Brand Congruence and Social Identity of Ethical Consumers

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Abstract

This paper examines how consumers with strong ethical identity evaluate CSR-led brands such as the Body Shop and the role of consumers’ self-brand congruence on virtue ethical character (labeled as ‘virtue character congruence’) in building favorable consumer evaluation for the Body Shop. A questionnaire survey found that, contrary to the notion emphasized in the Marketing literature and by practitioners, the self-brand congruence on virtue ethical character did not have a significant impact on customers’ identification with the Body Shop, with exception of the empathy virtue character. A structural equation model confirms that ethical image is influenced by empathy virtue congruence indirectly via consumer-brand identification. Ironically, in the case of the Body Shop, while empathy congruence is the most important indicator for consumer identification and ethical image, the gap on consumer-brand empathy virtue was the largest. The managerial implications of the findings are discussed.

145words

Key words: Social Identity, Empathy, Ethical Image, Virtue Congruence,
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The Body Shop, the campaigning cosmetics company, was acquired by French luxury goods manufacturer L’Oréal for £652 million in March 2006. On the day of the announcement, shares in Body Shop surged more than 10% towards the 300p mark offered by L’Oréal. They had been as low as 56.5p three years earlier (The Independent, 2006). While it was good news for investors, the consumers’ reaction was different. The Body Shop’s “satisfaction” rating measured by BrandIndex dropped by 11 points to 14, brand’s trendiness fell by 10 points to -4, and the ethical rating measured by Ethiscore immediately plunged from 11 out of 20 to just 2.5. The Ethical Consumer magazine urged a boycott of its products in protest not only at the French cosmetics group's ownership, but also its links with Nestlé, which owns 26% of L’Oréal (The Guardian, 2006). The media has been busy headlining negative phrases such as “The brand reputation was in risk”, “Body Shop's popularity plunges after L'Oreal sale”. “Anita sells her Body”. “Roddick sold out Body Shop to L'Oreal, the sort of company that people went to Body Shop to avoid”. In the work reported here, three important outcomes used are identification, citizenship and differentiation in the market to explore inter alia how Body Shop’s imagery as an ethical brand might be affected by the takeover. Research questions are then proposed to test whether or not the level of ethical character congruence between consumers and brand will influence consumers’ evaluation of the brand’s distinctiveness, citizenship and identification.

Congruence between Self - Brand Image

Today, more and more cosmetic brands try to engage their consumers with a favorable, ethical and distinctive image of their brand by promoting similarity between their consumers and the brand. Marketing literatures argue that a brand preference is influenced by one’s perception of how similar the personality of brand is to one’s own (Kassarjian, 1971). When a consumer buys a product, he or she buys not only functional benefits but also reputation, prestige, symbols and social meanings associated with the image of the brand. Customers make purchase decisions based on a product’s symbolic meaning and images, which can be used to maintain or enhance their self-image (Levy, 1959). For example, a man who considers himself rugged and masculine should prefer Marlboro cigarettes, whereas a woman who considers herself attractive, modern, and liberated should prefer Virginia Slims cigarettes. Marketers have capitalized on this desire by creating distinctive product images that will fit different customers’ self images. For CSR-led cosmetics brands, their target consumers are supposedly those who share similar ethical values and personality to the brand. Notwithstanding the growing interest of using such an ethical proposition as a marketing platform in the cosmetics market, such a theory focusing on the self identity of ethical consumers has not been tested on cosmetics brands (Shaw, 2005).

This research tested the level of congruence between the self and brand image and its possible link to the consumer’s identification with and favorable evaluation of the brand. Comparing the ethical aspects of self and brand image can be accomplished using 6 dimensions of ethical character (Chun, 2005); integrity, empathy, courage,
warmth, zeal, and conscientiousness (see Appendix 1). They are applicable to both human and corporate personality. Integrity is one of the most frequently emphasized corporate values, and is represented by character traits such as honest, sincere, socially responsible, and trustworthy. Both empathy (concerned, reassuring, supportive, and sympathetic) and warmth (friendly, pleasant, open, straightforward) are particularly important ethical characters for service business (Zeithaml et al., 1990: 26). Courage in the business world is defined as ‘success in achieving the desired outcome’ by being ambitious, achievement-oriented, leading and competent. It also means neither being dissuaded by threats and temptations nor being willing to step on other people. Unlike other moral virtues, zeal represents non-obligatory virtues such as exiting, innovative, imaginative, and spirited. The value of ‘fun’ has become increasingly popular in modern corporations for both internal and external stakeholders, but a brand such as Wal-Mart is perceived as caring, trustworthy, respected and friendly but not exciting and fun (Henderson and Mihas, 2000). Conscientiousness is one of the Big Five human personality factors and refers to reliable, hardworking, proud and secure (Barrick and Mount, 1991).

**Favorable Consumer Evaluation**

*Consumer Identification* Organizational identification is defined as a person's feeling of oneness with or emotional attachment to an organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). The level of emotional attachment consumers have with a brand is expected then to play an important role as both input for creating positive brand evaluation of the brands, and output for the self-image similarity. The construct was measured using statements such as ‘I feel an affinity with the Body Shop’ and ‘I am pleased to be associated with the Body Shop’.

*Citizenship Image.* One obvious desirable outcome for such a CSR-led brand is its image for being a good citizen. Good corporate citizenship is assessed as the consumer perception of, for example, ‘whether [or] not Body Shop plays a role in our society that goes beyond the mere generation of profits’; and ‘whether or not Body Shop helps social problems’. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree to such a statement.

*Distinctiveness.* The distinctiveness of the brand refers to ‘having a unique identity’ or ‘distinctive personality’ positioned in their consumer’s mind.

**Methodology**

*Sample.* A total of 317 questionnaires was collected using a snowball sampling technique from university students and their families and friends who had experience of the Body Shop as customers.

*Measures.* The consumer-brand image congruence on virtue character is measured using six dimensions and 24 associated items of the virtue ethical character scale (Figure 1). Respondents were asked to rate their own image and that of The Body Shop on the 24 ethical character items using a five-point Likert scale (from ‘1 strongly disagree’ to ‘5 strongly agree’). The congruence level was then calculated as the absolute differences between matching virtue items and dimensions of their own virtue and the brand virtue items. In other words the level of virtue congruence was measured as the consumer’s rating of their own virtue item minus their ratings of the
brand virtue items. *Consumer-brand Identification* was measured using statements such as ‘I feel an affinity with The Body Shop’ and ‘I am pleased to be associated with the Body Shop’. *Citizenship image* was assessed using three items such as the consumer’s perception of whether [or not] the Body Shop ‘plays a role in our society that goes beyond the mere generation of profits’; ‘allocates some of their resources to philanthropic activities’; and ‘helps social problems’. These items represent discretionary responsibilities (or citizenship) that are directly relevant to consumers of cosmetics, and therefore exclude economic, legal or ethical responsibilities that are designed to assess the views of employees (Maignan et al., 1999). Distinctiveness is measured using two items such as ‘the Body Shop as distinctive brand personality; Satisfaction is measured using items such as ‘I am overall satisfied with the Body Shop’. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with such statements on a five-point Likert scale.

**Findings & Discussion**

Using a survey of Body Shop customers, this research tested how the congruence between consumers’ self image and their Body Shop brand image will influence their evaluation of the company on three factors, such as citizenship, differentiation, and customer satisfaction; and what is the role of customers’ emotional attachment in such a link. My research reveals three key findings, depicted in Figure 1 and 2.

**FIGURE 1. A Hypothesized and Tested Model**
Figure 1 demonstrates that contrary to these assumptions, the person-brand image congruence proved to have little influence on the outcomes. Only one dimension of ethical character showed the expected effect, that of empathy. Empathy fit showed a significant influence on all four outcomes, satisfaction, citizenship, distinctiveness and identification. The similarity between a customer’s self-brand image on all the other dimensions, namely, warmth, zeal, courage and conscientiousness, had no impact on any of the outcomes. Modifications to the model suggested by the analysis included having identification as a mediating variable in the relationship between person-brand fit and satisfaction, citizenship and distinctiveness. The final model is summarized in Figure 2.

**FIGURE 2: A Confirmed Model**

![Diagram of the confirmed model](image)

**Empathy Fit: The Key Input**

The Values Report of the Body Shop emphasizes the integrity dimension the most: “Walking the talk, running our business with integrity and delivering against our promises are key to maintaining the trust of all our stakeholders.” However it was the level of congruence between consumers’ self image and their image of the Body Shop on ‘empathy’ dimension (supportive, reassuring, concerned sympathetic) not ‘integrity’ dimension that predicted the three outcomes.

The good news is that consumers rated integrity the highest for both the Body Shop and consumers’ self-image. The differences between the self-brand images were much smaller for integrity than those for empathy. The bad news is that this research found that the integrity congruence (fit) was not one of the drivers for the reputation of Body Shop. The difference between the perception of the self and the Body Shop on integrity had no impact on either Body Shop’s reputation for being a good citizen or its distinctiveness. The level of congruence has no impact on consumers’ emotional attachment to the brand either. Figure 3 depicts the differences of image on the 6 character dimensions.
Unfortunately, more bad news for the Body Shop is that there was also empathy where the biggest gap between consumers’ own image and the image of the Body Shop was found. In the eyes of the consumers, who see themselves relatively high on empathy, the Body Shop’s empathy level was just not good enough. The Body Shop’s claim for being a "caring" company with natural products and for “listening to stakeholders” has been often challenged on the grounds that the Body Shop pays their store workers low wages, well below the official European 'decency threshold' for pay and opposes trade unions.

This research was conducted prior to the takeover bid by L’Oréal. Body Shop customers already saw the reality of the company as falling much below their own self-image on empathy. Having been very negative about the standards and ethics of the large established cosmetics companies, the decision to accept the takeover would have been a considerable and ‘anti-empathetic’ blow to those who had been long standing customers of the company.

The Role of Identification

The consumers’ identification with, and emotional attachment to, a brand are influenced by the level of similarity (or fit) between consumers’ self-empathy and the brand empathy. In other words the role of identification is to mediate the relationship between the self-brand similarity on empathy and the three outcomes (Figure 1). The findings provide a useful explanation for the recent drop on the Body Shop’s ethical rating and for the negative consumer reaction since being taken over by L’Oréal. Consumers of the Body Shop are more likely to associate themselves with and have
affinity to the Body Shop if they feel the Body Shop shares an empathy character (supportive, concerned, reassuring) with them, regardless of their perception of the Body Shop on integrity character (socially responsible, honest, trustworthy).

**Implications for Strategy for a CSR-led Cosmetics Brand**

There are an increasing number of companies whose founding ideology has an ethical stance, but an increased emphasis on ethics means their ethical slogans have become less distinctive in the consumer’s mind. The idea that the more similar a consumer's self-image is to the brand's image, the more favorable their evaluations and attitude to that brand is a constant in the marketing literature. Contrary to such a belief, this research found the similarity of a consumer’s own image to the Body Shop’s image had little impact on citizenship, distinctiveness and satisfaction. Of the 6 ethical character dimensions used, only the congruence on empathy has a significant impact on all three outcomes. Surprisingly whether or not consumers and the Body Shop shared common views on integrity, represented by moral character traits such as honesty, social responsibility, trustworthiness, had no impact on either Body Shop’s reputation for showing either good citizenship or distinctiveness.

That said cosmetic brands such as Body Shop which position specifically as ethical brands require a different strategy from ordinary brands. The confirmed model suggests communicating their ‘empathy’ character with customers to leverage their emotional attachment to the brand is the key to distinguishing the brand in the marketplace, to enhance their citizenship image and to optimize consumer satisfaction levels.

Enhancing citizenship image and differentiating its ethical identity from that of competitors can be achieved by working on the emotional attachment of the consumers. Enhanced identification will also help as the greater identification customers have with the Body Shop, the more likely they will be to forgive the Body Shop when they hear negative information or unfavorable media coverage. At this point, the Body Shop’s existing consumers, who have a lot of concerns about the takeover, but still have emotional attachment to the brand, would like to see more interactive and empathetic communication from the Body Shop.

Other companies using an ethical positioning should evaluate the potential for similar work on the way their imagery influences the outcomes they seek. In particular it would be interesting to explore whether similar findings on the relatively low influence on similarity between self and brand image for integrity is shared by other ethical brands.
Appendix 1. Measurement Scale for Self Image and the Brand Image

Virtue Ethical Character Scale (VECS): 6 Dimensions and 24 Items

VIRTUOUS ETHICAL CHARACTER SCALE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Adjectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTEGRITY</td>
<td>Honest, Sincere, Socially-Responsible, Trustworthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMPATHY</td>
<td>Concerned, Reassuring, Supportive, Sympathetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COURAGE</td>
<td>Ambitious, Achievement-oriented, Leading, Competent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WARMTH</td>
<td>Friendly, Open, Pleasant, Straightforward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZEAL</td>
<td>Exciting, Innovative, Imaginative, Spirited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONSCIENTIOUSNESS</td>
<td>Reliable, Hardworking, Proud, Secure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Chun 2005)
References


The Independent. L'Oreal buys Body Shop for £652m. 17 March 2006