

Uniqueness: When Brand Meaning Gets Personal

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ABSTRACT

Despite a rich stream of qualitative research demonstrating that brands gain meaning as individual consumers engage in relationships with them, most branding research and practice assumes that brand meaning is predominantly consensual, such that people are generally expected to agree on what a brand stands for. To test whether this assumption is valid, a conceptual model inspired by the Social Relations Model for interpersonal perception frames brand consensus and heterogeneity in terms of the independent effects of brands as targets of perception, consumers as perceivers, and consumer-brand relationships on brand meaning. Findings across more than 70 brands in eleven different consumption domains suggest that, contrary to prevailing wisdom, a brand's meaning is predominantly personalized and unique to the individual consumer. The authors also test antecedents of brand uniqueness, indicating that brands become more unique as consumers are more familiar and have more private experiences with them, and show that unique, personalized meanings are associated with stronger self-brand connections and more positive brand attitudes. This research argues for a reconsideration of current theories and practices related to brand positioning and meaning management.

Key words: Branding, Brand Meaning, Brand Personality, Consumer-Brand Relationships, Brand Uniqueness, Brand Consensus.

Even though brand meaning constitutes the associations held in memory by the individual consumer (Keller 1993), branding research and practice have typically focused on the brand associations that are shared by consumers in a given segment or market (e.g., Dillon et al. 2001; John et al. 2006). In order to select and manage a brand's positioning, managers are encouraged to look beyond idiosyncratic associations to capture "the" manifest meaning of a brand (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986; Zaltman 2003). The emphasis placed on collectively- rather than individually-held associations is based on an assumption of consensus, according to which consumers mostly agree on what brands stand for (Keller 2008 p. 52).

Mapping associations at an aggregate level simplifies the brand management function at the expense of overlooking a brand's personalized meanings. Consumers are active meaning makers who craft individualized brand meanings that facilitate the pursuit of their personal goals (Fournier 1998). Therefore, brand meaning varies substantially across individuals (Ritson, Elliott, and Eccles 1996) and an aggregated perspective may result in a "flaw of averages" that underdelivers in its inattention to what a brand means to the individual consumer (Rust, Zeithaml, and Lemon 2004).

Surprisingly very little empirical research has focused on heterogeneity in brand meanings (for a review, see Allen, Fournier, and Miller 2008). Moreover, the extant literature provides inconclusive evidence about the degree to which the brand consensus assumption is valid (Hirschman 1981). Variance in brand ratings has implications for firm value (Luo, Raithel, and Wiles 2013). Still, no attempt has been made to investigate the heterogeneity in brand meaning beyond early work on perceptual biases (Beckwith and Lehmann 1975; Dillon, Mulani, and Frederick 1984). These gaps are particularly noteworthy in the current marketplace where value co-creation gains central stage: the Internet and related technologies dramatically increase

consumers' participation in the dissemination of brand-related messages (Deighton and Kornfeld 2009; Fournier and Avery 2011). Firms increasingly tailor their offerings and communications to individual customers (Reinartz, Krafft, and Hoyer 2004). More broadly, the focus of the brand experience is shifting away from the product toward value-creating processes that are performed by consumers (Vargo and Lusch 2004). In contrast with the increasingly personalized meanings that develop as consumers co-create brand experiences, branding theory still disproportionately focuses on understanding and mapping the collectively-held meanings of brands.

Our research proposes a conceptual model that is inspired in the Social Relations Model for interpersonal perception (Kenny 1994) and frames brand meaning in terms of the independent effects of (1) brands as targets of perception, (2) consumers as perceivers, and (3) consumer-brand relationships. A brand exerts an effect as target of perception to the extent that it elicits agreed-upon associations, for instance, if consumers agree that BMW is more exciting than the average car. A consumer has an effect as perceiver as she or he has a particular tendency to associate all brands with a given meaning. For example, if John believes more so than the average consumer that all car brands are exciting. Finally, a consumer-brand relationship impacts meaning if an individual sees a brand in a unique way, e.g., if John thinks of BMW as more exciting than how consumers agree it is (the brand effect) and how he sees car brands in general (the consumer effect). In essence, the proposed model decomposes the variance associated with each of these three effects. The variance in brand effects can be called consensus, since it captures how much consumers agree on the meanings of brands. Importantly, this model decomposes heterogeneity into the variance related to consumers (assimilation) and consumer-brand relationships (uniqueness). This conceptualization is fundamentally different from previous models dedicated to empirically exploration of variance in brand meaning, which

defined heterogeneity in terms of a single continuum (Hirschman 1981; Luo, Raithel, and Wiles 2013). Having disentangled the three components of brand meaning, we focus our investigation on the consumer-brand relationship as a source of unique, personalized meanings. This innovative conceptual model is the first to capture brand meaning at the level of the consumer-brand dyad. The model enables us to test the degree to which meaning is consensual or unique and propose specific hypotheses about antecedents of brand uniqueness.

We contribute to three different streams of the branding literature. First, research on brand positioning benefits from the insight that there exist two levels of brand meaning and differentiation: consumers may collectively agree on some differences between brands, but they can also distinguish brands in personalized ways, and different processes may be associated with each of these levels of meaning. Second, because we isolate brand meaning at the consumer-brand relationship level, our work invites brand relationship researchers to extend the link between relationships and brand meaning beyond one-to-one associations between relationship types and particular attributes (e.g., brand friendships and sincerity: Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). Third, we also contribute an innovative conceptual and methodological approach to the literature on brand meaning mapping (Dillon et al. 2001; John et al. 2006) that may be used by managers to understand the personalized meanings of their brands.

The paper proceeds as follows. First we review the Social Relations Model of interpersonal perception (Kenny 1994) and develop our componential model of brand meaning, clarifying similarities and differences from previous conceptualizations of brand consensus and heterogeneity. We then report four studies that reveal consensus to be a weaker component of brand meaning than uniqueness. We rule out alternative explanations related to affect halo, differences in brand usage, and common segmentation variables. These studies also test

antecedents of uniqueness: brand familiarity (study 2) and private rather than public experiences with brands (study 3) are both associated with higher uniqueness in meanings. In addition, these studies explore whether a consumer's engagement with a brand is driven by similarity with the consensual or unique meanings of the brand. Specifically, the distance between a consumer's own personality and the personalized meanings of a brand – rather than its consensual meanings – is associated with lower self-brand connection (studies 2 and 3) and less positive attitudes toward the brand (study 4). We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of our results.

Theoretical Foundations

The Social Relations Model

The Social Relations Model (SRM) has been extensively developed, validated, and codified over more than thirty years (Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006; Kenny 1981, 1994). The programmatic stream of research that evolved from SRM includes more than 150 published papers that mainly cover issues related to consensus and heterogeneity in interpersonal perception (e.g., Albright, Kenny, and Malloy 1988). The power of SRM to decompose consensus and heterogeneity makes it a perfect fit to address our research questions related to the shared and personalized meanings of brands.

The model identifies three sources of perceptions: the perceiver, the target, and the relationship. To illustrate, if Mary is asked how sincere her friend Jane is, her answer will be a function of the characteristics of (1) Mary the perceiver (i.e., the extent to which she thinks that people in general are sincere); (2) Jane, the target of perception (i.e., the extent to which people

in general tend to see Jane as sincere); and (3) the specific relationship Mary has with Jane (e.g., because they are friends, Mary feels that Jane is more sincere with her than with other people). In mathematical terms, Kenny (1981) defines perceiver i 's rating of target j on measure k in terms of:

$$(1) \quad X_{ijk} = \mu + \alpha_i + \beta_j + \gamma_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ijk},$$

where μ is the constant or global mean across targets and perceivers, α_i is the extent to which perceiver i rates all targets higher or lower than the global mean (the perceiver effect), β_j is the degree to which target j is rated higher or lower than average by all perceivers (the target effect), γ_{ij} is perceiver i 's unique rating of j (the relationship effect) after controlling for perceiver and target effects, and ε_{ijk} represents unstable variance (the measurement effect together with the measure x consumer, measure x brand, and measure x consumer x brand interactions), which can be calculated when multiple measures are used for a construct or the same measure is used multiple times (Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006; Kenny 1981). SRM is essentially a random effects model that partitions the variance of ratings into the components of equation (1). Kenny (1994) refers to the variance associated with the target effect (σ_{β_j}) as consensus, to perceiver variance (σ_{α_i}) as assimilation, and to relationship variance ($\sigma_{\gamma_{ij}}$) as uniqueness. We maintain SRM terminology in our conceptual model, with the exceptions that we refer to the target effect as the “brand effect” and to the perceiver effect as the “consumer effect.”

To our knowledge, SRM has only been used in marketing to investigate interactions between salespeople and buyers (Cronin 1994) and ours is the first study that extends SRM to the brand context. Despite the fact that SRM was not originally conceived for object perception (Kenny 1994), the model has been extended to the perception of non-human animals (Kwan, Gosling, and John 2008). More importantly, the substantial amount of evidence showing that

consumers perceive brands in similar ways as they perceive people (Aaker 1997; Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012) grants credence for the extension of SRM to branding.

A Componential Model of Brand Meaning Inspired in the Social Relations Model

Our conceptualization follows SRM in defining three sources of brand meaning: the brand as target of perception, the consumer as perceiver, and the consumer-brand relationship. As we detail below, brand consensus is associated with the effect of brands as targets of perception. Brand heterogeneity is decomposed into consumer and relationship effects. In other words, consumers may diverge in the meanings they ascribe to brands because they vary in how they see brands in general – the consumer effect – and because each consumer sees each particular brand in a specific way – the relationship effect. Importantly, relationship effects can be disentangled from measurement effects if more than one measure is used. Figure 1 describes the model, which was specified in equation (1). We now present each source of brand meaning within the context of previous consumer research, discussing similarities and differences with related concepts.

The brand effect (β_j in equation 1) concerns the shared knowledge that consumers hold about a brand. For example, if consumers share equally strong (weak) associations of Disney as a sincere brand, the brand possesses a positive (negative) brand effect on this attribute. Mathematically, a brand's effect is captured by the deviation of that brand's average score from the grand mean across all brands and consumers. Brand consensus, the variance in brand effects, indicates the extent to which consumers agree on the meanings of brands.

----- INSERT FIGURE 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE -----

Even though most of our current knowledge about brands (Keller and Lehmann 2006; Keller 2008) involves the shared meanings that consumers hold about them, brand consensus per se has been generally absent as a topic for empirical estimation. Previous research typically aggregates the meaning of brands across individuals (Keller and Lehmann 2006), as for example when it investigates the effect of brand meaning on stock returns (Mizik and Jacobson 2008), consumers' evaluations of brand extensions (Broniarczyk and Alba 1994), and priming effects on consumer behavior (Fitzsimons, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons 2008). This research assumes no relevant loss of meaning from aggregation, and therefore maintains that brand meaning is inherently consensual. Theoretically, this assumption of consensus manifests itself in the concept of "clarity of the image" (Aaker 1991), which refers to how much consumers agree on their brand associations. However, "clarity" has not been further specified and is also discussed as the opposite of image ambiguity (Aaker 1991 p. 152). In this sense, Aaker's clarity notion combines agreement within and across individuals. In contrast, the conceptualization of consensus based on SRM includes only agreement across individuals. To our knowledge, only one study went beyond conceptual discussions to empirically test the consensus assumption (Hirschman 1981). Hirschman (1981) investigated "commonality of meaning," which was defined in absolute terms as the presence or absence of shared associations across all consumers within a population. She concludes that there exists a lack of commonality of meaning because no association was mentioned by all participants in a free response elicitation task (Hirschman 1981). Our conceptualization also differs from Hirschman's concept of "commonality of meaning" because we focus on the (shared) strength of brand associations rather than their mere presence or absence. As we discuss in the following section, our expected results are also different: we expect some level of consensus on brand meaning across consumers, whereas she found none.

The relationship effect consists in the unique knowledge that a consumer has of a particular brand (γ_{ij} in equation 1) as developed by the specific pattern of interactions comprising and characterizing that consumer-brand relationship (Fournier 1998; Kenny 1994). For example, a consumer may believe that Disney is more honest (dishonest) than the other brands, which results in a positive (negative) relationship effect for this consumer-brand dyad on this attribute. We introduce the concept of brand uniqueness, the variance associated with relationship effects, which represents the degree to which brand meaning is personalized within consumer-brand relationships.

Previous research has extensively documented how consumers create personalized meanings for products and brands (Allen, Fournier, and Miller 2008) and more recent theorizing has shown the impact of the consumer-brand connection on how consumers process brand-relevant information (Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2013; Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli 2007). Consumers engage in personalizing rituals that bring mass-produced goods into their lives (McCracken 1986) and directly infuse their identities onto products (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). The process is reciprocating: brand meanings are integrated into consumers' sense of self, at the same time shaping and being shaped by consumers' identities in turn (Belk 1988; Park and John 2010; Weiss and Johar 2013). This reciprocating process of personalized meaning making cannot be explained simply by usage or ownership effects because it is fundamentally tied to the broader context of that person's life experiences and personal projects (Fournier 1998).

The consumer effect (α_i in equation 1) is an individual's tendency to perceive all brands in a particular way. For example, a consumer who believes that brands in general are (not) honest has a positive (negative) consumer effect on this attribute. Mathematically, a consumer's effect is

captured by the deviation of this consumer's average score across brands from the grand mean across brands and consumers. In estimating consumer effects, the unit of analysis is the individual consumer, in contrast with the individual brand in the brand effect or the consumer-brand dyad in the relationship effect. Brand assimilation, which refers to the variance in consumer effects, indicates the extent to which brand meaning is derived from individual consumers and the lenses they use to make sense of the world.

Similarly to the perceiver effect in the interpersonal domain, which derives from our mental representation of a "generalized other" (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991; Kenny 1994), the consumer effect derives from our mental representation of how brands are "in general". Therefore, empirical evidence for the consumer effect and the associated brand assimilation can be found in consumer research that explores individual variation in "generalized brand" representations. Brand attachment styles (Mende, Bolton, and Bitner 2013), the individual tendency to engage brands in the self-concept (Sprott, Czellar, and Spangenberg 2009), and brand schematicity (Puligadda, Ross Jr, and Grewal 2012) provide relevant examples of the consumer effect in the realm of branding.

Despite a significant stream of work on consumer-brand relationships and more recent theorizing on individual differences about how consumers engage with brands, brand meaning heterogeneity has rarely been the focus of attention in the extant literature. Importantly, the few exceptions have not disentangled relationship effects from consumer effects. Hirschman's (1981) previously discussed study presented commonality and idiosyncrasy as two opposite poles of the same dimension, defining idiosyncrasy as the brand associations held by only one consumer in a population (Hirschman 1981). A second approach involved brand dispersion, more specifically variance in brand ratings (Luo, Raithel, and Wiles 2013). Our conceptual model differs from

brand dispersion in three important ways. First, brand dispersion analysis is brand-centric: each brand has a mean rating and variance across consumers. In contrast, our approach includes consumers, brands, and consumer-brand relationships as sources of brand meaning, therefore acknowledging that consumers also have a mean rating and variance across brands, and so do consumer-brand dyads. Second, brand-centricity precludes disentangling consumer and relationship effects from brand dispersion, because a brand's dispersion is essentially the combined variance associated with both of these effects. Consumers may see brands differently both because each consumer sees brands in general in a particular way – the consumer effect – and because each consumer sees each brand differently – the relationship effect. This issue has already been empirically demonstrated within interpersonal perception research using SRM (Jung 1998). Finally, brand dispersion confounds heterogeneity in meaning with measurement effects because it does not allow the separation of stable from unstable variance. Because of these conceptual and methodological differences, the pattern of results with our model was different than what a brand dispersion analysis would suggest (for more details of this analysis are available upon request).

Overall, we offer an innovative conceptual model, inspired by SRM and grounded in consumer research, which decomposes brand meaning in three different components: brand, consumer, and relationship effects. Even though the extant literature supports the presence and relevance of each of these components of brand meaning, it does not provide us with appropriate ways to measure them, unequivocal findings about the relative strength of these different sources of meaning, nor foundation for theoretical propositions about the factors that could impact or be impacted by these effects. In the following sections we present and test our hypotheses, with a

particular emphasis on the relationship effect and the variance associated with this effect, brand uniqueness.

Hypotheses

Based on prior research and our conceptual model, we expect uniqueness, the variance in consumer-brand relationship effects, to be a more prevalent component of brand meaning than consensus, the variance in brand effects. To further our understanding about this critical component of brand meaning, we propose that familiarity and private consumption are antecedents of uniqueness and that the distance between consumers' own personality and this personalized component of brand meaning – rather than the consensual component – is associated with self-brand connection and brand liking.

Primacy of uniqueness over consensus

The extensive amount of research that has successfully advanced branding theory by focusing on the shared meanings of brands (Keller and Lehmann 2006; Keller 2008) clearly indicates the existence of a significant level of consensus. In other words, consumers should have some agreement on what brands mean to them. The question we ask is, how much do they agree or, more specifically, do they disagree more than agree on brand meaning?

Empirical evidence from previous research already calls into question the assumption that brand meaning is mostly consensual. Hirschman's (1981) previously mentioned study found more idiosyncratic (26%) than common (0%) associations after counting consumers' free responses to popular products and brands. Elliot (1994) also found evidence for heterogeneity from a similar free-response task. Even within consumption communities, which are conceived

as a space for the creation of shared meanings, consumers hold radically different meanings for a given brand or consumption experience (Chalmers Thomas, Price, and Jensen Schau 2013).

Still, previous research has not disentangled the two distinct sources from which this heterogeneity may derive: the consumer effect and the consumer-brand relationship effect. Individual consumers, with their generalized tendencies to perceive all brands in a particular way, also represent a significant component of brand meaning. In one study that included the random effect of consumers as a control variable, this effect accounted for more than 50% of the variance in the meaning of leading brands (Lehmann, Keller, and Farley 2008). Even though this figure confounds psychologically-relevant variance with differences in how individuals respond to questionnaires (Baumgartner and Steenkamp 2001), it clearly illustrates that the consumer effect cannot be disregarded as a source of heterogeneous meanings. Most importantly, only by disentangling consumer and relationship effects can we know the degree to which the heterogeneity in meanings suggested by previous research is really driven by the specific pattern of relationships between individual consumers and brands.

Interpersonal research using SRM indicates that uniqueness is a more prevalent component of meaning than consensus (Kenny 1994). Consumer research suggests that this finding should extend to brand meaning (Fournier 1998). The development of digital, interactive technologies that grant consumers a more active role as co-producers of brand experiences (Vargo and Lusch 2004) and allow them to actively disseminate branded content (Deighton and Kornfeld 2009) only amplifies consumers' potential to develop personalized meanings by offering them more diverse sets of experiences as they engage in relationships with brands. Hence we expect that, even after controlling for the variance in consumer effects, the variance in relationship effects (uniqueness) will be higher than the variance in brand effects (consensus).

H₁: Uniqueness accounts for a higher percentage of variance in brand meaning than consensus.

Effect of brand familiarity on uniqueness

According to the well-accepted hierarchy-of-effects model, brand familiarity is a key prerequisite for the establishment of brand associations in consumers' minds (Keller 2001). Consumers are less able to retain information about unfamiliar brands, which also tends to be blurred by information from competing brands (Kent and Allen 1994). Previous research that manipulated consensual brand meanings has shown that they are most influential among consumers that are highly familiar with the brand (Broniarczyk and Alba 1994). We expect a similar pattern of results regarding uniqueness. Consumers develop their own history with a brand as they become more familiar with it, which should lead to richer and more personalized meanings. Familiarity should influence individual consumers' ability to differentiate brands (relationship effect), just like it does at a collective level (brand effect), resulting in higher brand uniqueness among more familiar than less familiar brands.

H₂: Uniqueness in brand meaning is higher (lower) among more (less) familiar brands.

Effect of private or public consumption on uniqueness

If different patterns of experience between perceivers and targets are a critical driver of relationship effects (Kenny, 1994a), systematic changes in the degree to which a brand is experienced differently by consumers should impact the level of uniqueness in brand meaning.

Brands that are consumed in private tend to be shaped by localized practices related to family identity (Epp and Price 2008) and intergenerational influences within the family (Moore, Wilkie, and Lutz 2002); the privacy of the house is also a fertile ground to engage with singularized objects (Epp and Price 2010). Therefore, we expect privately consumed brands to be associated with more uniqueness in brand meaning than publicly consumed brands.

H₃: Uniqueness in brand meaning is higher (lower) among private (public) brands.

Personalized brand meanings as a core component of self-brand connection and liking

Consumer research has extensively documented that consumers tend to prefer brands whose personalities match their self-image (Levy 1959; Sirgy 1982). What we do not know is whether the effect of self-congruity (Sirgy 1982) is driven by a brand's personality associations that are shared across consumers, by personalized associations that each consumer develops in the process of establishing and developing a relationship with the brand, or both. Previous empirical studies do not provide conclusive evidence for the role of shared and personalized meanings in self-congruity, because no previous operationalization of brand meaning (Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005; Grohmann 2009; Malär et al. 2011; White and Dahl 2007) disentangled these two components, i.e., the brand effect and the relationship effect. Our componential model allows us to directly test whether the effect of self-congruity on self-brand connection and brand attitudes is derived from personalized rather than consensual brand meanings.

Initial formulations of the self-congruity proposition focus on shared associations: marketing actions establish the appropriate set of brand personality associations across consumers, and each individual consumer will be attracted to the brand if her or his own self-

image matches the brand's agreed upon personality (Levy 1959). However, more recent research suggests that self-congruity is a dyadic construction centered on personalized meanings: consumers connect with brands as they link them with their own experiences, for instance through the creation of stories that involve the self and the brand (Escalas 2004). Rather than existing prior to the consumer-brand relationship, self-congruity develops within the relationship as both the consumer's self-image approximates the brand (Park and John 2010) and personalized brand associations bring the brand closer to the consumer (Weiss and Johar 2013). In accordance with more recent theorizing, we expect that the perceived similarity between a consumer's own personality and what this consumer uniquely associates with the brand will be associated with higher self-brand connection. Since self-brand connection is associated with more positive brand attitudes (White and Dahl 2007), we expect consumers to also have more positive attitudes towards the brands that they uniquely perceive to be similar to themselves.

H_{4a}: Higher self-brand connection is associated with the perceived similarity between consumer's self-image and a brand's personalized meanings.

H_{4b}: More positive brand attitudes are associated with the perceived similarity between consumer's self-image and a brand's personalized meanings.

Overview of Studies

Our four studies involve more than 70 different brands from 11 different consumption domains to test the relative strength of brand uniqueness relative to consensus (H₁), ruling out alternative explanations such as affect halo (studies 1 and 4), different levels of brand usage

(study 2), and common segmentation variables (studies 1-4). We explore two antecedents of uniqueness in brand meanings: familiarity (H₂, study 2) and private *versus* public consumption (H₃, study 3). We also explore outcomes of personalized meanings by testing whether perceived similarity between self-image and personalized (rather than shared) brand personality associations influences self-brand connection (H_{4a}, studies 2-3) and attitudes (H_{4b}, study 4).

The Social Relations Model (Kenny 1994) provides the general framework for data collection and analysis. Specifically, we used the half block design with self data (Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006), in which all participants were asked to rate the same set of brands as well as themselves. Because brand and product meaning varies across demographic groups (Belk, Mayer, and Bahn 1982; Elliott 1994), sampling our participants from a circumscribed consumer segment provides for a more stringent test of the primacy of uniqueness over consensus (H₁) and a less confounded test of the other hypotheses than sampling from the entire marketplace. Our use of undergraduate student samples from the same private university allows us to test our hypotheses in a fairly well-defined and homogeneous consumer segment (Peterson 2001).

Our studies focus on brand imagery as domain of brand meaning, more specifically, on brand personality associations within the broader set of imagery and performance associations that form a brand's meaning (Keller 2001). This context of investigation serves managerial, methodological, and theoretical goals. Increased competition and technology advancements have limited the degree to which brands gain differentiation through tangible attributes, which led branding practice and research to shift focus from performance attributes to brand imagery (Keller 2003). Within the elements of brand imagery (Keller 2001), brand personality stands out as a core mechanism of differentiation through which consumers connect with the brand as a person (Aaker 1996). The managerial relevance of brand personality triggered a rich research

platform that involved the development of a measurement tool (Aaker 1997), its validation through continued empirical research (Aaker 1999; Batra, Lenk, and Wedel 2010) as well as its critique (e.g., Austin, Siguaw, and Mattila 2003) and development of an alternative scale (Geuens, Weijters, and De Wulf 2009). The result of this program of research is a methodologically sound measurement system that can be leveraged to investigate brand consensus and uniqueness. Finally, on theoretical grounds brand personality allows us to bridge brand perception and interpersonal perception, since research on the latter has mostly focused on personality judgments. However, to make sure our findings regarding the primacy of uniqueness over consensus are not circumscribed to brand personality, study 1B uses a different “building block” of brand equity, judgments of quality (Keller 2001).

Study 1A: Clothing Brands

The first study aims to test our hypothesis regarding the primacy of uniqueness over consensus in brand meaning (H_1). We selected clothing brands as the context for this study because it is a consumption domain with a high number of moderately to highly familiar brands whose positioning is usually centered on brand personality associations.

Participants, procedure, and measures

As part of an assignment for extra credit, 114 undergraduate students from a Boston area university completed a survey that first asked them to think about each brand as a person—using the same introductory instructions described by Aaker (1997)—and rate the extent to which a series of personality traits described 20 different clothing brands, one brand at a time. The measure of brand personality consisted of the 15 key items from Aaker’s (1997) scale (similarly

to Batra, Lenk, and Wedel 2010), such as “down to earth,” “daring,” “reliable,” or “upper class” (1 = not at all descriptive; 7 = extremely descriptive). After the brand personality ratings, participants were asked how familiar they were with each brand (1 = not at all familiar; 7 = very familiar), their overall attitude toward them (1 = dislike very much; 7 = like very much), and demographic questions. We randomized the order of brands and brand personality items.

Stimuli

We conducted a pre-test with a separate sample from the same population (N = 89) to select our stimuli of brands for studies 1A and 1B. This pre-test asked participants to name at least one, and no more than 5, brands from different categories. Our goal for study 1A was to choose clothing brands with which participants were moderately to highly familiar and which were not clearly associated with a specific gender. A total of 110 different brands were identified (326 total mentions, or 3.7 per participant), out of which we selected the 20 brands that received the most mentions (varying from 5 to 15 mentions per brand) and were named at least twice by both men and women in the sample. The following 20 brands responded for 178 mentions, which is more than 50% of total mentions: Abercrombie & Fitch, American Apparel, American Eagle, Armani, Banana Republic, Burberry, Calvin Klein, Chanel, Club Monaco, Express, Gap, Gucci, Guess, H&M, Hollister, J. Crew, Ralph Lauren, Prada, Urban Outfitters, Zara.

Results

Primacy of uniqueness over consensus. We conducted a three-way (brand x consumer x measure) random effects analysis of variance on the brand ratings in each personality dimension. Consensus is the variance associated with the random effect of brands (β_j in equation 1). The brand x consumer interaction represents the relationship effect (γ_{ij} in equation 1), and brand uniqueness is the variance in relationship effects. The other random effects in the model are the

consumer effect (and the associated variance named assimilation) and the measurement effect and its interactions with consumer, brand, and relationship effects, which collectively represent unstable variance (Kenny 1994). Table 1 contains the percentage of variance in personality ratings associated with brand, relationship, and consumer effects, as well as the unstable variance in each study.

----- INSERT TABLE 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE -----

To test whether uniqueness in brand meaning was higher than consensus (H_1) we conducted a test of equality of variances, which is a variation of the standard F-ratio test (Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006). We first conducted a variance components analysis (RMLE) to estimate the variance associated with random effects for each personality dimension, and then pooled variances across personality dimensions using Satterthwaite's (1946) adjustment. Next, we computed a ratio of the two pooled variances, with the variance hypothesized to be the largest in the numerator (i.e., uniqueness / consensus). Finally, we doubled the p value of the F-ratio test to arrive at a two-tailed p value, which is what we report here (Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006).

Results show that uniqueness in brand meaning ($\sigma_{\text{relationship}} = .90$) was significantly higher than consensus ($\sigma_{\text{brand}} = .27$; $F(9919, 74) = 3.26$, $p < .001$). Personalized meanings far outweighed the shared meanings of the brands sampled, in support of H_1 .

Ruling out alternative explanations: brand familiarity. Given our hypothesis on brand familiarity (H_2), and to make sure that the primacy of uniqueness is not based on differences in brand familiarity across consumers, we re-ran the equality of variances test described above with familiarity as a covariate in the variance components analysis. Consensus ($\sigma_{\text{brand}} = .28$) continued

to be significantly lower than uniqueness ($\sigma_{\text{relationship}} = .78$; $F(10005, 71) = 2.74$, $p < .001$). For reasons of brevity, in the following studies we report replications of the test of H_1 after controlling for familiarity (a similar pattern of results emerged without this control variable).

Ruling out alternative explanations: affect halo. We also wanted to rule out affect halo (Holbrook 1983), more specifically “idiosyncratic perceptual distortion” (Huber and Holbrook 1979), as an alternative explanation for the primacy of uniqueness. Hence we re-ran the variance component analysis with liking and familiarity as covariates, after which we conducted the equality of variance test. Consensus ($\sigma_{\text{brand}} = .19$) remained significantly lower than uniqueness ($\sigma_{\text{relationship}} = .69$; $F(1015, 69) = 3.60$, $p < .001$).

Ruling out alternative explanations: consumer segmentation. It could also be argued that uniqueness is merely a function of well-known segmentation variables, and hence would be insignificant within more similar segments or targeted groups. To offer a more stringent test of our hypothesis (H_1), we created even more granular groups within our sample by breaking down the student segment by gender and birthplace (e.g., only male students that were born in North America *versus* Asia). Uniqueness remained higher than consensus in all subsamples in this and subsequent studies. This result indicates that segmentation using typical demographic variables do not remove the primacy of uniqueness in brand meaning.

Discussion

This study suggests that, despite a significant level of consensus, uniqueness represents a significantly higher proportion of variance in brand meaning than consensus. Contrary to the consensus assumption, brand associations are not predominantly shared by consumers. Instead, they are mostly unique, personalized at the consumer-brand relationship level. Ignoring

relationship effects and uniqueness may prevent researchers and managers from capturing a significant component of what a brand means to consumers.

Study 1B: Quality Judgments

Study 1B replicates the primacy of uniqueness over consensus (H_1) beyond brand personality associations. Following the customer-based brand equity pyramid model (Keller 2001), this study shifts focus from brand imagery to brand judgments, more specifically, to perceived brand quality. Perceived brand quality is a key driver of brand equity (Aaker 1991) and can also be measured with well-established instruments (Erdem and Swait 2004).

In this study, we sampled brands from different categories in order to disentangle the effects of product category on brand meaning (Batra, Lenk, and Wedel 2010). Hence, one important extension of the conceptual model described in equation (1) involves the inclusion of category effects in the model, with brands nested within category:

$$(2) \quad X_{ij/ck} = \mu + \alpha_i + \beta_{j/c} + \gamma_{ij/c} + \delta_c + \zeta_{ic} + \varepsilon_{ij/ck},$$

where μ is the mean rating across all brands and consumers, α_i is the consumer effect, $\beta_{j/c}$ is the effect of brands nested within category, $\gamma_{ij/c}$ is the relationship effect with nested brands, δ_c is the category effect, ζ_{ic} is the category-specific consumer effect, and $\varepsilon_{ij/ck}$ represents measurement variance with all its interactions.

Participants, procedure, measures, and stimuli

One hundred four undergraduate students participated in a brand quality survey. Participants were asked to rate the quality of twenty brands, one brand at a time, on two nine-point items (Erdem and Swait 2004): “The quality of this brand is very high” (1 = disagree; 9 =

agree) and “ In terms of overall quality, I’d rate this brand as a...” (1 = low quality; 9 = high quality). After the brand quality ratings, participants rated how much they were familiar and liked the same set of brands, as well as demographic questions. In this study, we sampled brands that were frequently cited by participants in the aforementioned pre-test from the following categories: cell phones (AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, Verizon, and Virgin); department stores (K-Mart, Kohl's, Macy's, Sears, Target); media and entertainment (ABC, CBS, Disney, ESPN, Fox); and sports apparel (Adidas, New Balance, Nike, Reebok, and Under Armour).

Results

Primacy of uniqueness over consensus. We ran a similar equality of variances test as the one described in study 1B, now using equation (2) with familiarity as a covariate. Brand uniqueness ($\sigma_{\text{relationship}} = 1.47$) was once again higher than consensus ($\sigma_{\text{brand}} = .47$; $F(1647, 16) = 3.11$, $p < .05$). This effect remained significant after adding liking as a covariate ($\sigma_{\text{relationship}} = 1.04$; $\sigma_{\text{brand}} = .17$; $F(1646, 16) = 6.18$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

Results of studies 1A and 1B indicate that both brand personality and perceived quality associations are predominantly personalized rather than shared across consumers. Uniqueness (the variance in relationship effects) corresponded to a higher amount of variance in brand ratings than consensus (the variance in brand effects). If the relationship effect—and the associated uniqueness—is such a predominant component of brand meaning, we need to understand more about the drivers of this effect. What makes brand meaning more personalized? Our next two studies focus on providing initial answers to this question.

Study 2: Sports Brands

Study 2 was designed to test the effect of brand familiarity on uniqueness (H_2), as well as the influence of perceived similarity between consumers' self-image and personalized brand personality associations on self-brand connection (H_{4a}). It also allows us to replicate the primacy of uniqueness over consensus (H_1) in a different consumption domain. The domain of sports offered us a simple manipulation of brand familiarity through the selection of brands (sports teams) that were either from the same city where the university is located (more familiar) or from a different location (less familiar).

Participants, procedure, and stimuli

As part of an assignment for extra credit, 99 undergraduate students from a Boston area university completed two ostensibly unconnected surveys in the same seating. In the first survey, participants filled out a self-report personality battery that included a ten-item measure of the Big Five personality domains (Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann Jr. 2003) and a thirty-one item measure of brand personality (described in the measures section below). Subsequently, they answered an unrelated study that lasted approximately 20 minutes to clear short-term memories. Participants then conducted the second survey of this study, which asked them: (1) to think about each brand as a person and rate the extent to which the personality traits (31 items) describe ten different sports brands, one brand at a time; (2) self-brand connection items, again for one brand at a time; (3) brand familiarity; (4) the degree to which they are a fan of each team; and finally, (5) demographic questions. We randomized the order of brands and items in both the personality and self-brand connection questions. Five of the ten sports brands were located in the Boston area: Boston Red Sox (baseball), New England Patriots (football), Boston Celtics (basketball), Boston Bruins (ice hockey), and New England Revolution (soccer). The other five were from

Washington: Washington Nationals (baseball), Washington Redskins (football), Washington Wizards (basketball), Washington Capitals (ice hockey), and D.C. United (soccer).

Measures

Brand personality. In this study and in the following ones, we measured brand personality through three different approaches, two of them derived from Aaker's (1997) scale, and the third derived from Geuens, Weijters, and De Wulf's (2009) scale. Aaker's (1997) instrument has been extensively used in the brand context (e.g., Batra, Lenk, and Wedel 2010) and validated in the human personality context (Aaker 1999). Besides the same 15 key items from Aaker's scale that we used in study 1, we also included the five items that correspond to Aaker's highest level dimensions: "sincere," "exciting," "competent," "sophisticated," and "rugged." This approach allowed us to estimate measurement effects (unstable variance) using two sets of items for each dimension of brand personality: (1) the subset of the 15 key items that represent the dimension (e.g., "upper class" and "charming" for sophistication); and (2) two items: a direct measure of the dimension (e.g., "sophisticated") together with the average of the key items that represent it (e.g., the mean of "upper class" and "charming"). Because Aaker's (1997) scale was challenged in its ability to discriminate brands within a product category (Austin, Sigauw, and Mattila 2003), we also collected data on a second scale designed to address this concern (Geuens, Weijters, and De Wulf 2009). We focus our report on the analysis of Aaker's (1997) 15 key items for reasons of brevity and because it is the only scale that had its factor structure validated in the human personality domain (Aaker 1999). However, the analysis of both Geuens et al's (2009) scale and the aggregated Aaker items leads to the same conclusions as the results reported here (more detailed results are available upon request).

Self-Brand Connection. We used the 7-item self-brand connection scale (Escalas and Bettman 2005) together with the 3 items in the Connection dimension of the attachment scale (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). We report results from the self-brand connection scale, but they also replicate to the Connection dimension of attachment.

Results

Manipulation check. As expected, participants reported higher familiarity with sports brands from Boston ($M = 4.87$) than Washington brands ($M = 2.74$, $t(98) = 13.65$, $p < .0001$).

Effect of familiarity on uniqueness. We tested the effect of familiarity on uniqueness (H_2) through a similar test of equality of variances as the one described in study 1A. The differences were that we ran the same variance components analysis twice, first including only the local, more familiar, brands, and then including only the Washington-based, less familiar brands, and that the ratio of variances was computed for the same random effect across these two sets of brands, i.e., uniqueness with more familiar brands / uniqueness with less familiar brands.

Uniqueness was higher with more familiar brands ($\sigma_{\text{relationship, more familiar}} = 1.04$) than less familiar brands ($\sigma_{\text{relationship, less familiar}} = .78$; $F(1858, 1875) = 1.34$, $p < .001$), with provides support for H_2 . Consistently with prior literature, consensus was also higher in more familiar ($\sigma_{\text{brand, more familiar}} = .11$) than less familiar brands ($\sigma_{\text{brand, less familiar}} = .01$; $F(17, 14) = 16.15$, $p < .001$). There was no difference in assimilation (the variance in consumer effects) across conditions ($p > .2$).

Perceived similarity and self-brand connection. To assess perceived similarity between consumers' self-image and brand meanings, we calculated the Distance or D index of profile similarity (Cronbach and Gleser 1953). We chose the D index over other potential dyadic measures of profile similarity because it is the most comprehensive metric, capturing differences in elevation, scatter, and shape of ratings (Kenny, Kashy, and Cook 2006). The self-brand

distance index is the square root of the sum of square differences between consumers' ratings on how they perceive themselves and the brands sampled across the five personality domains.

More specifically, we calculated two focal distance indices and two control indices. First, perceived similarity between self-image and personalized brand meanings (D_{personal}) is the distance between a consumer's self-image ratings and a brand's ratings from the same individual that provided self-image ratings. Second, perceived similarity between self-image and consensual brand meanings ($D_{\text{consensual}}$) is the distance between a consumer's self-image ratings and a brand's ratings averaged across consumers. Finally, two indices were created to control for brand- and consumer-level effects: (1) the distance between the self-image of the average consumer and the consensual view of brands ($D_{\text{all consumers and brand}}$), i.e., average self-image ratings minus a brand's ratings averaged across consumers); (2) the distance between self-image and the "generalized brand" image ($D_{\text{all brands and consumer}}$), i.e., individual self-image ratings minus the average perception of all brands for this individual.

We conducted a multilevel modeling analysis (FIML) because these indices operate at different levels of data aggregation. Specifically, $D_{\text{all consumers and brand}}$ only vary at the brand level, whereas $D_{\text{all brands and consumer}}$ only vary at the consumer level, and the two focal indices vary at the consumer-brand dyadic level. Since the Distance indices are actually a measure of dissimilarity, evidence for the effect of perceived similarity is provided for each of these indices when they have a significant and negative effect on self-brand connection. Table 2 provides the results of this analysis with alternative model specifications.

----- INSERT TABLE 2 APPROXIMATELY HERE -----

Perceived dissimilarity between self-image and personalized brand meanings (D_{personal}) had a significant and negative effect on self-brand connection ($\gamma = -.01, p < .001$) after controlling for the perceived similarity between self-image and consensual brand meanings ($D_{\text{consensual}}$), the consumer-level distance index ($D_{\text{all brands and consumer}}$), the brand-level distance index ($D_{\text{all consumer and brand}}$) and brand familiarity. The likelihood ratio test comparing the deviance of the two models that include all covariates and differ only in the presence or absence of D_{personal} was also significant, $\chi^2(1) = 42.20, p < .001$, which is consistent with our hypothesis H_{4a} . Interestingly, perceived similarity between self-image and consensual brand meanings ($D_{\text{consensual}}$) is not significant in the full model ($\gamma = -.01, p > .2$), and the likelihood ratio test that contrasts the full model with one without $D_{\text{consensual}}$ is not significant – both models had equal deviance scores.

Because both our focal distance indices – D_{personal} and $D_{\text{consensual}}$ – are level-1 predictors in our multilevel model, we also performed a two-step double-centering transformation in order to remove any variance at the crossed brand and consumer levels (Enders and Tofighi 2007). By subtracting each individual distance score first by its own average across consumers, and then by its own average across brands, we produce ipsative data that only varies at the consumer-brand dyadic level (Dillon, Mulani, and Frederick 1984). Analysis conducted with transformed D_{personal} and $D_{\text{consensual}}$ scores produced the same results as obtained with raw scores.

These findings provide initial evidence that it is the perceived similarity between self-image and personalized brand meanings, and not with consensual brand meanings, what drives consumers' connections to brands.

Primacy of uniqueness over consensus. We conducted the same analysis described in study 1A to test the relative strength of uniqueness and consensus, and results were consistent with H_1 : uniqueness in brand meaning was significantly higher than consensus both within the

subsample of less familiar brands ($\sigma_{\text{relationship}} = .78$, $\sigma_{\text{brand}} = .01$; $F(1875, 14) = 114.74$, $p < .001$) and with more familiar brands only ($\sigma_{\text{relationship}} = 1.04$, $\sigma_{\text{brand}} = .11$; $F(1858, 17) = 9.50$, $p < .001$). Personalized meanings far outweighed the shared meanings of the brands sampled.

Ruling out alternative explanations for uniqueness: brand usage. Because users and non-users are known to perceive brands differently (Aaker 1991 p. 151), usage profile could be the main driver of what we conceptualized here as uniqueness in brand meanings. To test this possibility, and since different levels of fandom relate to increased consumption of sports brands (Hunt, Bristol, and Bashaw 1999), we re-ran the random effects ANOVA and equality of variances analysis including level of fandom for each sports brand as a control variable. After inclusion of fandom, brand consensus ($\sigma_{\text{brand}} = .02$) continued to be lower than uniqueness multivocality ($\sigma_{\text{relationship}} = .96$; $F(4208, 36) = 63.46$, $p < .001$), which further supports H_1 and clarifies the nature of uniqueness.

Discussion

Our second study suggests that brand familiarity increases uniqueness in brand meaning. Consistently with prior research, consensus was also higher among more familiar brands. Collectively, the finding that familiarity increases both consensus and uniqueness demonstrates the superiority of our conceptual model to alternative conceptualizations of common and idiosyncratic meanings as two opposite poles of a single continuum (e.g., Hirschman 1981). If consensus and uniqueness represented a single dimension, brand familiarity would operate in opposite directions (e.g., increasing consensus and reducing uniqueness), which was not the case within our sample.

The results of this study also indicate that self-brand connection is associated with the perceived similarity between consumers' self-image and the personalized component of brand

meaning – and not with the consensual component of brand meaning. It also replicates the primacy of uniqueness over consensus in a different consumption domain, even after controlling for brand usage. Thus, all the hypotheses tested were supported in the context studied.

Study 3: Food Brands

The main goals of study 3 were to test the effect of private *versus* public consumption on uniqueness (H₃) while replicating the tests of the relative strength of uniqueness and consensus (H₁) and the role of personalized brand meanings in self-brand connection (H_{4a}). Because food can be consumed both in private (packaged foods) and in public (fast food restaurant chains), we tested this prediction by selecting different sets of food brands.

Participants, procedure, measures, and stimuli

Similarly to study 2, 133 undergraduate students were asked to fill out two ostensibly unconnected surveys interspersed by another, unrelated survey that lasted approximately 15 minutes to clear short-term memory. The first survey consisted of the same self-reported personality measures as study 2. The second survey was exactly the same as in study 2 with only two exceptions: participants rated food brands rather than sports brands (on the same sets of items); and the question about level of brand fandom was excluded.

Our sample of privately consumed brands consisted of five packaged food brands: Betty Crocker, Campbell's, Kellogg's, Nutella, and Pepperidge Farm. Five fast-food restaurant chains represented publicly consumed brands: Burger King, McDonald's, Subway, Taco Bell, and Wendy's. A pretest with the same undergraduate student population (N=62) that used a two-item, seven-point measure ("To what extent is each of the following brands typically

consumed...at home?” and “...in public?,” reverse-coded) confirmed our manipulation of private versus public consumption ($M_{\text{private brands}} = 5.09$, $M_{\text{public brands}} = 2.36$, $t(61) = 14.52$, $p < .001$).

Results

Effect of private versus public consumption on uniqueness. We conducted separate random effects ANOVAs for the privately and publicly consumed brands, and then tested the equality of relationship effect variances across these two brand samples. As expected, uniqueness was stronger when consumption was private ($\sigma_{\text{relationship, private}} = .62$) than public ($\sigma_{\text{relationship, public}} = .53$; $F(2510, 2478) = 1.18$, $p < .001$). We also added familiarity as a covariate, and uniqueness among privately consumed brands ($\sigma_{\text{relationship, private}} = .57$) remained higher than among publicly consumed brands ($\sigma_{\text{relationship, public}} = .51$; $F(2522, 2479) = 1.11$, $p < .01$).

Interestingly, opposite results would be obtained if our analysis were restricted to brand dispersion (Luo, Raithel, and Wiles 2013), the overall variance in each brand’s ratings. As we already discussed, brand dispersion combines assimilation (the variance in consumer effects) and uniqueness (the variance in relationship effects). Because private consumption had opposite effects on each of these components of meaning, increasing uniqueness less so than it decreases assimilation, brand dispersion was actually lower among private ($\sigma_{\text{consumer + relationship, private}} = 1.64$) than public brands ($\sigma_{\text{consumer + relationship, public}} = 1.78$; $F(3084, 3119) = 1.08$, $p < .05$). Overall heterogeneity in brand meaning, represented by brand dispersion, was higher among public brands because they tended to be assimilated by consumers, whereas our focal construct, uniqueness in brand meaning, was higher among private brands as hypothesized.

Perceived similarity and self-brand connection. We calculated the same D (distance) scores that were described in study 2 and, as expected (H_{4a}), higher perceived dissimilarity between self-image and personalized brand meanings (D_{personal}) was associated with lower self-

brand connection ($\gamma = -.01, p < .001$) after controlling for the other three D scores ($D_{\text{consensual}}, D_{\text{all brands and consumer}}, D_{\text{all consumer and brand}}$) and brand familiarity. The likelihood ratio test comparing the deviance of the two models with and without D_{personal} was also significant, $\chi^2(1) = 45.30, p < .001$, which is consistent with our hypothesis (H_{4a}). Results regarding D_{personal} were not altered after double centering our two focal distance indices, D_{personal} and $D_{\text{consensual}}$, both in terms of the effect on self-brand connection in the full model ($\gamma = -.01, p < .001$) and the likelihood ratio test ($\chi^2(1) = 40.99, p < .001$).

In contrast with the results from study 2, perceived similarity between self-image and consensual brand meanings, $D_{\text{consensual}}$, was positive and significant in the full model ($\gamma = .03, p < .01$), and the likelihood ratio test that contrasts the full model with one without $D_{\text{consensual}}$ was also significant, $\chi^2(1) = 10.03, p < .01$. Since the D score is an index of dissimilarity, this result would mean that higher perceived similarity between self-image and consensual brand meanings reduces (rather than increases) self-brand connection. However, this effect is removed after double centering the focal D scores, which excludes brand-level and consumer-level variance in this score so that they only vary at the consumer-brand dyad level. The transformed $D_{\text{consensual}}$ score was not significant ($\gamma = -.01, p > .2$), and the likelihood ratio test was also not significant – once again, the deviance scores in the two models with and without $D_{\text{consensual}}$ were identical.

Primacy of uniqueness over consensus. We replicated the equality of variances test, with familiarity as a covariate, described in previous studies. Brand uniqueness ($\sigma_{\text{relationship}} = .63$) was once again higher than brand consensus ($\sigma_{\text{brand}} = .19; F(5612, 25) = 3.37, p < .001$).

Discussion

After study 2 showed that more familiar brands have more personalized meanings, study 3 further builds our knowledge about the drivers of uniqueness by suggesting that brands with

which consumers have more private relationships tend to have higher uniqueness in meanings than brands that consumers experience in public.

The pattern of results regarding the effect of private or public consumption also illustrates how our componential model provides a better understanding of heterogeneity in brand meanings than merely focusing on brand dispersion as the variance in ratings (Luo, Raitchel, and Wiles 2013). Because the variance in a brand's ratings combines both assimilation (the variance in consumer effects) and uniqueness (the variance in relationship effects), it is only by disentangling brand meaning heterogeneity into its two separate components that we can conclude that more private brand relationships result in more personalized meanings.

Besides this unique contribution to our knowledge about uniqueness in brand meaning, study 3 also replicated results from previous studies in the context of food brands. Uniqueness was a more prevalent component of brand meaning than consensus. It was the perceived similarity between self-image and personalized brand meanings – and not with consensual meanings – what increased consumer's self-brand connection at the consumer-dyad level.

Study 4: Most Valuable Brands from Multiple Categories

Study 4 tests the effect of perceived similarity between self-image and personalized brand meanings on brand liking (H_{4b}) and also replicates the primacy of uniqueness in an even more conservative test, which included only brands recognized for their high value. If a differentiated positioning is at the heart of branding strategy (Keller 2008) and brand personality is one of the core dimensions of differentiation (Aaker 1996), consensus on brand personality should be at its highest among the most valuable brands in the marketplace (Aaker 1991).

Participants, procedure, measures, and stimuli

One hundred six undergraduate students participated in this study. It consisted of two surveys, the first with self-reported personality questions and the second with brand personality questions, with an unrelated study in-between them to clear short-term memories.

In the first survey, participants answered the same 41 personality items used in studies 2 and 3 (derived from Aaker 1997; Geuens, Weijters, and De Wulf 2009; Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann Jr. 2003). In the second survey participants were asked to answer the same 31 brand personality items used in studies 2 and 3 (from Aaker 1997; Geuens, Weijters, and De Wulf 2009) for 20 brands, one brand at a time with randomized order of brands and items. After responding to the brand personality items, participants answered how much they were familiar with (1 = not at all familiar; 7 = very familiar) and liked the brands (1 = dislike very much; 7 = like very much), as well as demographic questions.

To select a sample of brands from discrete product categories that are recognized for their value, we used two major brand rankings: Interbrand's (2012) Best Global Brands and Millward Brown's (2012) BrandZ Most Valuable Global Brands. We first identified the nine sectors with at least five brands in Interbrand's Top 100 ranking (number of brands): automotive (13), financial services (12), FMCG (11), technology (9), luxury (8), alcohol (7), electronics (7), business services (6), and diversified (5). Only four of these nine sectors had a clear match with Millward Brown's product categories, so that we could identify at least five brands appearing both in Interbrands' Top 100 and Millward Brown's top brands per category: automotive/cars (9), financial services/institutions (6), technology (7), and luxury (6). We then averaged the standardized valuations in the two rankings to select the five highest value brands within each category: Toyota, Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Honda, and Volkswagen (cars); American Express,

HSBC, Citi, Visa, and Mastercard (financial services); Apple, Google, Microsoft, Intel, and Samsung (technology); and Louis Vuitton, Hermès, Gucci, Cartier, Prada (luxury).

Results

Perceived similarity and brand liking. The same analysis described in the two previous studies resulted in less liking for the brands with higher perceived dissimilarity between self-image and personalized brand meanings (D_{personal}) both when using raw scores ($\gamma = -.03$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2(1) = 67.83$, $p < .001$) and double centered D scores ($\gamma = -.03$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2(1) = 63.96$, $p < .001$), after controlling for the other three D scores ($D_{\text{consensual}}$, $D_{\text{all brands and consumer}}$, $D_{\text{all consumer and brand}}$) and brand familiarity. Perceived dissimilarity with consensual brand meanings, $D_{\text{consensual}}$, had no effect on liking after including the control variables both when using raw scores ($\gamma = -.01$, $p > .1$; $\chi^2(1) = 2.00$, n.s.) and double centered D scores ($\gamma = -.02$, $p > .1$; $\chi^2(1) = 2.39$, n.s.). These results provide support for our hypothesis (H_{4b}).

Primacy of uniqueness over consensus. An equality of variances test that followed equation (2), with familiarity as a covariate, showed that brand consensus ($\sigma_{\text{brand}} = .13$) was significantly lower than uniqueness ($\sigma_{\text{relationship}} = .48$; $F(8107, 53) = 3.77$, $p < .001$). We re-ran the analysis with both familiarity and liking as covariates, and consensus ($\sigma_{\text{brand}} = .09$) remained lower than uniqueness ($\sigma_{\text{relationship}} = .44$; $F(8090, 54) = 5.12$, $p < .001$). Thus, hypothesis 1 was once again supported.

Discussion

Study 4 replicates results from previous studies, showing that consensus accounts for less variance in brand meaning than uniqueness (relationship variance). This study also extends the effect of perceived similarity between self-image and personalized brand meanings from self-brand connection (H_{4a} , studies 2 and 3) to brand liking (H_{4b}). Consumers tend to like more the

brands whose personalized – rather than shared – meanings are more similar to consumers' own self-image.

General Discussion

Our results suggest that the assumption of brand consensus is not valid: across more than 70 brands from eleven different consumption domains, brand meaning is predominantly unique and personalized rather than consensual. Brand uniqueness (the variance in relationship effects) was associated with a higher percentage of variance than brand consensus (the variance in brand effects) on both brand personality ratings and judgments of brand quality. The primacy of uniqueness cannot be attributed to affect halo, differences in usage profiles or brand familiarity, typical segmentation variables, or the conflation of uniqueness with assimilation (the variance in consumer effects) and unstable variance.

This paper is also the first to explore what makes brand meanings more unique. Personalized, unique meanings evolve as consumers become more familiar with a brand and develop a relationship with it. The type of experience also matter: private consumer-brand relationships are associated with more uniqueness than more public ones. Finally, we further our understanding of how self-congruity works (Sirgy 1982) by showing that it is the congruity between a consumer's own personality and the personalized meanings associated with the brand, rather than consensual brand meanings, what drives self-brand connection and brand attitudes.

Theoretical contributions

This research offers a new way to think about heterogeneity in brand meaning, with a conceptual model to explain how individual consumer's knowledge aggregates to the segment or

market level. This model is fundamentally different from previous conceptualizations that either position commonality and idiosyncratic associations as two poles of a single dimension (Hirschman 1981) or explore dispersion in brand ratings without disentangling consumer effects and unstable variance (Luo, Raithel, and Wiles 2013). Without a model that separates the three sources of brand meaning – brand, consumer, and consumer-brand relationship effects – we would not arrive at the hypotheses and pattern of results reported in this manuscript.

Our work also relates to research on brand equity measurement, which builds on a long tradition of compositional models (Huber and Holbrook 1979). In contrast with previous work, which mainly focused on developing effective measurement methods by solving issues derived from multi-attribute rating tasks, our primary goal is conceptual rather than methodological. Specifically, we needed a conceptual model that isolates consensual and personalized meanings in order to test the brand consensus assumption and to start exploring how unique, personalized meanings emerge and their consequences to attitudes and self-brand connection.

Managerial implications

We foresee two main managerial implications of our research, the first referring to the locus of brand differentiation, and the second involving how to manage brand uniqueness. First, brands can differentiate themselves from competitors at an aggregate, consensual level, or at a more personalized, unique level. Brand positioning traditionally consists on establishing a clear point of differentiation, such that consumers agree that the brand is better than competitors on select attributes. However, differentiation can also emerge at the level of the consumer-brand dyad, as consumers associate the brand with personalized meanings (Fournier 1998; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). If these personalized meanings are, as our research suggests, a more prevalent component of brand meaning than consensual associations, brand managers should be

encouraged to dedicate less of their time to the selection and promotion of a single, consensual set of brand associations such that they can more properly measure and manage the different ways in which the brand may be perceived by consumers. For instance, maybe managers should be more concerned about the coherence of multiple, personalized meanings than about the presumed consistency of a unified meaning across all individuals.

How can, then, marketers manage unique, personalized brand meanings? The typical solution to the heterogeneity problem is to develop discrete, relatively homogeneous segments. Our results suggest that achieving sufficient consensus in brand meanings may require much more granular – and costly – segmentation efforts than what is generally pursued. However, the segmentation solution masks more fundamental questions that brand managers should be asking based on our research: how much do they want the meaning of a brand to vary within a given segment? Where to draw the line between personalized meanings to promote or accept and less tolerable meanings? Marketers are embracing brand management and communication tools associated with “open source branding” (Fournier and Avery 2011), perceived as the new and inescapable reality, without reflecting on the consequences to the content and morphology of the brand’s meaning map.

Limitations and further research

This research opens up several possibilities for further research. First, the establishment of the primacy of uniqueness over consensus as an empirical generalization requires additional studies that test the consistency of results in multiple conditions. Second, brand assimilation – the variance in consumer effects – also emerged from our empirical results as a more prevalent component of brand meaning than consensus, even after conducting separate analysis to purify brand ratings from response styles (Baumgartner and Steenkamp 2001) that could artificially

inflate consumer effects. The prevalence of this underexplored component of brand meaning invites research to also explore the nomological network around these generalized brand representations. Finally, further work is needed to link uniqueness to brand strength and brand value metrics. Our results regarding the role of personalized meanings in the development of self-brand connection and positive brand attitudes suggest that uniqueness may lead to stronger brands. In contrast, previous research shows that dispersion in brand quality ratings negatively impacts firm value (Luo, Raithel, and Wiles 2013). Additional research may investigate in what circumstances uniqueness lead to stronger or weaker brands.

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Table 1: Percentage of Variance in Personality Ratings Explained by Brand, Consumer, and Relationship Effects

	Brands Effect	<i>Study 1</i>	<i>Study 2: Sports</i>			<i>Study 3: Food</i>			<i>Study 4: Most Valuable Brands</i>
		Clothing Brands	Full Sample	Familiarity		Full Sample	Private/Public		
				High	Low		Priv.	Pub.	
Pooled Brand Personality	<i>Brand</i>	9%*	6%*	3%*	0%	5%*	1%	2%*	6%*
	<i>Consumer</i>	16%* ^A	27%* ^A	33%* ^A	41%* ^A	30%* ^A	31%* ^A	36%* ^A	16%* ^A
	<i>Relationship</i>	29%* ^A	34%* ^A	28%* ^A	27%* ^A	19%* ^A	19%* ^A	15%* ^A	18%* ^A
Sincerity	<i>Brand</i>	5%*	5%*	2%*	0%	8%*	0%	4%*	2%*
	<i>Consumer</i>	18%* ^A	32%* ^A	39%* ^A	43%* ^A	30%* ^A	36%* ^A	37%* ^A	16%* ^A
	<i>Relationship</i>	34% ^A	36%* ^A	31%* ^A	29%* ^A	20%*	22%* ^A	11%*	20%* ^A
Excitement	<i>Brand</i>	7%*	7%*	4%*	0%	1%*	1%*	1%	8%*
	<i>Consumer</i>	13%*	27%* ^A	32%*	39%* ^A	35%* ^A	32%* ^A	41%* ^A	13%*
	<i>Relationship</i>	34%* ^A	32%* ^A	28%*	24%* ^A	23%* ^A	22%* ^A	18%* ^A	19%* ^A
Competence	<i>Brand</i>	14%*	9%*	5%*	0%	2%*	0%	2%*	6%*
	<i>Consumer</i>	13%*	24%*	30%*	41%* ^A	20%* ^A	23%* ^A	22%* ^A	17%* ^A
	<i>Relationship</i>	31%* ^A	37%* ^A	30%*	28%* ^A	18%* ^A	20%* ^A	14%*	23%* ^A
Sophistication	<i>Brand</i>	19%*	5%*	2%*	0%	12%*	2%	2%	12%*
	<i>Consumer</i>	10%*	30%* ^A	33%* ^A	45%* ^A	24%*	27%* ^A	35%* ^A	10%*
	<i>Relationship</i>	23%*	32%* ^A	28%* ^A	25%* ^A	18%*	15%*	17%* ^A	14%*
Ruggedness	<i>Brand</i>	0%	6%*	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	<i>Consumer</i>	27%* ^A	24%* ^A	31%* ^A	37%* ^A	44%* ^A	39%* ^A	50%* ^A	24%* ^A
	<i>Relationship</i>	22%* ^A	33%* ^A	24%* ^A	29%* ^A	18%* ^A	17%* ^A	16%* ^A	18%* ^A

*: $p < .05$; ^A: different from brand consensus at $p < .05$.

Variance of measurement effect and its interactions (e.g., measure x brand, measure x consumer) were not included in the table.

Table 2: Distance Scores of Perceived Similarity and Self-Brand Connection in Study 2

Parameters	Model 1: No Focal Predictors	Model 2: D_{personal}	Model 3: D_{consensual}	Model 4: Both Focal Predictors
<i>Regression coefficients of focal predictors:</i>				
D _{personal}	–	-.01**	–	-.01**
D _{consensual}	–	–	-.02	-.01
<i>Other regression coefficients:</i>				
Intercept	2.59**	2.65**	2.62**	2.65**
D _{all consumers and brand}	-.07**	-.05**	-.05**	-.05**
D _{all brands and consumer}	-.03**	-.01	-.02**	-.01
Familiarity	.26**	.25**	.26**	.25**
<i>Variance components:</i>				
Brand	.00		.00	.00
Consumer	1.19**		1.26 **	1.23**
Residual	1.34**		1.33 **	1.27**
<i>Model summary:</i>				
Deviance statistic	3,327	3,282	3,324	3,282
Estimated parameters	7	8	8	9

* p < .05; ** p < .01.

Figure 1: Componential Model of Brand Meaning Inspired by the Social Relations Model (Kenny, 1994)

	Component	Definition	Operationalization	Variance Associated with the Component
Brand Meaning	Brand effect	How much consumers in general believe that a specific brand is high or low on an attribute	Random effect of brands in a 3way (brand*consumer*item) random effects model	<i>Consensus</i> : degree to which consumers agree on the meaning of brands
	Relationship effect	How much a specific consumer believes that a specific brand is high or low on an attribute, controlling for brand and consumer effects	Random effect of brands within each consumer, i.e., the consumer*brand interaction in the model described above	<i>Uniqueness</i> : degree to which the meaning of each brand is personalized by each consumer
Measurement Model	Consumer effect	How much a specific consumer believes that brands in general are high or low on an attribute	Random effect of consumers in the model described above	<i>Assimilation</i> : Degree to which each consumer perceives all brands similarly
	Measurement effect	How much the ratings for items associated with the same attribute are inconsistent (or unstable)	Random effect of items together with item*brand, item*consumer and item*consumer*brand interactions	<i>Unstable variance</i> : Degree to which the measurement model failed to capture the underlying brand attribute
	Constant	Base level: average rating across all consumers and brands on a given attribute	Grand mean of ratings on an attribute across brands, consumers, and items	

Our focus