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TOWARD A BRAND VALUES SCALE: CONCEPT AND FIRST EMPIRICAL STEPS

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SUMMARY

In modern consumer societies brands are closely tied to cultural context (Holt 2002; McCracken 1986). Therefore, brands contain meanings that go far beyond functional characteristics. Consumers have become more and more culturally competent, being able to “read” even complex brand meaning (Bengtsson and Firat 2006). Values are frequently named as being a central element of brand meaning. While it has been common for a long time to speak of brand values in the literature on branding (Aaker 1996; Kapferer 2008; Keller 2008), an increasing number of empirical studies underscoring the relevance of a brand values construct have only recently been published (Allen 2002; Allen et al. 2008; Quester et al. 2006; Strizhakova et al. 2008). However, this concept is not well-developed. Consequently, a sound instrument to measure brand values does not exist.

This paper addresses these important gaps in two ways. First, we offer a framework for conceptualizing brand values that builds on the work of Schwartz (1992) in the field of human values. Second, we report the methodology and results of three studies as steps toward a brand values scale.

The first study’s objective is to assess the fit of the formulation of the original Schwartz value items in the brand context. The German version of the SVS (Schwartz 1992) was distributed among 64 undergraduate and graduate students as well as marketing faculty members of a German university. The results indicated that with regard to the brand context there was a need to reformulate the items. Additionally, most indicators of the Schwartz value type conformity might generally not be well-suited.

Study 2 seeks to gain insights into how the Schwartz value types are understood in a branding context. Thus, a focus-group interview with a panel of nine marketing experts was carried out aimed at evaluating more deeply the suitability of the value types and at understanding which categories of brands might be strongly related to certain brand value types. Looking at the picture as a whole, – with the exception of conformity – all Schwartz

value types were first of all overwhelmingly accepted as being suitable for brand values. This also went along with numerous brands being named as reflecting these value types. Second, the semantic interpretation of some value types (i.e., tradition, universalism, achievement, power, and security) seems to differ significantly from Schwartz’s (1994) original definitions. Last but not least, these findings pointed strongly to how potential improvements of the item and task formulation could better adapt the SVS to the brand context. A further review panel consisting of 12 marketing experts tested the list of reformulated items for the wording as well as their breadth of applicability. The findings showed that most value items are suitable for a wide range of brands, that some apply to only a few brands, while others seemed to be generally inadequate for describing brands. Consequently, the latter were eliminated.

Finally, in Study 3 the resulting questionnaire with 39 items was subjected to a survey aimed at quantitatively testing the refined brand values items. The goal was to conceptualize brand values using the insights of Studies 1 and 2 as well as the literature on human value conceptualizations and value-related consumer behavior. A sample consisting of 99 undergraduate and graduate students from three universities in East and West Germany had to evaluate four brands from significantly different categories which were relevant for students. Each respondent was asked on five-point rating scales to indicate to what extent each of the items was descriptive of the respective brand. The data analyses performed include exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis and MDS. The findings suggest the existence of nine different brand value types and indicate that brands can be differentiated on this basis.

In total, the application of the value concept to the brand context is clearly viable. Values are meaningfully associated with brands and brands in turn are associated with Schwartz value types. Furthermore, we provide evidence for additional brand values not covered by a scale exclusively based on Schwartz values. References are available upon request.

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