

Handbook of Brand Relationships



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CHAPTER 4

SELF-EXPANSION MOTIVATION AND INCLUSION OF BRANDS IN SELF

Toward a Theory of Brand Relationships

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Much like relationships between people, relationships between consumers and brands are a central part of life. Similar to processes between persons, it has been argued that consumers purchase brands to construct their self-concepts and, in so doing, create self-brand relationships (Escalas and Bettman 2005). To advance knowledge of the underlying processes, considerable research has concentrated on understanding and describing the different relationships that consumers have with brands (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Fournier 1998). Several consumer-brand relationship concepts and related measures exist in the marketing and consumer research literature, which can be used to categorize consumers based on the intensity of those relationships (Fournier 1998). These concepts include brand attachment (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005), brand commitment (Warrington and Shim 2000), brand connectedness (Winterich 2007), brand evangelism (Matzler, Pichler, and Hemetsberger 2007), brand love (Ahuvia 2005; Albert, Merunka, and Valette-Florence 2007; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Fournier 1998), brand loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Jacoby and Chestnut 1978), brand passion (Bauer, Heinrich, and Martin 2007), and brand trust (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001), among others. Further, this volume offers a broad assessment of brand relationship, for example in terms of person-object love (Chapter 18) or attachment (Chapter 17).

All of these concepts have a relationship component, yet researchers argue that they are distinct constructs. For example, it has been suggested that brand love drives brand loyalty (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). Others posit that brand commitment reflects the degree to which a brand is the only acceptable choice within a product category, while brand loyalty is the repeated purchase of a single brand over time (Warrington and Shim 2000).

Despite the richness of different brand relationship facets presented in the marketing and consumer research literature, prior research has not yet identified a theory that unifies previous thought on brand relationships. Describing, however, the underlying processes of consumer-brand relationships provides a better understanding of how consumers relate to brands. In this chapter, we aim to bring to this topic a new perspective—the self-expansion model—that may account for central aspects of brand relationships not

previously considered, as well as integrating some diverse findings. Some prior work has related the self-expansion model to relationships with brands (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006); while we think that the application of the model was quite useful, the presented chapter goes beyond the earlier work, which focused on one aspect, to applying the model to a wide range of aspects of consumer-brand relationships.

Besides being of theoretical interest, we believe this approach provides insight into important aspects of brand management and can guide firms on how to promote intensive relationships between particular brands and consumers. Although our focus is on brands, the proposals we develop in this chapter may also have application in related domains in which there are significant person-object relationships, such as political psychology (e.g., relations of persons with political entities), health psychology (e.g., relations of persons with health behaviors and procedures), and environmental psychology (e.g., the relation of persons with nature and with particular natural locales).

This chapter is organized into four sections. First, we discuss the self-expansion model as it has been developed in the context of the social psychology of close relationships between humans (person-person relationships). Second, we consider applications of the basic concepts and findings related to the model for understanding the development and maintenance of brand relationships (person-object relationships). This will lead to the third section, which presents several research propositions on brand relationships based on the self-expansion model. Finally, we conclude with implications for further research and brand management.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THE SELF-EXPANSION MODEL

The self-expansion model is a conceptual framework that attempts to describe how people think, feel, and act in the context of close relationships. It was originally proposed by Aron and Aron (1986) and integrates Eastern psychology's views on the evolution of the self and the nature of love with contemporary Western psychological work on motivation and cognition. The self-expansion model offers two fundamental ideas: (1) a general motivation to expand the self and (2) inclusion of close others in the self.

Self-Expansion Motivation

People seek to expand themselves by enhancing their ability to accomplish goals, leading to ever greater goals or life purposes. This basic motive has been described in Western psychology as exploration, effectance, curiosity, competence, or self-improvement (Bandura 1977; Deci and Ryan 2000; Gecas 1989; Taylor, Neter, and Wayment 1995; White 1959). The self-expansion model emphasizes the central human motive of the desire to expand the self by acquiring resources, perspectives, and identities that enhance one's ability to accomplish goals (Aron, Aron, and Norman 2003; Aron, Norman, and Aron 1998; Aron et al. 2000). Like other self-related motives, self-expansion is a mix of conscious and unconscious processes. People may often be aware of feelings that could

be described as "expanded" and of seeking specific goals that facilitate self-expansion; however, expanding the self is generally not a conscious goal. Further, rapid expansion of the self, as often occurs when forming a new romantic relationship or experiencing the birth of a new child, is posited to result in high levels of excited positive affect, consistent with prior findings about the impact on affective state of rapid movement toward a goal (Carver and Scheier 1990).

These abstract ideas can be made more concrete by considering Lewandowski and Aron's the self-expansion questionnaire (2002), which assesses the degree to which a person experiences a relationship partner as a facilitator of increased knowledge, skill, abilities, mate value, positive life changes, and novel experiences. For example, representative items are "How much does your partner provide a source of exciting experiences?," "How much has knowing your partner made you a better person?," and "How much do you see your partner as a way to expand your own capabilities?"

Several research programs lend support to hypotheses generated from the motivational aspect of the self-expansion model. For example, one implication relates to initial attraction. A classic finding in the interpersonal attraction literature is that "similars attract" (Byrne 1971). From the perspective of the self-expansion model, this is due in part to the fact that any relationship expands the self, and people are aware that it is easiest to develop a relationship with someone who is similar to oneself (Aron et al. 2006).

Another implication of the model is that developing a new relationship expands the self. Thus, Aron, Paris, and Aron (1995) tested 325 students five times, once every two-and-a-half weeks over a ten-week period. At each testing, participants answered a number of questions, including items indicating whether they had fallen in love since the last testing, plus an open listing of "who are you today?" As predicted, there was a significantly greater increase in the number of self-content domains in the self-descriptions from before falling in love to after falling in love, as compared to the average changes from before to after other testing sessions for those who fell in love, or as compared to typical between-test changes for participants who did not fall in love. Based on this same line of thinking, through a series of surveys and experiments, other research found that the more expansion provided by a relationship before its dissolution, the greater the contraction of the working self-concept after its dissolution (Lewandowski et al. 2006).

Another important implication of the motivational aspect of the model, which has generated a number of studies, is based on the idea that the *process* of rapid expansion is affectively positive (Strong and Aron 2006). The major line of work developed from this idea has focused on a predicted increase in satisfaction with long-term relationships as a result of joint participation in self-expanding activities. This work emerged from a consideration of the well-documented typical decline in relationship satisfaction after the "honeymoon period" in a romantic relationship, a lowered level that is typically maintained over subsequent years (Tucker and Aron 1993). When two people first enter a relationship, there is usually an initial, exhilarating period in which the couple spends hours talking, engaging in intense risk taking and self-disclosure. From the perspective of the self-expansion model, this initial exhilarating period is one in which the partners are expanding their selves at a rapid rate by virtue of the intense exchange. Once they

know each other fairly well, opportunities for further rapid expansion of this sort inevitably decrease.

When rapid expansion occurs, there is a high degree of satisfaction; when expansion is slow or nonexistent, there is little emotion, or perhaps even boredom. If slow expansion follows a period of rapid expansion, the loss of enjoyable emotion may be disappointing and attributed to deficiencies in the relationship. Indeed, this pattern has been demonstrated in previous research such as studies of diaries as well as in field and lab experiments (Aron et al. 2000). For example, in one series of three laboratory experiments, couples in long-term relationships attended what they believed was an assessment session, which involved filling out questionnaires and being videotaped while interacting. The participants completed questionnaires, participated together in a task that was videotaped, and then completed more questionnaires. However, the questionnaires completed before the task served as a pretest and those after as a posttest. The task itself was experimentally manipulated so that some couples engaged in an expanding activity (one that was novel and challenging) and those in the control condition engaged in a more mundane activity. In all three experiments, as predicted, there was a significantly greater increase in relationship satisfaction for the couples in the expanding condition, whether measured by self-report or by blind analysis of content of pre and post verbal interactions between the couples (Aron et al. 2000).

In sum, the motivational aspect of the self-expansion model proposes that a major human motive, which occurs in diverse contexts including close relationships, is the desire to expand one's ability to accomplish goals.

Inclusion of Close Others in the Self

Perhaps the most important way in which people expand themselves is by including others in themselves, through close relationships. According to the model, in a close relationship, the resources, perspectives, and identities of a close other are experienced, to some extent, as one's own.

The *resources* of the other that are potentially included in the self contain material, knowledge-related assets (i.e., conceptual, informational, and procedural assets), as well as social assets (e.g., social status and roles) that can facilitate the achievement of goals. To include a relationship partner's resources means to perceive oneself as having access to or possessing the other's resources; that is, to some extent, that the other's resources are perceived as one's own (e.g., "I can do this because my partner will show me how" or "I have high status because my partner does"). The perceived inclusion of another's resources is particularly important from a motivational point of view because it means that the outcomes (i.e., rewards and costs) incurred by the others are to some extent experienced as one's own. This also implies that the other's acquisition and loss of resources are experienced to some extent as if they were happening to one's own resources (Aron and Aron 1986; Aron et al. 2003). Thus, for example, in game experiments in which people's allocation decisions will be unknown to recipients, people will allocate similar amounts to close others, but not to nonclose others (Aron et al. 1991).

Other examples show that people spontaneously experience the gains and losses of close others as if they were their own. A study of couples in romantic relationships found a standard equity effect (greatest satisfaction for those who are neither under- nor over-benefited), but this pattern was significantly weaker for those who perceived their relationship as having high levels of interconnectedness (Medvene, Teal, and Slavich 2000). That is, the authors predicted this pattern based on the idea that if the partner is part of the self, the partner's benefits are one's own, and if partners do not distinguish between their own and others' outcomes, the meaning of over- or under-benefited in relation to the partner is undermined. Similarly, several studies have found that social comparison processes are dramatically altered to be more like self-comparisons when the other is either already close to the self or closeness is created by a priming manipulation (Beach et al. 1998; McFarland, Buehler, and MacKay 2001; O'Mahen, Beach, and Tesser 2000; Stapel and Koomen 2001). For example, priming inclusion of others in the self completely undermined the negative effect of a partner outperforming the self and the degree of celebration in the close partner's success is correlated with the degree of including the other in the self (Gardner, Gabriel, and Hochschild 2002).

Including the other's *perspective* in the self refers to consciously or unconsciously experiencing the world to some extent from the included other's point of view. This implies that when another is included in the self, various self-related attributional and cognitive biases should also apply to that other person. For example, the usual actor-observer difference in the tendency to make situational versus dispositional attributions (Jones and Nisbett 1971) is smaller when the other is someone close to the self, such as a best friend or romantic partner (Aron et al. 1991; Aron and Fraley 1999; Sande, Goethals, and Radloff 1988). Other studies using memory recall methods have found that items imaged with close others, like items imaged with the self, are less vividly recalled than items imaged with non-close others (Aron et al. 1991). These studies suggest that just as one's own perspective is a background to experience, one's perspective gained through close others is also experienced as a background to experience; and the closer the others are, the more this is the case.

Taking another approach to this point, researchers examined whether people would extend to close others the usual effect found for the self in which past successes are recalled as more recent and past failures as more distant than they actually were. Consistent with the notion of including a close other's perspectives, this same effect was found when participants recalled past events for romantic partners, but only when those partners were close and not when they were distant (Konrath and Ross 2003).

Identity refers to features that differentiate one person from other people and objects primarily in terms of characteristics, memories, and other features that locate the person in social and physical space. Thus, when including a close other's identities in the self, people may easily confuse their own traits or memories with those of the other. In relation to the cognitive aspects in general (i.e., perspectives and identities), the self-expansion model implies shared cognitive elements of self and close others (Aron and Fraley 1999). Thus, for example, one may consider the consistent finding in the long-standing line of work on the "self-reference effect" of an advantage in terms of memory and response

time for self-relevant versus other-relevant processing. However, a meta-analysis of the effect found significantly smaller differences in the memory effect between self-reference and other-reference when the other was someone who was close to the self (Symons and Johnson 1997).

The self-expansion model specifically suggests that in a close relationship, the very structure of the self changes in that the self includes the other in its very makeup—that the knowledge structures of close others actually share elements (or activation potentials) with the knowledge structures of the self (Aron et al. 1991). For example, one paradigm to examine this idea focuses on patterns of response latencies in making me/not me decisions (i.e., does the trait describe me?) about traits previously rated for their descriptiveness of self and of a close other. Across multiple studies, traits on which the self matches a close partner (the trait is true of both or false of both), me/not me-responses are faster than when a trait was mismatched for self and partner (true for one but false for the other) (Aron et al. 1991; Aron and Fraley 1999; Smith, Coats, and Walling 1999). Moreover, the magnitude of the effect correlates substantially with self-report measures of closeness and in one study predicted increases in self-reported closeness over a three-month period.

Using a different paradigm, another study had participants rate one set of traits for self, a different set of traits for a close other, and still other traits for one or more nonclose others, such as media personalities (Mashek, Aron, and Boncimino 2003). Participants were then given a surprise recognition task in which they were presented each trait and asked to indicate to which person they had rated it. The analysis focused on confusions; that is, traits that the participant remembered having rated for one person when the participant had actually rated it for a different person. Results were consistent with predictions. For example, if participants did not correctly recognize a trait as having been originally rated for the self, they were more likely to remember it as having been rated for the partner than as having been rated for the media personality. Similarly, if participants did not correctly recognize a trait as having been originally rated for the partner, they were more likely to remember it as having been rated for the self than as having been rated for the media personality.

In summary, the self-expansion model's aspect of "inclusion of close others in the self" posits that in a close relationship each treats the other's resources, perspectives, and identities to some extent as one's own.

APPLICATION TO BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

In this section, we apply key ideas of the self-expansion model, which was developed in the context of the formation and maintenance of close relationships between persons, to the relationships between consumers and brands. We are therefore looking at typical self-expansion processes of consumers, which are intended to lead to an improved theoretical basis of brand relationships. We would like to note that there are also relatively direct ways in which person-person relationships facilitate brand relationships, such as when close friends or admired persons (as in advertisement testimonials) are known to prefer a particular brand. In such cases, the brand may be seen as expanding the self or

may be included in the self by extension from the personal relationship. Such vicarious processes have been shown to occur in the context of group identities in which a number of studies of the "extended contact effect" demonstrate that knowledge of a member of one's group having a close friend in another group creates more positive attitudes toward the other group (Wright et al. 1997). However, in this chapter our main focus is on direct person-brand relationships.

Brands and Self-Expansion Motivation

Rapid Self-Expansion with Newly Acquired Brands

Between persons, rapid expansion of the self, as often occurs when forming a new romantic relationship, is posited to result in high levels of excited positive affect. As noted earlier, this idea is consistent with prior analysis of the impact on the affective state of rapid movement toward a goal (Carver and Scheier 1990). This notion also implies a correspondingly intense negative affect when there is rapid "de-expansion" of the self; that is, when there is a rapid loss of perceived potential efficacy, as might occur with the sudden death of a spouse. We argue that between consumers and brands, rapid expansion takes place for newly acquired brands. For example, if a consumer buys a Rolex watch—which is now part of the relevant and actual sets of exclusive watch brands—the purchase and ownership of that watch can result in high levels of excited positive affect. This purchase can also lead to the formation of a new, close relationship between brand and consumer. If the owner loses the watch, this can lead to a rapid de-expansion of the self.

We posit that this takes place not only in high-priced, high-prestige product categories, but also for mundane, everyday brands. That is, if a consumer just changed from buying a no-name instant coffee to buying Nescafé's Taster's Choice brand, owning and using this product may also result in some self-expansion. And, if the brand is no longer available at the consumer's supplier, there may be disappointment. Of course, as the examples suggest, the intensity of the expansion may be smaller for mundane, low-involvement products (e.g., instant coffee) than for exclusive, high-involvement products (e.g., Swiss wristwatches).

As a brief excursion, we define involvement with brands by following the lead of previous research (Zaichkowsky 1985), which characterizes involvement as a person's perceived relevance of an object such as a brand based on inherent needs, values, and interests. Early research on involvement distinguishes between enduring involvement (i.e., represents an ongoing concern with an object that transcends situational influences) and situational involvement (i.e., involvement that occurs only in specific situations) (Houston and Rothschild 1978). Both represent a state of arousal and interest in the object, but they differ in their motivations and in the temporal pattern of their occurrence. Besides this categorization in enduring and situational involvement, the involvement construct may be differentiated into low versus high (Howard and Kerin 2006; Zaichkowsky 1985, 1994). Highly involved consumers are motivated to study information, such as

quality, more extensively. However, less involved consumers are more likely to apply simple heuristics or judgment-relevant cues, which are more easily understood (Chen and Chaiken 1999), when processing information (Howard and Kerin 2006; Meyers-Levy and Peracchio 1996).

Pertaining to brand and self-expansion motivation, we focus on enduring involvement toward a brand (Houston and Rothschild 1978), which we further categorize into low and high involvement (Howard and Kerin 2006). Research summarized earlier finds that when doing exciting activities with a person, one comes to value the person more (Aron et al. 2000). This may also apply to relationships with brands on both high- and low-involvement levels. That is, if one is able to do something exciting (i.e., novel and challenging) with a brand, one is likely to feel more positively about it. For example, Omega, another exclusive watch manufacturer, positions its Seamaster brand as the ultimate instrument for the challenging sport of sailing. Brands of products that actually are used in novel and challenging situations are also likely to show this effect; for example, brands of tools or of musical instruments. We posit that having a novel and challenging experience with a brand—even strong associations of the brand with vicariously or imaginably having such experiences—is over and above just having good or positive experiences with the brand. In summary, these arguments lead to the following proposition:

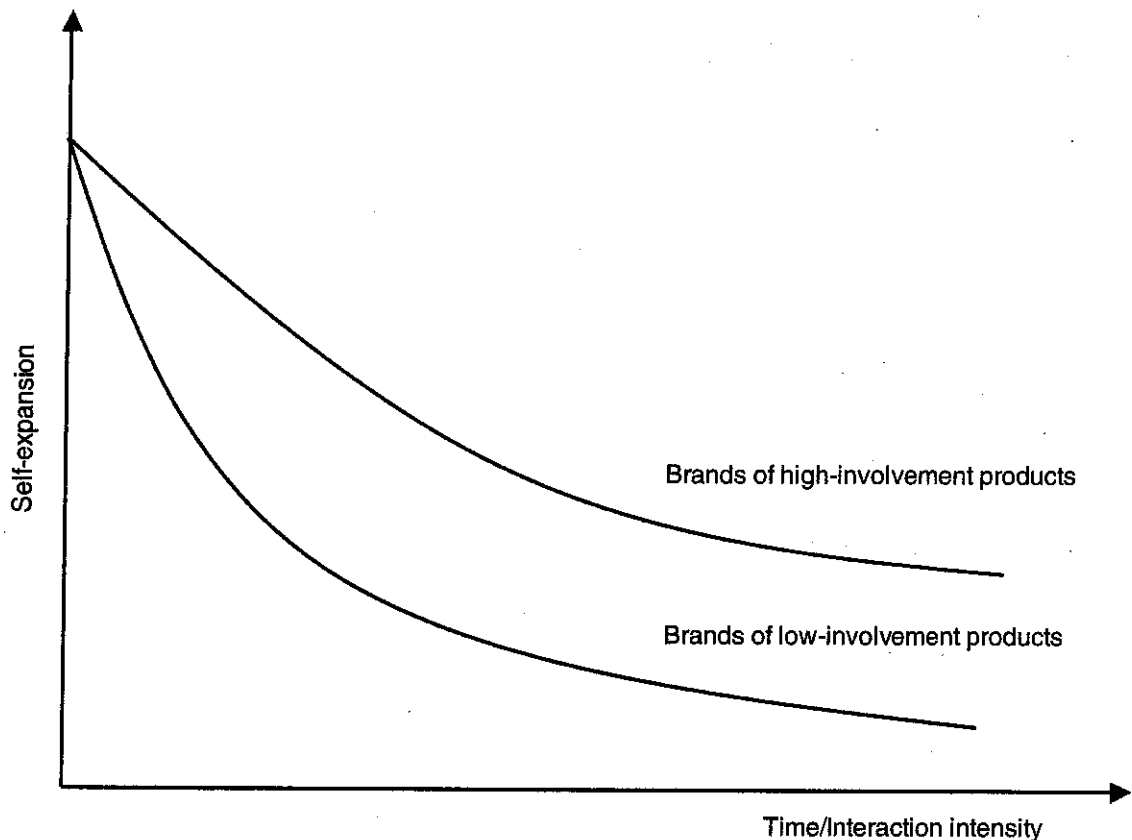
- P₁: For newly acquired brands, consumers may rapidly self-expand; thus enlarging the content of self-definitions, increasing self-efficacy, and experiencing positive affect. This effect is stronger for brands of high-involvement products and weaker for brands of low-involvement products.

Decreasing Self-Expansion with Well-Known Brands over Time

We also argue that the rate of self-expansion, and therefore positive affect and value associated with the brand, decreases over time with brands that have been repeatedly purchased, owned, and used. Starting from a state of rapid self-expansion with new brands, we posit that ordinarily (i.e., unless the brand is involved in ongoing novel and challenging activities), the amount of self-expansion decreases steadily. To use the previous Rolex example again, a Rolex that has been owned for years might still excite positive affect because of its timelessness; however, it will do so to a lesser extent than the latest, more beautiful, more technologically advanced Rolex model, or even for a newly acquired older model. For mundane, lower-involvement products, this decline starts at a lower level of self-expansion at the start of the brand relationship and may be even more rapid than for high-involvement products. Here, re purchasing this brand may lead to the least self-expansion; that is, it becomes a routine purchase. Thus, we propose:

- P₂: The longer the relationship with the brand lasts, the less self-expanding the brand is. This effect across time is stronger for brands of low-involvement products and weaker for brands of high-involvement products.

Figure 4.1 Brands and Self-Expansion Motivation



We also posit, however, that it is not just the relationship length that matters but also the intensity of the interaction with the brand. That is, the habituation process (i.e., routine purchase or long-term possession) that arises from relationship length is just one aspect of habituation. For human relationships, relationship length is one of the least important determinants of relationship closeness; more important is how many different things one does with a person and how much time one spends with them from day to day (Berscheid, Snyder, and Omoto 1989). Applied to brand relationships, we argue that the interaction intensity with a brand also reduces the rate of rapid self-expansion. Interaction intensity could, thus, function as an accelerator of the relationship-length effect posited earlier. We therefore offer the following proposition:

- P₃: The higher the interaction intensity with the brand, the more decrease in self-expansion will be associated with the brand over time. This effect is stronger for brands of low-involvement products and weaker for brands of high-involvement products.

Figure 4.1 illustrates our idea of high self-expansion levels for relationships with new brands (i.e., rapid self-expansion) and decreasing levels of self-expansion with

these brands over time and interaction intensity. It also provides an illustration for our argument that rapid self-expansion entry levels are generally higher for exclusive, high-involvement products and lower for mundane, low-involvement products. Here, we also argue that the link between self-expansion, time, and interaction intensity is steeper for low-involvement products than for high-involvement products. That is, a brand of a low involvement-product results in low levels of self-expansion much more quickly than a brand of a high-involvement product.

Yet, in line with prior human relationship research, we argue that when a consumer provides a high amount of self-expansion in a long-term relationship with a brand, it is more upsetting to "break up" with that brand (Lewandowski et al. 2006). For example, when Coca-Cola introduced New Coke, brand-loyal consumers became highly upset that the original brand was taken away and even boycotted the sale of the new brand. This led Coca-Cola to quickly reintroduce the original brand. Pertaining to brand relationships, we posit that high amounts of self-expansion toward a brand lead to brand loyalty (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006); specifically in terms of psychological loyalty (i.e., commitment to a long-term brand relationship). We therefore propose:

- P₄: The greater the self-expansion experienced with a brand, the greater will be brand loyalty.

Inclusion of Close Brands in the Self

Brands as Resources

We argue that brands serve as resources, which consumers include in the self. First, for brands having reached the level of status symbol—such as the famous Polo Ralph Lauren polo player embroidered on shirts or the Montblanc Meisterstück fountain pen—consumers draw from these materialistic resources and eventually include them in the self once they own the branded product. Observational evidence suggests that consumers that include these close brands in the self literally wear the brands with pride and show them to others. Typing on a slim Apple MacBook, quickly responding to an e-mail via the latest Blackberry model, or noting appointments in a leather-bound Filofax in a meeting signals to others that the brand and its user have bonded. Through signaling this bond to others, the brand's resources are perceived as one's own resources. That is, part of the identity of the brand is matched and enclosed with its user's identity. A sudden loss of the close brand may thus be experienced as a loss of one's own resource. Although brand relationships may generally not disappear as suddenly as human relationships (e.g., through death or divorce), automobile enthusiasts have reported a deep cut in their own identity if their beloved car—their own branded product—was lost in an accident. Second, brands literally provide resources for accomplishing goals to the extent they are useful. Therefore, brands that are perceived to be of higher quality (i.e., offer greater utility) may especially expand the self.

In summary, brands offer at least two types of resources, which consumers may include

in the self: (1) the social status or role availability that comes from people knowing that one owns the brand (respectively, one's perception of being the kind of person that has that brand) and (2) the actual benefits (e.g., utility) one has by owning that brand. Thus, we propose:

P₅: Brands can function as resources. Consumers include these resources in the self and perceive them as their own resources.

Moreover, if brands provide resources that are included in the self, then losses to the brand mean losses to the self and benefits to the brand mean benefits to the self. Thus, consumers who have purchased a brand are likely to promote the brand to others and also to resist arguments from others that the brand has problems. Indeed, in the context of competing brands, there may be devaluation of the competing brand. We therefore offer the following proposition:

P₆: Brands function as resources. The more a consumer perceives a brand's resources as the consumer's own resources (i.e., the more the brand is included in the consumer's self), the more the consumer will act on its behalf.

Brands as Perspectives

Further, we argue that consumers tend to consciously or unconsciously experience their world from the perspective of brands they possess (and have included in the self). A consumer would be subject to several attributional and cognitive biases in relation to the brand. For example, the BMW brand has been positioned as "The Ultimate Driving Machine" for many years. Correspondingly, BMW owners have been reported to drive more aggressively than owners of other automobile brands. Although Mercedes-Benz cars generally feature the same level of state-of-the-art technology and design as BMWs, Mercedes-Benz operators are not stereotyped as being as aggressive as BMW drivers. We thus argue that consumers may in part view their world and even act from the perspective of close brands. We posit that this is especially true during the consumption and use of the brand. An observation of a wedding party at an upscale hotel revealed that when dressed in expensive Armani and Prada suits, dresses, and shoes, people behaved quite differently than when they had checked into the hotel a few hours earlier, wearing Abercrombie shorts and flip-flops. The relaxed behavior at check-in was exchanged with formal behavior once people changed outfits, even among close relatives. Another example is that those who purchase brands associated with valuing the environment (e.g., Prius hybrid automobile or Ecover dishwasher soap) may take on pro-environmental attitudes. This leads to the following proposition:

P₇: Brands function as perspectives. Consumers' view their world from the perspective of brands they have included in the self, in the sense that they see the world from the perspective of perceived owners of the brand.

Brand as Identity

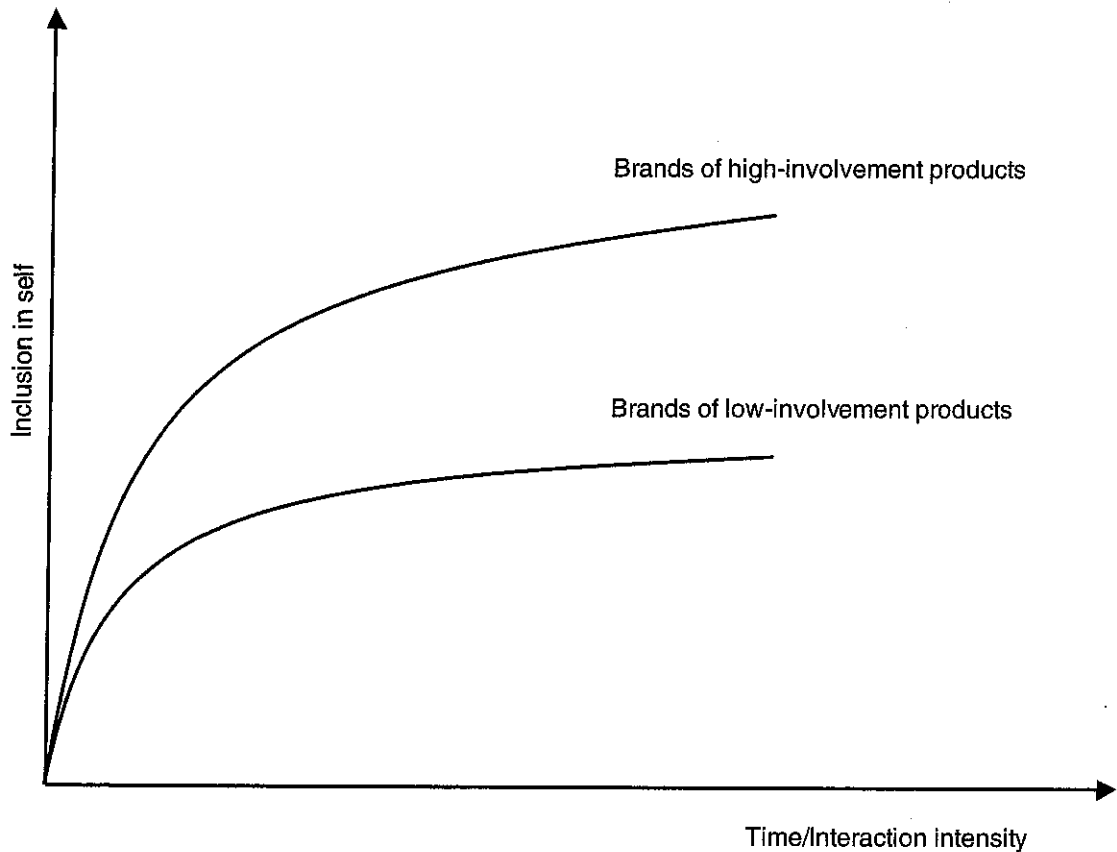
Previous research has argued for the importance of identity when considering consumer-brand relationships (Reed II 2004). It has been further argued that a brand relationship can be looked upon as an expression of consumer identities (Escalas and Bettman 2005). For example, a consumer's relationship with a Mercedes-Benz could build on the need to express individual-level unique identity, while a relationship with a local brand such as a Ford may relate to a group-level patriotic national identity (Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli 2007). Other findings in brand relationship research suggest that the greater the fit between human traits that consistently describe and distinguish an individual and those traits that describe and distinguish a brand, the greater the preference will be for that brand (Malhotra 1988; Sirgy 1982; Swaminathan et al. 2007). In the context of person-person relationships, the self-expansion model proposes that the identity of a close other is "included in the self," in the sense that the cognitive representation of the close other actually becomes part the cognitive representation of the self. As a result, the close other functions like the self in terms of recognition, memory, and distinguishing qualities. As summarized earlier, people are faster at identifying a trait as their own when that trait is not also true of the close other (Aron et al. 1991). Similarly, people make source memory confusions between the self and close others (Mashek et al. 2003) and are slower at recognizing themselves when their photo is morphed with that of a close other than when it is morphed with a nonclose other (Riela et al. 2008). Extending this idea to brands, we suggest the following:

P₈: Brands function as identity. When there is a close relationship with a brand, the brand's identity becomes part of the cognitive structure of the self.

In summary, the main difference between the three facets of inclusion of close brands in the self is that a close brand's *resources* can be viewed as part of the owner's self, while *perspective* means seeing the world from the brand's point of view and *identity* refers to a brand's identity becoming part of the cognitive structure of the owner's self.

We also posit that the effect of increasing inclusion in the self is steeper for brands of high-involvement products than for brands of low-involvement products. However, the increase in inclusion in the self continues at a decreasing rate over time. One reason for this effect is that the included brand provides only marginal additional utility to its owner's self. As such, the brand resources will mostly be included in the owner's self over time. Moreover, the perspectives and identity of a brand will merge with the owner's perspectives and identity over time. We also argue that the decreasing rate of inclusion in the self is higher for brands of low-involvement products than for brands of high-involvement products. That is, a close brand of a low-involvement product (e.g., Nescafé instant coffee) will be included much faster than a brand of a high-involvement product (e.g., Rolex wristwatch). Thus, a brand of a high-involvement product results in additional utility for a longer time than a low-involvement product's brand would. We propose that:

Figure 4.2 Inclusion of Brands in the Self



P₉: The longer the relationship with the brand over time lasts, the more the brand will be included in the self, although at a decreasing rate. While the effect of inclusion in the self will be stronger overall for brands of high-involvement products and weaker for brands of low-involvement products over time, the decreasing rate of additional inclusion in the self will be stronger for brands of low-involvement products.

We also posit that it is not just the relationship length that matters with respect to inclusion in the self but also the intensity of the interaction with the brand. This, we offer the following proposition:

P₁₀: The higher the interaction intensity with the brand, the more the brand will be included in the self, although at a decreasing rate. While the effect of inclusion in the self will be stronger overall for brands of high-involvement products and weaker for brands of low-involvement products, the decreasing rate of additional inclusion in the self will be stronger for brands of low-involvement products.

Figure 4.2 illustrates our idea of increasing inclusion of the close brand in the self over time and interaction intensity. Moreover, we illustrate that the rate at which there

will be additional inclusion in the self will decrease more for brands of low- than of high-involvement products.

DISCUSSION

Although the relationship viewpoint has become increasingly popular as a theoretical foundation for understanding consumer-brand relationships and several brand relationship facets have been highlighted in the literature, previous research has not yet identified a general theory of brand relationships. This chapter explored for the first time the broad implications of a perspective—the self-expansion model—that may account for central aspects of brand relationships not previously considered. We also attempted to integrate some diverse findings in prior brand relationship research.

Definition of Close Brand Relationships. As a result of our application of the self-expansion model to brands, we define a close brand relationship as one in which the brand becomes part the self of its owner.

Implications for Future Research. Our application of the self-expansion model to brands has several implications for further research in the domain of brand relationships. Specifically, our various propositions (as well as others that might follow from the thinking we have put forward here) could be tested using diverse methods, in many cases simply adapting to the brand context studies used to test the model in the context of person-person relationships.

Implications for Brand Management. The proposals of this chapter also have some implications for practitioners. Brand managers often emphasize the role of brands in conveying human identities (Swaminathan et al. 2007). However, based on our theoretical assessment, we find that brands may also function as resources and perspectives, which are important aspects to consider when building and managing brands. Our line of argumentation also suggests that there is a difference between brands of high- and low-involvement products. That is, consumers tend to expand themselves more with brands of high- than of low-involvement products. Further, the inclusion in the self also differs between involvement categories. While the overall rate of inclusion in self for brands of high-involvement products is steeper over time than for low-involvement products, the additional utility from inclusion is smaller for low- than for high-involvement products. Particularly for brands of low-involvement products, managers should identify strategies to maintain higher levels of self-expansion and a slower decrease of additional utility when consumers include close brands in their selves. This, for example, could be managed by regularly launching new offers or additional product features before old products expansion levels fall too far.

Conclusion. In sum, we hope that our speculations regarding the application of the self-expansion model to brand relationships will prove sufficiently beneficial in expanding the

scope and depth of work on brands, and will lead to including the model in the resources, perspectives, and identities of the field.

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