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The Influence of the Interaction Between Product Fit and Self-Construction on Consumers' Purchase Intention in Co-branding: The Intermediary Mechanism of Processing Fluency

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Abstract. With the increasingly fierce market competition, co-branding between brands has become the norm. Through co-branding, brands can achieve the effect of integrating resources and audiences, thereby enhancing value and driving market breakthroughs. Still, there are not a few cases of co-branded product failures. Therefore, existing research has not been able to explain the operating mechanism of such business decisions fully. This paper focuses on the mechanism of product fit and consumer self-construction of co-branded brands, introducing conceptual processing fluency as an intermediary variable to explore its impact on consumers' purchase intentions. The research method of this paper involves collecting questionnaire data and then analyzing it. The study found that product fit significantly affected consumers' processing fluency and purchase intention, while self-construction only played a partial role in the path. The overall interaction effect was not significant; however, the group analysis revealed that high fit could significantly enhance purchase intention by improving processing fluency among dependent consumers. In independent consumers, the mediating effect is not established. This article holds specific guidance for brands to develop more effective co-branding strategies.

Keywords: Co-branding, Self-construction, Processing fluency.

1. Introduction

As a business strategy, brand co-branding can help different brands achieve resource complementarity and market breakthroughs. However, the results of co-branding are not always positive, and some collaborations fail due to significant differences in product categories or a lack of psychological fit. Therefore, understanding how consumers form purchase intentions in different fit co-branding situations has become an essential topic of common concern between academia and industry.

In the field of consumer psychology, the type of self-construction is considered a crucial variable that influences the way information is processed. Independent individuals tend to emphasize difference and uniqueness, while dependent individuals value relationships and coordination, which

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may affect their acceptance of different types of brand co-brands. However, the interaction between self-construction and fit alone is not enough to explain the psychological processes of consumers. Recent studies have demonstrated that processing fluency, particularly conceptual processing fluency, plays a significant role in consumer judgment and decision-making. When consumers are more likely to understand and integrate the relationship between a brand and its products, it creates a positive emotional experience. It attributes this positivity to the brand or product itself, leading to increased purchase intent.

Based on this, this paper introduces conceptual processing fluency into the research framework of co-branding, focusing on how the interaction between product fit and self-construction affects consumers' purchase intention through processing fluency. From this perspective, the research not only enriches the theory of the intersection of co-branding and consumer psychology but also provides an empirical basis for selecting cooperation partners and targeting consumer groups in practice.

2. Literature review

Co-branding refers to a business strategy in which two or more highly recognizable brands collaborate to launch a jointly branded product or service. In this process, the brand name of the participating party will be retained, and the commercial value it creates will not be sufficient to constitute a new brand [1].

Brand fit: In the context of co-branding, brand fit refers to consumers' overall perception of the participating brands in terms of product category, brand image, and associated thoughts. When consumers perceive that the cooperative brand exhibits high consistency and coordination in these attributes, it can be regarded as a high fit; conversely, it can be considered a low fit [2]. This paper primarily examines the impact of the fit of cooperative brands in the product category dimension on consumers' purchase intentions.

Self-construction refers to an individual's understanding of the relationship between the self and others at the cognitive level, which can be divided into two forms: independent and interdependent. The former typically tends to detach from the social environment in pursuit of uniqueness; the latter prefers to establish contact with others and derive a sense of self-orientation from it [3]. In the field of consumer psychology, self-construction influences the way consumers process product information, leading to different perceptions of product categories, brand image, and associated ideas among consumers with varying self-construction types [4,5].

Processing fluency: Processing fluency refers to the ease of processing that individuals feel when they contact and understand a specific stimulus, which can be divided into perceptual fluency (ease of identifying physical features of stimuli, such as clarity, contrast, repetition, etc.) and conceptual fluency (understanding of the meaning of stimuli and their association with knowledge structures). High processing fluency is prone to trigger a positive emotional response, and consumers may attribute this positive emotion to a good impression of a brand or product, thereby increasing evaluation and purchase intention [6]. This study focuses solely on the fluency of conceptual processing.

3. Research hypotheses

Based on the above literature, brand product fit and self-construction may jointly affect consumers' purchase intention. Co-branding with high product fit is more likely to bring positive cognitive and emotional experiences, especially for dependent consumers. This fit will be more easily interpreted

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as social recognition and value matching, thereby increasing purchase intentions. Low product fit may be more likely to stimulate the interest of independent consumers under certain conditions, as they tend to pursue differentiation and uniqueness. In addition, this study found that conceptual fluency, as a mediating variable, explained the affective mechanism between fit, self-constructing type, and purchase intention.

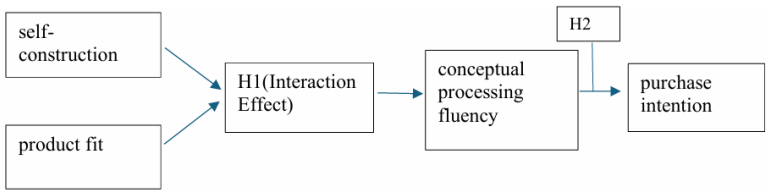

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the interaction between product fit and self-construction type

H1 (Interaction Effect): As shown in Figure 1, there is an interaction between product fit and self-construction. Specifically, when consumers are dependent, high product fit leads to higher conceptual processing fluency. Conversely, when the consumer is independent, low product fit results in greater conceptual processing fluency.

H2: As shown in Figure 1, conceptual processing fluency plays a mediating role in the influence of product fit and self-construction interaction on consumers' purchase intention.

4. Experimental design

4.1. Purpose of the experiment

The purpose of this study is to investigate the interaction between brand product fit and consumer self-construction on concept processing fluency, and to further explore the mediating role of concept product fit, consumer self-construction, and purchase intention.

4.2. Experimental design and subjects

The subjects were randomly recruited through the number platform. The total number of planned samples was N = 200, evenly distributed across the four experimental conditions (50 people in each group). The experiment employs a 2 (branded product fit: high vs. low) × 2 (self-construction: independent vs. dependent) between-groups design, measuring both conceptual processing fluency and purchase intention.

4.3. Experimental steps

The independent variables of this experiment include self-construction and brand product fit. Among them, self-construction is measured using a scale, and the independent and dependent self-construction scales developed by Singelis are employed, each containing five items that measure the tendency of subjects in the two dimensions of independence and dependence [7]. According to the average scores of the subjects on the two categories of questions, they were compared and dichotomized, resulting in two categories: independent and dependent. The measurement of brand product fit is experimentally controlled as a manipulative variable. Subjects were assigned to two scenarios: high fit and low fit. High fit was a co-branded combination of a sportswear brand and a running shoe brand, and low fit condition was a co-branded combination of a sportswear brand and

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video game equipment (e.g., PlayStation). A co-branded product introduction was presented to guide the subjects into the corresponding scenario.

The mediating variable is conceptual processing fluency, referring to the scale designed by Lee and Labroo, which consists of a total of four items, such as "I can easily understand the positioning and purpose of this product" [8]. The dependent variable is the willingness to buy, as measured by the scale designed by Spears and Singh, which consists of a total of three items, such as "If I have the opportunity, I would be willing to buy this co-branded running shoe" [9].

To test whether the manipulation of brand product fit is successful, this study set up a manipulation check, using the perceived fit scale proposed by Simonin and Ruth, designed three items, and asked subjects to score the fit of the co-branded products they saw [10]. In addition, to ensure the validity of the data, attention checks (e.g., "This question is used to test whether you answer seriously, please select 1") are included to screen out invalid answers. All scales were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree).

5. Experimental results

Table 1. Reliability test results

Scale	Cronbach's α	Reliability Level
Independent Self-construal Scale	.868	Good
Interdependent Self-construal Scale	.859	Good
Conceptual Processing Fluency Scale	.727	Acceptable
Purchase Intention Scale	.816	Good

First, the reliability of each scale was tested. As shown in Table 1, the independent self-construction scale (α = .868), the dependent self-construction scale (α = .859), and the willingness to purchase scale (α = .816) all had good reliability, and the reliability of the conceptual processing fluency scale also reached an acceptable level (α = .727).

Table 2. Manipulation check results

Condition	Mean (M)	t(df)	p-value	Cohen's d
High Fit	4.83	-	-	-
Low Fit	3.22	t (187.12) = -11.34	p < .001	1.60

As shown in Table 2, the fit score of the high fit group (M = 4.83) was significantly higher than that of the low fit group (M = 3.22), t(187.12) = -11.34, p <.001, and the effect size Cohen's d = 1.60, proving that fit manipulation was effective.

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Table 3. Two-way ANOVA results

Dependent Variable	Effect	F(df)	p-value
Conceptual Fluency	Fit (main effect)	F (1,196) =6.95	.009
Conceptual Fluency	Self-construal (main effect)	F (1,196) =5.86	.016
Conceptual Fluency	Interaction	F (1,196) =1.67	.198 (n.s.)
Purchase Intention	Fit (main effect)	F (1,196) =10.94	.001
Purchase Intention	Self-construal (main effect)	F (1,196) =.009	.925 (n.s.)
Purchase Intention	Interaction	F (1,196) =.08	.778 (n.s.)

Then, two-way analysis of variance was used to test the effects of product fit and self-construction on the fluency of concept processing. As shown in Table 3, the main impact of fit was significant, $F(1,196) = 6.95$, $p = .009$; the main effect of self-construction was significant, $F(1,196) = 5.86$, $p = .016$, and the interaction effect between the two was not important, $F(1,196) = 1.67$, $p = .198$. It shows that fit and self-construction affect the fluency of concept processing, respectively, but does not show a significant interaction.

For purchase intention, as shown in Table 3, the main effect of fit was also significant, $F(1, 196) = 10.94$, $p = .001$, while the main effects of self-construction and the interaction were not significant.

Table 4. Mediation analysis results (PROCESS Model 4)

Group	Path	Effect/Result	p-value	Conclusion
Independent	Fit → Fluency	β = .125	.211 (n.s.)	Not significant
Independent	Fluency → Purchase Intention	β = .450	.018	Significant
Independent	Fit → Purchase Intention (direct)	β = .450	.017	Direct effect significant
Independent	Indirect effect	95% CI [-0.035, 0.177]	-	Not significant
Interdependent	Fit → Fluency	β = .365	.022	Significant
Interdependent	Fluency → Purchase Intention	β = .750	< .001	Significant
Interdependent	Fit → Purchase Intention (direct)	β = .153	.399 (n.s.)	Not significant
Interdependent	Indirect effect	95% CI [0.044, 0.575]	-	Significant (Full mediation)

Finally, the role of processing fluency is further tested by mediation effect analysis using PROCESS Model 4 [11]. As shown in Table 4, the effect of fit on processing fluency was not significant ($p = .211$). Still, the processing fluency had a considerable positive impact on purchase intention ($p = .018$), and the direct effect of fit on purchase intention was significant ($p = .017$); however, the mediating effect was not established. In the dependent group, fit had a significant positive effect on machining fluency ($p = .022$), and machining fluency significantly predicted purchase intention ($p < .001$). The indirect effect was significant (95% CI [0.044 to 0.575]) while the direct effect was not, indicating that fit was influenced solely by machining fluency.

6. Conclusion

This study empirically explores how brand product fit and self-construction influence consumers' purchase intentions, introducing conceptual processing fluency as a mediating variable. The results show that, firstly, product fit has a significant main effect on the smoothness of conceptual

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processing and purchase intention. Consumers' processing experience is smoother and more favorable in terms of purchase intention under high-fit scenarios. Secondly, self-construction also has a significant main effect on the processing fluency, but the overall interaction effect is not substantial. Further grouping analysis shows that high fit can significantly enhance purchase intention by improving the fluency of conceptual processing in dependent consumer groups, and this effect is a complete mediation. In the independent group, the influence of fit on purchase intention is mainly manifested as a direct effect, and processing fluency does not play a mediating role.

This study revises and supplements the conclusions of previous research on co-branding. Although the initially hypothesized interaction effects were not statistically supported, the results revealed differentiated pathways for fit and self-construction across different groups. In particular, the psychological mechanism of dependent consumers aligns more closely with the mediating role of processing fluency, providing a new empirical basis for understanding the cognitive processing of different consumer groups in response to co-branding.

The results suggest that brands should adjust their focus according to the type of self-construction of the target consumer group when formulating co-branding strategies. If the target group is primarily composed of dependent consumers, prioritize high-fit partners to ensure that consumers can form positive attitudes and increase their purchase intent through smooth cognitive processing. For independent consumers, although improving fit remains effective, their purchase intention relies more on direct product perception, indicating that low-fit co-branding may not yield positive effects through processing fluency.

Of course, this study has some limitations that warrant further exploration in the future. The following conjectures are made for the part that is inconsistent with the research hypothesis: First, the sample in this study is mainly from China, and the cultural background and self-construction of the subjects may be relatively concentrated, resulting in a relatively insignificant overall interaction effect. This suggests that cross-cultural differences may play a key role in the psychological mechanism of co-branding. Future studies can be compared across different cultural contexts to test the universality of these conclusions. Second, in independent consumer groups, processing fluency fails to play an intermediary role, which is contrary to expectations. A possible explanation is that independent individuals rely more on other cognitive or emotional pathways (such as novelty and differentiated cognition) rather than simply fluent experiences to form purchase intentions. Future research can further explore other psychological mechanisms to improve the understanding of independent consumer decision-making processes.

Additionally, the sample size of this study is limited (N = 200), and it can be further expanded in the future to enhance the robustness of the results. In addition, the study only examines the fit of the product category dimension and does not cover other dimensions, such as brand image. The differences in the roles of various fit types can be further expanded and compared in the future. Finally, this study employs a virtual situational questionnaire design, which can be complemented with real co-branding cases or long-term tracking data in the future to enhance the external validity of the conclusions.

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