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Revolving Doors: Navigating Successive Cobranding Alliances

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(See full abstract below)

Short Bio
Eileen Fischer is a Professor of Marketing and the Max and Anne Tanenbaum Chair of Entrepreneurship and Family Enterprise at the Schulich School of Business at York University. She received her doctorate from Queen’s University in Kingston Ontario in 1988. She is interested in how consumers and entrepreneurs navigate markets as they strive to achieve their goals, and at how their actions affect both firm and market level dynamics. Her work has been published in Journal of Consumer Research; Journal of Retailing; Journal of Business Venturing; Journal of International Business; Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice; Consumption, Markets and Culture; Research Policy and a range of other outlets. She currently serves as one of four co-editors of the Journal of Consumer Research. She is also an editorial board member for a range of consumer and entrepreneurship research journals.
Revolving Doors: Navigating Successive Cobranding Alliances

Full Abstract

Cobranding is a ubiquitous marketing phenomenon, and marketing scholars have devoted considerable attention to understanding the diverse nature of cobranding arrangements and the ways they can be effectively implemented and managed. Recently, attention to cobranding alliances between product brands and person brands (also known as “key personas” (Dion and Arnould 2011)) has been growing. Some have investigated relatively short-lived, loosely coupled, persona/product alliances such as “celebrity co-branding” (e.g. Wilcox and Carrol 2008). Others have begun to investigate more enduring and tightly coupled persona/product cobranding such as that between CEOs and corporations (e.g. Graffin, Carpenter and Boivie 2011). To date, however, limited attention has been allocated to the challenges faced by firms that must navigate successive cobranding alliances when an existing key persona’s ties to its brand are severed and a new key persona is brought in to replace them.

Our paper investigates the challenges of managing successive cobranding alliances between key personas and products, drawing on a qualitative investigation of six fashion brands. The contemporary high fashion industry represents an ideal context in which to investigate the phenomenon of successive cobranding alliances since it is one where it is common to hire a creative director who becomes very publically associated with the brand, and it is also an industry where there has been considerable turnover in the creative directors affiliated with many of the high fashion houses.

Our paper addresses the following specific research questions. First, what institutional factors encourage firms to cobrand products with key persona? Second, what are the challenges to brand equity of cobranding with key persona? Third, what are the enacted strategies for addressing these challenges?

These questions are important at a managerial level because cobranding practices can impact, for better or worse, the brand equity of both members of the cobranding alliance. Moreover, the phenomenon of sequential persona/product brand alliances is relevant in multiple markets, ranging from sports to entertainment to our context, fashion. At a conceptual level, understanding sequential cobranding alliances can help to extend the emerging assemblage-theoretic perspective on brands (e.g., Parmentier and Fischer 2015).

Our main data is archival. It has been generated by gathering media coverage on the six cases we study (Balenciaga, Dior, Louis Vuitton, Saint Laurent Paris, Gucci, and Lanvin) from the fashion business press between 2000-2016 in: The New York Times; The Financial Times; The Wall Street Journal; The Guardian; The Independent; and The Washington Post. Coverage of the brands in key fashion industry media (especially Women’s Wear Daily, The Business of Fashion, and Vogue) has been gathered as well, along with commentaries published by top fashion business critics (especially Bridget Foley (WWD), Cathy Horyn (formerly, NYT, currently New York Magazine), Teri Agins (WSJ), Robin Gavin (Washington Post), Christina Binkley (WSJ) and Vanessa Friedman (formerly, Financial Times, currently NYT)). We have also gathered data from the fashion houses’ own digital archives and closely monitored the social media activity of the brands. This archival data has been supplemented with observational data from Paris and New York stores, and with interviews with industry experts. We are analyzing the data using the common iterative, hermeneutical practices now well established in qualitative marketing research (Belk, Fischer and Kozinets 2013).

Our findings in regard to the first research question indicate that persona/product cobranding is likely to be widespread in an industry to the extent that it facilitates balancing hybrid institutional logics, such as the logic of art and the logic of commerce, which are both central in the field of fashion. In answering our second research question, we find that the challenges represented by successive cobranding alliances are (1) facilitating the exit from the brand assemblage of one persona and the entanglement in it of a new persona, and (2) fostering conditions that facilitate brand renewal yet maintain continuity. Addressing our third research question, we find that firms use a variety of boundary work tactics (e.g., erasure, denigration, mining and bridging and poaching) to disentangle an existing key persona and enrol a new one. And we find they foster renewal while maintaining continuity by practices that paradoxically empower new key personae while at the same time partitioning their sphere of influence, and that enable the key persona to (further) promote his or her own person brand while at the same time leveraging links to the brand’s legacy.