The Malleable Brand: The Role of Implicit Theories in Evaluating Brand Extensions

This research documents how implicit theories regarding personality traits (whether they are deemed to be fixed or malleable) affect consumer inferences about the malleability of a brand's personality traits and, thus, its ability to extend into new categories. Study 1 documents that consumers who believe that traits are malleable (incremental theorists) are more accepting of brand extensions than consumers who believe that traits are fixed (entity theorists). These results hold whether implicit theories are measured or manipulated. Study 2 reveals how implicit theories affect consumers' perceptions regarding the flexibility of a brand's personality traits and not its physical traits. Study 3 demonstrates that consumers primed with different implicit theory orientations respond differently to varying degrees of change within a single trait. This study tests the limits of the effect and demonstrates the impact of using primes embedded within standard marketing communication.

Keywords: brand extensions, brand personality, branding, implicit theories, marketing communication

Brands are widely considered the most important assets of a firm (Keller 1993). A significant part of a brand's value or brand equity comes from its contribution in launching new products (Smith and Park 1992). With the cost of introducing an entirely new brand often being prohibitively high, brand extensions represent a strategic tool marketing managers use to exploit that asset; it is estimated that as many as eight of every ten new product introductions are brand extensions (Oursosol et al. 1992). Yet brands are complex entities, and some extensions are inexplicably more successful than others. Not surprisingly, the extent to which a given brand transfers successfully into various other categories has generated high levels of managerial and academic interest (Desai and Keller 2002).

Many factors determine the extent to which consumers will embrace a brand extension. One widely recognized factor is the degree of “fit” between the extension and the parent brand (Gürhan-Canli 2003; Völckner and Sattler 2006). We focus on perceptions of fit because prior research has indicated that categorization judgments and the transfer of parent brand associations are particularly affected by consumers’ perceptions of fit (Morrin 1999). Researchers exploring perceived fit have relied on a variety of measures, including feature-based or attribute-based similarity (Aaker and Keller 1990; Boush and Loken 1991; Loken and John 1993; Van Osselaer and Alba 2003; Zhang and Sood 2002), brand-specific associations (Broniarczyk and Alba 1994), and goal congruency (Austin and Vancouver 1996; Martin and Stewart 2001). Fit has also been explored at the category level. When the extension category is the same as or similar to the parent category and the fit is high, an affect transfer process is believed to occur such that extension attitudes are likely to be based on attitudes toward the parent brand (Aaker and Keller 1990; Boush and Loken 1991; Keller and Aaker 1992; Kirmani, Sood, and Bridges 1999; Park, Milberg, and Lawson 1991). When the categories vary, researchers have compared extensions and the parent brand’s existing product classes by assessing whether they can share the same usage context, can serve as substitutes for each other, and can use the same manufacturing skills accrued by the firm (Aaker and Keller 1990; Park, Milberg, and Lawson 1991).

While much is known about how brand, product, category, and firm differences affect brand extensions, considerably less is known about the effect of consumer-level differences on perceived fit and brand extension success. In this research, we examine the impact of a significant consumer-based difference—“implicit theory” of the self—on consumers’ perceptions of brand extension fit. A growing literature in psychology supports the notion that people have implicit theories about the malleability of their own personality traits and that these implicit theories affect the inferences they make when judging the traits of others (Dweck, Chiu, and Hong 1995b). As such, people tend to adopt one of two theories: Either traits are dispositional, fixed entities that cannot change (entity theorists), or traits are situational, dynamic, and able to change with time and effort (incremental theorists). If implicit theories determine whether a
person’s personality traits are considered fixed or malleable, we expect them to do the same with regard to the personality traits of a brand.

Brand personality refers to the “set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker 1997, p. 347). Brand research has emphasized the impact of brand personality on product evaluation through the endowment of human characteristics and traits. These brand personality traits have been distinguished from the more utilitarian function implied by tangible, product-related attributes (Aaker 1997; Keller 1993). Aaker (1997) developed and validated a framework to describe and measure what she found to be the 42 traits that constitute the five core dimensions of brand personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. A significant stream of empirical work using Aaker’s framework has emerged, supporting its use as a valid measure of the brand personality construct (Diamantopoulos, Smith, and Grime 2005).

If consumers imbue brands with human personality (Aaker 1999) and people make inferences about the traits of others based on their implicit theories of the self, we expect consumers to make similar inferences about the traits of brands. In other words, entity theorists, who view personality as fixed, should be less accepting of a brand’s ability to change. Therefore, we expect entity theorists to be less accepting of a brand’s attempts to extend into a new, dissimilar category than incremental theorists, who view traits as more flexible. This occurs when the brand’s positioning in the new category is incongruent with its personality. We test these predictions and their implications directly. By doing so, this work offers several valuable insights into understanding the evaluation of brand extensions and the role of brand personality and implicit theories in this process.

We organize the rest of this article as follows: The next section outlines the relevant research on brand extensions. This is followed by a brief introduction to implicit theories, along with a discussion of how this particular consumer-level variable can affect perceptions of brand personality and, in turn, brand extensions. We then propose and test specific hypotheses about the nature of the effect and the process involved across a series of studies. In Study 1, we document how consumers who believe that traits are malleable (incremental theorists) are accepting of a broader set of brand extensions than consumers who believe that traits are fixed (entity theorists). We also demonstrate how implicit theories can be situationally activated and, thus, potentially useful as a managerial tool. In Study 2, we examine the underlying process. This study reveals how implicit theories affect judgments by influencing the extent to which a change in the brand’s personality rather than a change in the brand’s attributes or physicality is acceptable.

In Study 3, we use advertising text as a less obtrusive prime, which increases the external validity and robustness of our results. In addition, we show how implicit theories determine the degree of change that is acceptable along a single dimension of brand personality. We conclude by discussing managerial implications and several limitations of this work before proposing opportunities for further research.

Brand Extension Research

During the past 15 years, more than 50 studies have been published on brand extensions in the marketing literature. A broad classification of the main research streams can be made based on research that has investigated the antecedents, process, and consequences of brand extension evaluation. The research examining antecedents and the process of brand extension evaluation can be further classified into (1) research on various conceptualizations of perceived fit or similarity, (2) studies of the effects of context variables, (3) studies of communication strategies for brand extension success, and (4) investigations of consumer-level differences. Our research explores consumer-level difference—implicit theories of the self—and its affect on perceptions of brand extension fit.

To date, studies of consumer-level differences have focused on four key variables: motivation, expertise, innovativeness, and (most recently) self-construal. Previous research has found a moderating effect of motivation on the transfer of both knowledge and affect from a parent brand to an extension and, thus, brand extension fit (Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran 1998). Under high-motivation conditions, consumers engage in elaborate cognitive processing and consider information about the extension in a piecemeal way. In contrast, under low-motivation conditions, cognitive processing is less elaborate and more categorical, and therefore greater transfer of affect occurs between the parent brand and the extension. Expertise has also been shown to moderate the effect of brand associations, brand affect, and fit on brand extension attitude (Broniarczyk and Alba 1994). Experts’ evaluations are based on the processing of product-related associations, whereas those of novices are based on perceptions of fit and attitude toward the brand. The third consumer-level variable already studied has been labeled consumer innovativeness and product adoption tendency (Klink and Smith 2001). Early adopters have been shown to be less sensitive to risk. Consequently, perceived fit is less important in their evaluation of an extension than it is for late adopters. Finally, more recently, Ahluwalia (2008) has explored how consumers who have a more interdependent self-view (i.e., more flexible view of relationships) may more easily uncover relationships between an extension and its parent brand, fostering perceived fit. The findings suggest that consumers who are high in interdependent self-construal, or “relational thinkers,” view brand stretches more positively but only when they are motivated to employ their superior relational abilities to unearth connections. By studying the impact of implicit theories on the evaluation and acceptability of brand extensions, we introduce a fifth essential consumer-level variable into the mix.

Implicit Theories of the Self

The role of implicit theories of the self in the interpretation and understanding of human behavior is gaining increasing acceptance among cognitive and social psychologists. Dweck, Chiu, and Hong (1995b) identify two distinct implicit theories that refer to assumptions people make about the malleability of personality, intelligence, and
mortality and have been shown to influence a variety of judgments about the self and others.

Research in this area has consistently found that entity theorists believe that ability, intelligence (Butler 2000), and moral character (Chiu et al. 1997) are fixed, whereas incremental theorists believe that these aspects can change. For example, entity theorists are likely to believe that intelligence is a fixed trait, and though people can learn new things, their underlying intelligence remains the same. In contrast, incremental theorists are likely to believe that people can become more intelligent through their efforts.

People call on their implicit theories regarding personality traits to interpret, explain, and predict human behavior (Hong, Levy, and Chiu 2001). In other words, entity theorists believe that knowing a person’s traits can lead to confident predictions about that person’s behaviors in new situations and knowing how a person behaved in the past can lead to confident inferences about this person’s traits. Conversely, incremental theorists are less prone to such rapid, global evaluations. For them, really knowing a person would involve seeing him or her repeatedly (Dweck, Chiu, and Hong 1995b). In other words, entity theorists rely on initial trait information when making causal attributions or subsequent judgments, whereas incremental theorists focus less on dispositional factors and more on psychological or behavioral mediators, such as the person’s needs, emotions, goals, or intentions. A significant outcome of these divergent viewpoints is that prior beliefs remain more stable for entity theorists than for incremental theorists, with the former being more likely to construe a purported personality change negatively.

The notion of brand personality ascribes human characteristics to brands on the basis of the premise that brands can have personality traits in much the same way as humans. Plummer (1985) argues that brand traits can be formed by direct or indirect contact with the brand. In the direct way, brand personality is formed by the people associated with the brand, such as the prototypical user, the company’s chief executive officer, or endorsers. In the indirect way, brand personality is formed by considering product-related attributes, product category associations, and other marketing-mix variables affected by advertising and product packaging, such as the brand’s name, symbol and logo, advertising style, price, and distribution channel (Batra, Lehmann, and Singh 1993). Consequently, consumers often think of brands as if they were famous people, celebrities, or historical figures (Rook 1985). Just as consumers make inferences regarding the malleability of their own and other people’s personality traits, we expect consumers to make inferences about the malleability of a brand’s personality traits. Thus, a particular brand extension might be viewed as a better or worse fit with the parent brand according to the consumer’s implicit theory of the self.

We hypothesize that, all else being equal, consumers who are entity theorists perceive a brand’s personality as less malleable and therefore are less accepting than incremental theorists of extensions that necessitate a change in brand personality. This difference should surface when consumers evaluate brand extensions in various categories that differ in their perceptual distance from the parent brand. Thus, incremental theorists will find a brand to be more malleable and therefore able to “stretch” further (i.e., into more diverse categories). Formally,

**H₁:** Compared with entity theorists, incremental theorists will deem a greater number of brand extensions for a particular brand to be viable.

We test **H₂** in Part 1 of Study 1. What makes our theorizing much more important for managers is the notion that a person’s implicit theory orientation is itself susceptible to influence. Given the extant literature in social psychology suggesting that this is the case, we hypothesize the following:

**H₂:** Compared with consumers primed to believe that people cannot change (entity orientation), those primed to believe that people can change (incremental orientation) will deem a greater number of brand extensions for a particular brand to be viable.

We test **H₂** directly in Part 2 of Study 1.

A goal of this research is to demonstrate how implicit theories affect beliefs about the malleability of a brand’s personality traits just as they affect beliefs about human personality traits. Although brands are inanimate objects, they can be imbued with personality traits, so the personality metaphor is suitable in many ways. Dweck, Chiu, and Hong (1995a,b) find that implicit theories regarding nonhuman entities with humanlike attributes (e.g., the malleability of the world) have the same format as their implicit theory measures for people. Marketers frequently encourage consumers to think of their products in human terms, and prior research has demonstrated that people indeed anthropomorphize brands (Aggarwal and McGill 2007; Fournier 1998). Consequently, brands frequently are viewed as people with complex personalities (Aaker 1999) and even gender (Yorkston and De Mello 2005). Furthermore, consumers are known to form deep interpersonal relationships with their brands (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Fournier 1998). It stands to reason that just as consumers ascribe personalities to brands, they apply their implicit theories. This leads to **H₃**:

**H₃:** Implicit theories affect the perceived malleability of a brand by affecting the perceived malleability of a brand’s personality and not its physicality.

We test **H₃** directly in Study 2. Finally, the idea that some people adopt a dynamic approach to understanding other people (incremental theorists) may derive from a different processing framework, but it does not imply that change can be unlimited. Although incremental theorists are more willing to accept a change in a brand’s personality than entity theorists, we suspect that too great a change may violate their boundaries as well. This leads to **H₄**:

**H₄:** Too great a change in personality violates an incremental theorist’s latitude of acceptability, which results in a response similar to that garnered from entity theorists.

We test **H₄** and the boundaries to using implicit theory primes in Study 3.

Taken together, these four hypotheses help explain how consumers process brand extensions and make judgments...
regarding a parent brand and its brand extensions. Our studies not only are applicable to managers interested in segmenting consumers on the basis of their ability to accept change but also demonstrate how managers can directly affect how accepting consumers are of change through advertising (Study 3). We begin by demonstrating the impact of implicit theories on brand extension acceptance in Study 1 and move toward inducing implicit theory orientations with marketing materials in Study 3.

Study 1: Implicit Theories and Their Effect on Brands
In Study 1, we investigate whether incremental theorists, who view their own personality traits as more malleable, are more accepting of brand extensions for a particular parent brand than entity theorists. In this way, Study 1 is a direct test of H1 and H2.

Method
This study consists of two separate parts, both of which use a 2 (implicit theory orientation: entity versus incremental) × 5 (product category) design, in which the second factor is a repeated measure. In Part 1, participants included 125 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory marketing course at a large West Coast university. To categorize respondents according to their dispositional implicit theory orientation, participants in Part 1 completed the implicit person theories measure (Levy, Stroessner, and Dweck 1998). Each respondent was given a list of five popular brands from five different categories (Dreyer's ice cream, OshKosh B'Gosh children's clothing, Skechers sneakers, Nokia cell phones, and Paper Mate pens) with five proposed extensions (e.g., Nokia extensions: personal digital assistant, desktop computer, laptop, tablet personal computer, and digital camcorder). We pretested the extensions to understand how they varied in their perceptual distance from the parent brand. Respondents were asked to choose as many of the proposed extensions as they believed would “fit” well with the existing brand. We employed the number of product extensions they chose for each brand as the dependent measure.

In Part 2, participants were an independent sample of 124 undergraduate students from the same subject pool at the same university. We again used a 2 (implicit theory orientation) × 5 (product category) design, in which the second factor was a repeated measure consisting of the brands Ivory soap, Starbucks coffee, Yamaha motorcycles, Nokia cell phones, and Paper Mate pens. We also pretested these extensions to understand how they varied in their perceptual distance from the parent brand. Unlike Part 1, in which we measured participants’ dispositional implicit theory, in Part 2, we situationally activated implicit theory orientation using the general trait manipulation employed in Chiu, Hong, and Dweck (1997). Participants were told that they were being tested on reading comprehension and memory. They were instructed to read a paragraph containing concepts about which they would be tested on later in the session. The critical excerpt for the entity theory orientation prime read as follows:

In his talk at the American Psychological Association’s annual convention held at Washington D.C. in August, Dr. George Medin argued that “in most of us, by the age of ten, our character has set like plaster and will never soften again.” He reported numerous large longitudinal studies, which show that people “age and develop, but they do so on the foundation of enduring dispositions.” He also reported research findings showing that people’s personality characteristics are fixed and cannot be changed.

The critical excerpt for the incremental theory orientation prime read as follows:

In his talk at the American Psychological Association’s annual convention held at Washington D.C. in August, Dr. George Medin argued that “no one’s character is hard like a rock that cannot be changed. Only for some, greater effort and determination are needed to effect changes.” He reported numerous large longitudinal studies, which show that people can mature and can change their character. He also reported research findings showing that people’s personality characteristics can be changed even in their late sixties.

This priming technique has been used extensively in social psychology. Researchers, including Dweck, Chiu, and Hong (1995a, b), Anderson (1995), Darley (1995), and Kruglanski (1995), have expressed the belief that it is possible for people to hold both implicit theories simultaneously. They argue that though one theory may be dominant, the other may remain available and become accessible under specific circumstances. Dweck, Chiu, and Hong (1995a) note further that though commonly used implicit theories measures ask participants to choose between the two (i.e., entity and implicit theories as mutually exclusive alternatives), it is possible for people to hold both theories concurrently, albeit to differing degrees. We adhere to this view and maintain the position that implicit theories can be situationally primed. Indeed, recent research in marketing has employed the use of video clips from movies and television to prime implicit theories (Jain, Mathur, and Maheswaran 2009).

Participants subsequently completed an unrelated filler task intended to erase their memory of the paragraph. Then, they turned to the focal task in which they chose as many of the proposed extensions as they believed would fit well with the existing brand. Again, the number of product extensions they chose for each brand served as the dependent measure. As a manipulation check, participants in Part 2 also completed the implicit person theories measure (Levy, Stroessner, and Dweck 1998).

Results
Brand extension acceptability: Part 1. We used a median split to divide participants from Part 1 into two groups according to their responses to the implicit person theories measure (α = .93, M = 27.9, Mdn = 28). A 2 (implicit theory orientation) × 5 (product category) analysis of variance (ANOVA), with the latter factor being a within-subject repeated measure, revealed that people with a chronically accessible incremental theory orientation (i.e., incremental theorists) were accepting of more brand extensions than those who possessed a chronically accessible
entity theory orientation ($M_{\text{Incremental}} = 2.77$ versus $M_{\text{Entity}} = 1.53$; F(1, 123) = 64.36, $p < .01$). There was a significant effect among brand categories (F(4, 120) = 5.30, $p < .01$) such that Paper Mate pens and Dreyer’s ice cream were believed to be less extensible than the other parent brands. No interaction effects between individual brands and implicit theory orientation were observed. Individual ANOVAs of implicit theory orientation on brand extensions for each of the five brands reveal the same pattern of differences between incremental and entity theorists (F(1, 123) = 68.52, 51.69, 37.74, 24.34, 15.14; all $ps < .01$). Table 1 presents the results for each brand. In summary, in Part 1 of Study 1, we find evidence that a difference in chronic implicit theory orientation affects judgments regarding the acceptability of brand extensions.

**Brand extension acceptability: Part 2.** The analysis for Part 2 was similar to Part 1, but respondents were sorted according to which prime they read, and the implicit person theories measure results were used as a manipulation check. As we expected, the manipulation of implicit theory orientation was successful. Participants exposed to the entity orientation prime differed significantly from those exposed to the incremental orientation condition on the implicit person theories measure ($\alpha = .91$, M = 28.6, Mdn = 28, $M_{\text{Entity}} = 30.10$ versus $M_{\text{Incremental}} = 27.13$; F(1, 122) = 4.54, $p < .05$). A repeated measures ANOVA of implicit orientation prime (entity versus incremental) on the number of acceptable brand extensions revealed a main effect of the general trait manipulation (F(1, 122) = 30.51, $p < .01$). Participants primed to believe that traits are malleable believed that the brands were capable of more brand extensions than participants primed to believe that traits are fixed ($M_{\text{Incremental}} = 1.89$ versus $M_{\text{Entity}} = 1.30$). Again, a brand category effect was significant (F(4, 119) = 5.27, $p < .01$); some brands—specifically, Yamaha and Nokia—were viewed as more extensible than others. There were no interaction effects between brand category and implicit theory orientation ($p > .15$). Again, the results hold for each individual brand (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study 1, Part 2: Primed Implicit Theories’ Effect on Brand Extendibility</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Implicit Theory Orientation</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total number of extensions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Extensions for:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivory soap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starbucks coffee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamaha motorcycles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nokia cell phones</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paper Mate pens</td>
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*p < .01.

Notes: The dependent variable is the average number of brand extensions deemed to be appropriate.

**Discussion**

The results from Part 1 of Study 1 support $H_1$ by illustrating that a person’s dispositional implicit theory orientation applies to brands. It appears that the more malleable a person views individual traits, the more likely he or she is to view a brand as being malleable. This malleability is reflected in the endorsement of a greater number of brand extensions. In Part 2 of Study 1, we manipulated rather than measured people’s implicit theory orientation using the generalized trait manipulation employed in social psychological research. Consistent with $H_2$, we find that activating a generalized belief can affect how malleable consumers believe brands can be. Knowing that implicit theories can be primed, which in turn affects the acceptability of brand extensions, makes these results especially relevant for marketing managers. As we show in Study 3, persuasive advertising communication can result in consumers believing that a brand is more malleable or more fixed with respect to its traits. Taken together, Parts 1 and 2 of Study 1 contribute to our understanding of branding by demonstrating how consumers’ individual beliefs regarding the malleability of personality traits can affect their evaluations of brand extensions.

In Study 2, we delve into the process. We demonstrate that implicit theories affect beliefs about the personality traits associated with brands rather than beliefs about the physicality of the brand. Study 2 reveals that implicit theories operate by affecting beliefs regarding the malleability of a brand’s personality traits, which in turn motivate either more positive or more negative interpretations of a brand extension’s perceived fit with the parent brand.

**Study 2: Personality and Physicality Congruence**

Aside from sharing physical attributes, perceived fit has been explored by assessing whether the parent brand and extension share the same usage context, can serve as substitutes for each other, and can use the same manufacturing
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skills in production. While previous studies (Bridges, Keller, and Sood 2000) have explored fit as a function of both attribute similarity (i.e., physical traits) and abstract concepts, such as cohesion (e.g., both are products targeted to children), in this study, we demonstrate how perceptions of fit are affected by similarities and differences in personality traits. In doing so, we not only identify a new aspect of perceived fit but also show that implicit theories, studied exclusively in the domain of human personalities, affect brand personalities.

Method

Participants were 150 students at a large southwestern university. We used a 2 (implicit theory orientation) × 2 (personality trait congruence) × 2 (physicality congruence) × 2 (parent brand) design, with the first three factors manipulated between subjects and parent brand as a within-subject replication. The parent brands were Subaru, the Japanese auto manufacturer owned by Fuji Heavy Industries Ltd., and Tiffany & Co., the U.S. jeweler and design house. We used two parent brands to replicate the effect in this study solely to show the generalizability of our results across divergent brands and categories; all results reported subsequently hold for each individual brand.

We drew brand personality traits from the five distinct dimensions (sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness) that Aaker (1997) identifies. A pilot study using Aaker’s brand personality scale found that Subaru excelled on ruggedness (this dimension rated significantly higher than the four others for this brand), while Tiffany & Co. excelled on sophistication. We intentionally chose brands that excelled on ruggedness and sophistication because these two dimensions of brand personality differ from the “Big Five” traits of human personality (Briggs 1992).

For each brand, several products were pilot tested to identify extensions that would enable us to vary physicality and personality congruence independently. The results revealed that extensions containing engine technology would be physically congruent for Subaru, while extensions that did not contain engine technology would be deemed to be physically incongruent. Similarly, products incorporating silver would be physically congruent for Tiffany & Co., while products incorporating leather would not. With respect to personality, “wilderness water” products (kayaks and jet skis) were deemed to be significantly more rugged and, thus, more congruent with Subaru’s rugged personality than “urban terrestrial” products (skateboards and scooters). High-heel shoes were viewed as significantly more sophisticated than flats and, thus, more congruent with Tiffany & Co.’s sophisticated personality. The parent brands, brand extensions, and the manifest congruencies appear in Table 3.

The focal task in the main study asked respondents to read separate summaries describing Subaru and Tiffany & Co. before answering questions about the parent brands and potential brand extensions. Each respondent was presented with an extension that was congruent with respect to the parent brand’s physicality, its personality, neither, or both, depending on the condition. Our dependent measure was intended to capture whether a consumer perceives the item as consistent with a parent brand—otherwise referred to as “perceptual fit”—because it is a key in predicting brand extension success (Tauber 1988; Völckner and Sattler 2006). Respondents evaluated the proposed extension on the basis of how well it “fit” with the parent brand on a five-point scale anchored with “does not fit at all” and “fits very well.”

As a manipulation check, respondents evaluated both parent brands (Subaru and Tiffany & Co.) and each extension on Aaker’s (1997) five personality dimensions. We accomplished this using the 15 personality subfactors along with a five-point measurement scale for each (1 = “not at all descriptive,” and 5 = “extremely descriptive”). Participants’ final task was to complete the implicit person theories measure before being debriefed and dismissed.

Results

Brand extension personality: a manipulation check. We created a brand personality score for each of the Big Five personality dimensions for each parent brand and each extension (see Table 4). For both brands and all extensions, Cronbach’s alpha on all dimensions exceeded the standard threshold of .7 (Nunnally 1978), except for the traits of sincerity and sophistication for Tiffany & Co.’s silver-buckled work flats ($\alpha = .65$ and .62, respectively). The lower-than-expected correlations for this extension did not influence any results presented here and thus were not a concern. In addition, somewhat lower alphas (e.g., in the .60–.69 range) are commonly acceptable if there are only a small number of items in the scale (Morgan, Gliner, and Harmon 2005, p. 286).

We used these measures to confirm that the extensions evaluated varied in terms of their congruence personality-wise with the parent brand (e.g., kayaks and jet skis were perceived as significantly more rugged than skateboards and scooters). A 2 (physicality congruence) × 2 (personality trait congruence) × 2 (parent brand) repeated measures ANOVA on the manipulated brand extension dimensions

<table>
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<tr>
<th>TABLE 3</th>
<th>Study 2: Parent Brands and Extensions</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A: Parent Brand: Subaru</strong></td>
<td><strong>Physical trait: engine technology</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Personality trait: ruggedness</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand Extension</strong></td>
<td><strong>Physical</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Congruence</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jet ski</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayak</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motorized scooter</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skateboard</td>
<td>No</td>
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| **B: Parent Brand: Tiffany & Co.** | **Physical trait: shoe material** |
| | **Personality trait: sophistication** |
| **Brand Extension** | **Physical** | **Personality** |
| | **Congruence** | **Congruence** |
| Silver-buckled high-heel shoes | Yes | Yes |
| Leather high-heel shoes | No | Yes |
| Silver-buckled work flats | Yes | No |
| Leather work flats | No | No |

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(i.e., ruggedness for Subaru and sophistication for Tiffany & Co.) with parent brand as a within-subject repeated measure served as a brand personality manipulation check. The significant main effect of brand personality ($F(1, 148) = 21.42, p < .01$) supports our manipulation of the personality dimensions. Wilderness water extensions were viewed as more rugged than urban terrestrial extensions for Subaru ($M_{\text{Wild}} = 4.05$ versus $M_{\text{Urban}} = 3.22$; $F(1, 142) = 16.10, p < .01$), and high-heel shoes were more sophisticated than work flats for Tiffany & Co. ($M_{\text{Heels}} = 4.10$ versus $M_{\text{Flats}} = 2.85$; $F(1, 142) = 8.47, p < .01$). In addition, the main effect of physical attribute congruence was not significant ($F(1, 142) = 3.42, p > .05$), indicating that our physical trait manipulation (i.e., Subaru: motorized versus nonmotorized; Tiffany & Co: silver versus leather) did not influence participants’ evaluations of the brand extensions’ personality traits (ruggedness and sophistication).

**Brand extension and perceived fit.** As in Part 1 of Study 1, we relied on chronic implicit theory orientation rather than activated differences in this study. We performed a median split to divide participants into two groups based on their responses to the implicit person theories measure ($\alpha = .86, M = 30.0, Mdn = 30$). We conducted a 2 (physicality congruence) $\times$ 2 (personality trait congruence) $\times$ 2 (implicit theory orientation) $\times$ 2 (parent brand) ANOVA on perceived fit with parent brand as a within-subject factor. Main effects of both physicality congruence ($F(1, 140) = 11.69, p < .01$) and personality trait congruence ($F(1, 140) = 33.90, p < .01$) were significant. The first effect ($M_{\text{Congruent-physical}} = 2.91$ versus $M_{\text{Incongruent-physical}} = 2.44$) is consistent with prior work on brand extensions that suggests that congruency on physical attributes matters. The main effect of personality trait congruence supports our hypothesizing by showing that personality traits affect perceptions of brand extension fit ($M_{\text{Congruent-personality}} = 3.02$ versus $M_{\text{Incongruent-personality}} = 2.33$).

More important for the purposes of this research, the interaction between implicit theory orientation and brand personality congruence was significant ($F(1, 140) = 4.16, p < .05$), while the interaction between implicit theory orientation and physical attributes was not ($F(1, 140) = 1.42, p > .24$). As Figure 1 illustrates, although both incremental and entity theorists perceived fit when an extension’s personality traits were congruent with the parent brand ($M_{\text{Incremental}} = 2.96$ versus $M_{\text{Entity}} = 3.07$), entity theorists were less willing to “stretch” the personality dimension to perceive fit between incongruent brand extension personalities ($M_{\text{Incremental}} = 2.59$ versus $M_{\text{Entity}} = 2.08$; $F(1, 140) = 6.85, p < .05$). In other words, consistent with $H_3$, incremental theorists were more accepting than entity theorists of larger changes in personality traits exemplified through less rugged (scooters, skateboards) or less sophisticated (flats) extensions.

### TABLE 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Brand</th>
<th>Rugged</th>
<th>Sincere</th>
<th>Excited</th>
<th>Competent</th>
<th>Sophisticated</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany</td>
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<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
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<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
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### Brand Extension

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<tr>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silver high heel</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leather high heel</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver work flat</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leather work flat</td>
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<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subaru</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jet ski</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayak</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motorized scooter</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skateboard</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### FIGURE 1

Study 2: Two-Way Interaction Between Implicit Theory and Personality Congruence on Perceptions of Fit
Note that the interaction effect between physical attribute congruence and brand personality congruence \((F(1, 140) = 6.98, p < .05)\) and the three-way interaction among implicit theory, personality congruence, and physicality congruence \((F(1, 140) = 7.22, p < .05)\) were significant. The two-way interaction is best understood in light of the three-way interaction (see Figure 2). When physical attributes were congruent (i.e., motorized extensions for Subaru and silver buckles for Tiffany & Co.), only entity theorists took issue with personality-incongruent extensions (i.e., the distinctly less rugged scooter/skateboard for Subaru and the unsophisticated flats for Tiffany & Co.). Incremental theorists rated the fit for these products as highly as the more rugged jet ski and sophisticated high-heel shoes (Figure 2, Panel A). However, when the goods were physically incongruent (nonmotorized and leather), personality incongruence (kayaks and flats) resulted in lower levels of perceived fit for both incremental and entity theorists (Figure 2, Panel B).

This result suggests that for incremental theorists, who are typically more accepting of changes in personality traits, a double hit of both personality and physical incongruence was enough to affect their perceptions of the parent brand-extension fit. Incremental theorists are more tolerant of personality incongruence (Figure 2, Panel A) except when the added physical incongruence (Figure 2, Panel B) makes the brand extension seem too much of a stretch (i.e., too big a change). Plaks, Grant, and Dweck (2005) find that implicit theory violation creates a “warm state,” in which people are motivated to protect their activated theory in the face of disconfirming evidence. Therefore, violations should engender negative attitudes toward an extension that goes too far as attempts to maintain cognitive consistency between a parent brand and its extension are thwarted. Although incremental theorists are more willing to stretch a brand’s personality traits than entity theorists, too much change (i.e., physical and personality incongruence) can be too much even for them. We test this interpretation explicitly in Study 3.

We also observed a within-subject effect of parent brand \((F(1, 140) = 21.31, p < .01)\) in which, overall, Subaru was viewed as more extendable than Tiffany & Co. \((M_{Subaru} = 2.95\) versus \(M_{Tiffany} = 2.39)\). In addition, there was a significant parent brand \(\times\) personality interaction \((F(1, 140) = 8.28, p < .01)\). These effects could be driven either by the strength of the parent brands or by the particular choices for brand extensions for this study, but they neither detract from the principal results nor offer much insight into the outcome of interest because the implicit theory results exist for each brand extension studied.

**Product category gender effects.** The target market for Tiffany & Co. is skewed toward women, while automobiles in general and Subaru in particular may be viewed as skewed toward men. Consequently, gender-oriented effects may exist in our data. Our sample consisted of 64 women and 82 men (2 participants did not supply gender information). Running the analysis including gender as an additional factor yielded a 2 (gender) \(\times\) 2 (implicit theory orientation) \(\times\) 2 (physical congruence) \(\times\) 2 (personality congruence) \(\times\) 2 (parent brand) design that produced neither a significant gender main effect nor any significant gender interactions. In particular, the brand \(\times\) gender interaction did not approach significance \((F(1, 130) = .96, p = .758)\). Although it is likely that attitudes and preferences regarding Tiffany & Co. and Subaru indeed differ by gender, perceptions of fit regarding the brands’ extensions do not appear to be driven by gender. Both male or female respondents were apparently familiar enough with both brands to make similar judgments.

**Discussion**

The results of Study 2 are consistent with Study 1 in that consumers’ responses to potential brand extensions depend on their implicit theory orientation. It is not surprising that congruency on both physical attributes and personality
traits affected perceived fit. What is novel in our results is that implicit theories influence perceptions of extension fit by moderating the impact of personality trait incongruence. The results from Study 2 provide direct support for H3 that implicit theories affect the perceived malleability of a brand’s personality traits and not its physicality. Thus, just as implicit theories affect how malleable personality traits can be for people, we find that implicit theories affect how malleable personality traits can be for brands.

In Study 2, for Subaru, the extension categories varied in congruency (e.g., jet skis and skateboards) but remained constant for the parent (i.e., cars). Conversely, the extension category remained constant for Tiffany & Co. (i.e., shoes), while the parent, albeit primarily a jeweler, already offered products in several different categories (e.g., barware, eyewear). It could be argued that differences on other category dimensions (e.g., the degree to which parent and extension products are substitutes or complements, whether production skills are more or less transferable) may have played a role in assessing perceived fit. Given that our results do not change if we analyze either brand separately (i.e., either the parent or extensions cross many categories), we become more confident in our findings. However, we acknowledge that we cannot rule out category effects in Study 2. Thus, we address this issue in our next study.

In Study 3, we set out to do several things. Recent research (Mao and Krishnan 2006; Ng and Houston 2006) argues that fit can be based on a category prototype or category exemplar. Controlling for categories would help ensure that different associations of category prototypes in relation to the parent brand category are not driving perceptions of fit between one brand extension and another. Therefore, we constrain both the parent (i.e., car companies) and the extension (i.e., sunglasses) to single categories. In addition, we use two parent brands that differ only in their perceived ruggedness. By isolating the impact of changes on the single brand personality dimension, ruggedness, we can claim that the differences in the acceptability of extensions are due to this particular aspect of the brand’s personality. Furthermore, by comparing extensions that are near and far and by pushing the rugged positioning of the extension to the extreme for each brand separately, we reveal a boundary with respect to differences in implicit theories: Even incremental theorists have limits regarding how far a particular brand personality can stretch.

Finally, and perhaps most important for managers, this study demonstrates how advertising copy can be used to invoke either entity or incremental orientations, thus demonstrating the practical significance of this research. If consumers can be placed into a more malleable mind-set when initially encoding information regarding a new brand extension, they should be more accepting of the brand extension.

**Study 3: Advertising Effects on Brand Extension Fit**

**Method**

**Brand personality traits pretest.** A pretest identified two brands that differed on only one brand personality trait (ruggedness) and were similar with respect to consumers’ brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Respondents were 36 undergraduate business students from a large West Coast university who were intentionally drawn from the same sample population but who did not participate in the main study. These respondents evaluated 38 existing automobile and fashion brand names on Aaker’s (1997) five brand personality dimensions and provided their overall liking and purchase intentions for these brands on seven-point scales. We found Mitsubishi and Jeep to be the most similar on overall liking (M_{Jeep} = 4.53 versus M_{Mitsubishi} = 4.50), purchase intention, (M_{Jeep} = 3.74 versus M_{Mitsubishi} = 3.85), and four of the five personality dimensions: sincerity (M_{Jeep} = 4.80 versus M_{Mitsubishi} = 4.00), excitement (M_{Jeep} = 4.63 versus M_{Mitsubishi} = 4.00), competence (M_{Jeep} = 4.68 versus M_{Mitsubishi} = 4.00), and sophistication (M_{Jeep} = 3.63 versus M_{Mitsubishi} = 3.16; all ps > .05). Jeep and Mitsubishi differed significantly only on perceptions of the fifth personality dimension, ruggedness (M_{Jeep} = 6.53 versus M_{Mitsubishi} = 2.95).

**Sample, design, and procedure.** Pretest results revealed that sunglasses would serve as a realistic brand extension for both Jeep and Mitsubishi. They also revealed that Jeep and Mitsubishi did not differ in terms of their perceived competence in making cars or their manufacturing skills (Aaker and Keller 1990). In addition, attitudes toward the brands did not differ significantly (all ps > .15). We developed 12 advertisements for sunglasses that differed on three factors to provide the 12 cells of our 2 (implicit theory: entity versus incremental) × 3 (brand stretch: near, moderate, and extreme) × 2 (parent brand: Jeep versus Mitsubishi) full factorial, between-subjects design.

First, we altered the ad copy to prime different implicit theories (entity versus incremental). A block of copy in each advertisement discussed the malleability of the brand. Pretesting helped us develop effective ad copy that situationally activated either an incremental or an entity theory orientation. The incremental theory prime ad copy stated, “At Jeep [Mitsubishi], we are evolving. We ask ourselves how we can adapt to fit your lifestyle. You change and Jeep [Mitsubishi] is changing with you.” The entity theory prime ad copy stated, “At Jeep [Mitsubishi], we are committed to consistency and unwavering steadfastness. Ask yourself how our rock-solidness can fit your lifestyle. Your personality and ideals stay the same and Jeep [Mitsubishi] stays there with you.”

Second, we varied brand stretch by varying the extension’s positioning regarding its ruggedness relative to the parent brand (near, moderate, and extreme). Each advertisement contained the header “Introducing JEEP [MITSUBISHI] brand sunglasses,” which served to introduce the extending brand. Each advertisement included a background picture and one block of ad copy that described the extension on the ruggedness dimension. For Mitsubishi, the copy in the near-stretch, or not-veru-rugged, advertisements focused on using the sunglasses for everyday events and contained a picture of a “hipster” walking his dog. The copy in the “moderate-stretch” (i.e., more rugged) and “extreme-stretch” (i.e., extremely rugged) conditions focused on
using the sunglasses for more rugged adventures, such as fishing off the coast of Baja and hiking in the Rockies. These portrayed a recreational fisherman wearing sunglasses while kneeling on shore holding his catch and a rock climber rappelling down a cliff wearing sunglasses, respectively.

Because Jeep was initially viewed as more rugged than Mitsubishi (M_{Mitsubishi} = 2.95 and M_{Jeep} = 6.53 on a seven-point scale), our three conditions varied slightly for this brand. The near stretch included what was deemed to be a moderate stretch for Mitsubishi: the advertisement portraying the recreational fisherman holding his catch (for an example, see the Appendix). The moderate stretch for Jeep included what was an extreme stretch on the rugged dimension for Mitsubishi: the advertisement displaying the rock climber rappelling down a cliff. For Jeep, the extreme-stretch advertisement included a cliff jumper flying in the sky in a glide suit. A pretest in which 54 respondents evaluated the ruggedness of one of the four advertisements for “Brand X” revealed that each advertisement differed significantly on ruggedness in the predicted order (F(3, 50) = 33.08, p < .01). Individual contrasts revealed that the advertisement displaying the dog walker (M = 2.0) was less rugged than the advertisement with the fisherman (M = 3.5; t(50) = 5.16, p < .01 [one-tailed]), which was less rugged than the rock climber (M = 4.0; t(50) = 1.69, p < .05 [one-tailed]), which was less rugged than the skydiver (M = 4.4; t(50) = 1.59, p < .06 [one-tailed]).

In summary, for two brands that differed in initial perceptions on the trait of ruggedness, we created advertisements portraying extensions that were consistent with respondents’ perceptions (near stretch), somewhat exaggerated (moderate stretch), or very much exaggerated (extreme stretch). Accordingly, we expected implicit theory and brand stretch to interact such that a near stretch is accepted by entity and incremental theorists alike while an extreme stretch is rejected by both groups. However, for a moderate stretch, we expected incremental theorists to be more accepting than entity theorists. Although the stimuli differed as a result of respondents’ initial perceptions of the ruggedness of each brand, we predicted that the same pattern would hold for both Jeep and Mitsubishi.

Respondents were 232 undergraduate business students at a large West Coast university. They were exposed to only one advertisement and then evaluated the brand extension with respect to its perceived fit on the same scale as in Study 2. They also provided their opinions with respect to the ultimate success of the extension. We assessed these two dependent measures using five-point scales anchored by “does not fit at all/fits extremely well” and “not at all successful/extremely successful,” respectively. As a manipulation check, participants also evaluated the parent brand on Aaker’s (1997) five brand personality dimensions.

**Results**

To ensure that we only manipulated the personality trait of ruggedness when we alternated the parent brand between Jeep and Mitsubishi, we compared all the personality dimension measures for the opposing parent brands. The parent brands did not differ on four dimensions (sincerity, excitement, competence, and sophistication), but they differed insofar as Jeep was viewed as significantly more rugged than Mitsubishi (M_{Jeep} = 4.50 versus M_{Mitsubishi} = 3.87; F(1, 231) = 29.80, p < .01). Similar to the pretest results, the results from our manipulation check confirmed that varying the parent brand resulted in a change on only a single personality trait: ruggedness.

A 2 (parent brand) × 2 (implicit theory orientation) × 3 (brand stretch) ANOVA on perceptions of fit revealed main effects of all three variables. As we expected, Jeep (M_{Jeep} = 3.40) is a better overall fit for rugged sunglasses than Mitsubishi (M_{Mitsubishi} = 2.59; F(1, 220) = 36.59, p < .01). This is likely due to Jeep being perceived as more rugged at the onset. Brand stretch also influenced perceptions of fit (F(2, 220) = 35.60, p < .01). In general, near stretches are more effective, such that sunglasses, which are a smaller stretch (M_{Near} = 3.69), have a better overall perceived fit than moderate stretches (M_{Moderate} = 2.97; t(220) = 4.03, p < .01) or extreme stretches (M_{Extreme} = 3.32; t(220) = 3.38, p < .01). As we also expected, participants primed with the incremental implicit theory ad copy (M_{Incremental} = 3.14) reported better perceptions of fit than those primed with the entity theory copy (M_{Entity} = 2.85; F(1, 220) = 4.91, p < .05). These main effects can be better understood in light of the significant two-way interaction between brand stretch and implicit theory orientation (F(2, 220) = 4.44, p < .01).

As Figure 3 shows, neither respondents primed to be entity theorists nor those primed to be incremental theorists deemed a near stretch to be incompatible, though those who viewed Jeep sunglasses were more approving than those who viewed Mitsubishi sunglasses (M_{Entity-Jeep} = 3.80 and M_{Incremental-Jeep} = 3.84 versus M_{Entity-Mitsu} = 3.53 and M_{Incremental-Mitsu} = 3.59). Because the advertisements differed for each level of stretch and Mitsubishi was initially perceived as less rugged, it is not surprising that we observe this difference. Similarly, both entity theorists and incremental theorists were far more skeptical of an extreme stretch, though those who viewed extremely rugged Mitsubishi sunglasses were less accepting overall (M_{Entity-Jeep} = 3.11 and M_{Incremental-Jeep} = 3.05 versus M_{Entity-Mitsu} = 1.56 and M_{Incremental-Mitsu} = 1.58). More important, implicit theory determines how accepting respondents were of a moderate stretch for both Jeep (M_{Incremental-Jeep} = 3.74 versus M_{Entity-Jeep} = 2.84; t(200) = 2.73, p < .01) and Mitsubishi (M_{Incremental-Mitsu} = 3.06 versus M_{Entity-Mitsu} = 2.25; t(200) = 2.45, p < .01). This pattern (see Figure 3) suggests that perceptions of fit for brand extensions that stretch a particular trait (ruggedness) are determined in large part by a person’s implicit theory, which can be situationally steered to be more flexible and accommodating.

In Study 2, the combination of a personality and physical stretch was too much. Here, perceptions are driven solely by the ruggedness trait, and consistent with H4, even incremental theorists can reject a brand personality stretch that is viewed as too extreme. These results also support both H2 and H3, such that participants primed to believe that change is common and acceptable (incremental theory prime) were more accepting of a moderate stretch (greater perceived fit) than those primed to believe that traits are fixed and unchanged (entity theory prime). We found an
Discussion

The results of Study 3 demonstrate how implicit theories affect perceptions of fit between a parent brand and an extension that differs in terms of its personality. In this study, we focused on personality differences within a single dimension: ruggedness. We demonstrate how situationally activating an incremental theory orientation enhances the perceived fit when a brand extension stretches in terms of the change in personality it attempts relative to the parent brand. Compared with participants primed to take on an entity theory orientation, those primed to take on an incre-

mental theorist orientation perceived a much better fit between the parent brands and extensions that differed to a greater extent solely on a single personality dimension.

This study has important implications for marketing managers because persuasive communication can lead consumers to believe that a brand is either more malleable or more fixed with respect to its traits. Knowing that implicit theories can be activated, and thus can affect the evaluations of brand extensions, contributes to the understanding of branding in general and brand personality and brand extensions in particular. However, simply because people may be incremental theorists or primed to be more flexible toward accepting a brand’s changes does not mean that the malleability of brands is limitless. Our results show that even for those primed to take on an incremental theory orientation, too much of a stretch (e.g., extreme) may be rebuffed. In addition, what is viewed as extreme for Mitsubishi differs from what is viewed as extreme for Jeep, which reminds brand managers that they must understand consumers’ perceptions regarding their brands’ personality when considering extensions.

In Study 3, we used parent brands known to compete in only one category (cars) and tested extensions in only one category (sunglasses). We also ensured that the only thing that varied was the positioning on a single personality dimension, ruggedness. We varied the degree of trait change such that the resultant brand extensions were relatively acceptable to both incremental theorists and entity theorists (near stretch), were relatively unacceptable to both groups (extreme stretch), and fell somewhere in between (moderate stretch). This in-between space is the area of interest because it reveals the moderating effect of implicit theory on acceptable malleability of a brand’s personality and, thus, an extension’s perceived fit.

General Discussion

Across three studies, we demonstrated that the success of brand extensions can benefit from understanding and influencing consumers’ implicit theories of the self. The research suggests that consumers who believe that brand traits are malleable are more accepting of brand extensions—those that are a stretch on personality dimensions—than consumers who believe that traits are fixed. The implicit theories that determine whether traits are viewed as malleable or fixed are dispositionally held and can be situationally primed (Study 1). Implicit theories affect the perceived fit on the basis of congruence between the personality traits of the parent brand and those of the brand extension (Study 2). Through the use of persuasive communication, marketers can influence consumers’ implicit theory disposition and, thus, their judgments of brand extensions (Study 3). Although implicit theories can increase the flexibility of the consumer regarding brand extendibility, there are limits even for those more favorably disposed to change (i.e., incremental theorists).

This work contributes to the existing literature in numerous ways. First, we enrich the brand extension literature. Managers often take a product focus when examining extension fit. However, as with brand image, fit exists in the

identical pattern of results for predictions about brand extension success.
consumer’s mind, and both product characteristics and consumer characteristics affect perceptions of fit. We demonstrate that the consumer characteristic described as implicit theory orientation affects the evaluation of brand extensions in many ways. It affects brand extension acceptability (Study 1), personality trait congruence (Studies 2 and 3), judgments of fit (Studies 2 and 3), and perceptions of success (Study 3). Second, we make a contribution to the brand personality literature. Aaker (1999) explores the self-exppressive role of brands, demonstrating how usage situations, brand personality, and self-concept interact. In her work on the malleable self, Aaker argues that given different situational cues, consumers’ preferences for brands can be expected to vary across usage situations. She accepts the brand’s traits as fixed while considering the consumers’ traits malleable. We offer evidence that consumers make inferences about the malleability of the brand, suggesting that the traits associated with a particular brand are more flexible than previously acknowledged. Third, we contribute to the social psychology literature on implicit theories by extending transference of implicit theories not only from the self to others but also from the self to brands. We also document an underexplored boundary condition—the degree of trait change or stretch. Taken together, this research offers managers several valuable insights into implicit theories of the self, how they operate, and their effect on the evaluation of brands and brand extensions. It also offers managers a potential tool for enhancing the marketing of brand extensions.

Managerial Implications

This research offers an alternative for how managers might think about the problem of perceived fit for brand extensions. Fit, viewed as a function of brand, product, category, and firm differences, is traditionally regarded as a fixed constant for a given parent brand and brand extension pair. Under this view, the only option available to managers is to make the existing fit between a brand and its extension more salient. In our expanded conceptualization of fit, managers are less constrained than previously believed. They can also change the mind-set of the consumer to make the same message more effective. This is a change from the traditional thinking that the advertising message is the variable that is manipulated and delivered to a fixed consumer. It is also unlike many other individual difference variables, which rely on managers identifying appropriate segments. Now the consumer’s mind-set becomes an additional controllable variable, and managers have an additional technique in their toolbox to increase a message’s effectiveness.

There are often situations in which marketing managers cannot modify their positioning, product characteristics, or brand personality. Managers can still increase acceptance of a brand extension if they recognize how to influence consumers’ implicit theory instead. It is important to note that though implicit theories are chronic, they can be situationally activated as well. Managerially, the notion that one implicit theory or the other can be activated has important implications for communication strategies, which may provide an avenue for easing the acceptance of brand extensions. In addition, the firm does not need to focus consumers specifically on the traits they want accepted; communicating the malleability of the parent brand as a whole or even manipulating consumers’ implicit theories regarding their individual traits should suffice. As we show herein, the manipulation can be subtle; it does not need to involve the brand name (Study 1) or directly mention the particular trait of interest (Studies 1 and 3). Avoiding this level of specificity might be useful if the firm wants to prime multiple dimensions of personality trait congruence. To this end, the power and flexibility associated with priming implicit theories has important real-world implications.

We have demonstrated that implicit theories are useful when managers want to make their parent brands more malleable to ease brand extension acceptance. However, there are many times when brand managers may appreciate when their brand personality is more fixed. For example, an entity orientation may protect a brand from equity dilution caused by unexpected events, such as when an athlete celebrity endorser tests positive for steroids. Promoting an entity orientation toward the brand on the ruggedness dimension may help shield the brand from negative fallout. If the perceptions of the core personality of the brand could be made more “fixed” during times of threat, implicit theories would be an important tool for protecting a brand’s existing equity. In summary, manipulating consumers’ implicit theories should help permit brand extensions and repositioning efforts and prevent brand equity dilution.

Limitations

This research is not without its limitations. Further research could also address differences in trait importance. Research by Plaks, Grant, and Dweck (2005) suggests that core beliefs are more important than marginal traits. This distinction may have an important impact on the brand extension literature because core beliefs about a brand, such as Coca-Cola being “classic” and “American,” may be more susceptible to implicit theories (i.e., viewed as more fixed or malleable by opposing camps) than other less core traits, such as “fizzy” and “sweet.” An important next step in studying the impact of implicit theories on marketing concepts should include improving the understanding of which types of traits are more or less likely to be affected.

Although we investigated implicit theories and their roles in brand extensions, the impact of how flexible or malleable an item’s traits are considered can affect several other areas in consumer behavior. For example, celebrity endorsers who move from brand to brand may raise the ire of entity theorists who cannot make the associations between Tiger Woods and Nike clothing in addition to Tiger Woods and Buick automobiles and Tiger Woods and Accenture consulting. It may even be the case that one extension (Nike) reinforces the traits associated with the core brand (Tiger), which makes other endorsements less consistent. Future work could also examine the interrelationships among change attempts, the degree of change, and the sequence of change.

People are never thought of as not possessing a personality, but a new brand can be a relatively blank slate. How
would implicit theories interact with the creation of a brand personality? Would entity theorists be quicker to set and choose a brand personality? Levy, Stroessner, and Dweck (1998) find that entity theorists assign significantly stronger traits to novel groups and endorse stereotypes to a greater degree than incremental theorists. This research may translate into a more efficient establishment of brand personality. Perhaps after established, personality set with a situationally primed entity orientation would be stronger or more consistently held than one arrived at through an incremental orientation. Alternatively, establishing a brand personality may mean growing or stretching traits from a “zero point” of no personality. If so, fostering an incremental theory may lead to a more efficient establishment of brand personality.

Either way, implicit theory is a useful managerial tool in brand creation and extension and warrants further study.

APPENDIX

Entity Advertisement for Moderate Mitsubishi Extension

Introducing Mitsubishi brand sunglasses

At Mitsubishi, we are committed to consistency and unwavering steadfastness. Ask yourself how our rock-solidness can fit your lifestyle. Your personality and ideals stay the same and Mitsubishi stays there with you. Mitsubishi now has sunglasses for what you do.

These are not just sunglasses – they’re protection from the elements. From hiking in the Rockies to fishing off the Baja coast – what protects you should be built to endure and as rugged as you are. Anywhere that adventure takes you, your gear should be ready to handle. Mitsubishi, we make sunglasses for every adventure.

REFERENCES


