

Examining the Role Brand Fit Plays in Generation Y's Propensity to Purchase

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Abstract

Many branding consumer-based models focus on analysing the influencing effects of the brand; however, not in relation to Generation Y. Given the size and influence of Generation Y, and that a number of brands (i.e. Red Bull) focus specifically on capturing Generation Y, increasingly their relevance to branding practitioners and branding academics is being realised. This study examines the relevance of Red Bull to Generation Y by examining the role brand fit plays in Generation Y's propensity to purchase Red Bull. Extending the branding literature in relation to Generation Y, brand fit and brand-aroused feelings, the results provide new insights as brand fit more strongly influences purchase intentions indirectly through brand significance, than directly or indirectly through brand-aroused feelings.

Introduction and Purpose

Relevant to brands is the sheer size and economic influence of Generation Y, which is a reason why a number of brands (such as Red Bull) have targeted them (Mininni, 2005; Morton, 2002; Vahie and Paswan, 2006). Generation Y accounts for 28% of the Australian population (McCrindle, 2007), and unlike previous generations, Generation Y from birth have been exposed to brands (Martin and Turley, 2004), as they were born between 1980 and 1994 (Wolburg and Pokrywczynski, 2001). Much of the literature in relation to brands has focused on understanding Baby Boomers and to some extent Generation X, the extant literature on Generation Y is limited (Vahie and Paswan, 2006; Wolburg and Pokrywczynski, 2001). Given the economic influence of Generation Y, a number of brands would like research into Generation Y brand consumption, to understand the drivers for brand purchases (Cortes, 2004; Mininni, 2005; Stone, Stanton, Kirkham and Pyne 2001; Vahie and Paswan 2006). Relevant to Generation Y, argues Sheahan (2005; 2006: an Australian Generation Y expert), is constructing a sense of identity, more so than other generations (i.e. Baby Boomers and Generation X). This is because Generation Y has less parental control, and are less involved in religion and other formal moral frameworks, and are told from day-one that they can do anything, and therefore a more self-actualised than previous generational cohorts (Breen Burns, 2006). Brand-image-fit is therefore relevant and important to Generation Y, because consumers can use brands to express and construct their self-identity (Sheahan, 2006).

At the heart of this self-identity construction is *fit*, that is fit of the brand-image to the consumer's self-image; ostensibly the greater the fit between a consumer's self-image and the brand the more likely that the consumer will have positive brand assessments and a propensity to purchase the brand (Sirgy, "et al.", 1997). Brand fit refers to a consumer's psychological assessment of the compatibility or match between the brand and the self (Sirgy et al., 1997). Previous studies have evaluated fit on the basis of the attributes that consumers have thought a brand to have (Aaker and Keller, 1990; Boush and Loken, 1991), the expected benefits believed to be derived from using a brand (Martin and Stewart, 2001), imagery created by other brand-users (Jamal and Goode 2001; O'Cass and Frost, 2002; Sirgy et al., 1997),

personality indicators (Graeff, 1996) limited are studies that assess the *fit* of the brand-image in relation to the self-image. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to address this limitation by examining the role fit plays in Generation Y's propensity to purchase Red Bull.

The Importance of Brand Fit in Relation to Intention to Purchase

The consumer's self-image is a self-perception and develops from infancy onwards (Ericksen, 1996; Graeff, 1996). The self-image may incorporate the actual, ideal and social viewpoints of the self. "*Actual self refers to how a consumer perceives him/herself and ideal self refers to how a person would like to perceive him/herself and social self refers to how a person represents him/herself to others*" (Sirgy, 1982, p. 287). Brand fit develops in response to self-perceptions and also from a range of stimuli, such as other brand users, product attributes, company information, employees, usage contexts, distribution outlets, some consumers will make holistic, rather than compositional assessments of brand fit (Biel, 1993; Oakenfull, Blair, Gelb and Dacin, 2000). On the basis of holistic assessment about a brand (i.e. Red Bull), and a holistic assessment of the self (i.e. self-image), consumers assess the degree of fit in relation to how well the brand-image matches the self-image. At times various forms of fit, for instance actual fit, ideal fit and social fit may compete in the mind of a consumer and the holistic assessment of brand fit would take into account various weightings and evaluations (positive and negative) about the degree of fit. For instance, a consumer may see a fit between themselves and Red Bull, yet not like Red Bull ads or its association with extreme sports. The assessment of brand fit is subjective and for this reason, assessments of fit are likely to produce individual differences that influence subsequent responses (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987).

The degree of fit is likely to have an impact on various brand assessments, for instance brand-aroused feelings. Feelings may be aroused in response to a consumer seeing/hearing a brand name, a brand jingle, a brand logo or tag-line (i.e. Red Bull gives you wings); such feelings may include happiness or sadness (Edell and Burke 1987; O'Cass and Lim, 2001). Aroused feelings are argued to be the behavioural component of emotions (Weiten, 1989) and occur when inner processes (emotions) have been stirred up by a stimulus (e.g. a brand) that is important to a consumer (Frijda, 1991). Brand-aroused feelings are defined as the conscious affective assessments a consumer experiences when encountering a brand (Frijda, 1991; Scherer, 1996). To support the notion that brands themselves arouse feelings in consumers, O'Cass and colleagues investigated whether brands could arouse feelings and found that various types of feelings, including positive feelings, were aroused in response to brands (O'Cass and Lim, 2001; O'Cass and Frost, 2002; O'Cass and Grace, 2003). In this vein, likely is that when a consumer interacts with Red Bull feelings may be aroused which influence perceptions of fit. Alternatively, a consumer may assess the brand to be a close match with their self-concept, and because of the closeness of the match, experience positive brand-aroused feelings. Brand-aroused feelings may vary in intensity (i.e. positive feelings will vary from content to joyous) and it is likely that the stronger the match between the brand and the self-concept, the stronger the intensity of the (positive) brand-aroused feeling, depending on which is experienced first, brand fit or brand-aroused feelings, the direction of the causality is likely to change. Thus, H1: there is a relationship between brand fit and brand-aroused feelings.

Along with brand-aroused feelings, it is likely that brand fit will influence other brand assessments, such as brand significance. The principle of developing brand relevance for

consumers, is finding what makes a brand significant for a consumer (Keller, 2003). Brand significance refers to the assessment that a brand has a meaningful role in one's life (McCracken, 1986; Mick, 1986). The idea of consumers using possessions and possessions having meaningful consequences of self-definition, self-image enhancement and providing significance was broadly discussed by Belk (1988) and uncovered analysing consumers favourite possessions (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988), and in brand communities (Kozinets, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2000; Muniz and Schau, 2005). The argument is that the more a brand-image matches a consumer's self-image, the more likely a consumer will find a brand meaningful, and assess the brand to have a significant role in their life. Alternatively, a low-match between Red Bull's brand-image and a consumer's self-image is likely to lead to a low determination of brand significance. Thus, H2: Brand fit influences brand significance.

Together with brand-aroused feelings and brand significance it is likely that brand fit will influence a consumer's propensity to purchase Red Bull. Purchase intention has been found to be a key construct in a number of brand models (Bhatt and Reddy, 1998; Cobb-Walgren and Ruble, 1995; Mackay, 2001; Martin and Stewart, 2001), as it is important for branding practitioners and branding academics to understand better the reasons consumers intend to purchase the brand. Purchase intentions refer to an individual consumer's tendency, via a conscious plan, to make an effort to purchase a brand (Spears and Singh, 2004). Whilst it is generally accepted that purchase intentions is often used as a proxy for behaviour, Chandon, Morwitz and Reinartz (2005) warn that it is not a perfect predictor of actual behaviour and this limitation should be addressed when reporting results. In the case of brand fit having an effect on purchase intentions, a lower level of fit would indicate a lower-level of intention to purchase Red Bull. However, a higher-level of fit would indicate a high-level match between the consumer and the Red Bull brand, and probably a higher likelihood of intention to purchase. Thus, H3: Brand fit influences purchase intentions.

In conjunction with brand fit, important to a consumer's propensity to purchase a brand are the positive feelings aroused by the brand. Feelings are important for some consumers, who may feel a need for connectedness, likely is that positive brand-aroused feelings may enable consumers to form brand attachments and develop brand relationships in order to feel connected with society (Fournier, 1998). The importance of positive brand-aroused brand feelings are that they provide consumers with emotive reasons to have positive purchase intentions (Bagozzi, Gopinath and Nyer, 1999; Keller, 2003), and that intense positive brand-aroused feelings can lead to repeat purchasing behaviours such as brand commitment and loyalty (Pham, Cohen, Pracejus, Hughes, Mick and Baumgartner, 2001; Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel, 2006). Seemingly the lack of positive feelings is likely to lead to neutral or negative purchase intentions, whereas the more intensely felt the positive brand-aroused feeling, the more likely that the consumer will purchase Red Bull. Thus, H4: brand-aroused feelings influences purchase intentions.

Along with brand fit and brand-aroused feelings, likely is that brand significance will influence a consumer's intention to purchase Red Bull. Findings from Kozinets (2001) on Star Trek fans and from Muniz and Schau (2005) on Apple Newton brand members, suggest that on the basis of assessing significance, consumers are likely to engage in consumption/purchasing activities, such as buying branded products or joining a club. In this vein, at the extreme end a fanatical brand collector might assess Red Bull as dominating their life, and as such this consumer would have a high likelihood of purchasing the brand on the basis of a high-level of assessed brand significance. Conversely a consumer with a self-

assessed lower-degree of brand significance is likely to have a lower propensity to purchase Red Bull. Thus, the more significant a consumer assesses a brand to be, the more likely that a consumer is likely to have a propensity to buy. H5: Brand significance influences purchase intentions.

Examining the role that fit plays in Generation Y's propensity to purchase, so far hypothesised are direct effects and indirect effects of brand fit on purchase intentions through brand-aroused feelings or brand significance. Given that consumers are likely to vary in their assessments of fit, with some perceiving a good match between themselves and the brand and others perceiving little match between themselves and the brand, likely is that brand fit might modify the effect of brand-aroused feelings on purchase intentions (H4) or the impact of brand significance on purchase intentions (H5). According to Baron and Kenny (1986), when assessing the impact of one variable on another, it is important to assess if the variable (i.e. brand fit) is likely to change the impact and/or the direction of the relationships (i.e. H4 and H5). The argument for brand fit possibly being a moderator is based on the premise that consumers may have a high or low-level of fit and an interaction with brand-aroused feelings and/or brand significance may moderate their effect on purchase intentions. Thus, H6: Brand fit moderates the relationship between brand-aroused feelings and purchase intentions; and H7: Brand fit moderates the relationship between Brand significance and Red Bull purchase intentions.

Research Design

To examine the role fit plays in Generation Y's propensity to purchase Red Bull, following the sampling procedures of Wolburg and Pokrywczynsk (2001), a group administered survey was given to 18-25 year old Generation Y university consumers from three classes, each at a different Eastern Australian university. The number of students participating in the study was dependant on the number in attendance on the day the survey was administered. As Red Bull directly markets to Generation Y university students, the expectation is that students are familiar with the brand, and therefore able to assess their degree of fit with Red Bull. The survey measures were developed following the guidelines of Netemeyer, Bearden and Sharma (2003) using a four-step procedure. Based on the first step of construct definition, the second step generated 60 items from the literature. The measure of brand fit was developed from Sirgy et al. (1997), brand-aroused feelings was developed from Edell and Burke (1987), brand significance was developed from O'Cass (2004) and purchase intentions was developed from Batra and Homer (2004). The third step of refining and trimming the measures involved a panel of expert judges, focus groups and a pilot test of the survey. The fourth step finalised the items in the measurement scale, which consisted of six items for brand fit, an example item is *I see a match between myself and Red Bull*; six items for positive brand-aroused feelings, an example item is *regarding Red Bull I felt happy*; six items for brand significance an example item is *Red Bull is significant to me*; three items for purchase intentions an example item is *indicate the degree to which you plan to buy Red Bull*. The survey items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale.

Findings

Returned were 104 useable surveys. The preliminary analysis found no issues with missing data or multivariate outliers and all of the assumptions underlying the analysis were met. To

analyse the data, the structural equation modelling technique of Partial Least Squares Analysis was considered the most suitable because PLS considers all the path coefficients simultaneously, which allows analysis of all direct, indirect and spurious paths to be assessed together (Chin, 1998; Fornell and Bookstein, 1982; White, Varadarajan and Dacin, 2003). The benefit of this is that PLS enables the researcher to avoid biased and inconsistent parameter estimates for equations (White et al., 2003). To assess the reliability of the measures, according to Johnson, Herrmann and Huber (2006), the factor loadings should exceed .707, the construct reliability should exceed .70 and the average variance extracted should exceed .50. The measurement results were found to surpass the minimum requirement as the factor loadings ranged from .73 to .95; the construct reliability ranged from .92 to .96; the average variance extracted ranged from .65 to .88; this means that the variance captured is reliably measuring the construct purported.

The structural results identify that the strongest relationship is that between brand fit and brand significance (H2, $\beta=.72$; $R^2=.52$; $t=6.09$), followed by the relationship between brand fit and positive brand-aroused feelings (H1, $\beta=.50$; $t=12.96$). Brand significance has a greater impact on purchase intentions (H5, $\beta=.30$; $R^2=.25$; $t=2.69$) than does brand fit (H3, $\beta=.26$; $t=2.63$) or positive brand-aroused feelings (H4, $\beta=.28$, $t=2.68$) and together they account for 51% of the variance in purchase intentions ($R^2 = .51$). The idea of brand fit having a moderating impact on the relationship between brand fit and positive brand-aroused feelings (H6, $t=0.43$) or a moderating effect on the relationship between brand significance and purchase intentions (H7, $t=1.02$) was not supported. This means that brand fit has a direct and an indirect influence on purchase intentions. Indirectly, brand fit influenced purchase intentions through brand significance more strongly ($\beta=.22$) than through positive brand-aroused feelings ($\beta=.14$), which means if the Generation Y consumer assessed a match between their self-image and Red Bull that they were more likely to purchase Red Bull if Red Bull was assessed as being significant to them.

Discussion

In the introduction, the importance of self-identity enhancement to Generation Y was identified and exploring this further, this study examined the role that fit plays in Generation Y's propensity to purchase. Given the limited research on drivers for brand purchase in relation to Generation Y (Cortes, 2004; Mininni, 2005; Stone, Stanton, Kirkham and Pyne 2001; Vahie and Paswan 2006) this study contributes to this gap. The need for consumers to feel connected in society and to form brand attachments has been realised and previous research has addressed the contribution of feelings, which can lead to repeat purchasing behaviours (i.e. Fournier, 1998; Pham et al., 2001; Thompson et al., 2006). This study finds that brand-aroused feelings have a weaker influence on purchase intentions than does brand significance, thus, extending previous brand feeling research, and also contributing to the gap regarding drivers for brand purchase. The results from this study show that brand significance is a key driver, operating as a mediating variable between brand fit and purchase intentions.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This study examined a singular brand, Red Bull. Studying one brand has limitations to broader generalisable findings because one cannot conclusively say that the role of brand fit on Generation Y's propensity to purchase will be the same for all brands. Given results in

previous brand fit studies (i.e. Graeff 1996; Jamal and Goode 2001), likely is the possibility that similar results to this study will be found; however, future research would need to assess if this is the case. Finding that brand fit is a key driver in developing brand significance, and that brand significance has a stronger impact than does brand-aroused feelings or brand fit on purchase intentions has research implications; such as, the need for future research to focus on understanding what makes a brand significant. From this study, we know that brand fit is a contributing factor, likely are that there are other contributing factors. For practitioners concerned with marketing to Generation Y this study provides insights suggesting a focus on brand relevance, matching a brand to its target audience and communicating the relevance of the brand to a consumer's life; because this is likely to produce a greater propensity to purchase than focusing on arousing brand feelings.

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