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Consumer's Symbol-consumption and Brand Management

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Abstract: As a key driving factor of brand equity, brand image is a research hotspot in the field of consumer behavior and brand marketing. The management over brand image is regarded as a key activity in the field of enterprise marketing. In addition, symbol consumption with the sense of self is another research hotspot in the field of consumer behavior. Brand image management of enterprises is faced with a new important topic, i.e. how to link symbol consumption with brand image management. This paper conducts in-depth research on the degree of consistency between actual self of consumers and brand image and that between their social self and brand image with product type as research variable by introducing self-concept theory based on the integration of existing symbol consumption research achievements. The research finds that the degree of consistency between actual self-concept and brand image of products in private is significantly higher than that between actual self-concept and brand image of products in public; that between social self-concept and brand image of products in public is significantly higher than that between social self-concept and brand image of products in private; that between actual self-concept and brand image of products in private is significantly higher than that between social self-concept and brand image of products in private; that between social self-concept and brand image of products in public is significantly higher than that between actual self-concept and brand image of products in public.

Keywords: self-concept, brand image, symbol consumption, brand management

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the concept of brand image was put forward, it has always been a research hotspot in the field of consumer behavioral science and brand marketing as well as an important concept. However, with constant changes of its contents with deep recognition of brand and image by the market, media and people, a stable and authoritative concept about brand image has not been established yet. Famous American advertising master David Ogilvy put forward the concept of brand image from the perspective of brand positioning in 1950s. The purpose of putting forward the establishment of brand image is to achieve the final sales result and surplus value of capitalists. Ogilvy put forward an important turning point in the era of product homogeneity, i.e. the establishment of brand image is even more important than function. However, the subsequent research on connotations of brand image has not made great progress in a long while. Till late 1980s, the academic world has achieved some important breakthroughs in the research on brand image around the topic of brand equity.

According to the summary on current domestic and foreign researches, previous researches on the consistency between self-concept and brand image mainly focused on classifying self-concept based on actual self and ideal self and discussing the comparison on the degree of consistency with brand image. Both self-concept and product type started to occur in researches on consumer behavior and psychology. Researches of predecessors have achieved certain achievements. However, they basically studied superficial phenomena of the consistency between self-concept and brand image. There are few researches on the influence of different product types on different types of consumers and on how their self-concept is linked with brand image and which factors will influence the consistency between self-concept and brand image. Therefore, I think that the systematization of such knowledge as the role, status and influence of self-concept in consumer behavior and the in-depth research on the consistency between self-concept and brand image through the arrangement and analysis of current researchers' researches on self-concept are good for providing theoretical support for the

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development of self-concept in the field of consumer behavior, psychology and marketing in China.

This paper conducts in-depth research on the degree of consistency between actual self of consumers and brand image and that between their social self and brand image with product type as research variable by introducing self-concept theory based on the integration of existing symbolic consumption research achievements. This paper is an empirical study with the connection between theory and practice. In the current environment with increasing economic development and a variety of commodities, consumption decisions of consumers mostly depend on brand image rather than simply physical characteristics of products. The research result of the consistency between self-concept and brand image provides many practical guiding suggestions for services of brand operators and marketing personnel, including product orientation, image design, market expansion and development and advertising.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Consumers' self-concept

Researchers often call all theories about self and identity collectively as “self-theory”^[1]. It is generally believed that self is a structure or system composed of specific identity or self^[2]. Self-concept is a vital part in individual self system, which will influence opinions of individuals on individual trait and the relationship between individuals and others as well as the emotion of individuals experienced in different situations and drive the motivation of individuals to take actions^[3]. Self-concept is an important motivational factor determining the emotion of individuals experienced in different situations and driving individuals to take different actions^[2]. Self-concept is an important constituent part in self-structure. It is in the central position in personality system. The influence of self-concept development on individual psychology and behavior has important significance of adjustment.

Though self-concept is considered as a system in psychology and academic circles, different scholars classify self differently according to different bases in consumer behavioral science. Markus and Kitayama (1991) put forward independent self and interdependent self, the classification of which has been identified by many scholars. Independent self reflects those aspects of individuals different from all others. Individual behaviors mostly stem from their internal feelings and thoughts rather than refer to others. Individuals of independent self emphasize the independence and separability of person. Independent self emphasizes personalized self and self-realization and expresses unique demands and abilities of individuals^[4]. The judgment on person and things by independent self emphasizes its intrinsic attributes rather than specific situation. Independent self pays attention to essence in individual evaluation and description of things^[5,6]. On the contrary, interdependent self reflects those aspects of individuals assimilated by others or important groups and regards self as a part of social relation. Individuals with interdependent self emphasize the relevance and interdependence between individuals and others^[3]. Interdependent self emphasizes fitness and individuals need to conform to group standard and specification so as to adapt and belong to the corresponding social group and complete their social tasks^[4]. Interdependent self considers individuals and situations integrated^[3] and emphasizes internal relation and situational information of things more than intrinsic attributes. Interdependent self pays attention to role and relation in individual evaluation and description of person and things^[5,6].

Self is the cognition and evaluation of people for their own aspects. This psychological process involves two self-perceptions, i.e. “who I am” and “what kind of person I want to be”, i.e. actual self and ideal self^[7-9]. Researchers have conducted more in-depth researches based on such classification. Foreign researcher Sirgy (2000)^[10] divided self-concept into four parts in more detail: actual self refers to subjective cognition of individuals for themselves, i.e. what kind of person I think I am; ideal self refers to the beautiful image that individuals expect to achieve, i.e. what kind of person I expect to be; social self refers to others' opinions on

oneself, i.e. what kind of person I think I am in others' mind; ideal social self refers to expected others' opinions on oneself, i.e. what kind of person I expect to be in others' mind.

2.2 The consistency between self-concept and brand image

Brand has an image like person. When people think of a product or brand, they connect various vivid images in their mind^[11]. Such connection might come from advertising or people using such product or brand^[12]. We can describe a brand as we describe a person. Consumers often express themselves by buying different products or brands^[13,14]. Therefore, the research on the consistency between self-concept and brand image seems very important. According to the classification of self-concept by Sirgy (1982)^[15], the consistency between self-concept and brand image should also be divided into four dimensions, namely the consistency between actual self-concept and brand image, that between ideal self-concept and brand image, that between social self-concept and brand image and that between ideal social self-concept and brand image. This study is mainly based on actual self and social self.

To study the degree of consistency between self-concept and brand image, the method used in the research of Sirgy (1982)^[15] is adopted of calculation. With the method mentioned, the cognition of testees for self-concept and brand image is respectively tested according to 15 adjectives in the brand image scale. Then, the difference between self-concept and brand image in each item is calculated and differences in all items are summed. Finally, the overall difference between self-concept and brand image is obtained. The score of the consistency between actual self and brand image and that of social self and brand image are respectively obtained after the overall difference is averaged. Lower score indicates closer connection between actual/social self-concept and brand image; on the contrary, higher score indicates their greater differences.

The computational formula for the consistency between actual self and brand image and that of social self and brand image is as below:

$$X_j = 1/15 |Y_i - Z_{ij}| (i=1, 2, 3, \dots, 15; j=1, 2)$$

Where, Y_i = the mark given to brand image in item i by the testee;

Z_{ij} = the mark given to self-concept in item i by the testee;

X_1 = the consistency between social self-concept and brand image;

X_2 = the consistency between actual self-concept and brand image;

2.3 Research hypothesis

According to a lot of data consulted before, there are an immense number of books about the research on the consistency between self-concept and brand image. However, their research topics are not profound. Most researches focus on the basic concept of the consistency between self concept and brand image, i.e. consumers compare brand image and their own self-concept psychologically. If they are consistent, they will influence consumer behaviors to a certain extent. Then, high self consistency will be produced if they fit each other; on the contrary, low self consistency will be produced when they do not fit each other or the degree of fitness is low. It is found through summary that there are few researches on the degree of consistency between self-concept and brand image and their influencing factors.

In allusion to some blank spots of previous researchers, this paper studies the degree of consistency of consumers with different self-concepts for brands of different product types, makes comparison, supplements and enriches the content of research on the consistency between self-concept and brand and meanwhile provides some beneficial inspirations and suggestions for the research on enterprise brand image strategies and consumer behavior.

From the perspective of consumer behavioral science, products or brands can be provided for consumers in two directions, i.e. functional benefit and symbolic interest. Functional benefit means that products can meet

consumer demands in functional attribute. It emphasizes external needs of consumers. Symbolic interest refers to symbolic effect produced by the use of a brand. It emphasizes external demands of consumers. According to their different emphases, products are divided into products in public and those in private. Products in public are corresponding to symbolic interest, while products in private are corresponding to functional benefit. Therefore, brand image is divided into brand image of products in public and that of products in private. According to the classification of self-concept by Sirgy, this paper mainly uses social self and actual self. Therefore, the following hypotheses are made based on the theory of consistency between self-concept and brand image according to the influence of two categories of products (products in public and products in private) and two important dimensions of self-concept (social self and actual self) classified according to different situations of use:

H1: The consistency between actual self-concept and brand image of products in private is significantly higher than that between actual self-concept and brand image of products in public.

H2: The consistency between social self-concept and brand image of products in public is significantly higher than that between social self-concept and brand image of products in private.

H3: The consistency between actual self-concept and brand image of products in private is significantly higher than that between social self-concept and brand image of products in private.

H4: The consistency between social self-concept and brand image of products in public is significantly higher than that between actual self-concept and brand image of products in public.

3. EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

3.1 Sample

As sample survey is time-consuming and tedious, students are chosen for survey as such samples are centralized. All survey samples come from Northeast Normal University, some of which are acquainted classmates and some of which are students for random distribution on the campus. 150 copies of brand image scale were issued and 140 copies of effective questionnaires were recovered, involving 85 females and 55 males. 159 copies of self-concept scale and brand image scale were issued and 150 copies of effective questionnaires were recovered, involving 92 females and 58 males.

3.2 Pretest: brand selection of different types of products

To study the consistency between self-concept and brand image more effectively and deeply, the classification of product type in the experiment is based on penetrance of products in consumer behavioral science. Products with high penetrance fall into products in public and those with low penetrance fall into products in private (Zhang Zhaohui, 2012). Meanwhile, as test objects are college students on campus, the following three conditions should be met for brand selection and confirmation of different types of products: First, the product or brand is often used in private or public environment. Second, students are familiar with the product or brand to a certain extent. Third, the product or brand can cause brand connection in the mind of college students.

According to daily life summary and research results of previous researchers, mobile phone, cigarette and drinks are products in public, while washing powder, toothpaste and toilet soap are products in private. Considering universality and gender factor, this paper selects mobile phone as the representative of products in public and washing powder as the representative of products in private. In the experiment, product brand is selected through questionnaire survey. That is, a questionnaire (appendix I) for college students' familiarity is prepared according to common brands of mobile phone and washing powder and issued randomly. Respondents are required to fill in the questionnaire based on fact according to their familiar brands. Then, product brands are ranked according to the survey and the top three brands are selected. Finally, brands required in the research are determined according to the practical situation.

3.3 Procedure and measures

Dimensions of self-concept in this paper are based on the classification by Sirgy (2000), i.e. self-concept of consumers is divided into four dimensions - actual self-concept, ideal self-concept, social self-concept and ideal social self-concept. Considering the complexity of questionnaire, it might be too complicated with excessive control variables. Therefore, this study only selects actual self-concept and social self-concept. The two dimensions are measured with the investigation method used in Chen Yinliu's master thesis. The cognition of testees for brand image and self is respectively tested according to adjectives determined in the existing scale. Then, the difference in items corresponding to self-concept and brand image is calculated. That is, 15 options of brand image are corresponding to 15 options of each dimension of self-concept. The questionnaire is adjusted appropriately to hide experimental purposes and avoid unnecessary measurement error which will cause untrue and unreliable questionnaire.

The measurement of relationship between consumers' self-concept and brand image is based on brand personality dimension scale put forward by Aaker (1997), i.e. Big Five Model as it is mostly used internationally. 15 adjectives describing brand image summarized by him from 400 copies of questionnaire are quoted directly as measurement indicators, mainly involving the following (see table 1).

Table 1. Brand image adjectives

Dimension	Specific aspect
Sincere	Pragmatic, honest, healthy and enjoyable
Exciting	Bold, energetic, imaginative and fashionable
Capable	Reliable, smart and successful
Elaborate	Upper-class and charming
Rude	Tough and crazy about outdoor activities

Apple mobile phone and Tide washing powder are respectively chosen as the representative of products in private and products in public under measurement. Such options are directly used for the measurement of brand personality. The measurement is conducted with Likert five scale, respectively involving strongly agree, quite agree, hard to explain, not agree and disagree with 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 scores given respectively.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS TESTING

4.1 Investigation on brand familiarity

150 copies of brand image scale were issued and 140 copies of effective questionnaires were recovered, involving 85 females and 55 males. According to the arrangement of statistical result, Apple, Samsung and Nokia respectively rank among the top three of mobile phone brands; Tide, Diaopai and Keon respectively rank among the top three of washing powder brands. Therefore, it is right to choose Apple and Tide in the questionnaire.

4.2 Reliability and validity test

As scales in the research are sum scales, the reliability of scale is evaluated with internal consistency of scale in the investigation. The principal indicator is Cronbach α . Reliability test is respectively conducted on brand image scale, social self-concept scale and actual self-concept scale in this research with SPSS17.0 statistical software and internal consistency of these scales is compared. Then, it is obtained that Cronbach α is respectively 0.812, 0.776, 0.791. All values are more than 0.7, indicating that these scales have a high reliability.

Validity analysis is mainly divided into content validity analysis and construct validity analysis. Content validity reflects the degree of consistency between item contents and the concept to be expressed. Basic items in this research come from foreign mature scales and are meanwhile localized in China appropriately. Therefore, content validity is high. Construct validity is mainly used to test whether the scale can actually measure

variables to be measured. For the analysis on formal questionnaire, see table 2:

Table 2. Construct validity analysis

Variable	Main indicators				
	Communality	KMO	Sig	Grouping superposition	P value
Brand image	>0.5	0.618	.000	No grouping	0.023
Actual self	>0.5	0.634	.000	No grouping	0.027
Social self	>0.5	0.652	.000	No grouping	0.031

4.3 Results and discussion

The consistency between self-concept of testees and brand image is averaged. It is obtained that mean values of the consistency between actual self and products in public, that between actual self and products in private, that between social self and products in public and that between social self and products in private are respectively 1.369, 1.012, 1.234 and 1.417.

Table 3. Variance analysis

Source of variation	Quadratic sum	Degree of freedom	Mean square	F*
Within-subject	12.877	120		
A (self-concept)	1.787	1	1.787	17.214**
A*subject	3.786	39	0.097	
B (product type)	0.812	1	0.812	7.534**
B*subject	3.755	39	0.96	
A×B	0.435	1	0.435	5.381*
B×C×subject	2.956	39	0.076	
Total	26.416	120		

* refers to significant differences at the level of 0.05; ** refers to significant differences at the level of 0.01.

The result of variance analysis table (table 3) shows that the main effect ($F(1,39)=17.214$, $p<0.01$) of self-concept (within-subject factor A) and that ($F(1,39)=7.534$, $p<0.01$) of product type (within-subject factor B) are significant. This indicates that the consistency between consumer self-concept and brand image is influenced by different types of products and different dimensions of self-concept. Self-concept and product type have significant interaction ($F(1,39)=5.381$, $p<0.05$), indicating that the consistency between consumer self-concept and brand image of product consumed is significantly influenced by the comprehensive interaction between product type and self-concept.

According to variance analysis table, we know that self-concept and product type have significant interaction. Therefore, simple effect test is conducted on them.

Table 4. Simple effect test on factor B at levels A1 and A2

Source of variation	Quadratic sum	Degree of freedom	Mean square	F
SSB (at level A1)	1.234	1	1.234	13.145**
SSB (at level A2)	1.031	1	1.031	12.113**
A×B×subject	2.831	38	0.075	

$F_{0.5}(1,38)=4.21$ * refers to significant differences at the level of 0.05; ** refers to significant differences at the level of 0.01.

$F_{0.01}(1,38)=8.11$

The test on interaction between product type and different self-concepts shows that, from the perspective of actual self-concept, the consistency between brand image of different types of products and actual self-concept

has significant differences ($F(1,38)=13,145$, $P<0.01$), i.e. the consistency between products in private and actual self-concept is significantly higher than that between products in public and actual self-concept, assuming that H1 is verified. From the perspective of social self-concept, the consistency between products in public and social self-concept is significantly higher than that between products in private and social self-concept, i.e. assuming that H2 is verified.

Table 5. Simple effect test on factor A at levels B1 and B2

Source of variation	Quadratic sum	Degree of freedom	Mean square	F
SSA (at level B1)	0.935	1	0.935	11.234**
SSA (at level B2)	0.831	1	0.831	10.013**
A×B×subject	2.831	38	0.075	

$F_{0.5}(1,38)=4.21$ * refers to significant differences at the level of 0.05; ** refers to significant differences at the level of 0.01.

$F_{0.01}(1,38) = 8.11$

The test on interaction between product type and different self-concepts shows that, from the perspective of products in private, the consistency between different self-concepts and brand image of products in private has significant differences ($F(1,38)=11.234$, $P<0.01$), i.e. the consistency between products in private and actual self-concept is significantly higher than that between products in private and social self-concept, assuming that H3 is verified. From the perspective of products in public, the consistency between products in public and social self is significantly higher than that between it and actual self-concept, i.e. assuming that H4 is verified.

5. GENERAL DISCUSSION

This paper conducts empirical study on the consistency between consumer self-concept and brand image by dividing products into products in private and those in public according to specific situation of use of products. The following conclusions and management inspirations are mainly obtained through in-depth analysis and discussions on research result: First, consumers dominated by actual concept pay great attention to the degree of consistency between brand image and actual self-concept besides functional property of products. Second, consumers dominated by social self-concept pay more attention to symbolic meaning of products in public than functional property of products and meanwhile emphasize the degree of consistency between brand image and social self-concept. Third, consumers with actual self-concept pay more attention to products in private than consumers with social self-concept and that the degree of consistency between actual self-concept and brand image of products in private is higher. Forth, consumers with social self-concept pay more attention to products in public than consumers with actual self-concept and that the degree of consistency between social self-concept and brand image of products in public is higher.

Though this research has made certain achievements, it has some deficiencies. Solving research limitations is the future research direction. First, research objects of this paper are mainly college students on campus. They basically belong to 1990s group with specific temperament and personality of the era. As it is difficult to take samples from other groups in the society, they are not included in this research. Therefore, research objects have limitations. Second, the classification of product type is worth consideration and thinking. To approach the practical situation of testees, products and brands selected are those familiar and affordable for testees in this survey. What about the degree of consistency between some other products such as automobile and real estate and individual self-concept? It is also worth consideration. In addition, this paper only studies the relationship between actual and social self-concepts and products in private and public. It can be expanded in the future research direction and self-concept and product type can be extended. Meanwhile, the relationship between self-concept and product type can be studied under the condition of different self-construction.

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