The Effect of Self-Construal on the Relationship Between Self-Congruence and Brand Attachment

Emily Rohrbach

October 15, 2015
INTRODUCTION

Some firms market to our “ideal” selves while others market to our “actual” selves. In fact, many companies are shifting from aspirational to more realistic marketing strategies. Unilever is an example of a company that has successfully implemented realistic marketing in an industry where cosmetic companies have historically communicated to consumers that their products will help them to achieve their “ideal” selves. Unilever’s transition to using average looking models to advertise its Dove line has proven to be a strategic marketing tactic that has appealed to the consumer’s “actual” self-concept and lead to strong emotional connections with the Dove brand. Meanwhile, many prominent cosmetic companies, such as Chanel, are continuing to engage in aspirational marketing. Chanel’s Summer 2015 campaign, “Dive Into Summer” showcased airbrushed models with immaculate jaw lines and volumptuous lips.

A valuable question concerning company managers is when to channel marketing toward the consumer’s “ideal” vs. “actual” self. This is an important issue to address because a stream of research shows that when consumers find a match between a brand and their self, they are more likely to form attachments with the brand (Park et al 2010; Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, Nyffenegger, 2011; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich and Iacobucci, 2010). The stronger the connection, the more likely the consumer is to go to greater measures to continue the relationship and promote the brand to others (Park et al 2010; Aron and Smollan 1992). Thus, a firm’s ability to foster strong attachments between the brand and the consumer leads to higher brand loyalty.

Past research has looked at how self-congruence impacts emotional attachment and found that when a brand appeals to the Western consumer’s “actual” self, brand attachment is stronger (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, Nyffenegger, 2011). However, research has yet to examine how different cultures would respond to this question of which self-concept appeal leads to stronger
brand connections. Would marketing to East Asian consumers’ “actual” self also lead to stronger brand attachment or would aspirational marketing be more effective? If the latter, could a difference in self-construal (interdependent vs. independent) be contributing to this dichotomy?

While prior research examines the impact of self-cohesiveness on emotional brand attachment to determine whether companies should be marketing their brands more toward the consumer’s “actual” or “ideal” self, research has yet to look at how disparities in self-construal affect this relationship. A question that remains is whether there is a significant relationship between self-construal, self-congruence, and emotional brand attachment. My cross-cultural study comparing consumers from the East and West will give companies the ability to discriminate between the varied impacts of self-congruence (“actual” vs. “ideal”) on emotional brand attachment across different cultures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Attachment

Brand attachment is the strength of the bond between the brand and the consumer (Park et al. 2010). Understanding how emotional brand attachment arises is a valuable research topic given that such connections lead to greater customer loyalty and profitability (Park et al. 2010). In addition, consumers that are more emotionally attached to a brand are more likely to progress to more reciprocal relationships with the brand (Aron and Smollan 1992). In other words, the ability for consumers to conceptualize a brand as part of their self and to have salient thoughts and feelings about a brand makes them more likely to expend greater resources of their own. In
fact, the stronger the attachment to a brand, the more difficult the behavior the consumer will be willing to display in order to maintain the brand relationship (Park et al. 2010).

In general, research on consumer-brand relationships has shown that individuals are inherently motivated to incorporate brands into their self-concept (Aron, Fisher, Mashek, Strong, Li, & Brown, 2005), and the more a brand expands into the realm of the “self,” the stronger the connection formed between the consumer and that brand. That is, the more consumers share salient thoughts and feelings with a brand, the more likely they are to form brand attachment. In fact, researchers have found that an emotional brand attachment cannot form in the absence of the consumer’s self-concept (Park et al. 2010). Therefore, when analyzing emotional brand attachment, it is advantageous to do so through the lens of “self-congruence” theory.

The “self” can be further broken down into the “actual” and the “ideal” self. The “actual” self refers to the individual’s view of who they realistically are, while the “ideal” self refers to the individual’s concept of who they aspire to be (Sirgy, 1982). Self-congruence theory takes a multidimensional approach in showing that both the “actual” and the “ideal” self can affect emotional brand attachment where self-congruence is a fit between the consumer’s self and the brand’s personality or image (Sirgy, 1982). Brand personality is the idea that consumers attribute human traits to a brand based on their perception of that brand (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality enables consumers to express their self-concept while providing a sense of comfort when the brand aligns with their self-concept, resulting in self-congruence (Aaker, 1999). Research shows that when consumers find a match between their “self” and a given brand, they tend to like the brand more and, therefore, purchase it more.

A fit between the consumer’s perception of their “actual” self and the brand’s personality results in actual self-congruence, while a fit between the consumer’s perception of their “ideal”
self and the brand’s personality results in ideal self-congruence. Actual self-congruence is rooted in self-verification theory, which suggests that people are motivated to verify, validate and solidify their existing self-concepts (Swann, 1983). These types of consumers embrace brands that support their existing self-concept and avoid those that threaten it. On the other hand, ideal self-congruence is a manifestation of self-enhancement theory, which suggests that people behave in ways that will enhance their feelings of self-worth (Sedikides & Strube 1997).

Knowing whether to appeal to the “ideal” or “actual” self-concept of certain consumers under different situations is highly influential on the marketing efforts of companies and presents an opportunity to generate more revenue going forward (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer & Nyffenegger, 2011).

The decrease in conventional sources of meaning and self-identity due to postmodern market attributes resulting from globalization, deterritorialization, and hyperreality has made consumers more actively conscious of authenticity (Arnould and Price, 2000). Research has shown that authentic branding is becoming increasingly important and that personal goals influence judgments of authenticity (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Simply, different personal goals and standards lead to discrepancies in what consumers interpret as real vs. fake. The remaining question is whether the vast majority of consumers are in fact developing more of a preference for authentic rather than aspirational marketing and, if not, what can account for that discrepancy.

Prior studies have generally looked at how self-concept impacts brand attachment and, in turn, brand loyalty. Research has found that brand loyalty plays an integral role in enhancing brand equity, resulting in various marketing advantages, such as reduced marketing costs, more new customers, and higher repeat purchases (Aaker, 1991). Traditional consumer-brand
relationship research has highlighted the significant value of understanding the emotional component of consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998). This is largely due to the fact that consumers tend to develop emotional attachments with only a select number of brands (Thomson, MacInnis and Park, 2005).

The idea that consumers are capable of cultivating strong emotional attachments to brands is especially important to managerial practitioners as attachment theory indicates that the nature of a consumer’s interaction with an object is largely determined by the strength of the emotional attachment to said object (Bowlby, 1979). Just like individuals are more committed to and likely to invest in and make sacrifices for a person they are strongly attached to, they are likely to do the same for brands they are attached to. From a marketing perspective, brand loyalty is typically an indicator of commitment (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). Therefore, the strength of emotional attachment should predict the magnitude of consumers’ commitment to a brand (e.g., brand loyalty) (Thomson, MacInnis and Park, 2005).

Now that prior studies have shown that emotional brand attachment enhances brand loyalty, it is important to analyze what characteristics affect the development of emotional brand attachment. Past research looks at how the influence of “actual” and “ideal” self-congruence on emotional brand attachment varies depending on three moderating variables-- the consumer’s level of product involvement, self-esteem and public self-consciousness (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, Nyffenegger, 2011). When looking at each of the three moderating variables, researchers found that actual self-congruence stages a much larger impact on emotional brand attachment among high-involvement consumers when compared to low-involvement consumers. This phenomenon can be traced back to interpersonal relationship theory, which states that self-enhancement is more likely to occur when cognitive capacity is limited (product involvement is
low) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In line with interpersonal relationship theory, the study shows that consumers who have interacted with a brand a lot, and therefore have a higher cognitive capacity in regards to that brand, tend to seek cohesiveness between their “actual” rather than their “ideal” self and the brand’s personality. On the other hand, ideal self-congruence has a significantly positive effect on emotional brand attachment solely among low-involvement consumers, as their cognitive capacity is lower. Overall, the study results demonstrate that although “actual” self-congruence stages a larger impact on emotional brand attachment, aspirational branding may still lead to stronger emotional brand attachment when faced with low product involvement, self-esteem or public self-consciousness (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, Nyffenegger, 2011).

This conclusion has a lot of valuable managerial implications for companies faced with the branding challenge of creating emotional brand connections with consumers; however, this study only looked at a data set of Western consumers (Swedish). While significant research evaluates the influence of self-congruence on emotional attachment, little has been done to examine the impact of self-construal in this domain. I would like to expand upon this research by conducting a cross-cultural study on both Eastern and Western consumers in order to determine if the prior finding that “actual” self-congruence plays a larger role in creating emotional brand attachment would be supported or reverted when tested among consumers with predominantly interdependent self-construals.
Self-Construal and Brand Attachment

Due to the integral role that self-congruence plays in creating emotional brand attachment, there are strong managerial implications that could result from integrating these two prominent streams of research—self-congruence and self-construal—to develop a better understanding of brand attachment. The concept of self-construal is “how individuals make meaning of, and see themselves in relation to others” (Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005). In America, “the squeaky wheel gets the grease.” While in Japan, “the nail standing out gets pounded down.” These popularized proverbs highlight how people across different cultures have contrasting construals of themselves, others, and the interaction of the two. These divergent construals have been proven to impact, and even in some cases determine, cognition, emotion, and motivation (Angrawal & Maheswaran, 2005).

Individuals’ self-construals are typically classified as independent or interdependent when examined across cultures. Individuals in Western cultures tend to have independent self-construals, valuing distinguishing characteristics and autonomy. However, those in Eastern cultures have predominantly interdependent self-construals, which place more emphasis on viewing oneself as part of a group and promoting societal conformity.

A stream of research looks at how culture impacts the way in which individuals process information. Considerable social differences among diverse cultures affect not only their beliefs about the world, but also their cognitive processes (Nisbett, Peng, Choi and Norenzayan, 2001). Individuals can either engage in analytic perceptual processes, in which the focus is on the object independent of its context, or in holistic perceptual processes, which emphasize the relationship between the object and the context in which the object is located. Prior research found that
Westerners tend to engage in context-independent and analytic perceptual processes, while Easterners tend to engage in context-dependent and holistic perceptual processes (Nisbett and Miyamoto, 2005). Therefore, Westerners typically focus on concrete characteristics of the object irrespective of the context in which it’s in, while Easterners tend to focus on the object’s relation to its context.

Aaker and Lee (2001) examined how central processing under goal compatible conditions underlies brand affinity by performing a study that had participants evaluate a website (Welch’s Grapefruit Juice) that conveyed either promotion- or prevention-focused product benefits. Immediately after reading the website, participants were asked to answer a series of questions on seven-point scales anchored by not at all willing and very willing in order to diagnose brand affinity. Their research concluded that individuals with independent self-construals tend to be more persuaded by promotion-focused information to approach a goal, while those with interdependent self-construals are more persuaded by prevention-focused information that fulfills an avoidance goal (Aaker and Lee, 2001).

Previous research has also looked at the relationship between construal level theory (CLT) and consumer behavior. CLT states that individuals’ representations of stimuli that are psychologically distant are high level and abstract, while stimuli that are psychologically near are low level and concrete (Dhar and Kim, 2007). Therefore, people with abstract mindsets access high level construals of available information, while people with concrete mindsets tend to access lower level construals of available information (Liberman and Trope, 1998; Trope and Liberman, 2003). Kim and John (2008) found that this disparity in low vs. high construal levels affects the relative importance of perceived extension fit in evaluating brand extensions. In their study, Kim and John evaluated perceived brand extension fit with Nike and New Balance across
undergraduates with varying self-construal levels with running insoles serving as the good fit and a treadmill serving as a moderate-fit brand extension. Respondents were shown a description of one of the brand extensions from either Nike or New Balance and then rated their evaluations of the extension on three 7-point scales (poor/excellent, inferior/superior, undesirable/desirable). Finally, participants judged the fit of the brand extension with the brand on two 7-point scales (inconsistent/consistent and atypical/typical). They ultimately concluded that consumers with high-level construals place more importance on perceived extension fit in evaluating brand extensions, whereas consumers with low-level construals do not evaluate high and moderate fit extensions any differently, unless the importance of using fit perceptions is primed (Kim and John, 2008).

Past studies have analyzed how self-construal affects brand commitment and marketing persuasiveness. Researchers have found that brand-situation congruity, when brand preference increases due to a congruent brand personality, is stronger for interdependent self-construal individuals. Furthermore, the study concluded that the effect of self-construal on brand-situation congruity is intensified when consumers hold weak commitment to the target brand (Sung, Choi and Tinkham, 2010). These findings indicate that self-construal impacts the extent to which self-congruence leads to stronger brand preferences, but does not look at which type of self-congruence appeal (“actual” vs. “ideal”), is more effective in creating emotional brand attachment when tested against different self-construals (independent vs. interdependent).

My study will continue to operate under the assumption that consumers use products to define themselves and interact with certain brands in order to communicate their self-concept (Aaker 1999). However, I plan to improve upon the comprehensiveness of the prior study by representing both Eastern and Western cultures in my sample set. This approach will allow me to
conclude whether self-construal (independent/interdependent) significantly impacts the stronger relationship between actual self-congruence and emotional brand attachment given high product involvement, self-esteem and public self-consciousness. Then, I will be able to summarize my findings and make cross-cultural conclusions that will help companies to navigate through the increasingly complex nature of managing brand relationships today.

Given my research, I posit that self-construal theory significantly affects the relative importance of different perspectives of self-congruence (“actual” vs. “ideal” self) on fostering emotional brand attachment. Based off the literature, I hypothesize that consumers with more independent self-construals (Western culture) are more concerned with authenticity and therefore, aspirational marketing would not be as effective. However, I would expect this to vary across a spectrum of public consciousness where if public consciousness is high and the consumer maintains an independent self-construal, then marketing that appeals to the consumer’s “actual” self will lead to more emotional brand attachment. I would expect the public consciousness of an interdependent consumer to be lower and for appeals to their “ideal” self to result in stronger brand connections. Ignoring moderating variables, I posit that when keeping products constant, marketing to the “actual” self will be more effective among consumers with independent self-construals, while marketing to the “ideal” self will prove to be more effective among those with interdependent construals.
Bibliography


