

Riding on the tailwinds of quality: Product quality as moderator on the effect of brand-consumer congruence on consumers' recommendation behavior

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Cite as:

Steiner Thomas, Bekk Magdalena, Öhler Thomas, Spörrle Matthias (2019), Riding on the tailwinds of quality: Product quality as moderator on the effect of brand-consumer congruence on consumers' recommendation behavior. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 48th, (9743)

Paper presented at the 48th Annual EMAC Conference, Hamburg, May 24-27, 2019.



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Abstract:

Extending previous self-congruence research, our study is the first to demonstrate that product quality increases the positive effects of personality-based congruence indicators on brand-consumer fit as well as the positive effect of this fit on word-of-mouth-communication in a moderated mediation model based on a customer sample.

Keywords: self-congruence, brand personality, word-of-mouth

Track: Product & Brand Management

1. Introduction

Scholars examining congruence between brand image and the self-concepts of their (potential) customers have concluded that similarity between a brand and the consumer (e.g., in terms of personality) results in positive consumer responses towards the brand (Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak & Sirgy, 2011). In the literature different methods to assess the self-congruence have been used (Sirgy et al, 1997). One focusing on perceived overall fit, the consumers' perceived match between the image of a brand and the consumers' self-image, as a global measure of fit. However, this global fit cannot give clear recommendations on which specific dimensions to focus on in marketing campaigns. Thus, managers must rely on attribute-based similarity, for example, the similarity of a brand and a consumer on personality characteristics, to inform their marketing campaigns. According to organizational person-environment fit research these two perspectives (e.g., fit as a global or an attribute-based consumer evaluation) are non-interchangeable (Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert & Shipp, 2006). Recent findings in the tourism marketing (Bekk, Spörrle & Kruse, 2015) support this differentiated perspective on fit. Building on the theory of self-congruence and the results of research in the organizational and tourism context, we argue that personality-based similarity between a consumer and a brand is a driver of perceived overall fit and that both, attribute-based similarity and perceived overall fit predict consumer outcomes (e.g., word-of-mouth).

Furthermore, we address product quality as moderator on the effects of similarity and perceived overall fit on consumer word-of-mouth. So far, product-related characteristics, like product quality, have not been observed in the image-related field of self-congruence research. Research showed positive effects of the congruence between products and consumers on consumer preferences and behavior (e.g., Govers & Schoormans, 2005). This only addresses the symbolic value of a product to the consumer but not the functional value. In this paper we focus on product quality, a functional value to the consumer. Product quality can be separated in objective and subjective quality, whereas the first includes mechanical or technical superiority of the product and the latter includes a subjective evaluation of the product (Kwak & Kang, 2009). This functional perspective has already provided useful insights by using self-congruity and functional congruity to predict consumer behavior (Sirgy, Johar, Samli & Claiborne, 1991). As practitioners cannot directly influence the desired performance attributes of consumers (one component of the functional congruence), we address the perceived functional attributes and their influence on image-related congruence,

as this can be influenced by marketing campaigns (i.e.; providing information about the mechanical or technical superiority). We argue that high levels of product quality, as a functional product-attribute, increase the beneficial effects of image-related congruence indicators on word-of-mouth: High levels of product quality indicate that a product is in line with (i.e., is similar to) one's own product-related quality expectations. This should boost the effects of other (e.g., image-related) similarities.

For this research mountain bike products were selected, because objective product quality features (e.g., durability, reliability) are crucial to their customers (i.e., low-quality products are usually no option because of security issues) and can be assessed quite reliably by them based on their individual user experience as well as their reception of user-focused publications (e.g., mountain bike magazines providing test reports).

This study contributes to theory and practice in several ways. By replicating the findings that perceived overall fit and attribute-based similarity are connected, yet distinct construct, we strengthen the argument, that it is beneficial to enhance our understanding of consumer behavior in the self-congruence theory. Further, by addressing product-related characteristics, we fill a gap in research, how consumer's product evaluations of products, in this case functional product attributes, interplay with the congruence between a brand and the consumer. Practice can profit from this research, by understanding the influence of product-related characteristics and their positive impact on beneficial self-congruence effects between their brand and the consumer. Additionally, by assessing the global fit and the attribute-based similarity practitioners can gain insight about specific personality dimensions (e.g., conscientiousness), they might address in their marketing campaigns to enhance congruence between their brand and the consumer.

2. Method

2.1 Sample

An online questionnaire was distributed in German and English via major online mountain biker platforms in the respective countries in Europe. A total of 2,177 participants (97% male, in line with the large male population in this sport) with an average age of 32.15 ranging from 13 to 66 took part in the survey. 414 participants of the survey have been

excluded from the analyses, due to missing responses, resulting in a final sample of 1,763 participants.

2.2 Measurements

We measured four different personality dimensions (Introversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Openness, $\alpha_{\text{BRAND}} [.69;.77]$; $\alpha_{\text{PERSON}} [.73;.82]$; indicating the range of Cronbach's Alpha for both entities). For each dimension we used three items derived from Saucier (1994), referring to the brand as well as the consumers' personality (German version: Weller & Matiaske, 2008). Thus, each item was applied to the brand as well as the participant. To calculate the similarity index between the personality of the participant and the brand, the absolute difference score between participant and brand for each item was subtracted from the maximum possible distance on the response scale. Next, we used these results to calculate Cronbach's α and the mean for the five personality-based similarity dimensions which we used in our analysis.

As mediator, perceived overall fit was assessed with three self-congruity items (Helgeson & Supphellen, 2004; e.g., "The brand is like me", $\alpha = .93$).

Together with experts from the field we developed a measure for our moderator, perceived product quality. The measure consisted of five items (e.g. "The [product of the brand] is of high quality", $\alpha = .90$).

Word-of-mouth (WOM) as the criterion was rated on four items (e.g. "I miss no opportunity to tell others about this brand") used by Bekk et al (2015), $\alpha = .87$. All calculations have been conducted using standardized values of all variables.

2.3 Analysis

For our analyses we mainly used linear regression and manifest mediation analyses using the PROCESS syntax (Hayes, 2013). All bootstrap intervals are bias corrected and accelerated and based on 5,000 resamples.

4. Results

Perceived overall fit ($R^2_{adj} = .19$) was driven by the similarity on agreeableness ($\beta = .14$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [.08;.19]$), conscientiousness ($\beta = .26$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [.21;.33]$) and openness ($\beta = .10$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [.04;.16]$). WOM ($R^2_{adj} = .16$), too, was driven by the similarity on agreeableness ($\beta = .06$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [.01;.12]$), conscientiousness ($\beta = .32$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [.27;.37]$) and openness ($\beta = .07$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [.04;.16]$). The effect of introversion showed the same direction but failed to reach significance. Results showed a positive effect of perceived overall fit on WOM ($R^2_{adj} = .39$, $\beta = .62$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [.58;.67]$).

To test whether the β -coefficients for the similarity dimensions are significantly different from each other, the method of Cumming and Finch (2005) using the bootstrap intervals overlap was applied. Conscientiousness was found to be a significantly more influential driver of perceived overall fit and WOM compared to agreeableness and openness.

Next, we examined whether perceived overall fit mediated the effect of the personality-based similarity dimensions on WOM conditionally for product quality (see Figure 1). Perceived overall fit mediated the effect of the personality-based similarity on WOM for the dimensions agreeableness ($a \times b = .01$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [-.04;.05]$), conscientiousness ($a \times b = .10$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [.06;.15]$) and openness ($a \times b = .05$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [.01;.10]$). The effect of agreeableness ($\beta = .06$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [.01;.11]$) was fully mediated and the effects of conscientiousness ($\beta = .32$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [.28;.37]$) as well as openness ($\beta = .07$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [.02;.13]$) were partially mediated by perceived overall fit. Thus, conscientiousness as well as openness still had incremental and independent significant predictive effects even when perceived overall fit was included. Thus, a differentiated perspective of congruence as a global and an attribute-based evaluation is beneficial in understanding consumer behavior.

In addition to the mediation effects, we observed significant moderations by product quality. High product quality increased the effect of the personality-based similarity on perceived overall fit for the dimensions agreeableness ($\beta = .06$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [.01;.11]$) and conscientiousness ($\beta = .06$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [.02;.11]$). In addition, high product quality also increased the effect of fit on WOM ($\beta = .11$, $CI_{95\%BCa} [.06;.15]$). This indicates, that higher levels of product quality, a functional product-attribute, does increase the positive effect of other image-related congruence effects on consumer behavior.

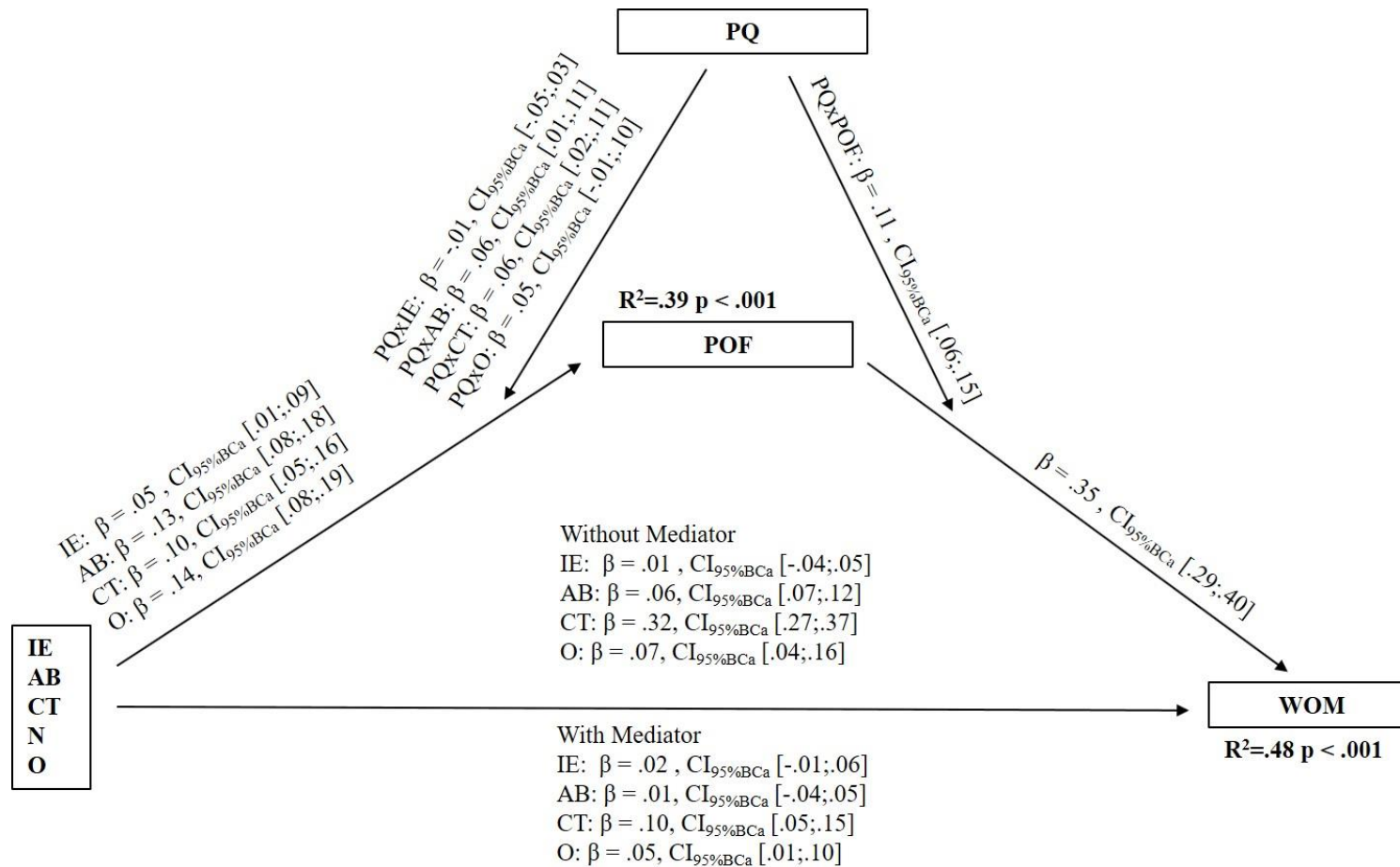


Figure 1. Moderated-mediation research model

Notes.

IE, AB, CT, IO: person-brand similarity dimension introversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness;

POF: perceived overall fit; PQ: product quality; WOM: word-of-mouth

5. Conclusion

Similarity and perceived overall fit are related, yet distinctive constructs and therefore both beneficial in predicting consumer behavior. This is in line with previous research (e.g., Bekk, Spörrle & Kruse, 2015; Edwards et al, 2006). Further, this study identifies comparatively relevant (i.e. conscientiousness) as well as irrelevant (i.e., introversion) personality dimensions of similarity for both perceived overall fit and consumer WOM behavior. Most importantly, the results prove that product quality increases the effect of similarity on perceived overall fit as well as the effect of perceived overall fit on consumer WOM behavior. Marketers can use these findings in their campaigns by addressing the relevant similarity dimensions and by focusing on product quality signals to further enhance the benefits of image-related congruence.

The study is not free of limitations that influence the generalizability of the results. First, it uses a customer sample in the mountain bike sport. Thus, the aspect of product quality might be especially crucial to consumers, as not only their experience is influenced by it, but also their safety relies on it. It is plausible, that in different situations or contexts, where neither the experience, nor the safety, rely heavily on the product itself, the positive effect of product quality on self-congruence effects on consumer behavior is different. Second, product quality and the consumers' evaluation of it, was assessed by focusing on the general functional product-attributes (e.g., durability, reliability) but not considering the consumers' usage of the product. For example, within the sport of mountain bike, the product quality might be evaluated high by consumers, when it is used in a specific terrain (e.g., compact gravel), but low in other terrains (e.g., grass and medium rocks).

Future research might further address the interplay between product-related attributes and image-related congruence between brands and consumers on consumer behavior. This study used personality-based similarity for the image-related congruence, but different characteristics (e.g.; sincerity, responsibility) might provide useful insight to self-congruence theory and consumer behavior. Further, researchers might consider addressing the role of the utilitarian (e.g., functional) and the hedonistic (e.g., experience) attributes of a product or a service and the influence on self-congruence effects on consumer behavior.

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