

EFFECT OF BRAND IMAGE & SELF IMAGE CONGRUENCY ON BRAND PREFERENCE & CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

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Abstract:

Objective– The brand image is of paramount importance for customers as well as marketers. Beyond their functional utility, products have a symbolic meaning. Parts of this symbolic meaning are accounted for by concepts like brand image and product-user image. The study provides an insight into various aspects of brand image and self-image congruency. The purpose of this article is to show that product image influences consumer preferences and satisfaction through a congruence effect.

Design/ methodology– Based on existing literature, the paper has introduced a conceptual framework to explain the interrelationships between the various facets of the brands and corresponding outcomes. It is proposed to use the metaphor of ‘brand as person’ to present a conceptual model to illustrate the interrelationship between consumer, consumer image and brand image.

Findings– This paper comprehensively examines the self-concept theory and research in consumer behavior and provides a conceptual framework for future research. It will be of critical importance for future practitioners to understand the increasingly complex variety of factors underlying and influencing the linkages between brands and customer relationship. The proposed model illustrates to have a competitive image that is according to the image of the user and in line with their target market’s needs, wants and experiences.

Originality/value – The self-concept literature in consumer behavior can be perceived as multi-dimensional perception of one’s self. The study fills the gap in the literature about the congruence between brand and human images, and demonstrates how self-image congruity dimensions impacts brand preference among consumers.

Keywords: *Brand image; Congruency; Purchase Intention; Brand Preference; Customer Satisfaction.*

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1. Introduction:

Consumer always seeks a product which can offer functional, symbolic, emotional, epistemic and situational benefits to them leading to satisfaction of their needs and wants. In today's world of competitive market there could be a variety of factors which influence the selection and purchase of any product or a brand. The concept of brand image can act as an important cue to explain the phenomenon of brand preference and customer satisfaction. Brand image is somewhere the output of the perceptions, which a consumer generates in his mind regarding the distinct attributes related to the product. Keller (1993) defined brand image as "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer's memory". Berkman, Lindquist and Sirgy (1997) revealed that brand image is the complete picture and association of a brand in the minds of the consumer. Many marketers rely on brand image as an effective tool to reach and penetrate their target markets (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis, 1986).

The theoretical issue of brand image and consumer's self image congruence in consumer behaviour is an area which has received great interest over the years. To clarify the nature of the brand and self image congruity, this paper aims to build a conceptual framework and to discuss the effect of self and brand image congruency on brand preference and customer satisfaction. The objective of this paper is to investigate the interrelationship between the consumer, the brand, and the existing congruity between their images which ultimately affects the after sales behaviour of the consumer.

The remainder of this paper is organised in three sections. The first section reviews the literature related to brand image and self-image congruity. In the second section, the proposed conceptual model explaining the effect of brand image and consumer's self congruity on brand preference and customer satisfaction is discussed and also presents the influential literature underpinning this model. It also aims at examining the effects on satisfaction, & purchase intention when there are congruent images between the parties. Finally, the paper discusses some implications for managerial practice along with some concluding comments.

2. **Review of Literature:**

In the literature of consumer behaviour, there is a general prediction that people should prefer brands which they perceive as being the sort of brands that would be consumed by a person who is "similar" to themselves. It gives rise to "self concept" which plays a very crucial role in consumer purchase decision, as the dimensions of self-concept may explain why and how the related consumers are motivated to select a particular brand. Levy (1959) suggested that consumers are not functionally oriented and their behaviour is significantly affected by the symbols which identify goods in the marketplace. This concept made the academicians and researchers to probe into the idea that consumers may purchase goods in order to develop a particular self-image (self-concept). Many self-concept models were formulated regarding this concept, which ultimately gave birth to the concept of congruency. Congruity theory very well explains the affect of congruence between the self-image of a consumer and their perception towards the image of the brand which directly influences their intention to choose the brand.

Keller (1998) describes the importance of congruence between user imagery and brand personality in building the brand image, and suggests that this congruence is particularly "relevant" regarding the more extrinsic benefits associated with symbolic brands. Consumers now prefer the brands with images that are congruent with their self-image and the quantification of these images indicates that it is not just the image of a brand, or product that is important in consumer decision making, but the relationship between the self image of the consumer and the respective image (Birdwell 1964, Dolich 1969, Dornoff and Tatham 1972, Grubb 1965, Grubb and grathwohl 1967, Grubb and Hupp 1968, Landon 1974, O'Brien and Sanchez 1976, Vitz and Johnson 1965).

Figure 1. depicts that brand image constitutes of image of the maker and user and image of the product. It is about how the consumers perceive the brand, the company and its product and it can be described as both a reflection and an interpretation of the brand identity. It can be described as the brand associations or the consumers' perception about a particular brand of the limit of proximity among the brand and the self images.



Figure 1: Components of Brand Image (Prepared by author)

Individuals express themselves by choosing brands whose personalities are perceived to be congruent with their own personalities (Aekar, 1999; Kassajian, 1971; Sirgy, 1982). Also, many researches propounded that brand associations act as an important source for the creation of purchase intention and the perception of self are closely related with the personality in the sense that individuals tend to buy brands whose personalities closely correspond to individuals' own self-images (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2000). Self concept may be defined as "the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (Sirgy, 1982; Wylie, 1961). A number of researchers have suggested that there is a positive association between self-concept and brand image (Levy, 1959; Sirgy 1982; Sirgy and Su, 2000; Sirgy, Grewal and Mangleburg, 2000; Johar and Sirgy, 1991).

2.1 Self image congruity:

Gardner and Levy (1955) and Levy (1959) initiated the self-image and product image congruity research. Self-image congruity represents the degree of similarity between consumer's self-image or self-concept and that of brand. The degree of consistency between the self-image and brand image is self-congruity (Sirgy, 1982). Congruity impacts are desirable because they influence positively consumer's self-image, but inconsistencies or incongruity is likely to result in feelings of inadequacy, and dissatisfied with their choices (Johar and Sirgy, 1991; Sirgy and Su, 2000). Onkvisit and Shaw (1987) revealed that the degree of harmony between a person's self concept and the image of the brand which he or she consumes is referred as image congruence.

2.2 Self-concept and purchasing behaviour:

In the literature of consumer behaviour, the self-concept has generally been identified as a multidimensional concept comprising five components: the ideal self, the apparent self, the social self, the perceived self, and the actual self (Burns, 1979; Markin, 1979; Rosenberg, 1979; Sirgy, 1981, 1982, 1986). Markin (1979) describes these multiple components of self as follows “...the perceived self is how one sees oneself; the ideal self is the model person which one aspires to be; the social self is how a person thinks others perceive them; and the apparent self is how people actually view the individual. The actual self is a composite of all these concepts”. This view was also adopted by other researchers in the self-concept area (Burns, 1979; Malhotra, 1988; Rosenberg, 1979; Sirgy, 1981, 1982, 1986). This multidimensional self-concept may explain why and/or how consumers are motivated to interact with reference groups, salespeople, and competing brands. Levy (1959) suggested that consumers are not functionally oriented and that their behaviour is significantly affected by the symbols which identify goods in the marketplace. This argument suggests that apart from the trait of functionality, the consumers intend to purchase a particular product for other reasons. This concept alerted academics studying consumer behaviour to the idea that consumers may purchase goods in order to develop a particular self-image (self-concept). Following the ideas of Levy, a number of self-concept models were formulated to describe, explain, and predict the precise role of consumers’ self-concepts in consumer purchasing behaviour.

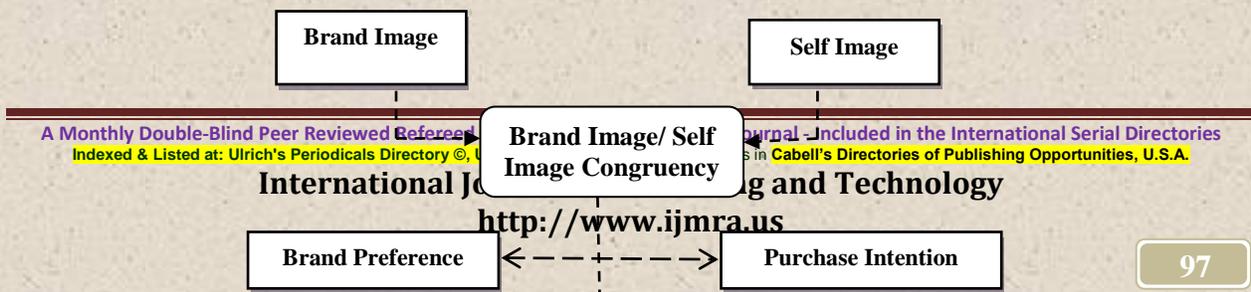
2.3 Effect of Congruency on Customer Satisfaction:

Satisfaction with a brand may be defined as the subjective evaluation of a chosen alternative brand that meets or exceeds expectations (Bloemer and Kasper, 1995). “Customers buying products are buying utility, function, and performance as much as image and status” (Terpstra and Sarathy, 1997) and hence consumers consume the symbolic meaning of the products as portrayed in their images, rather than consuming only the functional utilities of the product. These symbolic entities provide a type of contentment to the needs and wants of the customer which leads to stage of satisfaction to the customer. Customer satisfaction is “the customer’s

response to the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectations and the actual performance of the product/service as perceived after its consumption” (Tse and Wilton, 1988). Oliver (1997) also defines satisfaction as the difference between what we anticipate and what we accept. When a brand promise is made and expectations are fulfilled then a customer is said to be satisfied and the more satisfied a customer is then the more likely they intend to purchase a brand. This is in line with Yi’s (1990) theory of satisfaction and purchase intention i.e. customer satisfaction influences purchase intentions as well as post-purchase attitudes. Having satisfied customers is not enough for today’s competitive markets though. A company wants to have a committed customer base that is trusting of their image, brand and reputation.

3. Conceptual Framework:

The purpose of this paper is to construct a theoretical model to predict the effects of brand image expressions (congruent with self-concept) on the dependent variables: brand preference, purchase intention and customer satisfaction. The difference between the brand and the self image is neutralized by the inception of congruency between their images. The brand or the self image congruency creates the concept of brand preference and purchase intention in the minds of the customer. A conceptual model is proposed to predict the relative importance and affect of the related customer based factors on the brand image and self image congruency which leads to the customer satisfaction with the brand.



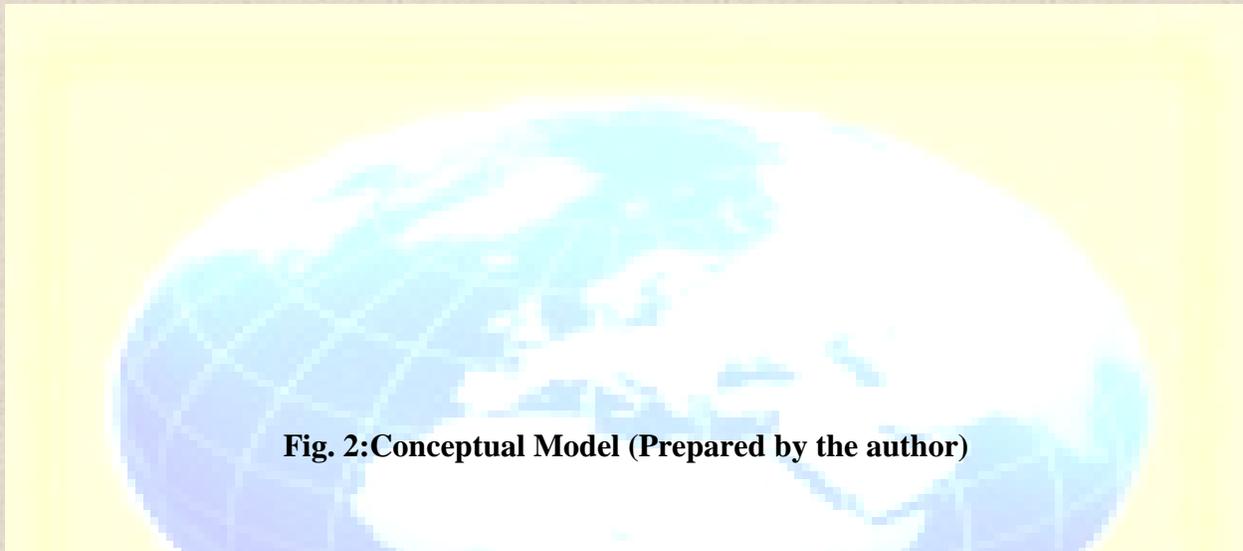


Fig. 2: Conceptual Model (Prepared by the author)

Above Figure 2 depicts the outcomes of the relationships between customer and product attributes and the affect of the presence of congruity between them. If there exists a correlation between the self and the brand image congruency then it affects the consumers' attitude towards the brand preference and consequently it positively affects the purchase intention of the consumer. Also, the previous research into the area of self-image congruence supports the idea that image congruity does affect consumer outcomes such as purchase intention and product/brand preference. Again, in the absence of the correlation the brand image congruence does not affect the consumers' attitude towards the brand preference and the purchase intention. The research suggests that a purchase is not likely to take place when there is a lack of congruity between product image and self-concept. Where incongruence exists and a purchase still take place, consumers are unlikely to repeat such a purchase, as it further may result in high or low probability of customer satisfaction with the brand.

A customer can be said to be satisfied when there is a strong positive co-relation between the self and the brand image as it ultimately leads to the selection of the brand resulting in "brand

preference and satisfaction” with the brand. Further, the proposed model suggests that self congruence may even affect the brand performance as self congruity may act as strong predictor of consumer satisfaction with product usage.

4. Conclusion:

In the present research, the role of brand image and self image congruity on the consumer purchase behaviour is examined. The proposed conceptual model attempts to explain the interrelationships between the various facets of the brand and outcomes such as brand preference, purchase intention and customer satisfaction. It is argued that a close match between a brand and its consumers leads to a higher brand performances. In time when competition is getting intense, it is imperative for the marketers to seriously evaluate factors that are not only important in creating strong brand equity but also assist them in achieving customer satisfaction with the brand. Customer values give markets a direction on how best to satisfy their customer needs and increase brand preference.

From a managerial point of view, it is of paramount importance to have a competitive strategy and likewise a competitive image in order to remain successful and to get closer to the customers. Nevertheless, managers today must realise that, while customers may purchase a brand, they are in fact purchasing the image of the entire company. Therefore, it is essential to manage all externally perceived images of the company and its product so as to have a harmonised and consistent message. The model illustrate to managers that it is important to develop a competitive image that is fitting and in line with target market’s needs and wants. Hence, to make a customer possess a strong purchase intention, it is necessary to maintain perceived value of the brand, satisfy the customer by building a strong brand image and creating a self and brand image congruity. Moreover, this study provides useful guidelines for future research in this area.

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