

Research Dialogue

Brands as relationship partners: Warmth, competence, and in-between

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Abstract

The dialogue between social perception and consumer–brand relationship theories opens new opportunities for studying brands. To advance branding research in the spirit of interdisciplinary inquiry, we propose to (1) investigate the process of anthropomorphism through which brands are imbued with intentional agency; (2) integrate the role of consumers not only as perceivers but also as relationship agents; (3) consider important defining dimensions of consumer–brand relationships beyond warmth and competence, including power and excitement; and (4) articulate the dynamics governing warmth (intentions) and competency (ability) judgments to yield prescriptive guidance for developing popular and admired brands.

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Introduction

Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone's (this issue) application of the Stereotype Content Model from psychology to the consumer–brand context presents an exciting step forward in the study of consumers' relationships with brands. This work builds from a fundamental premise argued in Fournier (1998): that people in many ways relate to brands similarly to how they relate to people. Over the past fourteen years, numerous tests of the applicability of the relationship metaphor to brand consumption have coalesced to support the validity of this basic tenet. Consumers become emotionally attached to brands they love (Albert et al., 2008; Batra et al., 2012; Shimp & Madden, 1988; Thomson et al., 2005). They display brand loyalties that resemble marriages in their passionate commitments (Fournier & Yao, 1997; Oliver, 1999). People have flings with brands (Alvarez & Fournier, in press), derive joy from childhood friendships (Connell & Schau, in press), invest in enmities (Hogg, 1998; Luedicke et al., 2010) and rivalrous adversarial relationships (Paharia et al., 2011), lament master–slave entrapments (Miller et al., in press) and struggle with abusive relations

wrought at the hands of malicious brands (Hill, 1994). Process similarities across brand and human relational spaces are also consistently supported. The same norms governing communal and exchange relationships between people shape behaviors in the brand consumption realm (Aggarwal, 2004; Aggarwal & Law, 2005). The avoidant, secure and anxious attachment styles that govern people's interactions with others shape their interactions with brands (Paulssen & Fournier, 2011; Swaminathan et al., 2009). With Kervyn et al.'s present work, and that of Aaker et al. (2010) we now have evidence that intentions (warmth) and ability (competence) are important dimensions underlying brand perception, as they are for people, stereotypes and social groups. The relationship metaphor, with appropriate contextual adaptations and adjustments (Swaminathan & Dommer, in press), has proven powerful for understanding brands.

As we think about the promise of advancing the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF), it is useful to reflect on basic relationship principles and ponder how these can be leveraged to inform the present work. First, although the BIAF assumes—as do all applications of relationship theory in consumer research—intentional agency on the part of an active, personified brand partner, theory concerning, and empirical support for, this process has yet to be put forth. Second, the BIAF considers characteristics of the brand partner as judged in terms of intentions (warmth) and ability (competence), but the

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model decidedly leaves characteristics of the actor/perceiver out. Since a relationship is a mutually co-created entity, a richer and more valid conception of consumer–brand interaction can be developed by recognizing that (at minimum) two parties come together in the brand relationship, the consumer and the brand.

A third area for reflection concerns the dimensionality of the brand relationships space. Kervyn et al.'s research builds from a respected research history in social psychology and supports the power of intentions (warmth) and ability (competence) to capture variance in the relationships people form with their brands. Crossing these dimensions yields reliable clusters of troubled brands, pitied brands, popular brands, and envied brands into which brand exemplars fall. Research on brand relationships, however, reveals greater complexity in people's brand relationships than that which is captured by the intentions and ability of the brand partner. The simplification and utility afforded by the 2 × 2 stereotype content framework comes at a cost in terms of explanatory and predictive power, especially when one considers theoretical adaptations required to accommodate the uniqueness of the context of brands. As we move forward with marketing applications, we must critically evaluate whether and how the BIAF conceptualization limits our view of brands.

Lastly, the BIAF is justly intended as a tool for brand management as Kervyn et al.'s positioning and discussion attests. In closing, we explore ways in which existing brand research and frameworks can be considered to increase the substantive utility and application of Kervyn et al.'s powerful ideas.

Bringing the brand alive

Kervyn et al.'s model—and all brand relationship work—build from the foundational assumption that brands are treated as people such that interpersonal models of perception and behavior readily apply. Kervyn and colleagues take an extreme stance on this question and pose that brands are in fact intentional agents with calculated and purposeful actions and plans. Brand intentionality is elemental to the BIAF framework: if brands do not serve as intentional agents, the BIAF becomes but a modified version of basic brand personality ideas (cf., Aaker, 1997). But brand intentionality is a tricky concept. As noted by Aggarwal (2004), the relationship metaphor may present inherent limitations since brands cannot appropriately be conceived as “human-like”. It is ironic that the fundamental assumption regarding the brand as enlivened and purposeful actor remains relatively unchallenged, and troubling that this assumption has yet to be informed and validated by dedicated empirical research. Are brands animated and personified such that they perform as intentional actors, and if so, how exactly does this happen? Are all brands equal in their ability to be considered and judged as persons are judged? Are all consumers equally prone to anthropomorphize brands? Our discussion addresses these three critical questions in the spirit of informing the BIAF.

Advancing the BIAF first requires illumination of the brand-as-person metaphor and identification of the mechanisms and processes whereby intentions (warmth) and ability

(competence) judgments are formed and facilitated. A key mechanism suggested by research on brand relationships that enables a brand to assume a role as an “active” and “personalized” participant in the relationship is anthropomorphism (Fournier, 1998).

Anthropomorphism involves the attribution of humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions to non-human actors (Epley et al., 2007). In anthropomorphizing a brand, one assumes feelings (i.e., “likes and dislikes, appetites and disinclinations, affections and antipathies”), goals (i.e., “desires and longing”), will (i.e., “desire to help or injure, to act or refrain from acting”), and “the power to act according to the prompting of these feelings and determination of will” (Gilmore, 1919, p.14). An anthropomorphized brand is by all accounts a palpable entity “having senses to be tickled, appetites to be gratified, mentality to be reckoned with, temper to be made or kept placid and amicable, and power to be turned to good account or, at least, to be prevented from acting against him” (Gilmore, 1919, p.204). Research on person-object relations suggests that people willingly and readily assign human properties and tendencies to brands (Belk, 1988; Levy, 1985; Plummer, 1985; Solomon, 1983). The uniquely-human activity of nick-naming, both at a shared cultural level (e.g., Coca-Cola is “Coke”; BMWs are “Beemers”) and within individual experience (e.g., “Blueberry” the Blue Valiant and Vicki's Honda Acura, “Teggie”), provides anecdotal evidence of consumers' tendencies to anthropomorphize brands (Fournier, 1994; Pribus, 1987, October 11).

In line with the BIAF, anthropomorphizing a brand involves going beyond observable “actions” (e.g., *Comcast indiscriminately raises its prices*, or *Dove launched the real beauty campaign*) to draw inferences about the brand's unobserved personality, intentions, and motivations (e.g., *Comcast is a bully who takes advantage of my loyalty*, or *Dove cares about women*). Literature on the formation of person impressions suggests that observed behaviors are spontaneously translated into trait language, and that these traits form the basis for the evaluative concept of the person (Srull & Wyer, 1989). Buss and Craik's (1983) act frequency approach to personality suggests a process through which behavioral incidents are translated into impressions of personality disposition. Within this theoretical framework, the fundamental measure of a person's character is obtained through repeated observation of the performance of trait-relevant behaviors on the part of the actor. To illustrate, a person is judged to be competent within the act frequency perspective when, over a period of observations, s/he has displayed a high frequency of competent acts relative to the norm for that category of acts. The frequency concept of personality thus treats behavioral acts as the basic units of analysis and seeks to specify the nature of the dispositional categories that encompass those acts.

The act frequency approach can be readily extended to the brand context by formally considering marketing mix, company, and employee actions as brand behaviors and cataloging the dispositional inferences these behaviors manifest. Trait inferences from selected marketing actions can be readily postulated using the dimensions from the Big Five Personality

typology, which includes sincerity (warmth) and competence (Aaker, 1997). For example, a brand that provides accessible return policies, supports PBS programming, speaks at the consumer's level in its customer interactions, offers a three-year warranty on its products, or leverages consumer-generated advertising, for example, may be seen as helpful, sympathetic, supportive, warm, and approachable, thus indicating the sincerity dimension of the Big Five. As noted, very dissimilar actions can be interpreted as evidence for the same disposition. Fournier (1994) provides such an exercise connecting brand actions to trait inferences to the Big Five Personality Traits. With the aid of primary research, a portfolio of trait inferences can be articulated and applied.

A second route for advancing the BIAF along recommended lines can be obtained through a deeper understanding of the potential variability in intentional agency across brands. Consumer research on anthropomorphism illuminates how brands might differentially encourage consumers to personalize them as intentional actors. Fournier (1994) suggests three ways in which the vitality of a brand may be realized in a relationship such that the brand is animated, humanized, and somehow personalized. These strategies vary in how closely the human condition is approximated and therefore may be more or less effective in enlivening the brand as an intentional agent such that personality impressions can be formed.

At a literal level are advertising strategies in which the brand is personified through product animation tactics (e.g., the California Raisins and the M&M guys) or personalized brand characters (e.g., Charlie the Tuna, the Fruit of the Loom Guys). The Pillsbury Doughboy, the Michelin Man, Mr. Clean: each are full-blown, identifiable characters endowed with the capacity to laugh, joke, scheme and conspire, albeit within the fantasy world of brand imagination. A second and more indirect strategy involves mechanisms whereby the brand becomes somehow possessed by the free-floating "ghost-soul" of another human being, thus enabling "the personal consciousness and volition of its corporeal owner to cause life and thought in the object it animates" (Tylor, 1874, p. 429). The use of spokespersons (e.g., Tiger Woods for Accenture, William Shatner for Priceline), showcased associations with corporate leaders (e.g., Steve Jobs and Apple, Richard Branson and Virgin), or embodiment in a corporeal person-brand entity (e.g., Martha Stewart) qualify as examples of this strategy for anthropomorphizing brands. Research suggests that such associations are effective because they allow the consumer to feel as though the spirit of the endorser is available through the brand (McCracken, 1989).

On an individual versus cultural level, consumer research supports the anthropomorphic power of brands that become associated with loved and detested others (Moore et al., 2002; Olsen, 1993; Solomon, 1983) both present and past (Fournier, 1998). A brand of air freshener that Grandma always kept in her bathroom, the laundry detergent that Mom used, the brand of mayonnaise favored by an ex-husband: these brands can become so strongly associated with another that his/her spirit comes to dwell in the brand, evoking strong memories with each use. Andersen et al.'s (1995) adaptation of the

psychological notion of transference can be usefully applied to understand this process. These authors posit that chronically accessible or transient representations of significant others (e.g., mother, ex-husband) can be activated in diverse relationship interactions to influence social perception. Thus a person's representation of mother or ex-husband becomes activated in a given consumption context so as to influence how s/he relates to household brands.

Another line of consumer research examines schema-driven mechanisms that may increase the likelihood of anthropomorphizing a given branded product. Aggarwal and McGill (2007) show that products with physical characteristics that trigger and activate the human schema are more likely to be anthropomorphized. In one experiment, consumers read a personified (or objectified) request to evaluate a picture of a car, which was manipulated to either resemble a smiling face (more congruent with the activated human schema) or a frowning face (less congruent). As expected, respondents were more likely to perceive and treat the car as a person when the car was "smiling" at them than when the car was "frowning".

Kim and McGill (2011) go beyond physical appearance to investigate the impact of a branded product's behavior toward the consumer on anthropomorphism. They find that products are more likely to be anthropomorphized when the object's behavior matches behaviors characteristic of the operative human schema. Specifically, a slot machine was more likely to be anthropomorphized by consumers in a condition of high social power that won (versus lost) the game. In other words, the winning slot machine gave high power consumers what they wanted, and thus consumers were more likely to perceive the object as a person in this circumstance. Technological products are especially conducive to anthropomorphism (Mick & Fournier, 1998; Moon, 2000; Turkle, 1984) since artificial intelligence and overt actions readily enable inferences of volition, motivation, and feeling on the part of the inanimate brand. Tools, transportation devices, food and drink, clothing, and weapons are also readily accorded selective qualities of strength, power, and guardianship: qualities typically reserved for human beings (Fournier, 1994).

A third direction for advancing the BIAF can derive from a deeper understanding of potential individual differences in anthropomorphizing processes. Just as brands may display different capacities as intentional agents, it is also possible that people are not all equally prone to anthropomorphize non-human entities and attribute intentional agency to brands. Epley et al. (2007) propose that individuals are more likely to anthropomorphize when the need for affiliation is high, or when there exist strong motives to understand the non-human agent's behavior. Kim and McGill (2011) show that the same level of anthropomorphism can lead to different product evaluations depending on individual-level characteristics. Specifically, anthropomorphism decreases the perception of risk from a slot machine for people with high power (who typically take a dominant position in social relationships), whereas it increases the perceptions of risk for people with low social power. Considering risk perceptions as a bridge between these two streams of research, Kim and McGill's research invites

the BIAF to incorporate interaction effects between the brand and the consumer, a topic we will further develop in the later section.

At present, it is not clear whether anthropomorphism is a necessary condition for inference-making related to a brand's intentions (warmth) and ability (competence); research is clearly needed to confirm the apparent value of applying theories of anthropomorphism to advance the BIAF. In informing this issue it may be important to disentangle inferences about the brand from inferences about brand management, the corporation that owns the brand, or the employees that deliver the brand in customer-facing interactions. Even though there exists empirical support for a halo effect from the company to the product (Chandon & Wansink, 2007), there are also instances in which consumers actively distinguish between the brand and corporation (Avery, 2010). This distinction between corporate associations and product associations has been usefully developed within the corporate social responsibility literature (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), for example. In moving forward it will be important for the BIAF to more clearly articulate not only how intentions (warmth) and ability (competence) are inferred, but also whose intentions (warmth) and ability (competence) are being evaluated when forming personality impressions of the brand.

Bringing the person into the process

Relationship research, in both brand and interpersonal contexts, teaches us that relationships are co-created entities: the course and nature of a given brand relationship is equally affected by the qualities of the person *and* the characteristics of the brand. Blackston (1992) first gave voice to this principle in his idea that a brand relationship is affected as much by what the person thinks of the brand (e.g., AMEX is prestigious, AMEX provides the highest quality service) as it is by what the person thinks the brand thinks of them (e.g., AMEX thinks I am inferior and not worth their investment or time). Time and again, consumer research supports the importance of understanding the consumer's personality, motives and intentions if we are to understand their interactions with a brand (Baumgartner, 2002; Swaminathan et al., 2009).

Attachment theory provides an inspirational context for appreciating how incorporating the person in the BIAF equation can enhance our understanding of consumers' interactions with brands. Attachment theory, the joint work of psychoanalyst John Bowlby and cognitive psychologist Mary Ainsworth, concerns the dispositions and propensities adopted by individuals in their development of relationship bonds (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1973). The research history concerning attachment is impressive, comprising literally thousands of effect studies (for reviews, see Berlin & Cassidy, 1999; Shaver et al., 1996). In recent years, attachment theory has been successfully applied beyond the close relationship setting to include relations with peers (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 2000; Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997), strangers (Berlin & Cassidy, 1999), workmates (Hazan & Shaver, 1990), and social institutions (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2003). Empirical investigations

of attachment theory in consumer relationship contexts (Paulssen & Fournier, 2011; Swaminathan et al., 2009; Thomson & Johnson, 2002, 2006) indicate the potential for personal attachment styles to explain differences in the strength and quality of business-to-consumer relationships. Individual-level analyses consistently support that attachment is associated with relationships that differ significantly in their qualitative nature and manifest effects.

The main tenet of attachment theory is that an individual's unique history of interpersonal experiences shapes not only how that individual thinks and feels about relationships generally and what is to be expected from them, but also how that individual behaves in those relationships. A person's attachment schema derives jointly from two internal working models: a model of the self in a relationship context and a model of others in relationship contexts. Per Bowlby (1973) and others (Collins, 1996; Collins et al., 2002; Shaver et al., 1996), these chronically accessible prototypes of the relational self and the relational other evolve through interactions with attachment figures such as mother, father, romantic partner, and friend. The working model of the self involves beliefs about whether one is competent and worthy of the love, support, and care of others; the working model of others concerns beliefs regarding whether or not attachment figures will be generally available, responsive, and trustworthy in fulfilling interpersonal needs (Gallo & Smith, 2001). Working models of attachment are thought to operate largely outside awareness in top-down processes that shape perception, emotion, and behavior in attachment-relevant contexts (Collins et al., 2002). Attachment models apply to both perceptions of strangers and perceptions of known others (Aron et al., 1997). This is an important consideration in the brand context where much of the "action" concerns not new-to-the-world brands but rather familiar icons that have long been part of people's lives.

Parallels between attachment theory and the BIAF can be readily drawn as both fundamentally implicate interpersonal trust processes: the models are similar in their mutual concern for the degree to which a relationship-other can be trusted or not. However, although the BIAF includes ratings of a particular brand as relational other, it ignores an important determinant of these perceptions: the person's co-occurring working models of the self and other in relationship contexts. This omission can prove critical. A relationship will be fundamentally different when a person thinks well of and trusts relationship others versus when s/he thinks others cannot be trusted, no matter what. Paulssen and Fournier's (2011) concept of commercial attachment style validates an avoidant, insecure style in the consumption context wherein all marketers are considered as essentially untrustworthy, disappointing, and rejecting. Securely attached individuals who view commercial brand partners as basically supportive and trustworthy will simply not hold the same perceptions as insecure individuals of intention (warmth) and ability (competence) regarding brands. Within the BIAF, trustworthiness is a simple function of the brand partner; within attachment theory, the person plays the critical role.

The quality of empathic accuracy provides another avenue through which individual differences can systematically affect

brand perceptions. Empathic accuracy concerns the ability of a perceiver to correctly identify the thoughts, feelings and intentions of other people (Ickes, 1997). Attachment styles affect empathic accuracy. Avoidant individuals—i.e., those with negative models of both self and other who consider themselves unlovable and others as untrustworthy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991)—display consistently lower accuracy in identifying the thoughts and feelings of interaction partners (Izhaki-Costi & Schul, 2011), perhaps through limited social intelligence skills (Riggio et al., 1989). Avoidant types also mentally distance themselves from others and therefore think about them less overall, thereby gathering less information about the other (Izhaki-Costi & Schul, 2011). Variations in empathic accuracy, and its interaction with attachment styles, should systematically affect people's perceptions of brands. Accurate perception of the others' thoughts and feelings may also derive from the readability of the target, including his/her ability and tendency to express thoughts and feelings overall (Zaki et al., 2008).

Attachment theory and empathic accuracy challenge a core assumption in Kervyn et al.'s model: that people rate brands similarly and use brand stereotypes consistently, and that most if not all people will be inclined to develop the same relationship with a given brand. A rich history of research on individual differences in relationships, particularly as this intersects with social perception and social comparison theories, can be mined to understand the boundaries of this assumption concerning culturally-shared stereotypes for brands.

Examining the cutting room floor: what BIAF leaves behind in the space called 'brand relationships'

The BIAF, by all counts, provides a theoretically-rigorous and parsimonious framework for understanding people's relationships with brands. In this model, brand relationships are driven by the same two overarching dimensions driving social perception—intentions (warmth) and ability (competence)—with extra explanatory power provided through a resulting matrix that incorporates people's affective reactions to brands. The quadrants of the BIAF perceptual space can encompass more complex relationships shown to characterize consumer–brand interactions (Fournier, 1998). For instance, as Kervyn et al. explain, adversarial relationships such as that which pits the Red Sox versus the Yankees can be usefully understood in terms of intentions and ability. Exchange relationships can be understood in terms of perceived ability and ratings of fair value in use (Miller et al., *in press*). Communal relationships are judged primarily on the basis of discernments of a brand's intentions, warmth and sincerity (Aaker et al., 2010). The BIAF, elegantly simple, can accommodate much variation in consumers' relationships with brands.

To better understand how to make the best use of the BIAF, it is important to discuss its limits in terms of what it is expected to capture about people's brand relationships, at least in its initial formulation. To simplify this discussion, we propose three relationship dimensions that have been widely discussed in the branding literature but are not captured by the BIAF.

The first important dimension usefully distinguishing brand relationships is power and the relative balance of position, status, and authority between consumer and the brand (Fournier, 2009). Balance and control of power are fundamental metaphors shaping perceptions, brand and otherwise (Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008). Power is considered at some level within the BIAF, albeit indirectly. Power in a relationship can be a function of the comparative levels of ability (competence) of the partners in a relationship; individuals who are perceived to be more competent are more likely to exert power and influence over other individuals in social groups (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). This is particularly true in social perception, where the other is spontaneously judged in comparison to the self (Stapel & Blanton, 2004).

However, it can be argued that power dynamics in the context of brand relationships are driven by factors beyond ability or intentions, and that this incremental variance taps into unique and important brand relationship types. For instance, when consumers have limited brand options or when barriers to switching brands are high, they perceive themselves in a low position of power and feel trapped, enslaved, angry, and hopeless (Miller et al., 2010). Such master–slave relationships are frequently reported for publicly-managed companies such as public transportation systems and government agencies including the postal service (Miller et al., *in press*). Based on the BIAF results from the present study, illustrative master–slave entrapments are classified as warm and low in competence, and are thought to elicit pity as a dominant emotional response. This positioning, based solely on judgments of intention and ability, can generate legitimate debate.

Another discordant example concerns an inverse power relationship wherein a high-value consumer believes him/herself to be in a position of power over the company and the brand. These “best customers” (Avery & Fournier, *in press*; Fournier & Avery, 2011a) boast with personal pride in relationships where each day brings new recognition and attention at the hands of a doting brand. Interesting is the inherently unsatisfying and frustrating nature of the best customer relationship, since expectations for attention and deal-making quickly escalate out of control. The best customer relationship is unique to the consumption setting and in this regard may go beyond sub-conscious snap judgments based on a target's ability to help or hurt. Perceptions of a brand's warmth and competence seem irrelevant in light of the phenomenology of the best customer relationship: this relationship is about power and pridefulness and imbalance between the person and the brand.

A second dimension that the BIAF may not fully capture is the emotional intensity of the relationship between the consumer and the brand. This dimension has arguably been lost in the translation of “warmth” to “intentions” affected in the BIAF. It is interesting to note that out of the 16 brands included in Kervyn et al.'s (this issue) study, consumers could be expected to have a more intense emotional experience with many “cold” brands (e.g., Porsche, Mercedes, Marlboro) than with some “warm” brands (e.g., public transport, USPS, Campbell's). This observation suggests that something about the emotional

experience is being left out by the ability/intentions matrix operationalized in the BIAF.

The dimension of emotional intensity is consistently implicated in branding research. Emotional intensity is very much related to the excitement trait in Aaker's (1997) brand personality model, and surgency/extraversion in the Big Five (McCrae & Costa, 1987), and hence stands as a fundamental dimension describing brand and human personalities. Aaker et al. (2004) demonstrate the power of cultivating exciting versus sincere brand personalities for otherwise identical service offerings, and catalogue systematic effects on the strength and enactment of the brand relationship, including such things as evangelism and forgiveness of the brand. Excitement also stands as a critical driver of brand success and engagement in the fast-paced, entertainment-oriented, and social-media-driven branding world (Fournier & Avery, 2011b). Excitement defines the very essence and quality of select forms of consumer–brand relationality: most significantly, secret affairs (Miller et al., 2010) and flings with brands (Alvarez & Fournier, in press; Fournier & Alvarez, 2010). Interpersonal relationships research supports the value of a functional–emotional dimension for capturing variance in the person–relationships space (Wish et al., 1976). Incorporating excitement (and its complement, contentment) can add discriminating power to the only positive emotional cell in the BIAF matrix: admiration for popular brands.

A third and related dimension for consideration is evidenced by the work of Ahuvia (2005). Initially set-up to investigate the psychology of love in consumption contexts, Ahuvia's research found that identity issues were central to consumers' experiences with loved objects and brands. An extensive and vibrant stream of research that can only be briefly referred to in this commentary has dealt with the identity relevance of brands (Belk, 1988; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Fournier, 1998; Kirmani, 2009; Sirgy, 1982). Not surprisingly, identity-related issues are an important aspect of many consumer–brand relationships such as marriages, best friendships, flings and even adversarial relationships with brands (Luedicke et al., 2010). Clearly, the self-identity dimension is outside the scope of the BIAF, but the extent to which it interacts with warmth and competence may be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Becoming a popular brand

The BIAF is a brand management system, and as such must deliver not only against criteria for internal validity but also practical utility and prescriptive guidance for management. At its core, the BIAF is a *trust model*, with the same dimensions of competence/ability and benevolence (i.e., having the best interests of the consumer at heart) that map onto multi-faceted conceptualizations of trust (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). Decades of marketing research support the power of trust as the critical mediator of brand and company relationships. Trust drives commitment, satisfaction and loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001, Morgan & Hunt, 1994). What does this new perspective involving stereotypes

teach us about the nature and cultivation of people's trust of brands?

In order to yield more managerial utility, the BIAF will have to extend beyond its core recommendation that brands should strive simply to be popular by cultivating intentions (warmth) and ability (competence). The current translation of the warmth construct into the consumer realm also has a social-good spin to it, and is defined using actions in the best interest of the public (e.g., socially-responsible corporate actions, support of social programs) rather than the best interest of the individual and his or her needs. Further, there is explicit mention of serving “ordinary people” through corporate intentions, which suggests a mainstream versus niche positioning for the brand. This prescription to build intentions through social good and mainstream positioning is narrow and limiting as a guide for management action, and may be problematic when one considers the varied types of relationships that a “popular” brand can engage (see preceding section). Can the BIAF be informed somehow to create a more complex system for “building popular brands”?

Y&R's BrandAsset Valuator™ system (BAV) provides one such model (Agres & Dubitsky, 1996). This system, as with the BIAF, leverages the useful management perspective of a 2 × 2 grid created by crossing important perceptual dimensions. In the BrandAsset Valuator™ model, the dimensions are Brand Strength (Differentiation × Relevance) and Brand Stature (Knowledge × Esteem). What is useful about the BAV is not just the profiling of a brand on the two dimensions, but also the process that is revealed by considering movement across the cells of the 2 × 2 matrix: a brand-building prescription that is captured in what Y&R calls the PowerGrid™. Based on what we know about stereotype formation, is there a way for a brand to navigate across the BIAF cells?

The consideration of dynamics via the PowerGrid™ also provides a framework for understanding the evolution of perceptions of a given brand. Questions of the dynamism of brand perceptions loom large in the BIAF framework: do brand stereotypes stay fixed and constant from the first time the person evaluates the brand “stranger” in terms of its potential to help or to hurt? The act frequency perspective (Buss & Craik, 1983) mentioned earlier suggests otherwise since brand actions are taken as cumulative signals indicating the character of the brand.

Developmental research on the BrandAsset Valuator™ system also attends judiciously to the differential roles of the two underlying brand dimensions, recognizing that individual facets are only useful if they make different contributions to a focal process somehow. Kervyn et al. support that high levels of warmth and high levels of competence drive purchase intent and loyalty. While useful for validating the framework, this correlation adds little to the history of research on trust. More interesting is insight into the particular roles that warmth and competence play in generating loyalty and purchase interest. Does competence (ability) drive trial and penetration while warmth (intention) drives repeat and loyalty, for example? Also of merit is a determination of the differential roles of warmth and competence in driving other important brand performance metrics. Does warmth (intention) serve as a leading

indicator of future growth and potential, for example, while competence (ability) drives current operating performance, as in the BrandAsset Valuator™? Which facet drives engagement with a brand (Brodie et al., 2011)?

The BIAF can be embellished by providing theoretically-rich and research-informed insight into what makes a brand popular and what makes for a popular brand. Building from our aforementioned recommendations to revisit the excitement dimension of brand perception, it is interesting that the Y&R BrandAsset Valuator™ system now includes energy, a fifth dimension that considers a brand's cultural traction and movement forward in time (Fudge, 2005, November).

Concluding thoughts

The BIAF is clearly not expected to explain everything that happens between consumers and brands, and the fact that we use this essay to discuss boundaries of the framework speaks to the broad appeal and explanatory power of the concepts at hand. Our essay attempts to persuade on one point: that the most interesting research pertinent to the BIAF lies in the intersection of theories concerning social perception and people's relationships with brands. Given the rich history of theories and models that exist in the branding literature, a dialogue between these traditions provides a valuable and necessary step in the generation of new propositions and research. The future of branding research is not exclusively about social perception, nor is it about people's relationships with brands. Progress is obtained not from one theory appropriating the other, but rather by challenging and informing each theory in the spirit of true interdisciplinary research.

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