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AUTHORS

Arpita Khare
Meenakshi Handa

ARTICLE INFO

Arpita Khare and Meenakshi Handa (2009). Role of individual self-concept and brand personality congruence in determining brand choice. *Innovative Marketing* , 5(4)

RELEASED ON

Wednesday, 27 January 2010

JOURNAL

"Innovative Marketing "

FOUNDER

LLC “Consulting Publishing Company “Business Perspectives”



NUMBER OF REFERENCES

0



NUMBER OF FIGURES

0



NUMBER OF TABLES

0

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Arpita Khare (India), Meenakshi Handa (India)

Role of individual self-concept and brand personality congruence in determining brand choice

Abstract

Brands represent value to consumers in a multi-dimensional manner. They supposedly enhance the personality of the individual who uses them. Aaker (1997) emphasized that products' non-functional attributes could influence the consumers' decision to purchase. The research explores the extent to which congruence between self-concept and brand personality influences brand evaluation and purchase inclination. A primary research involving university students evaluates the individual self-concept of these consumers using the scale developed by Malhotra (1981). The respondents then evaluate the personality of one of three hypothetical brands of mobile phones, rate the brand on overall quality and indicate inclination to purchase the brand. The study does not find a relationship between self-concept congruence with brand personality and product rating for the brand for the elite and modest versions of the cell phones. However, there is a relationship between self-concept and brand personality with regard to the attention-seeking brand version amongst the youth. Brands aimed at the youth must identify and relate to the traits and personality dimensions relevant to the segment and brand communications must be designed accordingly.

Keywords: self-concept, individual personality, brand personality, congruence, Indian youth.

Introduction

In the modern day branding, brand personality has been understood by organizations to fulfill a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional function of providing an identity to the organization and enabling in managing communications effectively (Davis, 2000; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Silverstein and Fiske, 2005). Giving a personality or a human form to the products, the symbolic representation is strengthened as it assists the consumer to associate with the brand. Consumers have been said to evaluate brands based upon their self-concept and what they aspire to be. It helps in projecting the attributes of the brands so that identification with the brand becomes easy – marketers use human metaphors which have relevance with the consumers conscious and unconscious motives (Dent-Read & Szokolszky, 1993; Zalthman, 1997). The contention of most brand theorists (Temporal, 2002; Keller, 2004; Percy and Elliott, 2007) is that consumer owns the brands; as a result, the consumer looks for self-identification with the brands. For the meaning of the brand to have relevance to the consumer, the personality of the brand should embody the everyday life stories, lifestyles and pursuits of the consumers. Therefore, the meaning of brand should be coded in the context of what is relevant to the consumer to enable decoding which symbolically represents the values and beliefs, activities and interests, attitudes, aspirations and personalities of the target consumers (Holt, 1997; Kates, 2002). Research in self-concept has been directed towards understanding the consumer behavior towards products. Research posits that the self-concept of the consumer influences his assessment of the brands and his purchase (Sirgy, 1982; Belk, 1988; Malhotra, 1988; Zinkham and Hong, 1991;

Plummer, 2000 and Parker, 2009). The evaluation of the brand is perceived to be done on how well it improves the self-image of the consumer. Landon (1974) suggested that individuals show interest in a brand which is consistent with their personality and self-concept. Research suggests that individuals select brands which enable them to improve their self-image and gain greater social acceptance (Belch, 1978). "Brand personality is seen as a means for consumers to express their actual or idealized self-image" (Keller, and Richey, 2006).

In the current scenario of globalization, for most companies investing in the developing economies, youth represents an important section for brands. For those countries that were hitherto not open to global brands, expansion of international brands presents vast opportunities and understanding the youth in particular and consumers in general becomes relevant for the multinational companies. In India, the youth represents a large segment, and increased exposure to international products, media, lifestyle and entertainment is fast changing their values, aspirations and lifestyle.

In this context the research examines the role of individual self-concept in understanding the brand personality. We believed that the assessment of the brand is governed by the individuals' personality traits. The research was conducted on University post graduate and graduate students to ascertain the role individual's personality plays in perceiving the brand's personality. The students were divided into three groups of 50 each, and were presented with a hypothetical brand of mobile handset, which was given a different personality for each group. The students were shown different qualities in the brand personality through different print advertisements. They were asked to rate their own personality on the self-concept scale developed by Malhotra (1981)

and then were asked to evaluate the personality of the brand on the same scale and in the third section they gave their opinion if they would like to purchase the brand. The research design was similar to the one used by Freling and Forbes (2005) wherein they have developed a hypothetical brand of mineral water and tested it with six different personality types. We wanted to analyze the perception of the students towards evaluating a product category which was relevant to them. We selected mobile handsets after doing a preliminary research on the products, that students find more relevant with their lifestyle. The first part of the paper deals with the literature review on the role of self-concept and personality in branding decisions. The second part presents the purpose of the research. In the third part the hypotheses are proposed. The fourth part describes the research design and the methodology. The fifth part focuses on findings and implications. The final part of the paper deals with the conclusions and limitations of the research. Also, the directions for future research are proposed.

1. Literature review

1.1. Self-concept. Earlier studies in the domain of self-concept have conceptualized self-concept as a multidimensional construct (Hamm and Cundiff, 1969; Hughes and Guerrero, 1971; Guttman, 1973) which enabled a consumer to evaluate himself in the context of various social situations (Sirgy, 1980). Most studies on self-concept have explored its role in explaining product choice, purchase intention towards a brand in relation to it being congruent to individual's self-concept. The origins of self-concept theory can be traced from the theory of Cooley (1902) where he has defined self-concept as how individuals see themselves. It is important for marketers to understand the impact self-concept and social self-concept have on the purchase decisions. In most of the research done on self-concept, the underlying premise was that brand associations are developed and nurtured based on individual's self-concept (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). Brand personality symbolically has been considered as an instrument that facilitates consumer self-expression (Asker, 1997; Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Johar et al., 2005). The human traits bestowed to the brands, empower them to play a pivotal role in the life of the consumer and extend their relationship with the brand (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). Brands facilitate the consumer to re-define his image and its personality enables the consumer to perceive how well the brand's image fits to the consumer's self-concept (Aaker, 1999; Swaminathan et al, 2007; Swaminathan et al., 2008). Burris and Rempel (2004) in their self theory have stated that

possessions can become part of the social image the consumer wishes to portray in society.

Self-image refers to the perception one has about himself/herself (Grubb and Grathwhohl, 1967; Graeff, 1996) and provides us with self-esteem and how we as individuals feel about ourselves. It is the view people hold about themselves (Runyan, 1988). Research now recognizes that consumers in different situations exhibit different self-images, this relates not only to the 'actual self' but what the consumer aspires to be, which is classified as 'ideal self' (Aaker, 1999; Gould, 1991; Graeff, 1996; Sirgy, 1982, 1986; Sutherland et al., 2004, Parker, 2009). In the similar vein, there is classification of self-image based upon the 'social self' and the 'ideal social self'. Self-concept may be represented as being a multi-dimensional concept, wherein the consumer plays different roles in different situations (Blackwell et al., 2001). As individuals we are required to enact different roles with different people and situations and brands are an extension to ourselves. The brands' personality enhances or improves the self-concept of the individual. It implies that brand personality is not a concept or theory, but is developed based upon consumers of the brand (Upshaw, 1995). Research, conducted by Freling and Forbes (2005), has discussed the relevance of strong brand attributes influencing consumer purchase decisions and leading to positive perception about the brand.

1.2. Personality. Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) define personality as a clear construct which is dissimilar to the cognitive construct, skills and capabilities. Since the concept of brand personality gained acceptance in the academic and corporate circles, much research has been directed to ascertain the influence of individual personalities on evaluating brands (Levy, 1959; Kassarian, 1971; Sirgy, 1982; Plummer, 1985; Duboff, 1986; Durgee, 1988; Ogilvy, 1988; Carr, 1996; Aaker, 1997). There have been several researches devoted to studying brand personalities (Supphellen & Gronhaug, 2003; Venable et al., 2003; Okazaki, 2006). Some researches have investigated the influence of brand personality in enabling consumers to improve their self-image and encouraging self-expression (Malhotra, 1981; Belk, 1988; Kleine et al., 1993). Rajgopal (2008) posits that brand personality traits provide a symbolic meaning to the product. In strategic terms creating distinctive personalities for the brands enables companies to differentiate their products. It assists organizations to devise communication strategies, which strengthen the traits of the brand in the minds of the consumers. Some researchers have speculated the utility and functional benefits of the brand personality in terms

of developing differentiation in the market (Biel, 1993; Halliday, 1996). With cut-throat competition and all brands nearly emphasizing the similar value of proposition and functional advantages, it becomes imperative for organizations to give their brands some special ingredients for success in the market.

On similar parameters, brands are conceptualized and developed as having human personalities. Belk (1988) and Dolich (1969) have emphasized that consumers prefer brands, which symbolically represent their actual or desired personality traits. The perception of the consumer regarding the brand is influenced by his/her own personality. Park (1986) posits that perception of personality traits is inferred by the individual's physical characteristics, attitudes, values and beliefs, behavior, and demographics. Hair (1950) argues that what kind of products people shop depends largely on the perceptions of the shopper. This would mean that individuals are affected by the physical characteristics of the products as much as by the attributes and functionalities of the products. The association of the brand (whether direct or indirect) with the consumer can help the consumer in visualizing personality of the brands (Plummer, 1985). Batra et al. (1993) have contended that the personality of the brand may be associated and developed through marketing efforts like building brand associations through product attributes, category associations, brand name, logo, advertising, pricing and use of appropriate channels of distribution.

In the modern day branding, brand personality has been understood by organizations to fulfill a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional function of providing an identity to the organization and enabling in managing communications effectively (Davis, 2000; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Silverstein & Fiske, 2005). Giving a personality or a human form to the products, the symbolic representation is strengthened and it assists the consumer to associate with the brand. It helps in projecting the attributes of the brands so that identification with the brand becomes easy – marketers use human metaphors which identify with the consumers conscious and unconscious motives (Dent-Read & Szokolszky, 1993; Zalthman, 1997). The contention of most brand theorists (Temporal, 2002; Keller, 2004; Percy and Elliott, 2007) is that consumer owns the brands; as a result, the consumer looks for self-identification with the brands. For the meaning of the brand to be established with the consumer, the personality of the brand should embody the everyday life stories, lifestyles and pursuits of the consumers. Therefore, the meaning of brand should be coded in the context of what is relevant to the consumer to enable

decoding which symbolically represents the values and beliefs, activities and interests, attitudes and personalities of the target consumers (Holt, 1997; Kates, 2002). It implies that brand personality is not a concept or theory, but is developed based upon consumers of the brand (Upshaw, 1995). The personality assigned to a brand is a specialized description of the distinctive aspects of the product and is governed by the physical features of the product also (Grovers & Schoorams, 2005).

Research has found evidence that image of the consumer affects the brand's image evaluation. Consumers seek image-congruence in the purchase decisions (Grubb and Hupp, 1968; Dolich, 1969; Ericksen and Sirgy, 1989, 1992; Heath and Scott, 1998; Hong and Zinkhan, 1995). Brands can be viewed as being a part of the consumers and an extension to their personality (Belk, 1988), wherein the purchase decision is governed by how well the brand communicates the consumer's personality. Consumers purchase products that are congruent to their self-concept and enhance their self-image (Britt, 1966). The idea of incorporating the self-concept in building the image of the brand is relevant to marketers as it helps consumers identify more with the brand (Mowen and Minor, 2000).

1.3. Indian youth. Indian consumers symbolize western brands to convey success and status which enhances the emotional experience (Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Kinra, 2006; Kumar et al., 2009). Indian society has been largely collectivist in nature, where the individuals' decisions to purchase products are governed by the family or group. However, we felt that the aspirations of the Indian youth are being transformed by their becoming more aware of their needs and individual achievements. They might still be governed by family values and culture, but they are conscious of their individual identities. Increased exposure to global telecommunication networks, media and entertainment has opened new vistas in their life. It was assumed that if the self-concept of the Indian youth is getting affected by availability of new brands and products, it would have a reflection on their choice brands. As previous research indicates that consumers select brands based upon its ability to confirm with their personality or self-concept, in the same vein, we attempted to understand the perception of Indian youth in selecting a brand and how far it has a relationship with his/her self-concept. Kjeldgaard (2009) posits in her study on Danish high school youths that selection of products is based upon how well that product/brand enhances their personality and style. For most youth their appearance must connote their self-image and style; similarly, selection of products/brands must be done with the same diligence.

2. Purpose

The purpose of the research was two-fold. At the first level, it was directed towards ascertaining how self-concept of Indian youth influences their evaluations regarding cell phone brand personality and whether there exists a congruency between the self-image and the brand-image. At the second level, through developing three different brand personalities for the cell phone, we attempted to identify which brand personality has greater degree of relevance amongst the youth. As it has been established through earlier research that brands may be considered as an extension to the consumers personality (Belk, 1988) and consumers seek image-congruence in their purchases (Grubb and Hupp, 1968; Dolich, 1969; Hogg et al., 2000; Freling and Forbes, 2005; Parker, 2009), we attempted to identify the brand personality traits more relevant for young consumers while purchasing a cell phone. The different personalities given to the cell-phone brands were elite, modest, and attention-seeking. Based on the literature review three hypotheses were established.

3. Hypotheses

Malhotra (1988) posits that self-concept or self-image motivates behavior of the consumers and consumers evaluate brands based upon their own personality (Duboff, 1986; Durgee, 1988; Ogilvy, 1988; Carr, 1996; Aaker, 1997). Cohen (1989, p. 127) posits that product as self-extension of the consumer is apparent in the linkage existing between self-concept and possessions and possessions symbolize self in most cases (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Thus:

H₁: There is a relationship between self-image congruency with a brand and rating of the brand in the cell phone category.

Consumers are motivated to purchase a brand which has high degree of congruency with their self-image (Hogg et al., 2000; Freling and Forbes, 2005; Parker, 2009). The purchase decision towards a brand is primarily governed by the desire to seek conformity with the self-concept. Products, which fit into the self-concept of the consumers, would have high probability of being accepted. However, as research posits that self-concept is multi-dimensional construct and enables consumers to interact in different situations, a brand would be selected according to its relevance of fitting into particular situations. This is based upon the concept of multiple-selves an individual possesses (Sirgy et al., 1997, 2000; Blackwell et al., 2001; Govers and Schoormans, 2005) and his/her aspirations to improve his/her self-image. It would be important for marketers to understand the difference between

actual and ideal self-image (Phau and Lo, 2004) and offer brands that help in bridging the gap. Thus:

H₂: There is a relationship between self-image congruency with a brand and willingness to purchase a brand in the cell phone product category.

Research demonstrates that the self-schemata of the consumers influence their perceptions towards brands and they evaluate brands according to their personality (Sentis and Markus, 1986). In the same vein, the greater the self-congruency is the greater the emotional attachment with the brand will be. (Blackston, 1992; Fournier, 1998; Taylor et al., 2000). This would entail brand loyalty and strong attachment (Malhotra, 1981, and 1988) leading to positive word-of-mouth publicity about the brand. Thus:

H₃: There is a relationship between self-image congruency with a brand and willingness to recommend the brand to others in the cell phone product category.

4. Research methodology

The sample for the research was selected from University students studying in undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The age group of the sample was between 18-24 years. Random sampling technique was used for collecting data.

The first stage of the study involved identification of a product category relevant to the target respondents. This was done by asking a sample of postgraduate students about the products, which at the current stage in their lives were likely to be involved in the purchase decision process. Cell phones were identified as one of the more frequently named product categories. To administer the test, structured questionnaire was used. The respondents were approached in their classrooms and were shown a fictitious cell phone brand with a personality (Modest, sophisticated and attention-seeking). They were asked to fill up a questionnaire stating their views about the cell phone personality and whether they would be interested to purchase it. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: the first section comprised self-concept scale of Malhotra (1981) and the students were asked to fill in their perceptions about their self. The second section contained modified version of Self-concept scale questions for the product's personality. The third section contained questions related to whether they would be interested to purchase the cell phone and recommend it to others. Each group of students was presented with a different model of the cell phone so that they could not make comparison with other personality type.

These descriptions conformed to a sophisticated personality (48 respondents), an attention-seeking personality (52 respondents) and a modest personality (43 respondents). The respondents then rated the brand quality on a five-point scale and indicated whether they would like to purchase such a brand or recommend it to their friends. The solid distance formula (Sirgy and Danes, 1982) was used to determine the congruency between perceived brand personality and self-concept:

$$D_j^k = \sum \sqrt{(S_j^i - P_j^i)^2} t = 1,$$

where D_j^k is the overall linear discrepancy between the j th consumer self image and her/his perception of image of the K th brand; I is the specific image components used to assess both brand and self-image; S_j^i is the j th consumer's self-perception of

the i th image component; P_j^i is the j th consumer's brand perception of the i th image component.

For each of the brands the difference in mean distance between self-concept and brand personality for the respondents inclined to purchase the product was compared with those not wanting to purchase the product as was the mean ratings for brand quality by the two groups. A correlation between self-concept and brand personality congruence and brand quality ratings was also undertaken.

5. Findings and discussion

Table 1 presents the results of the correlation between mean congruence between self-concept and brand-personality and product ratings for the various versions of cell phones used for the study.

Table 1. Mean congruence between self-concept and brand personality: Pearson correlation

Product version			
Elite		Mean distance	Brand rating
	Mean distance	1	
	Brand rating	.240	1
Attention seeking		Mean distance	Brand rating
	Mean distance	1	
	Brand rating	.412**	1
Modest		Mean distance	Brand rating
	Mean distance	1	
	Brand rating	-.284	1

Note: ** Correlation significant at 0.01 level.

There is no significant relationship between self-concept congruence with brand personality and product rating for the brand for the elite and modest versions of the cell phones. However, there is a positive and significant relationship between mean distance and self-rating for attention-seeking brand version. This signifies that the greater the distance between the product personality and the self-concept for the attention-seeking characteristic, the higher the attractiveness for the product for the category of respondents under study. The findings of this study,

thus, support H_1 with respect to attention seeking versions of the cell phone category, and do not support it with respect to other versions.

Table 2 presents a comparison between mean brand ratings by respondents who indicated a willingness to buy the particular version of the product with respondents who said that they would not buy the version. As can be expected, respondents willing to buy the brand rated the product version as significantly better than those not willing to buy it.

Table 2. Comparison of mean brand ratings for potential buyers and non-buyers: t-test

Product version	Purchase inclination	No.	Mean brand ratings		t value	Sig.
			M	S.D.		
Elite	Would like to buy	29	3.86	0.69	3.012	0.004**
	Would not like to buy	18	3.22	0.73		
Attention seeking	Would like to buy	25	3.68	1.11	2.408	0.020*
	Would not like to buy	25	3.04	0.74		
Modest	Would like to buy	15	3.93	0.80	9.507	0.000**
	Would not like to buy	25	2.56	1.12		

Notes: ** Significant at .01 level; * Significant at .05 level.

Table 3 presents the results of the comparison of the mean congruence between self-concept and

brand-personality for respondents indicating willingness to buy the model with those not

wanting to buy the model. The findings of this study, thus, support H₂ with respect to attention seeking versions of the cell phone category and do not support it with respect to other versions. This is in line with the research done earlier that consumers prefer brands, which symbolically project a better image, thus, enhancing their actual self-concept (Grub and Grathwhohl, 1967; Sirgy, 1986; Belk, 1988; Aaker, 1999; Parker, 2009). Rogers (1959) posits that individuals are motivated towards maintaining and improving their self-concept. Thus, the decision to purchase the cell-phone with an attention-seeking personality may be

attributed to a desire to improve the self-image and look smart in social circles. The endeavor of consumers to aspire to an ideal state and purchase of brands is driven largely to improve the actual self-image and reduce the gap between ‘actual and ideal’ selves. The greater the congruence between brand personality and the consumer's ideal/actual self-image is, the higher the acceptability of the brand will be (Kressmann et al., 2006). It may be because the consumer is able to reduce the discrepancies that exist between his/her actual and ideal self-image by the purchase of the brand and it enhances his/her self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979).

Table 3. Comparison of mean congruence between self-concept and brand personality for potential buyers and non-buyers: t-test

Product version	Purchase inclination	No.	Mean distance		t value	Sig.
			M	S.D.		
Elite	Would like to buy	29	8.30	2.80	0.512	0.611
	Would not like to buy	19	8.35	2.31		
Attention seeking	Would like to buy	25	10.79	3.04	2.897	0.006**
	Would not like to buy	25	8.59	2.27		
Modest	Would like to buy	15	1.89	1.06	1.703	0.097
	Would not like to buy	25	2.64	1.55		

Note: ** Significant at .01 level.

Table 4 presents a comparison of self-concept and brand personality congruence between respondents who were likely to recommend the product and respondents who were not inclined to recommend the product to others. There is no significant difference between the two groups. It

is possible that while recommending the product to others, the respondents may be considering the fit between the others personality and the brand personality along with other factors. The study does not find evidence to support Hypothesis H₃.

Table 4. Comparison of mean congruence between self-concept and brand personality for respondents inclined to recommend versus respondents inclined not to recommend brand: t-test

Product version	Inclination to recommend	No.	Mean distance		t value	Sig.
			M	S.D.		
Elite	Would recommend	32	8.30	2.80	0.065	0.948
	Would not recommend	16	8.35	2.31		
Attention seeking	Would recommend	38	9.94	2.93	1.091	0.281
	Would not recommend	12	8.90	2.65		
Modest	Would recommend	15	1.87	1.06	1.703	0.097
	Would not recommend	25	2.64	1.55		

The evaluation and purchase of brands by consumers is based upon its having congruence with the self-construct of the consumers. The higher the degree of congruence a brand has with the consumers' personality and how he/she perceives himself/herself, the higher is the likelihood that the brand will get acceptance with the consumer. In the case of youths, the primary motive is to appear smart, modern and be a part of the global youth community. Therefore, the brands that personify youthfulness, debonair-looking, enthusiastic, chic and classy would have greater acceptability. They do not wish too much sophistication or economic looking products; they might not enhance their self-concept in social settings. A brand, which captures

the attention of their peer group and gets them recognition and acclaim for their choice, would have greater congruency with their personality (Keller, 1998; Patterson, 1999). The more a brand fits with the individual's self-concept, the more loyalty the consumer would have towards the brand (Hayes et al., 2000). Marketers can use the self-concept framework of the youth to devise the advertising and marketing strategies for targeting them.

Conclusion. Limitations and directions for future research

Though the study contributes to the understanding of the relationship between self-concept and brand personality, there are a number of issues that need

to be addressed in subsequent research. Though a multi-item measure of self-concept was employed, the study focused on the actual self-image of respondents. As the study suggests, consumers may respond to brands from one or more of several selves, such as the ideal self and the ideal social self.

Secondly, only three types of brand personalities have been taken up for study. Further research

designs need to incorporate a more complete personality model, such as the Big Five. Thirdly, the research is based on one product category – cell phones. It is possible that consumer response to self-concept and brand personality congruence may differ for different categories of products. Finally, extending the research to other consumer segments would lead to a better understanding of the self-concept brand personality relationship.

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