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Research Dialogue

Brands as relationship partners: Warmth, competence, and in-between

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Abstract

The dialogue between social perception and consumer–brand relationship theories opens new opportunities for studying brands. To advance branding research in the spirit of interdisciplinary inquiry, we propose to (1) investigate the process of anthropomorphism through which brands are imbued with intentional agency; (2) integrate the role of consumers not only as perceivers but also as relationship agents; (3) consider important defining dimensions of consumer–brand relationships beyond warmth and competence, including power and excitement; and (4) articulate the dynamics governing warmth (intentions) and competency (ability) judgments to yield prescriptive guidance for developing popular and admired brands.

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Introduction

Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone's (this issue) application of the Stereotype Content Model from psychology to the consumer–brand context presents an exciting step forward in the study of consumers' relationships with brands. This work builds from a fundamental premise argued in Fournier (1998): that people in many ways relate to brands similarly to how they relate to people. Over the past fourteen years, numerous tests of the applicability of the relationship metaphor to brand consumption have coalesced to support the validity of this basic tenet. Consumers become emotionally attached to brands they love (Albert et al., 2008; Batra et al., 2012; Shimp & Madden, 1988; Thomson et al., 2005). They display brand loyalties that resemble marriages in their passionate commitments (Fournier & Yao, 1997; Oliver, 1999). People have flings with brands (Alvarez & Fournier, in press), derive joy from childhood friendships (Connell & Schau, in press), invest in enmities (Hogg, 1998; Luedicke et al., 2010) and rivalrous adversarial relationships (Paharia et al., 2011), lament master–slave entrapments (Miller et al., in press) and struggle with abusive relations wrought at the hands of malicious brands (Hill, 1994). Process similarities across brand and human relational spaces are also consistently supported. The same norms governing communal and exchange relationships between people shape behaviors in the brand consumption realm (Aggarwal, 2004; Aggarwal & Law, 2005). The avoidant, secure and anxious attachment styles that govern people's interactions with others shape their interactions with brands (Paulssen & Fournier, 2011; Swaminathan et al., 2009). With Kervyn et al.'s present work, and that of Aaker et al. (2010) we now have evidence that intentions (warmth) and ability (competence) are important dimensions underlying brand perception, as they are for people, stereotypes and social groups. The relationship metaphor, with appropriate contextual adaptations and adjustments (Swaminathan & Dommer, in press), has proven powerful for understanding brands.

As we think about the promise of advancing the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF), it is useful to reflect on basic relationship principles and ponder how these can be leveraged to inform the present work. First, although the BIAF assumes—as do all applications of relationship theory in consumer research—intentional agency on the part of an active, personified brand partner, theory concerning, and empirical support for, this process has yet to be put forth. Second, the BIAF considers characteristics of the brand partner as judged in terms of intentions (warmth) and ability (competence), but the

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model decidedly leaves characteristics of the actor/perceiver out. Since a relationship is a mutually co-created entity, a richer and more valid conception of consumer–brand interaction can be developed by recognizing that (at minimum) two parties come together in the brand relationship, the consumer and the brand.

A third area for reflection concerns the dimensionality of the brand relationships space. Kervyn et al.'s research builds from a respected research history in social psychology and supports the power of intentions (warmth) and ability (competence) to capture variance in the relationships people form with their brands. Crossing these dimensions yields reliable clusters of troubled brands, pitied brands, popular brands, and envied brands into which brand exemplars fall. Research on brand relationships, however, reveals greater complexity in people's brand relationships than that which is captured by the intentions and ability of the brand partner. The simplification and utility afforded by the 2 × 2 stereotype content framework comes at a cost in terms of explanatory and predictive power, especially when one considers theoretical adaptations required to accommodate the uniqueness of the context of brands. As we move forward with marketing applications, we must critically evaluate whether and how the BIAF conceptualization limits our view of brands.

Lastly, the BIAF is justly intended as a tool for brand management as Kervyn et al.'s positioning and discussion attests. In closing, we explore ways in which existing brand research and frameworks can be considered to increase the substantive utility and application of Kervyn et al.'s powerful ideas.

Bringing the brand alive

Kervyn et al.'s model—and all brand relationship work—build from the foundational assumption that brands are treated as people such that interpersonal models of perception and behavior readily apply. Kervyn and colleagues take an extreme stance on this question and pose that brands are in fact intentional agents with calculated and purposeful actions and plans. Brand intentionality is elemental to the BIAF framework: if brands do not serve as intentional agents, the BIAF becomes but a modified version of basic brand personality ideas (cf., Aaker, 1997). But brand intentionality is a tricky concept. As noted by Aggarwal (2004), the relationship metaphor may present inherent limitations since brands cannot appropriately be conceived as "human-like". It is ironic that the fundamental assumption regarding the brand as enlivened and purposeful actor remains relatively unchallenged, and troubling that this assumption has yet to be informed and validated by dedicated empirical research. Are brands animated and personified such that they perform as intentional actors, and if so, how exactly does this happen? Are all brands equal in their ability to be considered and judged as persons are judged? Are all consumers equally prone to anthropomorphize brands? Our discussion addresses these three critical questions in the spirit of informing the BIAF.

Advancing the BIAF first requires illumination of the brand-as-person metaphor and identification of the mechanisms and processes whereby intentions (warmth) and ability (competence) judgments are formed and facilitated. A key mechanism suggested by research on brand relationships that enables a brand to assume a role as an "active" and "personalized" participant in the relationship is anthropomorphism (Fournier, 1998).

Anthropomorphism involves the attribution of humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions to nonhuman actors (Epley et al., 2007). In anthropomorphizing a brand, one assumes feelings (i.e., "likes and dislikes, appetites and disinclinations, affections and antipathies"), goals (i.e., "desires and longing"), will (i.e., "desire to help or injure, to act or refrain from acting"), and "the power to act according to the prompting of these feelings and determination of will" (Gilmore, 1919, p.14). An anthropomorphized brand is by all accounts a palpable entity "having senses to be tickled, appetites to be gratified, mentality to be reckoned with, temper to be made or kept placid and amicable, and power to be turned to good account or, at least, to be prevented from acting against him" (Gilmore, 1919, p.204). Research on person-object relations suggests that people willingly and readily assign human properties and tendencies to brands (Belk, 1988; Levy, 1985; Plummer, 1985; Solomon, 1983). The uniquely-human activity of nick-naming, both at a shared cultural level (e.g., Coca-Cola is "Coke"; BMWs are "Beemers") and within individual experience (e.g., "Blueberry" the Blue Valiant and Vicki's Honda Acura, "Teggie"), provides anedoctal evidence of consumers' tendencies to anthropomorphize brands (Fournier, 1994; Pribus, 1987, October 11).

In line with the BIAF, anthropomorphizing a brand involves going beyond observable "actions" (e.g., *Comcast indiscriminately raises its prices,* or *Dove launched the real beauty campaign*) to draw inferences about the brand's unobserved personality, intentions, and motivations (e.g., *Comcast is a bully who takes advantage of my loyalty,* or *Dove cares about women*). Literature on the formation of person impressions suggests that observed behaviors are spontaneously translated into trait language, and that these traits form the basis for the evaluative concept of the person (Srull & Wyer, 1989). Buss and Craik's (1983) act frequency approach to personality suggests a process through which behavioral incidents are translated into impressions of personality disposition. Within this theoretical framework, the fundamental measure of a person's character is obtained through repeated observation of the performance of trait-relevant behaviors on the part of the actor. To illustrate, a person is judged to be competent within the act frequency perspective when, over a period of observations, s/he has displayed a high frequency of competent acts relative to the norm for that category of acts. The frequency concept of personality thus treats behavioral acts as the basic units of analysis and seeks to specify the nature of the dispositional categories that encompass those acts.

The act frequency approach can be readily extended to the brand context by formally considering marketing mix, company, and employee actions as brand behaviors and cataloging the dispositional inferences these behaviors manifest. Trait inferences from selected marketing actions can be readily postulated using the dimensions from the Big Five Personality

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