicable to brand related outcomes. Next, Study 2 uses a controlled experiment to test how VI influences retro brand evaluations. Further, we conducted four follow-up studies to rule out alternative explanations such as the role of the product category and other potential predictor variables such as nostalgia proneness. Further,
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