Research Dialogue

Brands as intentional agents: Our response to commentaries

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Abstract

We are grateful for the stimulating and hospitable welcome to us as guests in consumer psychology. As sojourners, we share a keen interest, but know that we come to visit without knowing the territory intimately. Granted, Chris Malone is an experienced, senior marketing practitioner who now owns a research-based consulting firm with a particular interest and specialization in this area. In addition, Nicolas Kervyn, trained as an experimental social psychologist, has worked and consulted in marketing. Susan Fiske, trained as an experimental social psychologist, had kibitzed in consumer psychology since she first served on the JCP board as an assistant professor. However, none of us has imperialist ambitions in consumer psychology. We are happy nonetheless to offer our framework as what seems to us a potentially useful complement to prior and ongoing related work. These exceptionally thoughtful commentaries broaden and inform our framework (Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012–this issue). In return, we offer some responses regarding our own view of the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF), its parent, the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), and relationships with the commentators' own contributions.
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Clarifying the BIAF's intended contributions: BIAF primarily frames brand perceptions and behavior, as SCM does for social groups

While certainly the BIAF and the brand evaluation methods used in our studies are limited, as the commentators note, our primary intention was to show that consumers can and do perceive brands through the specific lenses of warmth and competence, and that these perceptions lead to similar emotions and behaviors as in the well-established SCM. Further, this supports the hypothesis that consumers judge and form relationships with brands in ways that are similar to their interactions with other people, a point entirely compatible with the views of most commentators. Our work thus far suggests that while interesting and supportive of that core hypothesis, the 2 × 2 BIAF matrix might not be particularly useful for brand competitive analysis or positioning purposes. However, it does demonstrate the point that brands can

elicit similar perceptions and emotions as social groups, which seems useful in and of itself.

Appreciating the commentators' helpful feedback

Some papers, like Fournier and Alvarez (2012–this issue), are especially helpful in strengthening the theoretical foundation of the BIAF; all offer empirical opportunities. Most of the papers seemed to accept that the BIAF makes sense, though various authors saw various ways to develop it further: adding dimensions, developing how emotions mediate behavior, identifying different BIAFs for different demographics, and focusing in on intent/warmth and ability/competence.

Adding dimensions

First, we aimed to make the case for the usefulness of a parsimonious model that is applicable in a wide range of situations and populations, something that the BIAF does well given its simplicity and the amount of research already done on the SCM that establish warmth and competence as the two

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fundamental dimensions of social perception. Having such a model, it then of course makes sense to tailor it for specific contexts. The Bennett-Hill (2012–this issue), Keller (2012–this issue), and Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs (2012–this issue) response papers do so nicely by showing that the dimensions make sense within brands and by starting to look at how demographic variables moderate the perceptions on the two dimensions.

On the question of applying the BIAF to a specific brand, one of us (Malone) has been investigating individual brands (including Coca-Cola, Tylenol, OfficeMax and Hershey's), using the BIAF dimensions in addition to traditional brand features and benefits to demonstrate the incremental value and insight warmth/intent and competence/capability can provide.

Fournier and Alvarez (2012–this issue), originators of idea that consumers and brands have a two-way relationship, locate BIAF as focused on the consumer's role. In that context, they suggest that anthropomorphizing brands enriches their images, with the brand as personified actor. To pursue this, they suggest that BIAF explore other dimensions. Considering the different extra dimensions proposed by the different authors, perhaps most of them make sensible potential sub-dimensions of either intention or competence. But again, we see the world in BIAF tints.

Developing how emotions mediate between images and behavior

When proposing a social perception model of brand perception, emotions are an important mediator of the link from perception to behavior and further research is needed on the front. The reaction papers mostly overlook one of our favorite aspects: the emotional part of the BIAF. This is probably due to our results being weak on pity and envy, which are the SCM's most interesting emotions (because of their mixed nature). But still, some promise of that work appears in the commentary of Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs (2012–this issue), who show that perceived brand competence → admiration → purchase, noting that admiration is proximate to behavior. The SCM—and by extension the BIAF—endorse that pathway: perception to cognition to emotion to behavior.

Identifying different BIAFs for different demographics

Some authors suggest pursuing individual differences. Acknowledging Fournier and Alvarez (2012–this issue), admittedly, BIAF does not yet examine varieties of perceivers with differential relative power, emotional intensity, identity relevance, attachment styles, or Big Five traits. Similarly, Bennett and Hill suggest exploring demographic differences in BIAF responding. So far, the parent model, SCM, has not found demographic variations in participants' reports of societal images of outgroups; similarly, Bennett and Hill show no demographic difference for perceived competence (ability), and we agree that status/competence/ability hierarchies in particular are well-understood by all. But brands might have more personal contact than many outgroups do, so people might differ more systematically. Keller likewise suggests that many consumers have

merely utilitarian knowledge of brands, no relationship at all. One might well go beyond brands selected to demonstrate the BIAF phenomenon, as the new data in the commentaries do, speculating that BIAF would apply more to corporate than product brands. In true interdisciplinary spirit, we welcome further research along these lines.

Focusing in on intent/warmth and ability/competence

Some commentators suggest more direct focus on intentionality (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012–this issue; MacInnis, 2012–this issue): why the shift from warmth to intent, in particular? A short answer is that intent is the underlying concept behind warmth, and the most novel idea in viewing brands as people. Also, warmth as a trait by itself is easily confused with the perceiver's feelings of warmth, so it was a cleaner working definition in this context where we can ask only a few questions about each brand.

Focusing on the two dimensions, some new empirical work identifies the golden quadrant, that is, becoming a brand appearing to have both good intentions and ability (Aaker, Garbinsky, & Vohs, 2012–this issue). Although they find a slight interaction boost, favoring this combination even over the two main effects, their data show a warmth but not competence main effect, whereas we, as well as Bennett and Hill (2012–this issue), show main effects for both dimensions. Further research remains to be done.

"Where do perceived intent and ability originate?" ask Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs (2012–this issue), as well as Keller (2012–this issue), who suggests that corporate credibility is expertise, trust, and liking (in BIAF terms, this combines ability and intentions into one evaluative dimension, reminiscent of Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum's, 1957 first dimension). Keller also suggests that brand resonance reflects being in sync, related to intensity and activity (reminiscent of Osgood's second two dimensions, which often combine in person perception). While we appreciate this possibility, our social cognition research suggests that evaluation and potency/activity operate at a roughly 45% angle to our warmth and competence dimensions (Kervyn & Fiske, under review).

What's more, on the origins question, the SCM identifies social status as predicting perceived competence and cooperation as predicting perceived warmth. The BIAF analogies are a brand's perceived status/ability and cooperation/intention.

Conclusions

Warmth and competence fundamentally drive human social behavior, so perhaps conventional brand constructs can be strengthened and updated by integrating them

The notion that warmth and competence perceptions, emotions, and behaviors developed adaptively, as a means of human survival, has recently become well-accepted. By definition, then, the emergence of branded trade and commerce of products and services certainly came much later in human development. Since current notions of brands and consumer

relationships with them were developed without the benefit of these fundamental insights on human social behavior, perhaps these can be strengthened and updated with warmth and competence in mind. We are not at all suggesting that previous brand constructs are not already correct and valid, but rather somewhat that they could be further enriched by having warmth and competence reflected in their foundation. Of course, we see the academic landscape through BIAF-colored lenses, but our intended implication is the opportunity for integrative research.

BIAF hypothesizes that brands are "people," so reconciling it completely with other constructs may be difficult

Many concepts of consumer–brand relationships seem based on the premise that brands are non-human, inanimate objects and the term "relationship" is primarily a metaphor for how consumers interact with them. As a result, brand constructs such as anthropomorphism, love, personality, and attachment have developed in isolation from our more foundational hypothesis—that people were the first brands and that branded trade and commerce have simply adapted human interaction processes to simplify and aid human choices. As a result, we are not inclined to see brands as inanimate creations of post-industrial society that must be diligently studied to reveal their complex and paradoxical nature.

We believe a much simpler explanation may be closer to the target. More likely, brands are simply a tangible extension of the individual people and groups that produce them. As a result, consumer perceptions, emotions, and relationships with brands are not with the inanimate objects themselves, but rather with what they know and believe about the people and social groups that produce and sell them. This is why we believe that social perception models are likely to be so useful and predictive of consumer behavior. However, this fundamentally different premise is also likely to make it difficult to reconcile BIAF completely with existing brand constructs.

BIAF only scratches the surface of what we can learn from applying social perception insights to brands

The response papers offer many valid, insightful, and useful suggestions on additional issues and questions that can be researched in this area moving forward. These should include the application of other social perception models to brands, as well as an exploration of the broader range of warmth and competence dimensions, emotions, and behaviors that are elicited by brands. In doing so, the premise that consumers are indirectly perceiving, emoting, and behaving toward the producers of branded products and services should be strongly considered. Taking this approach will greatly simplify the application of social perception models to brands, as well as facilitate their execution in the real world. After all, they will need to be implemented by people for people in the market place.

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