Consumer–brand relationship quality: When and how it helps brand extensions ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Two studies demonstrate that strong brand relationship quality (BRQ) enhances consumer judgments about brand extensions. Different methods (survey vs. experiment), participants (real consumers vs. college students), and cultural contexts (Korea vs. Canada) demonstrate that this effect generalizes. Study results suggest that this effect only occurs for two moderately-low-fit extensions: the extension and the parent are similar product categories with inconsistent attributes, or dissimilar product categories with consistent attributes. Two different cognitive processes underlie the BRQ effects depending on these conditions.

1. Introduction

Prior research emphasizes long-term relationships' importance in business settings (e.g., Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Consumer researchers support extending the relationship construct, primarily as consumer–brand relationships (e.g., Fournier, 1998), but relatively limited research informs this topic and most work is qualitative (Fournier, 1998; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), with a few exceptions (cf., Aggarwal, 2004; Park & Kim, 2001; Park, Kim, & Kim, 2002). The present research provides empirical evidence for the positive effect of strong consumer–brand relationship or brand relationship quality (BRQ) on consumers' evaluation of a brand extension (Fournier, 1998). Two studies identify underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions for the effect to occur.

The two studies differ in terms of method (survey vs. experiment), participants (real consumers vs. college students), and culture (Korea vs. Canada). They demonstrate that strong BRQ influences brand extension judgments positively; however, two extension characteristics, product category similarity and attribute consistency, moderate the effect. Further, the research identifies two different cognitive processes that underlie the effect. Results show that the positive effect of

BRQ on extension judgments occurs only when the overall parent-extension fit is moderately low: when the extension and the parent are *either* similar product categories with inconsistent attributes *or* dissimilar product categories with consistent attributes.

2. Theoretical considerations and hypothesis developments

2.1. Brand extension judgments

Over the past two decades, an important research focus involves factors influencing consumer judgment about brand extensions. Researchers propose many factors that may influence consumers' acceptance of extensions. Most research focuses on the fit between a brand extension and parent brand (Keller, 2003), demonstrating product category similarity is important (e.g., Aaker & Keller, 1990; Ahluwalia, 2008; Völcknera & Sattler, 2007). This category-similarity effect often results from a category-based judgment process. That is, when a brand extension is similar to the parent brand category, consumers base the extension evaluations on the brand category's favorableness (Boush & Loken, 1991; Milberg, Park, & McCarthy, 1997).

Prior research also investigates more specific brand extension characteristics as determinants of extension judgments. For example, evidence shows consumers likely evaluate a brand extension more favorably when specific parent brand associations or attributes are highly relevant (e.g., Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994). Concept consistency between the general image of the extension category and the parent's brand concept (functional vs. symbolic) increases the favorable judgment (Park, Milberg, & Lawson, 1991). Individuals evaluate an extension more favorably when accompanied with another complementary extension than when introduced alone (Shine, Park, & Wyer, 2007).

Other research examines contextual and individual factors that might affect extension judgments such as mood state (Barone, Miniard, & Romeo, 2000), rational/holistic versus analytic processing (Ahluwalia, 2008; Monga & John, 2007), and construal level (Kim & John, 2008).

Most investigations focus on cognitive factors, mainly emanating from the stimuli or contexts. Surprisingly, little is known about motivational factors (see Maoz & Tybout, 2002; Park et al., 2002; Yeo & Park, 2006 for exceptions). The present research proposes the consumer–brand relationship quality (BRQ), also reflects consumers' strong motivation toward the brand (Fournier, 1998), strongly influences extension judgments, and identifies the boundary conditions and mediation processes for the BRQ effect to occur.

2.2. Brand relationship quality (BRQ)

Brand researchers traditionally assess how consumers perceive and evaluate brands examining brand attitudes, brand evaluations, or perceived brand quality (Keller, 2003). More recently, researchers note that consumers differ not only in brand perception, but also how they *relate* to brands (Fournier, 1998; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). For example, consumers often do not distinguish between brands and brand manufacturers or representatives. Further, marketers often attempt to induce consumers to think of their brands as a living by employing personification, animism, and anthropomorphosis as well as using human characters and other attributes (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Moon, 2000). Brand associations with human qualities lead people to develop emotional attachments similar to relationships they form with other people. In fact, motivations and norms governing interpersonal relationships likely guide people's interactions with brands (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004) and consumers describe their relationships with brands in social relationship terms (e.g., Coke Classic relationships as "best friendships" and shampoo relationships as "flings") (Fournier, 1998).

Conceptually, consumer–brand relationship or brand relationship quality (BRQ) is much richer than overall brand evaluations or behavioral intentions. BRQ further reflects a strong emotional and motivational tie with a brand. Specifically, researchers conceptualize BRQ as multifaceted, including several relationship components such as affective and socio-motive attachments (e.g., love/passion, self-connection, and nostalgia), behavioral ties (e.g., interdependence and commitment), and supportive cognitive beliefs (e.g., trust, intimacy, and brand partner quality) (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Fournier, 1994, 1998; Park et al., 2002). Combining these components yields strong and durable consumer–brand relationships.

2.3. Implications for BRQ effects on brand extension evaluations

People with a strong relationship tend to hold relationship components firmly in memory as a form of relational schema. These components activate spontaneously upon the encounter with the relationship partner, guiding individuals' subsequent judgments and behaviors about the partner (e.g., Baldwin, 1992). People with strong versus weak or no brand relationships might interpret the relationship partner's acts more favorably, particularly when the act evaluation is ambiguous (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). This positive bias sometimes occurs, even if a relationship partner commits a transgression which violates the implicit or explicit rules guiding relationship performance and evaluation (Metts, 1994; Wiseman, 1986). A longitudinal investigation of evolving relationships between consumers and brands shows that consumers maintain the relationships even during transgression acts, depending on the nature of existing brand relationships (Aaker et al., 2004). Analogically, consumers with strong brand relationships view extensions as an act committed by a brand partner and the aforementioned positive bias of strong relationship likely occurs. In other words, BRQ positively influences evaluations of the brand's act (i.e., a brand extension) and consumers with a strong BRQ versus weak BRQ likely evaluate the brand extension more favorably.

However, the degree of an extension-parent fit likely moderates the BRQ effect as it affects consumers' categorization processes and their motivation to engage in elaborate processing for judgments (Boush & Loken, 1991). When an extension closely fits with the parent, consumers rapidly categorize the extension as belonging to the parent category and their motivation to carefully examine the extension's quality is low. In this case, consumers would evaluate the extension favorably on the basis of this high fit. On the other hand, low-fit extensions instantly cause consumers to classify the extension as *not* belonging to the parent brand, and consumers would evaluate these low-fit extensions unfavorably. Thus, the positive BRQ effect unlikely occurs for either very high- or very low-fit extensions. This proposition is consistent with the previous research suggesting that consumers typically evaluate high-fit extensions favorably and low-fit extensions unfavorably and other contextual or individual factors do not easily affect these judgments (Ahluwalia, 2008; Barone et al., 2000; Monga & John, 2007).

On the other hand, contextual and individual factors seemingly influence consumers' evaluations of a moderately low-fit extension. For example, individuals' positive mood enhances extension judgments only for moderately low-fit extensions (Barone et al., 2000). Holistic or relational processing (Ahluwalia, 2008; Monga & John, 2007) appear to enhance extension judgments, but the effect less likely occurs for unambiguously high- or low-fit extensions. These observations suggest that the positive BRQ effect likely operates only in situations in which the extension's characteristics have an ambiguous fit with the parent (i.e., when an extension exhibits a moderately low fit).

Brand extension research typically examines the fit between an extension and parent based on either product-category similarity (Aaker & Keller, 1990) or attribute-level consistency (Loken & John, 1993), but studies rarely consider both. Typically, communication about new consumer products contains information about both the product category and key benefits/attributes. In this case, both product category and key attributes combine to produce the perception of an overall extension-parent fit. That is, an extension exhibits a high fit if the product category is similar to and the attribute is consistent with the parent's; a low fit impression forms if the product category is dissimilar and the attribute is inconsistent; and a moderately low fit occurs if the product category is similar but the attribute is consistent or vice-versa. The category similarity and attribute consistency in combination suggest unique implications for the BRQ effect. Therefore, the present research considers both factors in a single study by asking participants to evaluate either a categorically similar or dissimilar extension product while mentioning the key attribute, which is either consistent or inconsistent with the key association of the parent brand. In this case, BRQ likely influences only two moderately low-fit conditions—the extension and the parent are similar categories but inconsistent attributes, or they are dissimilar categories but consistent attributes.

H1. Strong BRQ consumers evaluate moderately low fit extensions more positively than weak BRQ consumers. This effect will be less evident, however, when an extension has either a very high fit or a very low fit.

2.4. Mediation processes

Considering both category similarity and attribute consistency, at least two mediating processes seem to underlie the influence of BRQ. First, BRQ may increase individuals' perceptions of the overall extension-parent fit and enhance extension judgments ("*perceived-fit*" process). Second, BRQ may enhance consumers' extension judgments via first increasing their subjective beliefs in the extension's attribute

claim. By definition, consumers with a strong BRQ exhibit stronger brand trust than weak BRQ consumers, they more likely believe the extension's claims ("*attribute-belief*" process).

The "perceived-fit" and "attribute-belief" processes could contribute independently to the BRQ effect on extension judgments. However, one process may predominate, depending on different extension conditions. First, the "perceived-fit" process likely predominates when an extension and the parent are dissimilar categories but consistent attributes. Extensions dissimilar to the parent category are risky and lead to unfavorable evaluations (Yeo & Park, 2006). However, social relationship research shows that when people with a strong relationship learn the relationship partner's non-normative acts, they tend to seek information to understand the behaviors to help maintain their relationship; they often interpret the behaviors as less non-normative (e.g., Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996). As such, strong BRQ versus weak BRQ consumers more likely attend to specific extension attributes when the categories are dissimilar. If they find the extension's attributes highly consistent with the parent brand's associations, they likely relate the extension to the parent more easily, thereby perceiving the overall extension-parent fit more strongly. Consequently, consumers likely evaluate the extension favorably. BRQ likely enhances brand extension judgments via first increasing perceptions of the overall extension-parent fit for extensions with dissimilar categories with consistent attributes.

A second, "attribute-belief" process suggests BRQ may enhance extension judgments via first increasing the consumers' beliefs in the claimed extension attribute. However, this belief-based advantage of a strong BRQ likely occurs only when enough room exists for trust, implied by a strong BRQ, to come into play in increasing consumers' beliefs in the claimed attribute. This notion would be the case if the extension and the parent are inconsistent attributes but similar categories. When the extension's claimed attribute is consistent with the parent's, consumers likely believe such a claim, regardless of their BRQ level. If not only the attribute is inconsistent, but the product category is dissimilar, even individuals with a strong BRQ may have difficulties in believing the claimed attribute. When an extension's attribute is inconsistent but product category is similar, strong BRQ versus weak BRQ consumers likely form stronger beliefs in the extension's claimed attribute, and they evaluate the extension more favorably.

H2a. When an extension is dissimilar to the parent's product category and consistent with the parent's attribute, perceptions increase in the overall extension-parent fit mediates the positive BRQ effect on extension evaluations.

H2b. When an extension is similar to the parent's product category and inconsistent with the parent's attribute, beliefs increase in the claimed attribute mediates the positive BRQ effect on extension evaluations.

Two studies evaluate the preceding hypotheses. Study 1 tests and confirms H1 in a field experiment. Although Park et al. (2002) show similar results, the present study examines different product categories and employs more refined measures. Study 2 replicates Study 1 in a lab experiment and confirms the mediating processes hypothesized in H2a and H2b.

3. Study 1

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Respondents and design

The sample consists of 300 married females (aged 25 to 55) living in a metropolitan city in Korea. Participants are frequent users of various products manufactured by a focal parent brand. Samples were drawn by a quota sampling, based on local demographics (e.g., age). Respondents underwent random assignment to one of four combinations of category similarity (similar vs. dissimilar) and attribute

consistency (consistent vs. inconsistent). They later formed two groups of BRQ (weak vs. strong) based on the median BRQ score of their self-report measures. This study employs a 2 (category similarity) by 2 (attribute consistency) by 2 (BRQ level) between-subjects design.

3.1.2. Parent brand and extension products

The study's focal parent brand, *Pulmuone*, is a Korean national brand of grocery food products, mainly selling Korean traditional food items (e.g., tofu). *Pulmuone* has a strong reputation for healthfulness and wholesome food, while it has weak associations with rich and exotic tastes or flavors.

A pretest identified a new grocery food item ("baguette") for a similar product category and a non-food item ("cologne") for a dissimilar product category. The category similarity of the extension was manipulated by these two product categories. Another pretest identified two attributes: "natural ingredients with no artificial additives" (consistent attribute) and "rich and exotic flavor/aroma" (inconsistent attribute). Care was given to select reasonably relevant and important attributes for both extension categories. Finally, four different extensions were created by varying the combination of the two product categories (similar vs. dissimilar) and the two attributes (consistent vs. inconsistent).

3.1.3. Procedure

A professional survey organization administered the survey to individual respondents in face-to-face interviews. Respondents assigned randomly to one of the four conditions answered questionnaires fitting the specific extension product to be evaluated. They read an introduction of the extension as a product that the company was considering seriously for new product development. With this preamble, respondents saw a brief product description such as, "Introducing *Pulmuone* baguette, natural ingredients with no artificial additives." Respondents were requested to provide feedback about the proposed new product.

Respondents evaluated the extension product along two 7-point scales, ranging from 1 (very bad/very low quality) to 7 (very good/very high quality) The averaged responses to these items formed a composite index of extension evaluations for analysis (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$).

Next, the strength of each respondent's relationship with the focal parent brand (BRQ) was assessed using 24 attitudinal questions. Question construction was based on the existing conceptual basis (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2000; Fournier, 1994, 1998) and empirical results (Park et al., 2002) (see Table 1). In the survey, respondents indicated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each item along a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Creating BRQ groups (weak vs. strong)

Factor analysis and a varimax rotation looked for major themes in respondents' ratings on the 24 BRQ items. As suggested in the literature, this analysis resulted in eight factors, accounting for 81.6% of the rating's total variance.

Preliminary analyses determined whether or not each factor/dimension distinctively influences extension evaluations, but the analyses produced very similar results across the eight dimensions. Thus, a composite BRQ index was constructed by averaging the ratings of eight dimensions. The median score divided weak versus strong BRQ groups (BRQ means for weak vs. strong BRQ group: $M = 3.25$ vs. 4.66, $F(1, 298) = 425.06$, $p < .001$). This BRQ group serves as a variable in the analyses for hypothesis testing.

3.2.2. Extension evaluations

Extension evaluation scores were analyzed as a function of category similarity (similar vs. dissimilar), attribute consistency (consistent vs. inconsistent), and BRQ (weak vs. strong) (Table 2).

Table 1
Factor analysis results for BRQ measures (Studies 1 and 2).

	Factor loadings	
	Study 1	Study 2
Nostalgia		
I have at least one fond memory that involves using this brand.	.72	.82
This brand reminds me of what I was like at a previous stage of my life.	.80	.85
This brand reminds me of someone in my life.	.80	.64
Self-connection		
This brand and I have a lot in common.	.78	.87
This brand's image and my self-image are similar in a lot of ways.	.78	.73
This brand says a lot about the kind of person I am or want to be.	.74	.72
Commitment		
It would be destructive in some ways if I have to select anther brand.	.75	.76
I will stay with this brand through good times and bad.	.79	.63
I have made a pledge of sorts to stick with this brand.	.70	.80
Trust		
Using this brand somehow makes me feel at home.	.77	.78
This brand adds a sense of stability into my life.	.71	.74
Using this brand somehow makes me feel safe and secure.	.84	.78
Intimacy		
I know things about this brand that many people just don't know.	.66	.84
I know a lot about the company that makes this brand.	.77	.89
I feel as if I really understand this brand.	.78	.76
Partner quality of the brand		
This brand treats me like an important and valuable customer.	.70	.70
This brand takes good care of me.	.79	.59
This brand plays an important role in my life.	.63	.53
Partner quality of the consumer		
I want to contribute to this brand.	.77	.71
I am willing to recommend this brand to others.	.58	.78
When I have a good idea for this brand, I want to let it know the idea.	.73	.61
Love/passion		
No other brand in the category can quite take the place of this brand.	.84	.81
I have a powerful attraction toward this brand.	.60	.79
I have feelings for this brand that I don't for many other brands.	.52	.57

Table 2
Extension evaluations, purchase intention, and mediators as a function of attribute consistency, category similarity, and BRQ (Studies 1 and 2).

	Consistent attribute		Inconsistent attribute	
	Similar category	Dissimilar category	Similar category	Dissimilar category
Study 1				
Overall evaluations				
Weak BRQ	4.76	3.76[a]	4.52[a]	4.33
Strong BRQ	4.94	4.54[b]	4.94[b]	4.40
Study 2				
Overall evaluations				
Weak BRQ	6.00	4.01[a]	4.24[a]	4.50
Strong BRQ	6.30	5.70[b]	5.57[b]	4.98
Purchase intension				
Weak BRQ	4.90	3.27[a]	2.54[a]	3.05
Strong BRQ	5.14	4.67[b]	5.31[b]	4.07
Attribute belief				
Weak BRQ	5.81	4.43[a]	3.68[a]	4.10
Strong BRQ	5.88	5.83[b]	4.72[b]	5.22
Perceived fit				
Weak BRQ	5.56	3.32[a]	4.02	3.18
Strong BRQ	5.45	5.26[b]	4.80	3.45

Note. Different superscripts between low and high BRQ indicate a significant difference at $p < .05$.

First, the extension evaluations are more favorable when they are similar than dissimilar to the parent brand category ($M = 4.81$ vs. 4.27; $F(1, 291) = 21.19$, $p < .01$). Second, BRQ's main effect on the brand extension is significant. Specifically, respondents evaluate brand extensions more favorably when their BRQ is strong than when their BRQ is weak ($M = 4.75$ vs. 4.34; $F(1, 291) = 9.94$, $p < .01$). As expected, however, the BRQ effect is qualified by a significant 3-way interaction of category similarity, attribute consistency, and BRQ ($F(1, 291) = 4.35$, $p < .05$). Planned comparisons reveal results consistent with H1. The BRQ effect is significant *both* in the dissimilar-category and consistent-attribute condition ($M = 4.54$ vs. 3.76; $F(1, 291) = 9.04$, $p < .01$) *and* in the similar-category and inconsistent-attribute condition ($M = 4.94$ vs. 4.52; $F(1, 291) = 4.35$, $p < .05$). By contrast, the effect is not significant when the extension and the parent are both similar and consistent, or when they are both dissimilar and inconsistent ($p > .10$) (Fig. 1).

3.3. Discussion

Results from Study 1 support BRQ's hypothesized effect on extension evaluations. Adult respondents with a strong BRQ evaluate the extension product more favorably than those with a weak BRQ. Further, this effect is contingent upon the level of fit, as predicted by H1. BRQ significantly affects extension judgments only when the extension and the parent have a moderately low fit (i.e., similar category and inconsistent attribute, or dissimilar category and consistent attribute). However, BRQ has no effect when the fit is either very high or very low.

These results require caution in the interpretation. First, the BRQ effect obtained in Study 1 might be culture-specific as collective Eastern cultures emphasize "relationships" to a great extent (e.g., Kang, Shaver, Sue, Min, & Jing, 2003). Second, the survey contains a relatively long series of questions prior to the extension evaluation task. Possibly, the method might have induced a heuristic process by which participants evaluated extensions based on global features, such as extension-parent fit. Study 2 attempts to address these limitations and empirically assesses the mediation processes postulated in H2a and H2b.

4. Study 2

Study 2 extends the findings of Study 1 in three ways. First, to generalize the results obtained in Study 1, Study 2 uses different
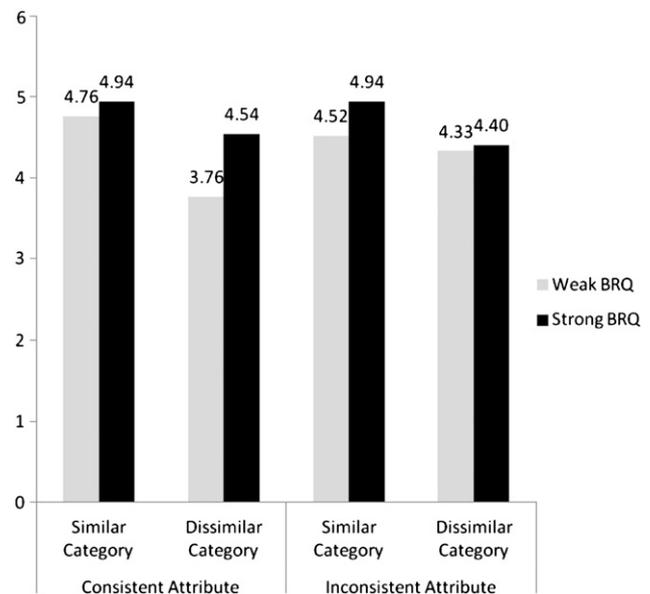

Fig. 1. Extension evaluations (Study 1).

methods, stimuli, countries, and dependent measures. Specifically, the present study (vs. Study 1) employs an experimental approach (vs. field survey), uses durable goods (vs. non-durable goods) as target stimuli, recruits individuals as participants in Canada (vs. Korea), and assesses behavioral intentions as a dependent measure in addition to overall extension evaluations. Second, participants in Study 2 (vs. Study 1) perform the extension evaluation task without a precedent task. Third, the study examines the mediating processes for the BRQ effect on extension evaluations.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants and design

Undergraduate students (n = 160 from a large university in Canada) participated in the experiment for extra credit in introductory management courses. The experimental design follows Study 1, employing a 2 (category similarity) by 2 (attribute consistency) by 2 (BRQ level) between-subjects design.

4.1.2. Parent brand and extension products

IBM, a well-known brand of computer-related products, serves as the parent brand. The extension's category similarity manipulation is a computer-related item (i.e., portable video game console − similar) or a sporting goods item (i.e., snowboard boots − dissimilar).

Several pretests identified consistent or inconsistent attributes with the key associations of *IBM* as well as equally relevant and important for both extension product categories. The pretest results identified two attributes, "innovative" and "comfortable to use" as consistent and inconsistent attributes (consistency ratings (n = 40): $M = 5.43$ vs. 3.96, $F(1, 38) = 8.85$, $p < .01$). Thus the extension product involves one of the four combinations of the two product categories (game console vs. snowboard boots) and the two key attributes (innovative vs. comfortable to use).

4.1.3. Procedure

Participants were seated in front of computers and given randomly a questionnaire that contained one of the four extension products. The procedures followed Study 1.

After reading a brief extension product description, respondents indicated their overall evaluations of the extension along two 7-point scales, ranging from 1 (very bad/low quality) to 7 (very good/very high quality). Averaged responses to these items later formed a composite index of extension evaluations (Cronbach's α = .92). Next, participants indicated their purchase intentions along two 7-point scales ranging from 1 (very unlikely to purchase/to recommend to my friends) to 7 (very likely to purchase/to recommend to my friends). Averaged items formed a composite index of purchase intentions (Cronbach's α = .90).

Next, factors potentially mediating the extension evaluations were assessed. Specifically, participants reported their agreement with four items along scales, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The first two scale items examine the strength of the participants' beliefs in the claimed attribute (i.e., "The new product is innovative (comfortable)," and, "I am confident that the new product possesses the claimed attribute"); the next two pertained to the perceived overall fit between the extension and the parent brand (i.e., "Overall, this new product is similar to the *IBM* brand," and, "Overall, this new product is typical of the *IBM* brand").

Lastly, the 24 items used in Study 1 measure the participants' BRQ with the *IBM* brand. As in Study 1, a factor analysis confirms the expected structure (see Table 1), and thus averages of participants' ratings on the items formed a composite index of BRQ scores. As in Study 1, participants were placed into the weak versus strong BRQ groups, based on a median split (BRQ means: $M = 2.18$ vs. 3.75, $F(1, 158) = 292.42$, $p < .01$).

In addition, participants' general brand attitudes toward the parent brand (IBM) were assessed, independent of the BRQ measures, by employing three 7-point scale items, ranging from 1 (very unfavorable/dislikable/negative) to 7 (very favorable/likable/positive). The averaged responses on these scales formed an overall index of general brand attitudes (Cronbach's α = .93).

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Extension evaluations

Participants' extension evaluations were analyzed as a function of category similarity, attribute consistency, and BRQ (Table 2).

First, participants evaluate the similar extension more favorably than the dissimilar-category extension ($M = 5.48$ vs. 4.79; $F(1, 152) = 8.40$, $p < .01$). In addition, participants evaluate the extension more favorably when the attribute is consistent rather than inconsistent with the key associations of *IBM* ($M = 5.45$ vs. 4.79; $F(1, 152) = 7.18$, $p < .01$).

Of greater importance, BRQ's effect of and interactions with the other experimental variables are significant. Participants with strong BRQ versus weak BRQ evaluate the extension more favorably ($M = 5.65$ vs. 4.59; $F(1, 152) = 14.20$, $p < .01$). Findings are consistent with H1 and results from Study 1; however, a significant 3-way interaction of category similarity, attribute consistency, and BRQ qualifies the effect ($F(1, 152) = 4.91$, $p < .05$) (Fig. 2).

Planned contrasts reveal that the BRQ effect is significant only in the moderately low-fit extension conditions—the dissimilar-category and consistent-attribute extension condition ($F(1, 152) = 11.61$, $p < .01$) and the similar-category and inconsistent-attribute extension condition ($F(1, 152) = 6.94$, $p < .01$). By contrast, the effect is negligible in both high- and low-fit extension conditions ($p > .10$).

A covariate analysis including general brand attitudes as a covariate produces virtually identical results. This analysis statistically controls the general brand attitude's effect on extension evaluations, and provides a more stringent test for BRQ's effect and interactions with other variables. Not surprisingly, general brand attitudes significantly correlate with extension evaluations ($F(1, 151) = 4.30$, $p < .05$). More importantly, the covariate analysis yields a significant main effect of BRQ ($F(1, 151) = 9.98$, $p < .005$) and a significant 3-way interaction of category similarity, attribute consistency, and
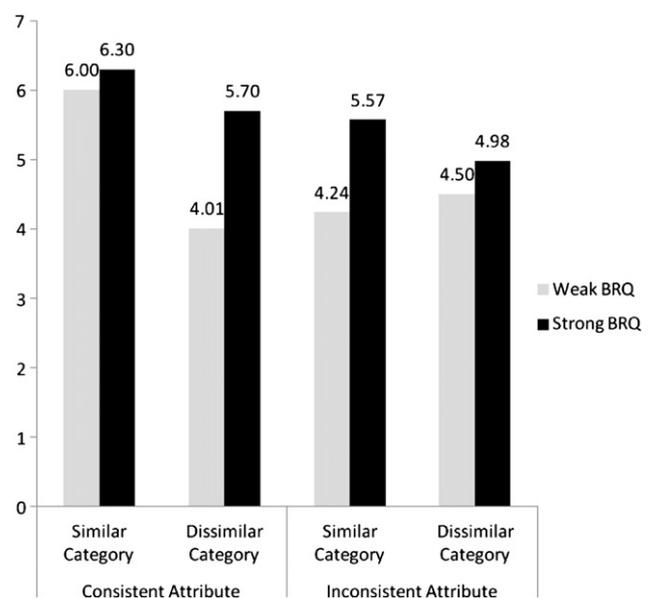
Fig. 2. Extension evaluations (Study 2).

BRQ ($F(1, 151) = 4.03$, $p < .05$), as consistent with results from the original analysis. These results strongly confirm H1.

4.2.2. Purchase intentions

The pattern of participants' purchase intentions is generally consistent with the pattern of extension evaluations. Participants indicate higher purchase intentions when they have a strong versus weak BRQ ($M = 4.78$ vs. 3.34; $F(1, 152) = 18.43$, $p < .01$). Of greater importance, this effect is qualified by a significant three-way interaction of category similarity, attribute consistency, and BRQ ($F(1, 151) = 5.26$, $p < .05$). As expected, the BRQ effect is significant in the dissimilar-category and consistent-attribute condition ($F(1, 152) = 4.77$, $p < .05$) and in the similar-category and inconsistent-attribute condition ($F(1, 152) = 19.05$, $p < .01$). Results are negligible in both high- and low-fit extension conditions ($p > .10$).

4.2.3. Mediation analyses

Although BRQ positively influences extension judgments (and on purchase intentions) in the two moderately low-fit conditions, the mediating processes conceptually differ under the two conditions. The perceived-fit process mediates the BRQ effect for an extension with dissimilar category and consistent attribute (H2a), whereas the attribute-belief process mediates the effect for an extension with similar category and inconsistent attribute (H2b). Mediation process tests confirm the results (see Muller, Yzerbyt, & Judd, 2008).

In the dissimilar-category and consistent-attribute condition (H2a), participants with a strong versus weak BRQ perceive a higher level of extension-parent fit ($M = 5.26$ vs. 3.32; $F(1, 41) = 14.28$, $p < .001$) and believe in the claimed attribute more strongly ($M = 5.83$ vs. 4.43; $F(1, 41) = 7.27$, $p < .05$). When perceptions of fit are included in the analysis as a covariate; however, an analysis of covariance indicates that the original BRQ effect becomes non-significant ($F(1, 40) = 2.60$, $p > .10$) and the covariate significantly predicts extension evaluations ($F(1, 40) = 13.10$, $p < .001$). At the same time, the original BRQ effect remains somewhat significant ($F(1, 40) = 3.42$, $p = .07$) when the attribute-belief ratings are covaried. Consistent with H2a, these results suggest the perceived-fit process is more likely than the attribute-belief process to mediate the BRQ effect in the dissimilar-category and consistent-attribute condition.

On the other hand, in the similar-category and inconsistent-attribute condition (H2b), participants with a strong versus weak BRQ tend to believe in the claimed attribute more strongly ($M = 4.72$ vs. 3.68; $F(1, 38) = 3.78$, $p = .059$). By contrast, the two groups do not differ in their perceptions of extension-parent fit ($F(1, 38) = 1.76$, $p > .10$). In addition, when attribute-belief ratings are covaried, analyses of covariance indicate that the original BRQ effect decreases to marginal significance ($F(1, 37) = 3.76$, $p > .05$) while the covariate significantly predicts extension evaluations ($F(1, 37) = 12.23$, $p < .001$). However, the original BRQ effect remains significant ($F(1, 37) = 5.44$, $p < .05$) when perceptions of extension-parent are covaried. As hypothesized in H2b, these results suggest the attribute-belief process versus the perceived-fit process more likely mediates the positive BRQ effect in the similar-category and inconsistent-attribute condition.

4.3. Discussion

Results from Study 2 confirm the positive BRQ effect on extension evaluations and contingency on the combination of category similarity and attribute consistency over different cultures, methods, and experimental stimuli. Further, these effects generalize to behavioral intentions toward the extension product. Finally, the mediation analyses suggest that the BRQ effect in the two moderately low-fit conditions is attributable to two different cognitive processes, as hypothesized in H2a and H2b.

5. General discussion

5.1. Theoretical contribution

The present research demonstrates the benefits of strong consumer–brand relationships for brand extension judgments and identifies the boundary conditions and mediation processes for the effect to operate. First, BRQ significantly improves brand extension judgments. This effect only applies when the overall fit between an extension and the parent brand is moderately low. These conditions exist when the extension and the parent are similar categories but inconsistent attributes, or when the extension and the parent are dissimilar categories but consistent attributes. The research validates these results consistently, obtained both in the overall evaluations and in behavioral intentions and generalized over different countries, survey versus experimental methods, real consumers versus student participants, and durable versus non-durable goods. Finally, the BRQ effect and contingency on category similarity and attribute consistency remain consistent, even when the effect of general brand attitude measures regarding the parent brand is controlled statistically. To date, no prior record of these results exists in the literature.

The BRQ's significance is contingent on the level of fit constructed by category similarity and attribute consistency. These results suggest that BRQ influences extension judgments only when the overall fit between the extension and the parent brand is neither very high nor very low. This contingency is consistent with previous findings that the effects of situational factors (e.g., mood) and individual characteristics (e.g., relational vs. analytic processors) are most pronounced when the overall similarity or fit between an extension and the parent brand is moderately low (Ahluwalia, 2008; Barone et al., 2000; Monga & John, 2007). More generally, these findings are consistent with the context effect literature showing that context effects most likely operate when the target object is ambiguous in rendering judgments and decisions (e.g., Higgins, 1996). On the theoretical side, the present research provides insights into mediating processes by which BRQ influences extension judgments. Proposals for two alternative mediating processes are possible. The first, the "perceived-fit" process suggests that BRQ influences consumers' perceptions of overall fit between an extension and the parent brand, affecting extension product evaluations. The second, the "attribute-belief" process posits that BRQ influences the degree to which consumers hold beliefs in the claimed attribute of the extension, thereby affecting evaluations of the extension.

Although both mediation processes could contribute independently to the BRQ effect on extension judgments, the findings suggest that one process predominates, depending on the physical and functional characteristics of the extensions. Specifically, mediation analyses in Study 2 suggest that the perceived-fit process likely mediates the BRQ effect when an extension and the parent are dissimilar at the category level but consistent at the attribute level. The evidence further suggests the attribute-belief process is responsible for the BRQ effect when an extension and the parent are similar at the category level but inconsistent at the attribute level. By and large, when encountering an extension in a relationship that does not appear to have a good fit with the brand, consumers with a strong BRQ seem motivated to attend to and process additional information about the extension to justify their acceptance of the extension (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996). Consumer's additional effort might occur only when the justification is feasible, that is, when they can find a fit between a dissimilar-category extension and the parent on the basis of their high level of attribute consistency, or when they can increase their beliefs in the extension's inconsistent attribute due to a large overlap between the extension and the parent at the product category level. In the latter case, strong BRQ individuals perhaps place more trust in the brand's ability to incorporate the "new" attribute into the extension product of the category in which the brand has operated

successfully. Nevertheless, future research that provides more direct evidence for different mediating processes in different conditions and that identifies more clear reasons for the contingency shows potential.

5.2. Managerial implications

Managerial implications of findings from the present research are quite straightforward. For example, companies successfully managing their brands with strong customer relationships can consider brand extensions as a way of introducing new products more aggressively than they might normally do otherwise. For example, they may consider expanding into new product categories that are physically or functionally dissimilar to the current categories, if they can assure that the new product's attribute concept is consistent with the original brand associations. Alternatively, they may introduce variants of their existing products with totally new attributes that might be quite inconsistent with the original brand associations, as long as the product categories are not remote to the original categories. In sum, this research provides evidence for the strategic and managerial importance of developing strong consumer–brand relationships. Therefore, brand managers should develop and manage their brands from the perspective of the multi-faceted nature of the consumer relationship and not merely based on traditional assessments of consumers' perceptions about their brands.

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