

# **BRAND STRESS AND HOW CONSUMERS COPE WITH IT? AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

We explore a relatively new concept in marketing, namely brand stress. In the current study, brand stress is understood as strain caused by the felt pressure to own and consume certain branded products. We first conceptualize the construct of perceived brand stress and suggest how we can operationalize it. Furthermore, we attempt to shed light on the various ways in which consumers cope with perceived brand stress.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The majority of studies in branding research emphasize the relevance of brands and their benefits for both companies and consumers. Indeed, brands play an important role in everyday life of consumers and there are a number of positive effects resulting from purchasing and consuming brands. Brands, for instance, help consumers to minimize purchase risks, provide the basis for status consumption, and build a source of social interactions among consumers (e.g., Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Although brand consumption involves many positive effects, negative influences should not be denied. However, only few scholars (e.g., Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004) have engaged in research on such "dark" sides of brands.

One negative effect can be seen in brand stress in the form that individuals feel pressured to purchase and consume branded products and services in order to be accepted by the peer group (Hammann, Palupski, and Bofinger 1997). The influence to purchase and consume branded products is primarily caused by marketing, the media and peers and it is most likely to be experienced for publicly consumed goods such as branded clothing and fashion items (e.g., Childers and Rao 1992).

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The main objective of this study is to conceptualize and operationalize the construct of adults' perceived brand stress. In so doing, we draw on results from the existing brand stress literature (Albrecht, Stokburger-Sauer, and Bauer 2007; Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, and Albrecht 2007; Hammann, Palupski, and Bofinger 1997) that has focused on the group of adolescents so far, related constructs, other disciplines and studies that explicitly use stress concepts. Furthermore, we identify possible strategies to which individuals resort when they cope with brand stress. The analysis of the coping strategies gives insight into potential negative outcomes of brand stress. Thus, our study investigates the potential harm brands can do to individuals.

## **EMPIRICAL STUDY**

To empirically test the hypothesized brand stress scale and the hypotheses, clothing was selected as a sample product category because clothing is a publicly consumed product. Data were collected in Germany (n=295, 58.9% female, 41.1% male, mean age 27.6) in 2007. Structural equation modeling was used as method of analysis.

## **RESULTS**

According to our study, one in eight adult consumers suffers from brand stress. The most important coping strategies are withdrawal and emotional support seeking as part of emotion-focused coping on the one hand, and information seeking and purchase behavior as part of problem-focused coping on the other hand. The coping strategy of reappraisal is of minor importance and the coping strategy of distraction is of no importance at all in our research context.

References Available on Request.