Stronger brands in all product categories based on warmth and competence?

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INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The stereotype content model postulates that variations in our evaluation of others are largely explained on the basis of "the Big Two": our perceptions of warmth (intentions) and competence (realisation of intentions) (Fiske et al., 2002; Wojciszke et al., 1998). According to recent research, this also applies to a large extent to brands and organisations (Kervyn et al., 2012) because of our innate tendency to anthropomorphise (e.g., Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Epley et al, 2007).

Together warmth and competence predicts up to 82 percent how we assess brands (Malone & Fiske, 2013). Warmth and competence hereby supersede traditional constructs that are used to predict the brand preference of consumers, as well as brand attitudes and brand personality, where warmth in many cases is more important than competence (Bernritter et al., 2016; Wojciszke et al., 1998). Being able to forecast warmth and competence therefore holds a great promise for brands.

It is nonetheless not known whether warmth and competence forecast different outcome variables in different ways (for example buying intentions and word-of mouth advertisement); and is it also not known whether the predictive power of warmth and competence differs per product category. Based on previous research on the social behaviour regarding brand recommendations (Bernritter et al., 2016), our hypotheses was that non-profit brands profit more from warmth and competence than commercial brands (Aaker et al., 2010).

METHOD

A questionnaire was distributed amongst members of a nationwide representative panel ($N = 419$, $M_{age} = 45$, $SD = 1.13$; 55.1% female). Respondents were randomly assigned one of seven product categories. Each respondent assessed two (out of a total of 32) brands on a scale of warmth and competence. Following questions about brand recognition within the category and current trademark use, warmth and competence measured by means of the four items on the validated scale of Kervyn et al. (2012) (7-point Likert scale; $M_{warmth} = 4.6$, $SD = 1.3$; $M_{competence} = 4.6$, $SD = 1.2$). Furthermore, the degree to which one feels attracted to a brand was measured with an item on the scale of Park et al. (2013) ($M_{attraction} = 6.9$, $SD = 2.1$), as well as the intention to spread word-of-mouth advertising ($M_{wom} = 4.2$, $SD = 1.7$). Switching intentions are also measured with a 7-point Likert scale with a single question: "How likely is it that you [X] will remain a client of [X]/ continue using [X]?" ($M_{loyalty} = 4.8$, $SD = 1.6$). All scales used were sufficiently reliable with a Cronbach's alfa higher than .75.

RESULTS

Warmth and competence predicted to a large extent whether respondents were planning to speak positively to others about a brand ($R^2 = .44$, $F(2,817) = 319.4$, $p < .001$), were attracted to this brand ($R^2 = .40$, $F(2,817) = 268.5$, $p < .001$) and were planning to continue buying from their current brand ($R^2 = .24$, $F(2,582) = 90.3$, $p <$

.001). The highest-scoring brands were, as expected, the non-profit category (M_{warmth} = 5.5, SD = 1.2 and $M_{\text{competence}}$ = 5.1, SD = 1.1). There are clear differences between the different product categories. Competence accounts for 43% (β = .457, p < .01) whether one felt attracted to an insurance brand and warmth was not significant, and for banks only warmth was decisive (R^2 = .47, β=.550, p < .001). Perceptions regarding warmth (feeling) and competence (facts) are thus rather or less significant, according to the product category.

CONCLUSION

For most researched brands, warmth and/or competence were of great importance. Warmth and competence are strong forecasters of attraction power, brand loyalty, and word-of-mouth advertising. Specifically, as we assumed, the non-profits benefit the most here. This can however, as is the case with people, also depend on the objective that was pursued (Wojciszke et al., 1998). As opposed to existing literature, it was found in the research that different rules apply for each product category. And sometimes, warmth or competence is not even a significant forecaster of the outcome measures. This has practical implications for marketers, which can determine for each category whether they need to focus properly or not on the increase of perceptions of warmth and/or competence for their brand. This appears to be an interesting field for further research, particularly because the research was limited in the number of product categories and brands that were researched. Future research by the authors will then further focus on studying the antecedents of warmth and competence per category.

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