

“My” Brand or “Our” Brand: The Effects of Brand Relationship Dimensions and Self-Construal on Brand Evaluations

VANITHA SWAMINATHAN
KAREN L. PAGE
ZEYNEP GÜRHAN-CANLI*

Consumer-brand relationships can be formed based on individual- or group-level connections. For example, a consumer's relationship with a Mercedes may be based on the desire to express individual-level unique identity (e.g., self-concept connection), whereas a relationship with a local brand (e.g., Ford) may be based on a group-level patriotic national identity (e.g., country-of-origin connection). We suggest that the effects of self-concept connection and brand country-of-origin connection vary based on self-construal. Results across two studies reveal that, under independent self-construal, self-concept connection is more important. Under interdependent self-construal, brand country-of-origin connection is more important.

Recently, the relationship perspective has become increasingly popular as a theoretical lens for understanding consumer-brand interactions (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Fournier 1998). Consumers are known to form strong relationships with those brands that have values and personality associations that are congruent with their self-concept (Sirgy 1982). In this way, brand relationships can be viewed as expressions of consumers' identities (Escalas and Bettman 2005; Reed 2004).

Self-concept connection, a dimension of the consumer-brand relationship, indicates the amount that the brand contributes to one's identity, values, and goals (Fournier 1998). For instance, the Harley Davidson brand, with its free-spirited and rebellious image, is likely to appeal more to those

individuals whose self-concept contains these traits. Therefore, a high self-concept connection can symbolize a consumer's individual identity.

Another stream of research suggests that brand relationships can furnish participants with a social identity (Weiss 1974; Wright 1974). Consistent with this idea, consumer research has shown that brands can be used to communicate and reinforce national identity (Johansson 1989; Shimp and Sharma 1987). Further, brand attitudes have been shown to vary based on country of origin (Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran 2000; Hong and Wyer 1990; Maheswaran 1994). For example, when France refused to participate in the U.S.-led Iraq war, Americans demonstrated their displeasure by boycotting French-made wines and increasing their purchases of U.S.-made wines (Chavis and Leslie 2005). This example highlights the notion that brand country-of-origin connection can form an important facet of a consumer's relationship with a brand.

The research to date has primarily focused either on self-concept connection (Escalas and Bettman 2005; Fournier 1998) or brand country-of-origin connection (Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran 2000). Synthesizing these two research streams, we examine the differential role of self-concept connection and brand country-of-origin connection within a unified conceptual framework. The unified framework allows us to examine when and how these dimensions of consumer-brand relationships are more relevant or salient in influencing brand evaluations.

Consumers have been shown to express different aspects of the self under varying circumstances (Reed 2004). In-

*Vanitha Swaminathan is assistant professor of marketing, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260 (vanitha@katz.pitt.edu). Karen L. Page is assistant professor of marketing, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-4112 (kpage@mays.tamu.edu). Zeynep Gürhan-Canli is associate professor of marketing, Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey (zcanli@ku.edu.tr). Correspondence: Vanitha Swaminathan. The authors gratefully acknowledge a research grant from the International Business Center at the Katz Graduate School of Business and helpful input in reviews from the editor, associate editor, and reviewers. In addition, the authors thank Rohini Ahluwalia, Esra Gencturk, Andrew Gershoff, Jeff Inman, Chris Janiszewski, Vikas Mittal, Aysegül Ozsomer, Serdar Sayman, Stijn Van Osselaer, and David Wooten for their helpful comments on previous versions.

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dividuals with an independent self-construal view themselves as separate individuals, whereas individuals with an interdependent self-construal view themselves as part of a group (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Further, research suggests that most individuals have a dynamic self consisting of both independent and interdependent traits and situational cues can activate either type (Agrawal and Maheswaran 2005; Triandis 1995). Drawing on this perspective of the dynamic self, it is suggested here that the impact of self-concept connection (with its focus on the individual) and brand country-of-origin connection (with its focus on the group) may vary based on an individual's construal of self.

The context for examining these research issues is brand attitude change following negative brand information concerning a closely related line extension. Negative information or negative publicity surrounding a brand can threaten the stability of the consumer-brand relationship and has a higher salience and diagnostic value than positive information (Aaker et al. 2004). According to research on branding, a key benefit of strong consumer-brand relationships is their ability to help maintain brand attitudes in the face of negative information (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2000; Fournier 1998). Because brand attitude change is likely to vary significantly based on relationship strength, it provides an ideal context for investigating the relative importance of individual- and group-based consumer-brand relationship dimensions.

In summary, the extent to which the negative brand information is likely to influence brand attitudes will depend on (a) self-concept connection, (b) the brand country-of-origin connection, and (c) self-construal. In study 1, we demonstrate how self-construal moderates the effect of both self-concept connection and brand country of origin. Study 2 replicates this effect in a different context (i.e., athletic shoes).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Based on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), the self can be conceptualized as composed of a personal identity and a group identity. Object ownership has been shown to contribute to one's unique individual identity (Belk 1988). Material possessions can also help communicate group identity. Wallendorf and Arnould (1988, 532) demonstrate that attachments to objects are "signs of one's connection to or differentiation from other members of society."

Extending identity theory to the realm of consumer behavior, Kleine, Kleine, and Allen (1995) conceptualize material possession attachment as having two distinct facets—one facet reflects consumers' desire for a unique personal identity (i.e., autonomy seeking), and a second facet reflects a desire for group identity (i.e., affiliation seeking). Applying the theory of material possession attachment to the context of brand relationships, it is suggested here that unique self-concept connection is based on the need for individual autonomy and brand country-of-origin connection is based on a need for affiliation with a group. We elaborate on these ideas next.

Self-Concept Connection

Recall that the self-concept connection reflects the degree to which the brand is used to express a significant aspect of the individual self (Fournier 1998). While self-concept connection can be based on both personal and group identities (as per social identity theory; Tajfel and Turner 1979), we distinguish between personal and group aspects and conceptualize self-concept connection as the relationship between a consumer and a brand on the basis of a connection between a consumer's unique self and what the brand symbolizes for the consumer. In other words, self-concept connection focuses on personal identity and not on group identity. In many independent cultures (where Fournier's research was conducted), an individual's self-concept is primarily unique, abstracted from the social environment, and independent of others.

What are some of the benefits of a strong self-concept connection? A strong consumer-brand relationship is believed to encourage relationship durability and greater tolerance when the brand perception is challenged by negative circumstances (Ahluwalia et al. 2000; Fournier 1994, 1998). Consequently, we expect that consumers with a high unique self-concept connection, a dimension of consumer-brand relationships, will be more likely to disregard the negative brand information. In support of this, Pomerantz, Chaiken and Tordesillas (1995) show that when attitudes are viewed as central to the self-concept, individuals are more likely to demonstrate selective memory and resistance to counter-attitudinal information.

Self-Construal

A growing body of work suggests that the self is a complex structure with multiple manifestations (Singelis 1994). An individual's construal of the self is frequently defined as a "constellation of thoughts, feelings, and actions concerning one's relationship to others such as the self being distinct from others or connected to others" (Singelis 1994, 581). While self-construal is often considered to be based on cultural orientation (Markus and Kitayama 1991), research has found that self-construal can be activated through situational priming (Agrawal and Maheswaran 2005; Ng and Houston 2006; Triandis 1995).

According to Markus and Kitayama (1991, 226), the independent self-construal is characterized by "an individual whose behavior is organized and made meaningful primarily by reference to one's own internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings, and actions, rather than by reference to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others." This implies that an independent self-construal should cause one's opinions to be altered by individual thoughts and personal opinions. Conversely, those with an interdependent construal of self base their attitudes and behavior on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

Different aspects of the self have been shown to influence consumer behavior at different points in time (Reed 2004).

Consumer behavior research has shown that individuals' construal of self (independent or interdependent) can influence brand meaning (Escalas and Bettman 2005), the persuasiveness of various advertising appeals (Agrawal and Maheswaran 2005), and brand extension evaluations (Ng and Houston 2006). We suggest that a consumer's self-concept connection is likely to be important only when an independent self-construal becomes salient. The self-concept connection is based on consumers' desires to express their individuality and their self as distinct from others. Therefore, the impact of self-concept connection is likely to be greater when an independent self-construal is primed.

On the one hand, if an independent self-construal is relatively salient and there is a high self-concept connection with the brand, the individual is more likely to refute any negative information challenging his or her self-concept connection with the brand by counterarguing the negative information (Ahluwalia et al. 2000). Such counterarguments will minimize any brand attitude change caused by negative information. However, if an independent self-construal is relatively salient and there is a low self-concept connection with the brand, then brand attitude change will occur, since there is no refutation of negative information.

On the other hand, when an interdependent self-construal is made salient, self-concept connection is likely to be less important when evaluating a brand. For instance, Markus and Kitayama (1991, 236) suggest that, "among those with more interdependent selves, one's inner feelings may be less important in determining one's consequent actions."

The preceding arguments imply that the impact of self-concept connection should vary based on self-construal, such that changes in brand attitude should be greater for low self-concept connection (vs. high self-concept connection) brands under independent self-construal. The preceding arguments also suggest that, when an interdependent self-construal is made salient, brand attitude change will occur regardless of whether the individual has a high or low individual-based relationship with the brand. This leads to the following hypothesis:

- H1a:** The impact of self-concept connection on the extent of brand attitude change varies based on self-construal. When an independent self-construal is primed, exposure to negative information about the brand leads to lower brand attitude in the negative information condition (relative to a control group) for consumers having lower self-concept connection. For consumers having higher self-concept connection, there will be no change in brand attitude in the negative information condition (relative to a control group).

Brand Country-of-Origin Connection

Brand country-of-origin connection is the extent to which a brand is used to express one's patriotic national identity.

Researchers have demonstrated that country of origin has an important impact on consumer evaluations of products and brands (Hong and Wyer 1990; Maheswaran 1994). Shimp and Sharma (1987) found that ethnocentric individuals were more likely to purchase domestic products over foreign products, reinforcing their patriotic identity. Similarly, Klein, Ettenson, and Morris (1998) found that even when a consumer recognizes a brand as high quality, the consumer may still refuse to purchase the brand if it does not adequately symbolize their group membership. Furthermore, John and Klein (2003) suggest that consumers often participate in boycotting specific brands (e.g., religious organizations boycotting Disney) because it strengthens their group identity.

The impact of country of origin on brand evaluations is shown to vary based on a variety of factors, including prior elaboration (Hong and Wyer 1990), consumer expertise (Maheswaran 1994), consumer ethnocentricity (Shimp and Sharma 1987), and culture-specific factors (Klein et al. 1998). It is suggested here that the brand country of origin (i.e., whether the brand name is local or foreign), a group level variable, is particularly meaningful to consumers as it helps differentiate between in-group members and out-group members. Further, brand country-of-origin connection may become more prominent or salient when there is a greater focus on relationships with others. Recall that an interdependent self-construal places greater emphasis on the relationship between self and others, with distinctions made between in-group and out-group members. Because of this, brand country of origin, which distinguishes between local and foreign brands, is likely to have a greater impact when self-construal is relatively more interdependent. Specifically, consumers are more likely to resist negative information regarding local (vs. foreign) brands when an interdependent self-construal is primed. In contrast, since an independent self-construal places greater emphasis on self, brand country of origin is expected to have less influence on brand attitudes when an independent self-construal is primed. In support of this, Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran (2000) show that home country products are evaluated more favorably when the interdependent self-construal is dominant.

The preceding arguments imply that the impact of brand country-of-origin connection should vary based on self-construal, such that changes in brand attitude should be greater for foreign (vs. local) brands under interdependent self-construal. However, the impact of brand country-of-origin connection will be lower in independent self-construal. This leads to the following hypothesis:

- H1b:** The impact of brand country-of-origin connection on the extent of brand attitude change varies based on self-construal. When the brand is of foreign origin and an interdependent self-construal is primed, there should be a lower brand attitude in the negative information condition (relative to a control group). When the brand is of local origin and an interdependent self-construal is primed, there should be no

change in brand attitude in the negative information condition (relative to a control group). Brand attitudes do not vary as a function of brand country-of-origin connection when an independent self-construal is primed.

STUDY 1

Our methodological approach for testing the hypotheses involved using real brand names. Further, the empirical context had to be such that the category represented a high degree of risk to the consumer, so that negative brand information could potentially have an impact on brand attitudes. Based on this criterion, consumer electronics was the chosen product category. To manipulate negative brand information, the context for the study was an electronics brand introducing a failed line extension.

Pretests. To study the effect of self-concept connection and brand country of origin on brand attitudes following exposure to negative information, we chose various consumer electronics brands. Further, to test the impact of varying levels of self-concept connection (which are measured for each respondent), the brand names chosen had to represent a broad range of self-concept connection scores, ranging from very low to very high. In addition, since brand country-of-origin connection was to be manipulated based on whether brands were of local origin or foreign origin, various pairs of local and foreign brands were selected for further pretesting.

In the pretest ($n = 42$), various local and foreign electronics brands were presented to respondents who were asked to rate these brands in terms of familiarity (1 = highly familiar; 5 = highly unfamiliar) and brand attitude, as measured on four five-point scales (low quality/high quality, bad/good, unfavorable/favorable, negative/positive). The four brand attitude scores were then averaged to form an evaluation index ($\alpha = .95$). Based on subject responses, this pretest yielded Samsung and Dell as two consumer electronics brands with both high familiarity ($M_{\text{Samsung}} = 1.62$, $M_{\text{Dell}} = 1.51$; $t(41) = 0.50$, NS) and similar levels of initial brand attitude ($M_{\text{Samsung}} = 3.84$, $M_{\text{Dell}} = 4.01$; $t(41) = 1.21$, NS).

In a second pretest ($n = 42$), in order to eliminate possible alternative explanations (e.g., brand breadth and perceived fit), we determined the brand breadth of the Samsung and Dell brand names by having respondents list all product categories that came to mind when presented with the Samsung/Dell brand names. The number of product categories associated with a given brand name was computed. Both Samsung and Dell exhibited similar brand breadth ($M_{\text{Samsung}} = 3.40$, $M_{\text{Dell}} = 3.52$; $t(41) = 0.32$, NS). Additionally, the perceived fit of each brand with televisions was examined. Participants responded to three five-point items (extremely bad fit/extremely good fit, not at all logical/extremely logical, not at all appropriate/extremely appropriate)

that were averaged into a perceived fit score ($\alpha = .92$). The perceived fits of Samsung and Dell with a television were similar ($M_{\text{Samsung}} = 3.4$, $M_{\text{Dell}} = 3.5$; $t(41) = 0.78$, NS), and both brands currently manufacture televisions.

To determine the extent of brand relationship strength (i.e., self-concept connection and the brand country-of-origin connection) of the two brands, respondents rated Dell and Samsung on both self-concept connection and brand country-of-origin connection. Self-concept connection with the brand was measured through five statements taken from a brand relationship quality scale developed by Fournier (1994). The statements are as follows: "The brand and I have a lot in common," "This brand's image and my self image are similar in a lot of ways," "This brand says a lot about the kind of person I am or want to be," "This brand reminds me of who I am," and "This brand is a part of me." Responses to each statement were measured on a five-point scale (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree) and were averaged to obtain a self-concept connection score ($\alpha = .93$). Both Samsung and Dell had similar levels of self-concept connection ($M_{\text{Samsung}} = 2.20$, $SD = 1.1$; $M_{\text{Dell}} = 2.30$, $SD = 1.1$; $t(41) = 0.58$, NS). Additionally, there was a broad distribution of self-concept connection scores around this average ranging from very high to very low.

To judge the degree to which Dell was representative of a local brand and Samsung represented a foreign brand, the same pretest measured the extent of brand country-of-origin connection of each brand. For instance, participants responded to the following statements: "I associate the Dell (Samsung) brand name with things that are American (foreign)," "To me, Dell (Samsung) brand represents what America (a foreign country) is all about." Responses were indicated on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) and averaged to determine the brand country-of-origin connection of the Dell brand ($\alpha = .89$) and Samsung brand ($\alpha = .95$). The results of the pretest confirmed that Dell and Samsung were significantly different in terms of their "American-ness" (Dell = 3.87; Samsung = 1.82; $t(41) = 9.58$, $p < .01$) and in terms of their "foreign-ness" (Dell = 1.71; Samsung = 3.04; $t(41) = 6.66$, $p < .01$).

Procedure. Participants received a questionnaire and were informed that they could voluntarily participate in this marketing study about products and brands and receive an incentive of either \$3 cash or course credit in return for their participation. The questionnaire first asked students to indicate their familiarity with and use of the brand and then completed the brand relationship scale using the scale items described previously. Measures of self-concept connection elicited from respondents were used in the subsequent analysis. This was followed by a filler task to clear short-term memory that asked students to evaluate an unrelated brand. Next, the self-construal prime was administered, followed by negative brand information (or no information in the no information condition) and participants' evaluation of the brand. Finally, the students completed the self-construal manipulation check and finished with a brief demographic sec-

tion. After the study, participants responded to an open-ended suspicion probe.

Independent Variables

Self-Concept Connection. As described previously, self-concept connection was measured using five items from Fournier's (1994) brand relationship quality scale. Responses to each statement were measured on a five-point scale (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree) and were averaged to obtain a self-concept connection score ($\alpha = .93$).

Self-Construal. Self-construal was primed using Trafimow, Triandis, and Goto's (1991) method. Participants were instructed to take 5 minutes to think about and write down how they are similar to (interdependent) or different from (independent) their friends and family.

Design

A total of 320 students (50% male; 99% ages 18–24) at the University of Pittsburgh participated in the study. None of the students were of foreign origin, and all of the students indicated at least moderate familiarity (less than or equal to three on a five-point scale; 1 = highly familiar; 5 = highly unfamiliar) with the brand names in the study. They were randomly assigned to conditions in a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (information valence: negative vs. no information [manipulated], self-construal: interdependent or independent [manipulated], brand country of origin: local vs. foreign [manipulated]) between-subjects design. Self-concept connection was measured as described earlier.

Negative Information. To create a negative information scenario, we presented information about a fictitious line extension and hypothetical ratings on three attributes of the extension, along with the competitor's ratings on the same attributes. Participants read the following information: "We are interested in obtaining your evaluations with regard to a new television that Samsung has introduced. Following are the ratings of Samsung's new line of Super Fine 34-inch Model WS34V1 by an independent product testing agency. This line has recently been introduced in the market place. Please read carefully through the ratings of Samsung's new line of televisions as well as its competitors' and answer the questions that follow." The ratings for the new Samsung television and its competitors' televisions (Sony and GE) were presented to the participants in a table. In the hypothetical ratings (1 = very high; 7 = very low), the Samsung television received a seven on picture quality, seven on sound clarity, and heavy on weight. The Sony competing television received a two on picture quality, two on sound clarity, and light on weight. The GE competing television received a four on picture quality, four on sound clarity, and light on weight.

Brand Attitude. After reading the negative line extension ratings, participants evaluated the brand name in general according to the same four brand attitude items used in the

pretest, each measured on a five-point scale and then averaged to form an evaluation index ($\alpha = .95$).

Results

Manipulation Checks. To check the primed self-construal, we use the Kuhn and McPartland (1954) statement test where participants complete 10 statements beginning with "I am." Two independent research assistants coded each statement as either independent or interdependent (93% agreement with any disagreements resolved through discussion). Independent items include a personal description, attitude, or belief (e.g., I am intelligent). Interdependent items refer to either a demographic group or category to which the participant belongs (e.g., I am a Catholic) or a relationship or sensitivity to others (e.g., I am a sister). Items that did not relate to either of these two categories (e.g., I am almost done with this survey) were classified as other and excluded from the analysis. The self-construal statement test indicated that participants in the independent prime condition relative to the interdependent prime condition wrote more individualistic sentences ($M_{ind} = 5.20$, $M_{inter} = 4.50$; $F(1, 320) = 3.92$, $p < .05$), whereas those in the independent prime condition relative to the interdependent prime condition wrote fewer collectivistic sentences ($M_{ind} = 3.10$, $M_{inter} = 5.30$; $F(1, 320) = 8.41$, $p < .01$), indicating that self-construal was successfully primed.

Brand Attitudes. The predictions were tested using ANOVA, including main effects of information valence, self-concept connection (included as a continuous variable), self-construal, brand country of origin, and all possible two- and three-way interactions of information valence, self-concept connection, self-construal, and brand country of origin. The four-way interaction was also included but is not significant. Importantly, the three-way interaction of self-concept connection, self-construal, and information valence is significant ($F(1, 305) = 3.9$, $p < .05$), which supports hypothesis 1a. In addition, the three-way interaction of self-construal, brand country of origin, and information valence is significant ($F(1, 305) = 4.5$, $p < .05$), supporting hypothesis 1b.

To explore the three-way interaction of self-concept connection, self-construal, and information valence further, we created high- and low-self-concept connection groups based on a median split (Med = 2.20 for the foreign brand and 2.30 for the local brand). Tests for simple interactions suggest that when an independent self-construal is primed, the two-way interaction between self-concept connection and information valence is significant ($F(1, 305) = 14.4$, $p < .01$). A simple effects test indicates no significant differences in mean brand evaluation in the negative information condition (vs. no information condition) for consumers having higher self-concept connection, whereas the difference is significant for consumers having lower self-concept connection ($M_{high} = 3.77$ vs. 3.86; $F(1, 305) = 0.51$, NS; $M_{low} = 2.05$ vs. 3.50; $F(1, 305) = 5.94$, $p < .01$).

When an interdependent self-construal is primed, the

two-way interaction between self-concept connection and information valence is not significant ($F(1, 305) = 0.74$, NS). Based on the median split of self-concept, mean brand evaluation for the negative information (vs. no information condition) is not significant for both higher and lower levels of self-concept connection ($M_{\text{low}} = 3.20$ vs. 3.60; $F(1, 305) = 3.00$, $p > .05$; $M_{\text{high}} = 3.60$ vs. 3.90; $F(1, 305) = 3.05$, $p > .05$). This pattern of results supports hypothesis 1a. The means and standard deviations for each of the experimental conditions are presented in table 1.

Exploring the three-way interaction of information valence, brand country of origin, and self-construal further, tests for simple interactions in the primed interdependent self-construal condition indicate that the two-way interaction between brand country of origin and information valence is significant ($F(1, 305) = 3.78$, $p < .05$). In this case, there are no significant differences in brand evaluations for the negative information (vs. no information context) for the local brand, although these differences are significant for the foreign brand ($M_{\text{local}} = 3.79$ vs. 3.90; $F(1, 305) = 0.28$, NS; $M_{\text{foreign}} = 2.91$ vs. 3.59; $F(1, 305) = 5.30$, $p < .01$). This pattern of results supports hypothesis 1b.

However, when an independent self-construal is primed, the two-way interaction between brand country of origin and information valence is not significant ($F(1, 305) = 2.10$, NS). A simple effects test in the independent local-origin condition reveals significant differences in brand evaluations for the negative information versus no information context ($M = 2.99$ vs. 3.87; $F(1, 305) = 4.80$, $p < .01$). The independent foreign-origin case also yields significant differences in brand evaluations for the negative information versus no information context ($M = 2.75$ vs. 3.50; $F(1, 305) = 4.01$, $p < .05$).

Process Measures. To understand the processes underlying the results, we examine open-ended cognitive responses from the participants. Prior research (Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001) has suggested that people who have positive attitudes toward a target are likely to generate more counterarguments in response to negative information.

This suggests that counterarguments are likely to mediate the effect of negative information on brand attitudes. Further, one may also distinguish between types of counterarguments. Counterarguments are likely to be based on self-concept connection as well as brand country of origin. A self-concept counterargument is defined as a counterargument presented in conjunction with a self-concept-based thought. A brand country-of-origin counterargument is defined as a counterargument presented in conjunction with a country-of-origin-based thought.

To examine the mediating role of counterarguments, two independent coders rated the responses as self-concept counterarguments, brand country-of-origin counterarguments, support arguments, and other arguments. For example, a comment such as: "I am a bit skeptical of these ratings. Dell's products are very good and very affordable for someone like me" was coded as a self-concept related counterargument. An example of a brand country-of-origin counterargument is "Dell is a reliable American brand, and I don't trust these ratings." The coders were in agreement approximately 95% of the time and disagreements were resolved by discussion.

To examine the role of counterarguments, for each condition (independent and interdependent self-construal), the two variables (self-concept connection counterarguments and brand country-of-origin counterarguments) were tested as potential mediators of the impact of self-concept connection and brand country of origin on brand attitude. We performed the mediation analysis by estimating the three regressions recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986), with results presented in table 2. Process measures were also analyzed using ANOVA. These results indicate findings that are consistent with the results of the mediation analysis and are not reported for the sake of brevity.

Self-concept counterarguments emerged as a mediator of brand attitude when an independent self-construal is primed (see table 2), with this mediation supported by Sobel's test ($Z = 4.11$; $p < .01$). In contrast, brand country-of-origin counterarguments mediated brand attitude for participants

TABLE 1

STUDY 1: MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS

	Independent		Interdependent	
	No information	Negative information	No information	Negative information
Samsung brand evaluations:				
Low connectedness	3.21 (.99)	2.03 (.48)	3.23 (.75)	2.70 (.85)
High connectedness	3.78 (.72)	3.45 (1.07)	3.98 (.87)	3.11 (.88)
Dell brand evaluations:				
Low connectedness	3.79 (.97)	2.10 (1.01)	3.87 (.64)	3.70 (.94)
High connectedness	3.96 (.58)	3.90 (.97)	3.95 (.60)	3.85 (.70)

NOTE.—Cell size ranges from $n = 18$ to $n = 22$.

TABLE 2
STUDY 1: MEDIATIONAL ANALYSIS

Dependent variable	Independent variables	Standard beta	t-value
Independent self-construal:			
1. Brand attitude	Self-concept connection	.58	5.80***
	Brand country of origin (foreign = 1; local = 0)	.04	.41
2. Self-concept-based counterarguments	Self-concept connection	.60	6.49***
	Brand country of origin	.06	.62
3. Brand attitude	Self-concept connection	.24	1.56
	Brand country of origin	-.89	-.83
	Self-concept based counterarguments	.53	5.27**
	Country-based counterarguments	-.18	-1.90
Interdependent self-construal:			
1. Brand attitude	Self-concept connection	.11	1.16
	Brand country of origin (foreign = 1; local = 0)	-.50	-5.11**
2. Country-of-origin-based counterarguments	Self-concept connection	.05	.94
	Brand country of origin	-.87	-16.50***
3. Brand attitude	Self-concept connection	.09	.95
	Brand country of origin	-.35	1.20
	Self-concept-based counterarguments	-.00	-.02
	Country-based counterarguments	.24	1.99*

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

when an interdependent self-construal is primed (see table 2), with this mediation supported by Sobel's test ($Z = 1.98$; $p < .05$). As expected, self-concept counterarguments did not emerge as a significant mediator of brand attitude for participants when an interdependent self-construal is primed and brand country-of-origin counterarguments did not emerge as a significant mediator of brand attitude for participants when an independent self-construal is primed. These mediation results indicate that independent consumers resist negative information based on their self-concept counterarguments, whereas interdependent consumers resist negative information based on brand country-of-origin counterarguments.

Discussion. These findings further highlight the role of self-construal in brand attitude change. Self-construal moderates the relationship between self-concept connection and brand attitudes following exposure to negative information. We demonstrate that self-construal interacts with brand country of origin to determine the extent to which consumers resist the negative information. The cognitive responses shed further light on the mechanisms underlying the processes in the negative information conditions. The results of the self-concept counterarguments demonstrate that a high self-concept connection condition is associated with more self-concept counterarguments. The results show that in interdependent states brand country-of-origin thoughts minimize attitude change only for the local brand. To examine whether these results are specific to the particular brand names used in this study (Dell and Samsung), we replicate the results with a second pair of brand names (GE and Sony). The results of this replication are consistent with the results reported here.

One possible mechanism driving the results is that self-construal priming may impact self-concept connection which, in turn, may influence brand attitudes. To examine this possibility, a posttest ($n = 54$) was conducted to study the impact of self-construal priming on self-concept connection with the brand. The posttest was a repeated measures within-subjects design involving priming of self-construal. Respondents' self-concept connection with Samsung and Dell was measured both before and after they were exposed to either an independent or an interdependent self-construal prime. The ANOVA results with change in self-concept connection as a dependent measure show that self-construal priming did not influence the change in self-concept connection for Samsung ($F(1, 52) = 0.09$, NS) or Dell ($F(1, 52) = 0.10$, NS) (reanalyzing this data using pre- and post-self-concept measures as a repeated measures variable produced identical results).

In summary, one of the key results from this study is that the impact of self-concept connection varies based on self-construal using Fournier's (1998) self-concept connection scale. One limitation is that the scale used for self-concept connection may potentially measure group-level connections with the brand as well. For instance, "This brand is a part of me" and "The brand and I have a lot in common" may tap into group-level connectedness. We address this potential limitation in study 2 by using a modified self-concept connection scale.

A second issue in this study is that it was conducted in the electronics brand context. Do the results generalize to other product categories as well? To examine this further, study 2 tests the hypotheses in a different product category, athletic shoes, which have higher average levels of self-

concept connection. Finally, study 2 incorporates a within-subject design to measure attitudes before and after exposure to negative brand information for the same participants. While the use of control groups in study 1 avoids the possibility of demand artifacts, a within-subjects design and measuring the extent of attitude change for a given participant provides a more direct measure of brand dilution. By testing hypotheses using an alternative experimental approach, we provide additional evidence to validate the findings from this study.

STUDY 2

The athletic shoes category was chosen as a context for this study for the following reasons: (1) the athletic shoe category has strong brands, particularly with regard to the undergraduate student population; (2) athletic shoes as a category has been used in previous brand dilution research (Ahluwalia et al. 2000); and (3) athletic shoe brands consist of both local and foreign brands.

Pretest. A pretest ($n = 30$) yielded Adidas and Nike as two athletic shoe brands with both high familiarity ($M_{\text{Adidas}} = 1.66$, $M_{\text{Nike}} = 1.57$; $t(29) = 0.44$, NS) and similarly high initial brand attitude ($M_{\text{Adidas}} = 4.32$, $M_{\text{Nike}} = 4.26$; $t(29) = 0.38$, NS). Additionally, both Adidas and Nike exhibited similar brand breadth ($M_{\text{Adidas}} = 1.90$, $M_{\text{Nike}} = 2.01$; $t(29) = 0.64$, NS) and similar perceived fit with an athletic shoe ($M_{\text{Adidas}} = 4.7$, $M_{\text{Nike}} = 4.6$; $t(29) = 0.60$, NS). The self-concept connection of both brands was also measured (1 = low self-concept connection; 5 = high self-concept connection) and both brands had similar levels of average self-concept connection ($M_{\text{Adidas}} = 3.00$, $SD = 0.91$; $M_{\text{Nike}} = 3.02$, $SD = 0.90$; $t(29) = 0.52$, NS). Similar to study 1, the self-concept connection scores ranged from very high to very low. It is important to note that the results of the pretest confirmed that Adidas (a German brand) and Nike (an American brand) were significantly different in terms of their "American-ness" (Adidas = 2.4; Nike = 3.2; $t(29) = 2.3$, $p < .05$) and in terms of their "foreign-ness" (Adidas = 2.6; Nike = 1.7; $t(29) = 2.78$, $p < .05$).

Main Study

We use two items that distinctly tap into individual identity aspects of self-brand connection. Based on the autonomy scale from Kleine et al. (1995), a modified scale for unique self-concept connection was developed with the following items: "This brand makes me feel unique," and "This brand is a statement of how I am different." To establish correspondence with study 1, we also collected participants' responses to the same self-concept connection scale items as those used in study 1. The old and new scale items all load onto the same factor, and the results of study 2 do not change if the new scale is replaced with the old scale items.

To further validate this scale and to ensure that it does not measure group identity aspects of consumer-brand re-

lationships, we conducted a factor analysis of the modified self-concept connection scale items using pretest data. We collected pretest data from American students ($n = 40$) on the modified self-concept connection scale items and measures of group identity (e.g., "This brand makes me feel connected with other Americans," "This brand reminds me of my country," and "This brand is a statement of how I am American"). The individual- and group-identity statements were randomized and the scale items presented to participants who were asked to rate Adidas and Nike brands. A factor analysis conducted on the individual- and group-identity measures revealed a two-factor structure, corresponding to individual- and group-identity dimensions. Further, the factor analysis revealed that the individual- and group-identity measures load on separate factors. The factor analysis results validate the use of the modified self-concept scale to tap into unique self-concept dimensions of consumer-brand relationships.

Procedure. A total of 150 students (50% male; 99% ages 18–24) at the University of Pittsburgh participated in the study for either cash or course credit. No students were of foreign origin and all students indicated at least moderate familiarity with the brand name. They were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2×2 (brand country of origin: local vs. foreign (manipulated), self-construal: interdependent or independent (manipulated)) between-subjects design. Self-concept connection was measured using modified and original scale items.

Recall that this study focuses on establishing attitude change following exposure to negative information. Participants were provided with a cover story which asked them to participate in two unrelated studies to be administered 1 hour apart. To measure attitude change, participants' were first asked to indicate their evaluations of Adidas and Nike (along with their evaluations of four other brands). This initial evaluation was used as a pretest score to assess the extent of attitude change. We tried to minimize potential demand effects from premeasurement by (1) providing a plausible cover story; (2) including other brands in the premeasurement to minimize the possibility of making Adidas or Nike salient; and (3) allowing participants to attend to other unrelated tasks for approximately 1 hour to clear short-term memory. Based on responses to the suspicion probe at the end of the survey, students did not appear to have any suspicions regarding the relationship between the pretest and posttest.

Self-construal priming, negative brand information, brand evaluations, and the manipulation checks in this study are similar to those used in study 1, with the product category being athletic shoes. In this study, Puma and New Balance were used as comparison brands for the new product. Participants were provided with some background information regarding a new athletic shoe featuring Adidas or Nike and following that were exposed to negative information (from an independent rating agency) regarding the same athletic shoe product.

Results

Manipulation Checks. The Kuhn and McPartland (1954) statement test was used to check primed self-construal. Statements were coded as either independent or interdependent (93% agreement with any disagreements resolved through discussion). The self-construal statement test indicated that participants in the independent prime condition relative to the interdependent prime condition wrote more individualistic sentences ($M_{\text{ind}} = 5.92$, $M_{\text{inter}} = 4.65$; $F(1, 148) = 5.48$, $p < .01$), whereas those in the independent prime condition relative to the interdependent prime condition wrote fewer collectivistic sentences ($M_{\text{ind}} = 2.15$, $M_{\text{inter}} = 3.96$; $F(1, 148) = 5.90$, $p < .01$), indicating that self-construal was successfully primed.

Brand Attitude Change. The predictions were tested using ANOVA, including main effects of self-concept connection (included as a continuous variable), self-construal, brand country of origin, and all possible two- and three-way interactions of self-concept connection, self-construal, and brand country of origin. Attitude change (posttest attitude minus pretest attitude) was used as the main dependent variable. The use of difference scores follows earlier research (Ahluwalia et al. 2000). However, we also re-analyzed the data using a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ ANOVA, with pre- and posttest scores as a within-subject factor. The pattern of results obtained using this alternative approach is consistent with the results using difference scores. For ease of exposition, we subsequently present details of the analysis which use difference scores as the dependent measure.

The results with attitude change as the dependent measure revealed that the two-way interaction of self-concept connection and self-construal is significant ($F(1, 142) = 3.90$, $p < .05$), which supports study 1 findings for hypothesis 1a. The two-way interaction of self-construal and brand country of origin is also significant ($F(1, 142) = 3.86$, $p < .05$), which supports the findings in study 1 with regard to hypothesis 1b. The three-way interaction of self-concept connection, self-construal, and brand country of origin was not significant ($F(1, 142) = 0.01$, NS). The means are presented in table 3.

Exploring the two-way interaction of self-concept connection and self-construal further, we created high- and low-self-concept connection groups based on a median split (Med = 3.00, for both local and foreign brands). Tests for simple interactions suggest that in the independent conditions, there is a significant difference in attitude change between the high and low self-concept connection conditions ($M = -0.23$ vs. -0.68 ; $F(1, 142) = 3.96$, $p < .05$). However, in the interdependent case, there are no significant differences between the high and low self-concept connection conditions ($M = -0.71$ vs. -0.67 ; $F(1, 142) = 0.15$, NS). This pattern of results is consistent with hypothesis 1a and with the previous findings in study 1.

Exploring the two-way interaction of brand country of origin and self-construal further, when the self-construal is independent, there are no significant differences in attitude

TABLE 3
STUDY 2: BRAND ATTITUDE CHANGE

	Independent attitude change	Interdependent attitude change
Adidas:		
Low connectedness	-.65	-.89
High connectedness	-.24	-.99
Nike:		
Low connectedness	-.71	-.45
High connectedness	-.21	-.43

change (posttest brand attitude minus pretest brand attitude) for the local versus foreign brand ($M = -0.50$ vs. -0.51 ; $F(1, 142) = 0.15$, NS). However, when the self-construal is interdependent, there are significant differences between the local and foreign brands ($M = -0.44$ vs. -0.95 ; $F(1, 142) = 11.0$, $p < .01$). This pattern of results is also consistent with the results in study 1 and with hypothesis 1b.

To account for potential brand ownership effects as an explanation for the above findings, we also estimated a separate model where brand ownership (1 = current owner; 0 = nonowner) was included as a covariate. The brand ownership variable was only marginally significant ($p < .10$), and the inclusion of the covariate in the model did not change the results.

Process Measures. We examine open-ended cognitive responses from the participants similar to the method used in study 1. The results of the mediation analysis are consistent with those reported in study 1, and the details are presented in table 4. Self-concept counterarguments emerged as a mediator of brand attitude change for independent self-construal conditions, which is further supported by a Sobel's test ($Z = 2.36$; $p < .01$). Brand country-of-origin counterarguments mediated brand attitude for participants in the interdependent self-construal conditions, which is also supported by a Sobel's test ($Z = 3.09$; $p < .01$). These mediation results indicate that independent consumers resist negative information based on their self-concept counterarguments, whereas interdependent consumers resist negative information based on brand country-of-origin counterarguments.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This research illustrates how consumer-brand relationship dimensions can affect brand equity in the face of negative information, based on an individual's construal of self. The findings across two studies suggest that when self-concept connection is high, consumers tend to discount and counterargue the negative information, but this effect is greater in independent self-construal conditions. Further, it appears that brand country-of-origin connection can significantly promote tolerance in the face of negative information. How-

TABLE 4
STUDY 2: MEDIATIONAL ANALYSIS

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Standard beta	t-value
Independent self-construal:			
1. Brand attitude change (posttest minus pretest)	Self-concept connection	.24	2.10*
	Brand country of origin (foreign = 1; local = 0)	-.03	-.31
2. Self-concept-based counterarguments	Self-concept connection	.44	4.24***
	Brand country of origin	.00	.04
3. Brand attitude change	Self-concept connection	.12	.99
	Brand country of origin	-.05	-.48
	Self-concept-based counterarguments	.30	1.98*
	Country-based counterarguments	.10	.93
Interdependent self-construal:			
1. Brand attitude change	Self-concept connection	-.04	-.36
	Brand country of origin (foreign = 1; local = 0)	-.40	-3.50**
2. Country-of-origin-based counterarguments	Self-concept connection	.02	.27
	Brand country of origin	.82	11.10***
3. Brand attitude change	Self-concept connection	-.09	-.80
	Brand country of origin	.00	.02
	Self-concept-based counterarguments	.16	1.32
	Country-based counterarguments	.51	2.84**

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

ever, the role of country of origin appears to be greater within interdependent self-construal conditions.

Taken together, these findings suggest a new perspective regarding the importance of consumer-brand relationships in promoting tolerance in the face of negative brand information. While past research shows that consumer-brand relationships can minimize the impact of negative brand information on brand equity (Ahluwalia et al. 2000) or alter the impact of brand transgressions, this research suggests that consumer-brand relationships have multiple dimensions, and the impact of these dimensions is significantly moderated by self-construal. Therefore, different from previous research, we suggest a more nuanced perspective of how patterns of brand dilution can vary based on consumer-brand relationships.

Our results also shed light on the mechanisms that result in dilution of brand equity. Despite the prior work on brand equity dilution that has focused on situations in which negative information has greater (or lesser) impact on the parent brand (Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran 1998; John, Loken, and Joiner 1998; Swaminathan, Fox, and Reddy 2001), little work examines how and when brand equity dilution takes place based on these views of self-brand connectedness. The literature on negative publicity suggests that committed consumers can be biased information processors (Ahluwalia et al. 2000). We provide a deeper understanding of the sources of bias which results in different types of counterargumentation (e.g., self-concept-based counterarguments vs. brand country-of-origin counterarguments). In summary, by developing a theory-based framework of when and how self-concept connection or brand country-of-origin connection can influence brand equity (based on the type of self-construal), this research extends our current understanding of

consumer-brand relationships and their significant impact on maintaining brand equity when challenged by negative circumstances.

The extant research has been silent with regard to the interaction between the dynamic self and different aspects of consumer-brand relationships. The present research illuminates the role of the self in the context of consumer-brand relationships by demonstrating that self-construal has a significant impact on which aspects of consumer-brand relationships are more important. Therefore, our research bridges a gap in the literature by examining consumer-brand relationships in the context of the dynamic self.

Taken together, the results indicate that brands are highly symbolic entities that are intricately woven into the fabric of consumers' lives and help shape and communicate their individual as well as their group identities. This dichotomous view of self-identity at the individual and group level is one of the key assumptions of identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) but has not been applied to the context of consumer-brand relationships. However, the importance of one's identity to consumption has been recognized (Deighton 2005) and the idea that material possessions in general act as "facilitating artifacts" for consumer identities has been suggested previously (Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993, 229). For instance, Kleine et al. (1995) use attachment theory and suggest that material possessions can be used to represent different facets of identity (e.g., autonomy and affiliation). Consistent with this notion, work by Escalas and Bettman (2005) suggests that brands can communicate reference group identity. Research by Reed (2004) highlights the role of social identities in product judgments and attitudes. However, different from past findings on this topic, the current research suggests that brands help strengthen consumer iden-

tity at both the individual and group level. Additionally, the key contribution of this research is specifying and experimentally testing the role of individual-identity (self-concept connection) and group-identity (brand country-of-origin connection) dimensions of consumer-brand relationships and the moderating role of self-construal.

This research also has various practical implications. Much of the managerial emphasis is on the role of brands in conveying individual identities, but our research uncovers an additional basis for connecting with consumers (i.e., brand country-of-origin connection). Other group-level associations such as membership in art museums (Bhattacharya, Rao, and Glynn 1995) and brand communities may provide additional bases for building relationships with consumers and enhancing customer retention. The impact of negative information on brand equity can be severe and devastating as recent brand crises (e.g., Vioxx, Ford Explorer) have indicated. The findings lead us to suggest communication strategies following a negative incident can potentially direct consumers' attention to brand country of origin to minimize brand dilution.

This research is not without its limitations. One potential limitation is that self-concept connection is a measured variable. In an ideal experimental design, both self-concept connection and self-construal should be manipulated factors. In the context of consumer-brand relationships, it is rather challenging to construct relationships for hypothetical brand names in an experimental setting. Future research can focus on manipulating both self-concept connection and self-construal to extend and validate the results in this research.

Several interesting extensions for future research can also be envisaged. One possible avenue for future research can be to examine differences in the control group receiving positive/neutral information about a product launch rather than no information at all. Our results regard the impact of negative information, but it is interesting to speculate whether these results would hold for negative consumer experiences, since product experience can be a valuable source of consumer beliefs (Hoch and Deighton 1989). Extending the findings from this research to other types of product categories (e.g., hedonic goods) may provide additional insights. Future research should also extend our framework to incorporate multiple roles that consumer-brand relationships play in communicating and shaping various types of consumer identities (e.g., ethnic group identity or regional identity).

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