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Consuming Identity: Impact of Brand Personality and Self-Concept on Consumer Behaviour in B2C Markets — A Conceptual Literature Review Using MUJI

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Abstract. The present-day businesses are becoming more of a cross of the functional usefulness of their consumer (B2C) market not just in identity, symbolic meaning, and psychological self definition. The article relies on the consumer psychology and brand literature in a quest to identify the interrelations between the brand personality, self concept and self brand consistency in influencing identity driven consumption. The article integrates the basic principles of symbolic consumption and self extension with the newest findings of digital self signals with the discussion being that a brand is a symbolic resource whereby people negotiate authenticity, social belonging and self coherence as a mechanism of identity empowerment.This article lacks empirical test but uses MUJI as conceptual example on how minimalism and anti brand strategy are the two ways of identity empowerment. MUJI expressly shuns conventional logos and obvious brand statements, but instead, the representational emphasis is placed on how it is interpreted by consumers so that it can be an adaptable source of identity rather than some form of prescribed identity. It is in this sense that restraint and understatement can provide an outlook to identity expression, which to a large extent challenges the presumption that the expression of identity is largely based on popularity or on high profile brands. Through highlighting these strained relationships, this article assists in a more specific explanation of how the brands engage in the current identity process involved in the building of identity within the present B2C market.

Keywords: Brand personality, Self-concept, Self–brand congruence, Identity-driven consumption, Minimalist branding

1. Introduction

With the B2C market, consumption is less about satisfying the utilitarian needs, but more of making statements of identity, values as well as psychological desires. Consumers are not just experiencing brands based on their functional performance today, although they also experience them based on how they can express themselves or the way they wish to be expressed in terms of their symbolic performance. This change has been hastened by the digital environment, with consumer behavior being transparently seen, selectively evident, and interpreted in the social networks as a signal of identity. Whereas the fact of this further change has been largely established, how exactly certain

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brand attributes are defining identity oriented consumer processes in everyday markets, has not been fully revealed yet [1].

The rise in the popularity of identity based consumption has brought forth various issues in consumer psychology which are interrelated. What are the ways the consumer views a particular brand that it has psychological meaning? How does a brand integrate its self concept rather than being an choice object? Why do certain brands appear more to be an everlasting union with the consumers, whereas others may not appear to be so? Despite the fact that existing studies have touched upon several areas of these problems, tensions abound on how symbolic meanings are constructed, bargained, and sustained, especially on the Internet where identity is constructed in an unremitting, open and perpetual fashion that is open to consistent social critique.

A thorough research in this article examines the notion of brand personality, self-concept, self-brand consistency, and identity signals. This article is not aimed at a competent review or empirical test, but the attempt to clarify the connection of these structures onto each other and the influences they create on consumer behavior in modern markets B2C. These theories are the basic symbolic consumption theory and self-extension theory [2-5]. Current studies build upon this study by examining identity processes within the sphere of online intermediaries and social interactions [6-9].

As an example to explain how identity driven consumption is applied in reality, this article presents an example of MUJI, a Japanese minimalist brand that is defined by anti-branding spirit. MUJI is not analyzed as an object to evaluate the rate of objectivity because it is theoretically informative to clarify the process of object-identity formation. MUJI emphasizes the explanatory contribution of consumers to meaning construction by reducing the logos and unambiguous brand names, and permitting products to serve as open sources of identity as opposed to dictatorial sources of identity. Past research has indicated that MUJI aesthetics was minimal and assisted identity discourses based on authenticity, calmness, conscious living [10,11], the brand is an apt case study in understanding the working of brand personality in restraint and the correlation of restraint with consumer self-concept in the modern markets.

2. Theoretical foundations

2.1. Consumer meaning-making and brand personality

Five dimensional framework used by Ak sincerity, excitement, ability, complexity and solidity continues to influence in building empirical research but later studies have doubted their cultural applicability and applicability to distinct categories.

The recent scholarly studies highlighted the strategic role of brand personality in a more saturated and digitized market. Eisend and Stockberg Sauer have shown that brand personality that is well expressed provides differentiation and consumer-involvement, in a situation in which functional differences are hard to sustain [6]. Equally, Su and Tong have demonstrated that brand personality can amplify the participation in the brand communities online particularly in situations where there is perceived consistency between the brand features and how the consumer defines his/her symbolic self [12]. Kumar et al. followed the same line of research by exemplifying how certain dimensions of personality influence the behavior in the process of the customer all the way to the end, which influences not just the brand preferences but also search activities, decision-making processes and post purchase involvement [13].

The conceptualization of brand personality can be made one way of how the large creative process operates by which consumers integrate the brand into their identity. To satisfy identity narratives based on situational factors and social context, customers are selective in using brand

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personality to promote them, instead of passively ascribing brand qualities. This explicatory dimension suggests the effectiveness of brand personality is not just in the apparentality of features, but in the allowing a narrow no less than allowing consumers the room to adjust the brand meaning according to the changing definitions of the self.

2.2. Self-concept and the extended self

Self concept is the total amount of thoughts and feelings of an individual concerning his or her identity. During consumer research, the long-standing understanding of this idea has been in correlation to material wealth, which functions as a practical object and at the same time as a symbolic object carrier of meaning. The theory of extended self innovation suggested by Belk proposes that property is constituted as part of identity formation in which people can construct themselves, reveal, and sustain a consistent sense of self about what they possess and consume.

The view will be further expounded by future literature through focusing on the social and symbolic aspects of consumption. With more definitions of self being represented by consumer preferences, there is an increment in relevance of products and brand to self definition. It is the ability to express qualities like propensities and values of morality, authenticity, and belonging to the group that makes property the means by which consumers express their identities, according to Ferraro et al., in symbolic consumption as the stage point in the modern market place identity construction [1]. According to this perspective, consumption is expressive, and also relational, something that is guided by anticipated social accounts.

These dynamics are also worsened by the digital media environment. Platform based and social media consumption has amplified the visibility of brand decisions, result in identity expression continuity as well as publicly judged. Chernev and Blair made a distinction between internal self signals and external signals, in which consumers confirm the identity of their self-concept by relying on internal self signals and make claims to others using external signals [7]. The processes tend to be observed concurrently in the digital space because brands are simultaneously a psychological reflection and a means of social performance to display identity.

The self-determination theory is an extra dimension as it connects close consumer decisions with fundamental psychological needs which are autonomy, ability and relevance [5]. Brands that appeal to these needs can facilitate coherence of identity, particularly where a high number of social comparisons and feedback are involved. Simultaneously, it remains unclear nowadays whether this coherence constantly stabilizes or creates pressure to ensure constant identity performance in different settings. This ambiguity signifies the need to consider self-concept as negotiated and an ongoing process in consumer behavior, but not a stable structure.

2.3. Self–brand congruence

Self-Brand congruence explains that it is the perceived consistency of self-image against that of companies in the brand personality by consumers. It is one of the most popular means that the symbolic brand meaning can be converted to consumer attitudes and their behavior. As consumers perceive that what they feel about themselves or what type of person they would like to be would be a perfect fit to the brand image, it becomes more likely that the brand will be considered as having a personal sense of relevancy as well as emotional meaning.

Self brand consistency has been positively associated with positive relationship results in a number of empirical studies. The studies have revealed that consistency can be an indicator of brand liking, brand loyalty and brand advocacy behavior in online contexts [8,9,14]. Notably, these

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influences do not just apply to real self harmony, but ideal self harmony to a great extent. It means that ideal identity projects are frequently represented through the brand in a symbolic way. Hence, the consumers can favor brands that reflect the desired characteristics in the sense that they do not necessarily stem in the consumer present self-concept.

The self brand consistency effect appears to be increased by the digital consumption environment. Consumers on the social networking site can gain more insight into how other people perceive brand decisions, and it is important to note that identity recognition is critical in the visual orientation setting. The brands are becoming a symbol of identity and less the hint of preference as consumption becomes a thoughtful process of identity creation. The perceived consistency, in this instance, can be considered the stronger influencer of attitude commitment and expressive behavior.

Simultaneously, self brand consistency is not an exclusively unidirectional and always-good process. Even though alignment can improve psychological coherence, it can also confine the ability to express identity by providing support to limited scripts or scripts that society should have. Such a strained relationship indicates that consistency is to be conceived not as a static or generally good state, but as dynamic and environmentally dependent and as shaped on the one hand by identity goals and social environments that are in a state of constant flux and change.

2.4. Modern debates of identity-based consumption

According to recent scholarship, there are numerous debates, which were not resolved within the context of identity-driven consumption. A remarkable conflict relates to the relations between authenticity and curation in modern consumer self-presentation. As much as consumers would be voicing a desire towards authenticity in their selection of a brand, digital spaces would also promote a well-maintained and carefully designed presentation of identity. This becomes contentious regarding whether, authenticity is still an embodied psychological experience or is becoming more of a performative process controlled by visibility, metrics of engagements, and social feedback.

According to Chernev and Blair, consumers tend to become attracted to brands that enable them to engage in subtle and in-your-face identity signaling [7]. In that view, authenticity can indeed serve as a seemingly effortless display of the self, though it is usually well-restrained. These dynamics make it hard to conceive of the traditional conceptions of self-verification, because consumers are not using brands to only represent who they are, but also so as to justify a socially achievable and desirable self-concept. It is still not entirely clear what constitutes actual expression of self and what is a strategic management of identity then.

A second argument is on the dangers of overt emotional closeness to the brands. On the one hand, the presence of strong self-brand alignment can promote the psychological congruence, however, on the other hand, it can also help to obscure the boundary between individual identity and various commercial organizations. Scholars warn that this kind of alignment can make one vulnerable emotionally especially when there is a change in the meaning of the brand or where access to a brand is interrupted. With the digital forms of mediation in which the identity performances are constantly subjected to the comparison and assessment, those risks might be increased even more.

3. MUJI as an example of identity-driven consumption

3.1. Minimalist brand personality at MUJI

MUJI has been mentioned as anti brand due to its conscious not using logos and overt public signature ascendancy [11]. This is a strategic limiting factor that diminishes the normative brand

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meaning and places a burden of interpretation on the consumer. MUJI lacks a clear identity proposal, rather it offers a rather neutral symbolic system, in which customers can construct their meaning. In this regard, brand personality is not an assertional phenomenon, but rather an absence, which simplicity is the characteristic feature of the symbolism.

This approach underscores the other form of the brand personality expression. The presence of MUJI as a position allows consumers to create their own explanations as opposed to trying to convey a strong or unique identity story. The quality of minimalism perhaps is especially appealing to individuals who appreciate independence and psychological understanding, which implies that minimalism is actually an identity resource due to the fact that it does not impose meaning.

3.2. Meaningful consumption and identity perception in MUJI

MUJI has introduced intentional living, minimalism and mindfulness forms of identity expression. These orientations of identity have been in harmony with more psychological needs to control emotions, independence and equilibrium, which is gaining prominence in the modern consumer context. Guo and Sun indicate that minimalist aestheics has the potential to improve psychological clarity and self coherence, which makes it possible to discuss the emotionality of a minimalist design [10].

Moreover, the visual language used by MUJI is very minimalistic, preventing consumers to be too close to excessive consumerism. Recalling not to be overemphasized, using antagonistic brands would imply the message of restraint in morality and rejection of overconsumption to the customer without ever stating that it is anti consumption. Such properties, according to Belk, do not represent the status symbols; they represent inconspicuous extensions of the self - objects that facilitate expression of identity but are consistent with everyday activities.

Such kind of symbolic consumption means that signs of identity may not be necessarily based on visible and overstating. Quite on the contrary, even nuance and restraint can be used as significant symbols. This is the reason why MUJI is an example of achieving identity driven consumption by deliberately not saying or not seeing things, as opposed to communicating explicitly on the brand.

3.3. Self–brand congruence of MUJI consumers

Empirical studies indicate that consumers with simplicity and introspection and emotional composure have high consistency with minimalist brands. These customers as observed by Zhang and Li were characterized by ranking above average in terms of self brand consistency which ultimately leads to loyalty and continued activity [9]. Thus, aesthetic and philosophical positioning of MUJI appears to be highly effective and aligned with real and ideal concept of self of the key consumer unit.

According to one of the previous studies, consistency might not be enhanced with repetitive symbolic emphasis, but, instead, with hedonistic stresses with which brand object turns into self daily experience [8].

4. Discussion

Brand personality, self-concept, and self brand consistency have become more significant because of the integration, which identifies identity building as the significant part of modern consumer behavior formation. Brand is not merely a cognitive shortcut in the making of decisions, but it is more of a symbolic platform that people use to haggle authenticity, social belonging and

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psychological coherence. Nevertheless, the body of literature that was consulted in this paper suggests that these mechanisms are non-homogenous and issue free. Branding as a form of identity seems to be dynamic, incidental, and driven by more general social and technological situations.

The classic example of MUJI emphasizes identity as a phenomenon, which takes place in the minor but unobtrusive manner of consumption. Through reducing overt symbolic articulations, MUJI gives consumers liberty of interpretation so that the meaning of a brand can be absorbed within their self-perception without it having to be pronounced publicly in any way. Nonetheless, this transparency also brings about the concern of inconsistency in the consumer explanations. Though a consumers would possibly find minimalist brand experiences very free and accommodating to the spirit of freedom some feared feeling ambiguous or not directed. This shows that the relationship between the openness and the identity security is tense and needs to be treated with closer theoretical and empirical focus.

These dynamics are increased by the digital environment. On the one hand, they have increased possibilities of identity manifestation and exploration. Conversely, they are putting more pressure on uniformity, publicity and inter-personal identification. Symbolic consumption can turn itself into a form of expression which is a resource and is thus much more expressive and also may turn into a resource which is more of a continuous requirement as it becomes continuous and publicly rated. In this case, the brand that is suggesting coherence or calmness can simultaneously reduce and increase identity related stress.

These observations indicate a more general theoretical interpretation identity motivated consumption cannot be interpreted only in the terms of consistency or coherence, but also in terms of negotiation and tension. A brand consumer relationship can facilitate self coherence and constrain identity exploration particularly through an algorithmically enhanced or symbolically enforced socially approved symbolic meaning. It is important to realize this duality in order to move forward models of identity based consumption concept in the absence of linear or consistent positive accounts.

The weakness of this article consists in its conceptual focus and debate based on the existing literature. Even though this methodology provides theoretical unity among various areas of research, it fails to put into focus the implicit or unconscious aspects of identity that might exceed the reflective consciousness of the consumers. This limitation can be overcome in future studies which incorporate behavioral experiments or neuroscience or digital trace analysis in order to examine the formation of identity based meaning and its practical implementation.

The other constraint is connected to the possible psychological stress connected with the continuous identity management. Majority of available literature implicitly believes that both consumption as a means of expressing identity is adaptive and fulfilling. But due to the tendency of consumers to plan their identities across various online platforms, identity work can be tedious and even paradoxical. In as much as the identity dissonance or a concept like identity fatigue is associated with how well the consumer comprehends the long-term relationships and consumption of a given brand, these have not yet been examined fully. The relationship between identity motivated consumption and emotional consequences may be regulated by social comparison intensity and self-monitoring tendencies as well as platform level visibility pressure as the subject of the future research.

Lastly, the theoretical consequences of the minimalism and anti branding strategies should be expanded upon further. MUJI brands do play down their overt symbolic meanings; this rise to a strategic lack on its own is a clear identity mark. The current brand symbol models are primarily based on popularity and excellent performance and do not completely provide how the neutral and

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restrained branding or de branding strategies create identity resonance. Thus, the concept should be refined, and anti branding should be incorporated into a wider structure of proprietary relations with brands, particularly as minimalist brands gain popularity in the world market.

5. Conclusion

The paper will examine the inter-relationship between brand personality and self-concept with self brand consistency as it affects the consumer behaviour in the modern B2C market. It has been analyzed that brands are becoming symbolic resources, via which individuals communicate a sense of who they are, how they manage the self presentation, and they are seeking psychological alignment in the multifaceted social space, in stead of considering consumption as a functional and instrumental act.

The article provides an example of MUJI to highlight how minimalist brands can be used in showcasing identity by emphasizing restraint as opposed to overt performances. The anti branding approach of MUJI implies that brand personality is not necessarily realized in terms of popularity or advocacy; On the contrary, the neutrality and understatement approach could offer consumers an opportunity to instill personal meaning to the brand and make it part of their everyday identity script. This observation puts to question the notion that expression of identity is required to be anchored on conspicuous or expressive brand strategies.

Concurrently, another point that is highlighted in the discussion is the fact that identity driven consumption is not always steady and constructive. Since consumers are progressively framing their identifications online, symbolic consumption can be characterized by constant process of securing or losing the battles of authenticity, social demands, and emotional self-preservation. The minimalism brand approach also poses more theoretical issues regarding the fact that the absence can be used as a symbolic meaning, which points to the necessity to extend the available models of brand symbolism and self branding relationships.

In this article, there is no clear conclusion, but a number of suggestions on what can be further studied such as cultural differences in the construction of identity meaning, and the psychological cost of never ending self management and the latent process in self brand alignment. This article, by highlighting these strained interrelations, seeks to advance the closer comprehension of what is over the market through identity based consumption that involves brands that are more involved in self construction.

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