

Do you really feel a superhero?-antecedents and consequences of brand engagement in self concept

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ABSTRACT

The current research aims to shed light on consumer-brand relationship, adopting the self-determination theory as theoretical lens for the definition of the antecedents and the consequences of the Brand Engagement in Self Concept (Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009). Thus, the goal of this study is to test a model previously proposed by Razmus, Jaroszyńska, & Pałęga (2017) in a community of high engagement manifestations, that is the cosplayer community (e.g. dress-up as their own favourite character) shedding light on the relationship between engagement and brand related constructs such as brand advocacy and brand loyalty.

Keywords: Cosplayer, Fashion, Brand Engagement in Self Concept, Brand Advocacy, Brand Loyalty.

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INTRODUCTION

The literature of consumer behavior provides various comments upon the phenomenon of products and brands serving as a means by which consumers express something about themselves (Holman, 1980). In this perspective, it emerges how clothes, even more than other material goods, are consumed not only for their functional benefits, but also as symbolic signifiers of identity (Cox & Dittmar, 1995). A paper of Levy states that "People buy things not only for what they can do, but for what they mean" (1959, p. 118); Robertson asserts how products vary in the degree to which social-symbolic meaning is important describing clothing as products recognized in our society as "saying something" about a person (1970, p. 3). Indeed, clothing is recognized by literature as a medium of communication that expresses a range of social information (Rosenfeld & Plax, 1977).

In order to better understand this phenomenon, authors focus on the cosplayer community as an extreme case of dressing to express the self. This specific case can be useful to analyze the overall propensity of dressing in such a way to transmit the self-identity. For this purpose, the study deepens consumer-brand relationship topic, adopting the self-determination theory as theoretical lens for defining the antecedents and the consequences of the Brand Engagement in Self-Concept (BESC). Particularly, authors would like to answer the call of the literature in shedding light on the relationship between engagement and brand related constructs such as brand advocacy and brand loyalty (Dessart Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015). With this aim, authors test a model previously proposed by Razmus et al (2017) in a community of high engagement manifestations, that is the cosplayer community.

FASHION AND THE SELF

Clothing, an important aspect of nonverbal behavior, serves a wide variety of communicative functions. Verlaben (1953) was one of the earliest authors to assert that clothing consumption was more than for mere physical needs for protection of the body. Veblen's research represents one of the major approaches to clothing use, specifically considering fashion for its symbolic value in the society.

One relevant function of clothing is the interaction with other people. According with Bovone (2006), since individuals can have just a limited access to another person's identity through appearance, the body is the first element for discerning person's character or personality. Another important role of clothing is the desire to differentiate ourselves from others, and most of all from what others would normally expect from us. In this sense, clothing represents a tool for controlling the images of ourselves that others have (Goffman, 1961, p. 152). Clothing has another function more: it is

indicative of the wearer's group membership or position within a group. In this perspective, fashion, adding aesthetic touches, is mostly a means of adhering to a specific social order (Hendricks, Kelley and Eicher, 1968). Aiken (1963)-tried to link clothing style with social position and personality. He founded that decoration in dress is correlated positively with such traits as conformity, sociability, and non-intellectualism. So biological, aesthetic and social levels as well as cultural standards of clothing interact while the consumer constructs his/her identity through clothing choices, and he/she expresses a self-construction process through appearance, *inter alia* with clothing (Niinimäki, 2010). Therefore, literature agrees in recognizing clothing as an instrument of communication that expresses a range of social information (McCracken and Roth, 1989). Considering all these functions of clothing, this research focuses on the link of people with the self.

COSPLAYER AND THE SELF

An extreme case in which communicating role of dressing clearly emerges is the phenomenon of cosplayers. The term cosplay is a linguistic mash-up that derives from the combination of the English words costume and play (Ito & Crutcher 2014) and refers to the practice of disguising characters from fantasy stories (television series, videogames and comics) during events associated with such cultural productions, like the cartoon fairs (Winge, 2006). Cosplay dress may be the most important tool the cosplayer has to nonverbally communicate the chosen character and character traits. Cosplay dress also allows cosplayers to move from their actual identities to their chosen cosplay characters, and sometimes back again (Winge, 2006). However, in cosplay, the image and identity of an individual is never stagnant. It is possible that many cosplayers move between different characters according to their changing interests and passions. Individuals tend to wear different masks to construct, transform or reshape their temporary identities over the course of self-formation and transformation (Rahman, Wing-Sun, & Cheung, 2012). In this perspective, it emerges how clothes, even more than other material goods, are consumed not only for their functional benefits, but also as symbolic signifiers of identity (Cox & Dittmar, 1995). Therefore, authors turn to the literature on consumer brand-relationship. Indeed, from this point of view, comics represent a limit case, where the main character of stories is immediately overlapped with the comic brand and conveys its identity and personality. In other cases, branding strategies may consider the opportunity to create an ad-hoc character for communication needs. Characters may benefit the associated brands by establishing a strong identity and favourable associations (Dotz, Morton, & Lund, 1996). Three broad typologies of characters exist: brand characters in animation and comics (e.g. Spider Man), brand characters with identity (e.g. Michelin Man), and

brand characters in pure design (e.g. Diddle). The case of cosplayers is embedded in the brand character in animation and comics case. Brand characters in animation and comics offer a rich storyline, and typically include other supporting characters as background. The storyline and visual animation impart personalities to the characters and relate to consumers' fantasies (Hosany et al., 2013). Consequently, a strong relationship between brand, character and consumer originates.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As previous literature shown (Aggarwal, 2004; Belk, 1988; Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel, 2004; Escalas, 2004), consumer brand relationship is influenced by the link between self-connection or related terms such as self-congruence, self-presentation, and reference group. Recently, the research on brand-consumer relationship has focused on differences between consumers (Fetscherin, & Heinrich, 2015) with respect to their engagement with brands (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Leckie, Nyadzayo, & Johnson, 2016; Sprott, Czellar, and Spangenberg, 2009). Among the other studies deepening in customer brand engagement, the study of Sprott et al. (2009) introduced the concept of BESC which can be considered as "the individual difference representing consumers' propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves" (p.92). Drawn by a theory developed by Markus (1983) the same authors highlight that self-concept is the set of self-schemas originated from stable knowledge structures about the self, used to interpret incoming self-related information and to help people make sense of themselves in their environment. Consequently, the varying tendency of people to possess self-schemas leads to differential attitudes and behaviour toward those objects relevant to those schemas (e.g. brand, community, characters). Therefore, the underlying assumption of the BESC construct stems in the varying tendency of consumers to possess brand-related schemas (Sprott et al. 2009). For this reason, people develop different brand-related cognitions, perceptions and behaviours, and vary in their tendency to engage in identity building and expression through brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Considering the theoretical framework proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000) of the self-determination theory, people are pushed into action by a variety of factors. These factors can be associated to two types of goals: intrinsic and extrinsic (Razmus, Jaroszyńska, & Palęga, 2017). The number of goals in this theory evolved from four (Kasser and Ryan, 1993) to seven (Kasser and Ryan, 1996). In this research, authors adopt Razmus et al. (2017) perspective, in which only six goals are considered. Namely, intrinsic goals are represented by (1) self-acceptance (achieve psychological growth, autonomy, and self-regard); (2) affiliation (have satisfying relationships with family and friends); (3) community feeling (improve the world through activism or generativity); whereas extrinsic goals include: (4) financial success (be wealthy and materially successful); (5)

social recognition (be famous, well-known, and admired); (6) appealing appearance (Look attractive in terms of body, clothing and fashion). In this perspective, the self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) can be useful to apply to the case of cosplayers who manifest their brand engagement in self-concept by dressing-up as their own favourite characters because of their personal aspirations. Formally, the following hypotheses are stated:

H1: Intrinsic aspirations negatively influence BESC. Self-acceptance (H1a), affiliation (H1b) and community feeling (H1c) are negatively and directly related to BESC.

H2: Extrinsic aspirations positively influence BESC. Financial success (H2a), social recognition (H2b) and appealing appearance (H2c) are positively and directly related to BESC.

Moreover, this relationship between personal aspirations and BESC leads to brand advocacy and brand loyalty. Brand advocacy consists in the promotion of a specific object embedded in the self (e.g. the brand, the character). According to Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, and Sankar Sen (2012), such promotion or advocacy can take place both socially and physically. Socially, advocacy includes the recommendation of the brand to others or the defense of the brand when it is attacked by others. Physically, advocacy may involve buying and using brand merchandise that displays concrete referring to it. Concerning brand loyalty, it is defined as “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviours” (Oliver, 1999, p. 3). So the following hypotheses are formulated:

H3: BESC positively influences brand advocacy.

H4: BESC positively influences brand loyalty.

METHODOLOGY

Authors adopt a quantitative methodology for investigating the phenomenon and test the model. They developed a survey and they submitted it privately to 600 members of two different cosplayers Facebook communities. Authors decided to contact respondents on these communities in order to target the questionnaire to cosplayers and reach an appropriate number of respondents. The questionnaire will be administered in English for the international community of cosplayers (actually formed by 37.450 members) and in Italian for the Italian community (actually formed by 24.202 members). 46 items included in the survey will embed Likert scale from 1 to 7 (Likert, 1932). Results will be analyzed with AMOS. The personal aspiration will be measured

adopting Razmus, Jaroszyńska and Pałęga (2017) description of six aspirations, based on Kasser and Ryan (1996) model. Authors will use 18 items related to intrinsic (Self-acceptance, Affiliation and Community feeling) and extrinsic (Financial success, Social recognition and Appealing appearance) aspirations basing on Truong (2010) and Sheldon et al. (2001) scale. According with Sprott (2009) BESC will be examined through 8 items. Authors will measure brand advocacy adopting Kemp and Bui (2011) 3 items scale adapted from Kim et al. (2001) and brand loyalty using Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) 3 items scale.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The sample.

416 cosplayers responded to the questionnaire; authors checked respondents' identity as cosplayers asking them if they use to dress up famous characters. More than half of the sample are female (63.3%) and the males are 36.7%. The majority of respondents aged 21 to 25 (33.3%), 20.5% are between 16 to 20, 20.5% are 26 to 30, 5.8% and 8.3% are 36 to 40 and over 40. Moreover, authors asked cosplayers if they use to dress up the same character or they use to change: 35.1% declare that change their costume, whereas 64.9% maintain the same.

Structural equation model results

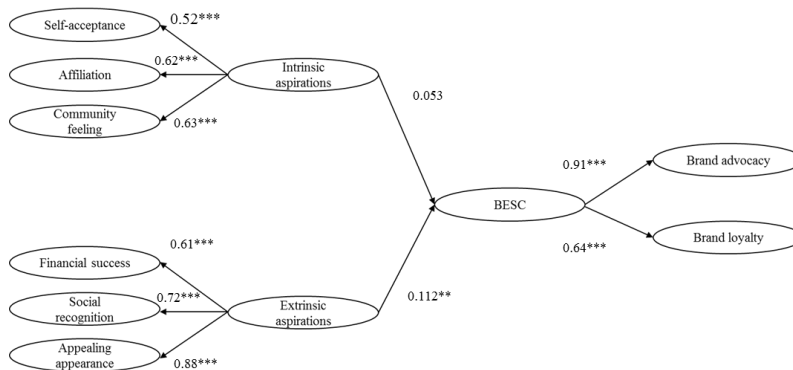
Table 1. CFA results

Construct	Items	CFA	AVE	CR	C.a
Intrinsic aspiration	Com_Feel	0.619	0.614658	0.349057	0.803
	Affiliation	0.634			
	Self_Acc	0.512			
Extrinsic aspiration	Financ_Succ	0.619	0.785139	0.553722	0.876
	Appeal	0.865			
	Soc_Rec	0.728			
BESC	BESC_1	0.833	0.957482	0.738197	0.957
	BESC_2	0.871			
	BESC_3	0.907			
	BESC_4	0.823			
	BESC_5	0.895			
	BESC_6	0.885			
	BESC_7	0.853			
	BESC_8	0.8			
Advocacy	ADVOC_1	0.772	0.830704	0.621071	0.831
	ADVOC_2	0.837			
	ADVOC_3	0.753			
Loyalty	LOYALTY_1	0.733	0.865237	0.682867	0.858
	LOYALTY_2	0.861			
	LOYALTY_3	0.877			

Notes: Model fit: $\chi^2= 536.656$, $df= 160$, $NFI= 0.907$, $IFI= 0.933$, $CFI= 0.932$, $GFI= 0.885$, $RMSEA= 0.075$.

The SEM testing was conducted to verify the fit with the empirical data. The model was validated and fit test indicated $\chi^2/ df=3.671$, $GFI= 0.872$, $RMSEA= 0.08$, $NFI= 0.894$; $TLI= 0.909$, $CFI= 0.921$, satisfying the criterion suggested by Bagozzi and Yi (1988). All the hypotheses were statistically significant except for H1. Indeed, intrinsic aspirations failed to significantly influence BESC suggesting that intrinsic aspirations, such as self-acceptance, affiliation, and community feeling, are not associated with BESC. H2 that regards the influence of extrinsic aspirations on BESC demonstrates how extrinsic aspirations are significant in explaining consumer behaviours. H3 and H4 are particularly significant and show how BESC positively influences brand advocacy and brand loyalty. The analysis of data sheds light on antecedents and consequences of Brand Engagement in Self-Concept, confirming the higher level of extrinsic aspiration generates a higher BESC level, consequently improving brand advocacy and loyalty.

Figure 1. SEM results of model



IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Authors believe that this study would help scholars and practitioners to shed light on the construct of brand engagement, by testing a model in the international community of cosplayers. The specific context of analysis chosen should provide relevant insights related to antecedents and consequences of engagement and other variables that could affect the relationships between engagement and other brand related constructs (e.g. brand advocacy and brand loyalty) in the fashion industry. Indeed, as scholars have shown, fashion goods are usually used to express a part of the self, thus the concept of

identification and the self-concept conveyed by a brand or a product is considerably relevant in the decision making process of consumers. Consequently, the more the brand is able to convey its personality, by exploring its proper own personification process (in some case with the help of a character), higher is the likelihood to have consumers that choose that brand because they feel close (in terms of identity or personality) to it. Thus, for brands, being part of the self-concept of consumers is the first step to be advocate and re-purchased by them. However, different natural tendencies of consumer (e.g. personal aspirations) must be considered, because they are able to determine different natural inclination to engagement that lead to different propensity toward brand loyalty and brand advocacy. Given that this research does not consider moderators of the relationship between personal aspirations, BESC, brand loyalty and brand advocacy, future research should study other variables able to affect this relationship. In addition, the model should be tested in other contexts of analysis related to the fashion industry.

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