

Brand Extension Acceptability in Food and Beverage Product Categories

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Abstract

Brand extension is a powerful marketing strategy that allows firms to offer new product categories, taking advantage from the original brand name and its positive associations (Evangeline and Ragel, 2016). It helps firms to launch new products without the risks connected to the introduction of a new brand in the market. Firms have repeatedly adopted this marketing strategy, not always with success (De Chernatony *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, a bad brand extension performance might have negative consequences on the original brand/product, both in terms of brand reputation and market positioning. Indeed, consumers perceived fit, namely the perceived similarity between the core brand product and its extension, has a crucial impact on brand extension acceptability by the market (Aaker and Keller, 1990; Bottomley and Doyle, 1996). Because of the important role of consumers' judgment, the identification of constructs that might support a good similarity perception can help firms to choose appropriate brand extension strategies. This paper presents an exploratory study focused on three products hypothetically introduced on the market by Coca Cola with the same core brand, in order to investigate the role trust might have to foster consumer perceived brand extension acceptability. The experimental set is based on an energy drink, that can be considered as part of the same product category, chips and a chocolate bar, belonging to food category. For each product, consumers acceptability depends on product category fit and brand level fit, both these last two constructs depending in turn on brand trust (Martini *et al.*, 2016; Tedeschi *et al.*, 2017). The results show that cognitive brand trust can sustain a high product category perceived fit, whereas affective brand trust supports high brand level fit.

Keywords: Brand trust, Brand extension, Food and beverage, Structural equation models.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

Brand extension is a popular and frequently adopted marketing strategy that uses an established brand name to launch a new product (Aaker, 1990; Aaker and Keller, 1990). Extending brands both within and beyond the original product category is considered to be successful, since the new product can take advantage from the image and reputation of the parent brand. Nonetheless, the risk of failure is high: about 80% of brand extensions in many fast-moving consumer good product categories come to a bad end (Ernst & Young and ACNielsen, 1999), which may lead the parent brand to a loss of reputation. For this reason, several researches have focused on consumers' acceptance of brand extensions and brand extensions' success drivers (see, e.g., Aaker and Keller, 1990; Sunde and Brodie, 1992; Bottomley and Doyle, 1996). Most of the research is based on the assumption that consumer perceived fit plays an important role in the brand extension acceptability (Boush et al., 1987; Aaker and Keller, 1990; Boush and Loken, 1991; Bottomley and Doyle, 1996); brand loyalty has also been incorporated as an

important driver of brand extension success (Bloemer and Kasper, 1995; Hem and Iversen, 2009).

The role of brand trust has been investigated for several years only in a partial and indirect way (McWilliam, 1993; Smith and Andrews, 1995; Hem *et al.*, 2000). In more recent years the relationship between brand trust and brand extension acceptance has been examined (Reast, 2005; Anwar *et al.*, 2011; Das *et al.*, 2014), but rarely assuming a multidimensional structure of brand trust.

In this paper, we focus on the role of brand trust, defined as a multidimensional construct, in the relationship between brand extension acceptability and its drivers, namely perceived fit and brand loyalty. First, we validate a multidimensional measurement scale for brand trust, and we test a sequential order among its sub-dimensions; then, we assess the direct and mediated influence of brand trust sub-dimensions on brand extension acceptability. Three different types of brand extensions for a popular parent brand are hypothesized, with different levels of acceptability and perceived fit, and the models concerning each of them compared.

2. Theoretical framework

There is a wide literature on brand extension success factors, that Reast (2005) suggests to group into three typologies: brand extension characteristics, parent brand characteristics, and consumer characteristics.

Brand extension characteristics are centered on the extent to which the brand extension fits the parent brand. The meaning of this fit can be similarity, consonance, consistency, replaceability, but also complementarity (Aaker, 1990; Aaker and Keller, 1990, Boush and Loken, 1991).

Parent brand characteristics measure the quality of the relationship between the consumer and the brand: the loyalty (Bloemer and Kasper, 1995; Hem and Iversen, 2009), the level of affect (Boush and Loken, 1991; Yeung and Wyer, 2005; Anwar *et al.*, 2011), the perceived credibility (Keller and Aaker, 1992), but also the appearance of the brand: its quality (Smith and Park, 1992), prestige (Park *et al.*, 1991), experience (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2001), conviction (Kirmani *et al.*, 1999), image (Vazifedost *et al.*, 2009), associations (Park *et al.*, 1991; Rangaswamy *et al.*, 1993).

In the following, we will consider the effect on brand extension acceptability of the perceived fit and the quality of the loyalty relationship between consumer and brand, while we will omit consumer's characteristics. These, in fact, are mainly focused on the consumer's knowledge, expertise and involvement with the product category of the extension (Murphy and Medin, 1985; Broniarczyk and Alba, 1994; Klink and Smith, 2001), and are not completely relevant for our experimental extensions.

Brand trust has been only marginally considered in researches on brand extension success, as related to "brand credibility" (Keller and Aaker, 1992), as a driver of loyalty (Berry, 1993; Reicheld and Scheffer, 2000), as a component of brand equity (Dyson *et al.*, 1996). Recent studies have examined the relationship between brand trust and brand extension acceptance, but, in spite of a general agreement on the relevance of the brand trust construct in consumer behavior, there are still different approaches to its measurement, both unidimensional and multidimensional. Laforet (2008) includes a unidimensional measure of trust in studying retail brand extension; Wu and Yen (2007) and Anwar *et al.* (2011) also employ a unidimensional measure of brand trust, while Das *et al.* (2014) point out the problem of integrating a multidimensional trust measurement into brand extension studies, but only analyze the affective component. Reast (2005) proposes a two-dimensional trust construct ("credibility" and "performance satisfaction"), and finds associations of both dimensions with brand extension acceptability.

The predominant conceptualizations of trust across literature suggest that trust is multidimensional, made of cognitive and affective components (Geyskens *et al.*, 1998; McAllister, 1995; Williams, 2001). The dimensions involved in brand trust are not always simultaneously present and they do not have always the same intensity (Li *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, we can hypothesize that the involved dimensions be causally related to each other: arguably, cognitive dimensions, likely at the beginning of the brand relationship, are progressively replaced by those more emotionally rooted (Gronroos, 1994, 2000; Gummesson, 1994, 1998; Harris and Goode, 2004; Oliver, 1997, 1999). Competence should precede, and partially shape, the consumer perception of a sincere respect of his/her interest and wellness (Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2003).

According to the literature, in this research we assume brand trust as a multi-dimensional construct based on four factors: competence, honesty, empathy and benevolence.

Competence is an indicator of experience, professional quality and ability to respond to buyer needs. Honesty describes brand sincerity (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, Geyskens *et al.*, 1996, Kumar *et al.*, 1995), while empathy (Sheppard and Sherman, 1998) represents the brand ability to systematically interact and communicate with its buyers. Benevolence is the sincere willingness of brand to help its buyers.

However, unlike previous studies pointing out a direct relationship between brand trust and brand extension acceptability (see, e.g., Das *et al.*, 2014; Reast, 2005; Wu and Yen, 2007), we expect the effect of trust to be mediated by loyalty and perceived fit.

Our hypotheses are:

H1: Brand trust influences brand extension acceptability through perceived fit and brand loyalty.

H2: The roles of affective and cognitive dimensions of brand trust support brand loyalty and perceived fit with different intensities.

H3: The role of affective trust changes according to the level of perceived fit

The hypothesized structural model is shown in Figure 1: brand extension acceptability is determined by brand extension perceived fit and brand loyalty. Brand trust affects brand extension acceptability through perceived fit and loyalty, but we also test for direct effects. We hypothesize a multi-dimensional sequential structure of brand trust, where the most functional dimension, competence, influences honesty that, in turn, impacts on empathy, which enforces the most affective component, benevolence. For simplicity, and in order to focus on the effects of the most divergent sub-dimensions, we only assess the influence of competence and benevolence on perceived fit, brand loyalty and acceptability.

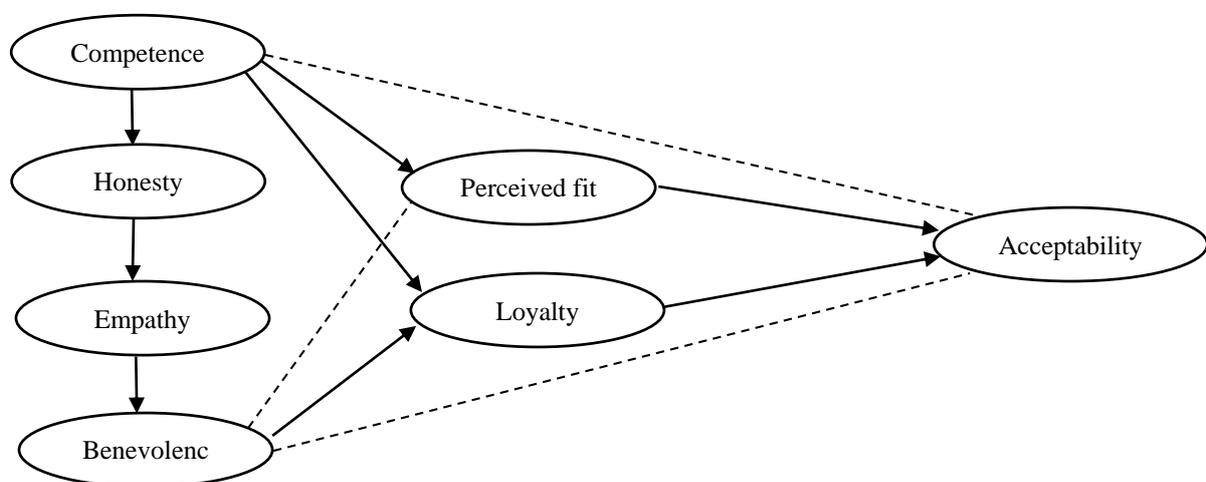


Figure 1. The structural model

3. Method

In order to study the relationship among trust, loyalty, perceived fit and acceptability under a set of different conditions implied by the characteristics of the specific extension, we imagined to introduce three different products under the popular brand Coca-Cola: a chocolate bar, an energy drink and some chips. The three extensions are quite far from the parent brand, especially compared to the brand extensions launched by Coca-Cola in the past: with the (partial) exception of the energy drink, they are not even in the same product class as the parent brand. This choice derives from the need to challenge respondents, since a core brand like Coca-Cola, with a high level of perceived quality, might not be expected to encounter problems in consumer acceptance due to a lack of similarity when less extreme extensions are proposed (Keller and Aaker, 1992)

The three extensions were randomly assigned to respondents.

The indicators that we surveyed to represent the involved constructs are presented in Sect. 3.1, while the survey sample is described in Sect. 3.2. Sect. 3.3 introduces the statistical analyses performed in the following.

3.1. Construct measurement

Brand trust

On the basis of previous analyses (Martini *et al.*, 2016; Tedeschi *et al.*, 2017) we hypothesize the existence of four sub-dimensions of trust: competence, honesty, empathy and benevolence.

Brand trust – Competence:

We used the following 3 items to measure competence: “Coca-Cola is competent”, “Coca-Cola is experienced”, “Coca-Cola is qualified”. Cronbach’s Alpha is 0.856, item-to-total correlations vary between 0.701 and 0.756.

Brand trust – Honesty:

The 3 items to measure honesty are: “Coca-Cola is sincere”, “Coca-Cola is fair”, “Coca-Cola is honest”. Cronbach’s Alpha is 0.893, item-to-total correlations vary between 0.776 and 0.798.

Brand trust – Empathy:

Empathy is measured by “Coca-Cola understands me”, “Coca-Cola is interested in me”, “Coca-Cola would help solve problems”. Cronbach’s Alpha is 0.772, item-to-total correlations vary between 0.544 and 0.653.

Brand trust – Benevolence:

The items to measure benevolence are the following 4: “Coca-Cola is willing to run into difficulty for me”, “Coca-Cola helps me in tough choices”, “Coca-Cola does all it can for me”, “Coca-Cola takes care of me”. Cronbach’s Alpha is 0.872, item-to-total correlations vary between 0.671 and 0.789.

Attitudinal loyalty

Attitudinal loyalty is measured through 3 items: “I often speak well of Coca-Cola”, “I would go to another shop if Coca-Cola be unavailable”, “I’m willing to pay more in order to buy Coca-Cola”. Cronbach’s Alpha is 0.798, item-to-total correlations vary between 0.621 and 0.678.

Extension acceptability

Acceptability is measured by the 3 items “I feel this Coca-Cola extension would fulfill my expectations”, “I’d like to find in the market this Coca-Cola extension”, “I’d buy this Coca-Cola extension if available”. Cronbach’s Alpha is 0.789, item-to-total correlations range from 0.536 to 0.684.

Perceived fit

Perceived fit is measured by 5 items: “I feel this Coca-Cola extension would fit with the other brand products”, “I feel this Coca-Cola extension would fit with the consumers’ way of life”, “I feel this Coca-Cola extension would have the same quality as the other brand products”, “I feel this Coca-Cola extension would taste good as the other brand products”, “I feel the brand image could be reflected on this Coca-Cola extension”. Cronbach’s Alpha is 0.792, item-to-total correlations range from 0.541 to 0.628.

All the items are measured on 7-point self-anchored quantitative scales.

3.2. Survey and sample

The survey was carried out in Italy in September and October 2016 through an online questionnaire administered via the SurveyMonkey survey tool. The questionnaire included the socio-demographic profile of the respondents, some questions about their consumption of Coca-Cola, and the items to measure brand trust and brand loyalty, as described above. The respondents were randomly assigned one of the three extensions, and answered the items on acceptability and perceived fit with reference to the assigned extension. 186 respondents answered questions on the chocolate bar, 152 on the energy drink, and 153 on the chips.

The sample size amounts to 491 respondents; the average age is 26.

The acceptability averages score 3.01 (on the 7-point scale) for the chocolate bar, 3.21 for the energy drink, and 3.79 for the chips.

The average fit scores are 3.71 for the chocolate bar, 4.21 for the energy drink, and 4.41 for the chips.

3.3. Statistical analyses

Preparatory, descriptive analyses and exploratory factor analysis are carried out with SPSS. The measurement model and the structural model are validated through structural equation modeling (SEM, see Jöreskog and Sorbom, 1979). Parameter estimates are obtained with Lisrel 8.7 (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 2004); since the items are measured on a 1-7 quantitative scale with a non-normal distribution, we applied robust maximum likelihood (Browne, 1987), with an adjusted Chi-squared test (Jöreskog *et al.*, 2001; Satorra and Bentler, 1988). In order to calculate a large set of fit indices, we removed partial nonresponses from the dataset, reducing the sample size to 487.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement model of trust

The 4-dimension hypothesized measurement model for brand trust is shown in Figure 2. The RMSEA index is 0.047, showing an adequate fit; all the other indices are also adequate (SRMR = 0.040; GFI = 0.95, CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.99) [An RMSEA below 0.06 and SRMR below 0.8, as well as an NFI and CFI above 0.95, indicate a good fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999); for the GFI, values of 0.90 or greater are recommended (Hooper *et al.*, 2008)]. We found that the four dimensions were significantly intercorrelated. We assessed the discriminant validity by testing whether the 95% confidence interval did not include the value 1 and by comparing the nested models with and without restrictions on single correlations (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Both procedures confirmed discriminant validity.

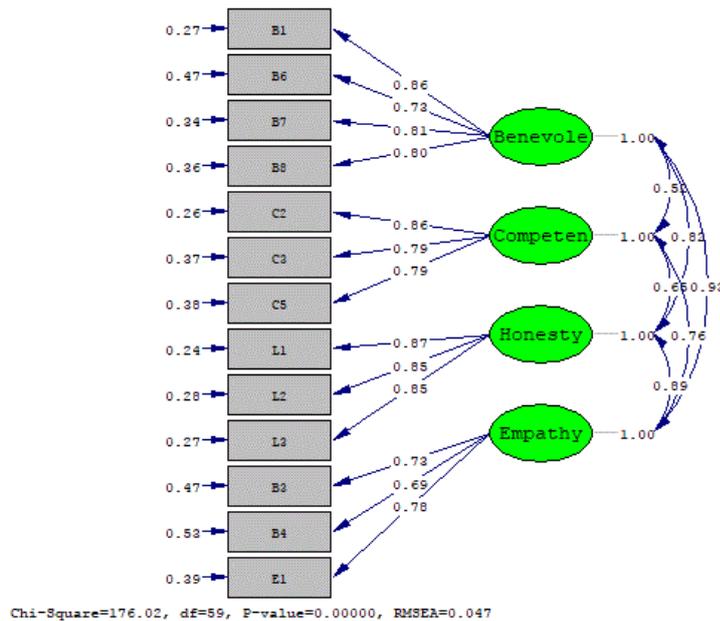


Figure 2. Measurement model for the four dimensions of brand trust

The second-order model also show an adequate fit, confirming the existence of an underlying common trait, namely brand trust [The RMSEA was 0.058, SRMR = 0.048, GFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.99].

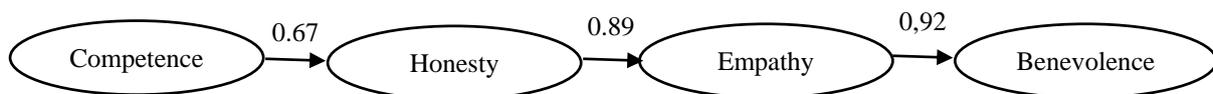


Figure 3. Sequential pattern among the sub-dimensions of trust

Finally, we validated the sequential order of the sub-dimensions, with competence influencing honesty that, in turn, supports empathy, which enforces benevolence (Figure 3); again, this model showed an adequate fit [The RMSEA was 0.059, SRMR = 0.050, GFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.99].

4.2. Structural model

The structural model depicted in Figure 1 was estimated for the whole sample and, separately, for the three sub-samples answering questions on the three different brand extensions. Parameter estimates for the four models are provided in Table 1.

The effect of brand loyalty and perceived fit on brand extension acceptability is confirmed for the four models, as far as the role of brand trust, that affects brand extension acceptability solely through loyalty and perceived fit; direct effects were not significant in all the models.

Affective brand trust (the “benevolence” component) exclusively sustains brand loyalty: in all of the four models, the influence on the perceived fit is not significant.

Conversely, cognitive brand trust (the “competence component”) mainly sustains perceived fit: the effect on loyalty is not significant for the chocolate bar model, and definitely weaker than the effect on perceived fit for the energy drink; only in the chips model cognitive brand trust is able to affect perceived fit and loyalty alike. Since chips are the extension with the highest perceived fit, while the chocolate bar has the lowest, this seems to indicate that the importance of cognitive trust in affecting loyalty grows when the perceived fit is higher. This is consistent with the idea of a rational trust that can generate loyalty only if its functional adequacy can be induced by the similarity to the past experiences.

Table 1. Parameters of the structural model for each extension and in total.

<i>Relationship</i>	<i>Chocolate bar</i>	<i>Energy drink</i>	<i>Chips</i>	<i>General model</i>
Competence→Honesty	0.68	0.66	0.67	0.67
Honesty→Empathy	0.87	0.92	0.90	0.89
Empathy→Benevolence	0.89	0.93	0.96	0.93
Competence→Fit	0.25	0.52	0.31	0.35
Competence→Loyalty	n.s.	0.25	0.31	0.18
Competence→Acceptability	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Benevolence→Fit	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Benevolence→Loyalty	0.53	0.52	0.49	0.54
Benevolence→Acceptability	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Fit→Acceptability	0.74	0.56	0.79	0.72
Loyalty→Acceptability	0.23	0.38	0.29	0.29
<i>RMSEA</i>	<i>0.046</i>	<i>0.049</i>	<i>0.049</i>	<i>0.046</i>

Affective trust, on the other side, has a stronger effect on brand loyalty when perceived fit is low: if the brand is entering a brand-new adventure, competence is not guaranteed, and only benevolence can sustain loyalty.

5. Limits, further research and implications

This research was carried out on a limited number of respondents; the sample size in itself is not particularly small, but only few more than 150 questionnaires were collected on each of the brand extensions. Therefore, the study should be extended to a larger sample. Moreover, the participation in the survey was proposed on a voluntary basis, with a risk of self-selection for categories of respondents interested in the theme, or in the Coca-Cola brand. A further weakness of the sampling design is the use of a web survey, that could induce a self-selection of people accustomed to use the computer, i.e. younger and more educated than average. A further study carried out on a larger, less biased and more representative sample of respondents could help overcome the weaknesses of the present study.

A second possible limit is the choice of the three brand extensions; as already stressed, in order to avoid automatic acceptance due to the prominence and the perceived quality of the brand, we chose three product categories quite far from the parent brand; in a future research the alternative brand extensions could be more differentiated, ranging from a similar product, to a totally different one.

Moreover, in this paper we compare the models applied to the three extensions sub-groups by simply describing their differences, while testing for the model invariance across groups would have been more appropriate.

Even with the described limits, some implications are relevant. A unidimensional scale for trust would have hidden the differences in how affective and cognitive trust intervene in the relationship between perceived fit and loyalty, and acceptability. Equally relevant, brand trust does not directly affect brand extension acceptability, but it intervenes in the relationship by influencing perceived fit and loyalty. Cognitive trust is a good driver for loyalty when perceived fit is high, but with low levels of fit only affective trust can generate loyalty.

Given the sequential structure of the four trust dimensions, a firm willing to launch a new brand extension needs to confirm his competence, experience and ability to match customers' expectations, but this is not enough to support strong relationship when the new product is perceived as weakly consistent with the parent brand; if what is asked to the consumer is a leap in the dark, only affective trust can help.

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