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How Life-Role Transitions Shape Consumer Responses to Brand Extensions

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ABSTRACT

Life-role transition is a state when people pass through different life stages that involves changes in identities, roles, and responsibilities. Across six studies, the current research shows that consumers under life-role transition have more favorable attitudes towards distant (i.e., low- or moderate-fit) brand extensions compared to consumers who are not under life-role transition. The effect is driven by a sense of self-concept ambiguity associated with life-role transition, which subsequently prompts dialectical thinking that helps to improve perceived fit between a parent brand and its extension, and finally results in more favorable brand extension evaluation. This effect diminishes for (1) near (i.e., high-fit) brand extensions that do not require dialectical thinking for perceiving fit, (2) for sub-brand (vs. direct brand) architecture, for which there is less of a need to use dialectical thinking to reconcile the inconsistencies between a parent brand and its extension, and (3) when consumers perceive they have resources to cope with the life-role transition which attenuates self-concept ambiguity. This research offers important theoretical and managerial insights by focusing on life-role transition—an important aspect of consumers' lives that has been largely under-researched, and by demonstrating how and why it elicits more favorable attitudes toward brand extensions.

Keywords: life-role transition, brand extensions, self-concept ambiguity, dialectical thinking

Looking for new avenues for growth, brands frequently launch extensions into distant product/service categories. For example, Capital One cafes, Ferrari theme parks, Huggies day care centers, and NASCAR romance novels. Reflecting this trend, academic research has focused its attention on distant brand extensions (i.e., extensions that are perceived as low- or moderate-fit with the brand's existing core line of products, Chun et al. 2015; Cutright, Bettman, and Fitzsimons 2013; Johnson et al. 2019; Meyvis, Goldsmith, and Dhar 2012; Monga and John 2007; Parker et al. 2018), and forwarded multiple benefits that such extensions offer, such as allowing consumers to variety-seek within the brand, maintaining relevance among consumers, expanding revenue streams, and diversifying sales risk (Chun et al. 2015; Parker et al. 2018). Indeed, the launch of the Dyson Supersonic hair dryer in 2016 allowed the Dyson brand, which until then mostly focused on vacuum cleaners, to diversify sales risk and dramatically increase its revenue by 28% to £4.4 billion (Chandler 2019). Similarly, Ralph Lauren's extension from apparel and fragrance to hospitality helped the company pique interest among consumers "with experiential and unique expression of the brand" (Ralph Lauren Corporation 2019). However, despite the immense popularity of brand extensions in general and some successful cases in the marketplace, the failure rate is surprisingly as high as 80-90% (Full Surge 2018). Thus, understanding factors that influence consumer evaluations of brand extensions is crucial.

Much of the existing research has examined consumer variables such as mood states (Barone, Miniard and Romeo 2000), motivation (Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran 1998), cultural style of thinking (Monga and John 2007), knowledge (Broniarczyk and Alba 1994) and prior consumer experiences (Sood and Keller 2012). Missing however, has been a consideration of how dynamics in consumers' life cycles alter their reactions to brand extensions. Adolescence, marriage, parenthood, starting college, and career changes are examples of some of the

transitional events that consumers will experience at some point in their lives (Noble and Walker 1997). They require major behavioral adaptations within a relatively short period of time and have far-reaching influence on consumption behavior (Duhigg 2013; Mathur, Moschis, and Lee 2008). In this research, we propose life-role transition – a state when people pass through different life stages that involves changes in identities, roles, and responsibilities (Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate 2000; Noble and Walker 1997), as a novel factor that influences how consumers respond to brand extensions.

Every year, around 1.9 million American undergraduates graduated from college (National Center for Education Statistics 2016), 2.2 million American couples married, 0.8 million American couples divorced (National Center for Health Statistics 2016), and 3.9 million babies were born (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2017). A 2019 survey revealed that nearly half (49%) of the respondents made a dramatic career change (e.g., from marketing to engineering, or from teaching to finance; Liu 2019). While there may be a relatively small proportion of the population undergoing transition at any given point in time, an understanding of this phenomena is crucial for firms (Andreasen 1984). Notably, major life events such as the recent Covid-19 global pandemic or the earlier 2008 financial crisis induce the experience of liminality (a stage in the life-role transition process), which is the “hallmark of the career change process” (Ibarra 2020). Confirming this, 61% of women in US are looking to change careers amid the pandemic (NBC News Digital 2020). Life-role transitions can change the course of consumers’ lives and even their consumption activities, with consumers adopting or abandoning brands (Schouten 1991; Sevin and Ladwein 2008). In the bestselling book, “The Power of Habit,” many practitioners observed that going through major life events can greatly impact consumer buying behaviors (Duhigg 2013). Importantly, information about life-role transition is

readily available to managers, through public records (e.g., births, divorces), utility companies (e.g., new relocations), and purchase patterns (e.g., purchase of baby furniture can signal the arrival of a baby in the near future), allowing companies to leverage its value. In fact, Target has been using big data to identify consumers under life-role transition and then aiming marketing interventions at them (e.g., mailing coupons for baby clothes to pregnant women; Duhigg 2013).

In the current research, we propose that for distant brand extensions, life-role transition leads to a perception of self-concept ambiguity, and prompts dialectical thinking, which subsequently increases brand extension fit, and results in more favorable evaluation. In a series of six studies, we demonstrate this phenomenon and its underlying mechanism. In Study 1, we induce life-role transition through advertisements and provide initial evidence for our hypothesis. Study 2 illustrates that life-role transition increases fit perceptions and evaluations for distant (i.e., low- or moderate-fit) brand extensions, but not for near (i.e., high-fit) brand extensions. Study 3 identifies brand architecture as another boundary condition showing that the effect of life-role transition is attenuated when a sub-brand (vs. direct brand) architecture is used, for which there is less of a need to use dialectical thinking to reconcile the inconsistencies between a parent brand and its extension. Studies 4-6 provide direct support for our proposed mechanism by demonstrating the sequential mediation by self-concept ambiguity and dialectical thinking. In addition, Study 5 shows that the effect of life-role transition on brand extension responses is unique to life-role transition and does not extend to general changes in consumers' lives that do not involve role or identity changes. Finally, Study 6 demonstrates that the effect diminishes when consumers perceive they have the resources to cope with the life-role transition, which reduces self-concept ambiguity.

Our findings contribute to a better understanding of brand extension evaluations by showing that life-role transition, a seemingly unrelated life event that consumers undergo when evaluating a brand extension, plays a critical role in determining responses toward distant brand extensions. In so doing, our research contributes to an emerging body of research that calls for a better understanding of how consumers evaluate brand extensions, especially distant brand extensions, in realistic marketplace conditions (Cutright, Bettman, and Fitzsimons 2013; Johnson et al. 2019; Klink and Smith 2001; Meyvis, Goldsmith, and Dhar 2012; Parker et al. 2018), and reveals that consumers' product preferences can be grounded in their life dynamics. Lastly, our findings provide practical suggestions for brand managers. We find that highlighting life-role transitions (in an advertisement), targeting consumers who are naturally undergoing one, or using a sub-brand architecture are effective strategies when launching distant brand extensions.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Brand Extensions

Brand extension occurs when an established brand uses its name to enter a different product category (Keller and Aaker 1992). This is a popular way to introduce new products into the market because companies can leverage their existing brand equity and has therefore aroused a lot of attention (e.g., Chun et al. 2015; Meyvis, Goldsmith, and Dhar 2012; Monga and Gurhan-Canli 2012; Parker et al. 2018). The most important factor that influences brand extension evaluation is perceived fit, which is the overall similarity between a brand extension and the parent brand (Keller and Aaker 1992; Völckner and Sattler 2006). Consumers respond to

a brand extension more favorably if they perceive a connection or fit between the brand extension and its parent brand (Aaker and Keller 1990).

Perceived fit and evaluation of a brand extension can be determined by the characteristics of the parent brand or the extension. For example, Hagtvedt and Patrick (2009) suggested that a luxury brand elicits more favorable fit perceptions and evaluations than a utilitarian brand. Further, situational or chronic consumer characteristics including mood state (Barone et al. 2000), perceptions of control (Cutright, Bettman, and Fitzsimons 2013), and cultural styles of thinking (Monga and John 2007, 2010) can influence consumers' fit perceptions and evaluations. For instance, Cutright, Bettman, and Fitzsimons (2013) demonstrate that consumers with low perceptions of control rejected low-fit brand extensions. In this research, we examine life-role transition as a novel determinant of brand extension fit perceptions and evaluations.

Life-role Transition

Life-role transition is “the psychological or physical movement between life roles, including disengagement from one life role and engagement in another” (Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate 2000). In contrast to general changes that happen in people's lives (e.g., moving an apartment, changing one's exercise type), life-role transition refers to the situations when people's roles or identities are changed. Research has documented a wide range of psychological and behavioral consequences of life-role transition. For instance, life-role transitions like job loss can cause stress because it involves disruption of a previously balanced state (Mathur, Moschis, and Lee 2008), while adults transitioning to life as a parent often have optimistic feelings of enjoyment, pleasure, and excitement (Harwood, McLean, and Durkin 2007). Within consumer research, studies have found that role-transitional events such as divorce and relocation to a

different country can trigger people to purchase aesthetic plastic surgery (Schouten 1991), whereas the experience of first-time motherhood in modern societies results in a search for a healthier life, leisure goods, and new clothes (Sevin and Ladwein 2008); people in a positive career transition, such as promotion engage in self-gift consumption (Mick, DeMoss, and Faber 1992) and symbolic consumption consistent with their new image (Belk 1988); the liminal period of retirement can be a time of consumer identity renaissance, with an increased breadth and depth of identity-related consumption (Schau, Gilly, and Wolfinbarger 2009).

During life-role transition, people are often caught between different identities. They need to disassociate from their previous life role, while their new role may not be established yet (Appau, Ozanne, and Klein 2020; Noble and Walker 1997). As each life role or identity has a set of unique traits and characteristics (Oyserman and Destin 2010), different life roles and identities can generate rather different or even conflicting expectations and self-definitions such as personal values, beliefs, or attitudes. Thus, it can be difficult to balance pre-transition and post-transition roles and be able to have clear and identified idea of what is right, proper, and preferable (Chen et al. 2013). For example, Cantor et al. (1987) revealed that students undergoing transition from high school to college life endure self-concept instability, which subsequently affects their social interactions in college. Thus, we propose that life-role transitions would cause a perception of self-concept ambiguity among people experiencing them.

Self-concept Ambiguity and Dialectical Thinking

Self-concept ambiguity is the opposite state of self-concept clarity, which is defined as “the extent to which self-beliefs are clearly and confidently defined, or internally consistent, and stable” (Campbell et al. 1996; p. 141). Individuals generally desire self-concept clarity, so when

self-concept ambiguity is felt, individuals attempt to alleviate this negative state (e.g., Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009) by affirming unrelated self-aspects (Sherman and Cohen 2006) or maintaining a stable self-concept (by keeping unused subscriptions; Savary and Dhar 2020).

People experiencing self-concept ambiguity triggered by life-role transition are likely to use dialectical thinking as a coping method. Dialectical thinking is a thinking mode characterized by comfort with ambiguity, and the acceptance or tolerance of inconsistencies and contradictions (DeMotta, Chao, and Kramer 2016; Peng and Nisbett 1999). For dialectical thinkers, inconsistencies and opposites can co-exist in the same object or event simultaneously (e.g., Peng and Nisbett 1999; Smith and Tushman 2005). Dialectical thinking allows people to attune to fluctuations in the self-concept, and regard inconsistencies in the self-concept as a natural part of life and be more accepting of unanchored or unestablished self-concept situations (English and Chen 2007). Specifically, research shows that people high (vs. low) in dialecticism view the self as possessing inconsistent traits and holding contradictory beliefs (Spencer-Rodgers et al. 2009). Similarly, higher dialectical thinking is associated with greater self-concept ambiguity (e.g., discrepancies between the actual and ideal selves or between public and private selves; Diener and Diener 1995; Spencer-Rodgers and Peng 2004). Given that dialectical thinking can potentially alleviate people's perceived threat from self-concept ambiguity, we predict that dialectical thinking is likely to be triggered among individuals under self-concept ambiguity.

The Current Research

We investigate the impact of consumers' life-role transition on their responses to brand extensions. Consumers' response to a brand extension is largely determined by perceived fit between the parent brand and the extension (Aaker and Keller 1990; Völckner and Sattler 2006).

While a near brand extension, which is in a similar product category as its parent brand is regarded as high-fit, we expect inherent inconsistencies and even contradictions exist between a distant brand extension and its parent brand. Distant brand extensions such as Honda furniture and Coke shampoo, represent inconsistencies and even contradictions, in which opposing elements are presented together (i.e., Honda makes products with engines, and furniture does not have engines; Coke is edible, but shampoo is not).

As discussed earlier, people experiencing self-concept ambiguity triggered by life-role transition are likely to engage in dialectical thinking. Dialectical thinking allows people to integrate dissimilar or inconsistent beliefs (Smith and Tushman 2005), accept that contradictions can exist in harmony, and view two opposing positions as both true (Peng and Nisbett 1999). For a distant brand extension, dialectical thinking can reconcile the inconsistent and contradictory elements existing between the parent brand and the extension, resulting in a higher perception of fit, and consequently more favorable evaluation of the brand extension. For a near brand extension, consumers will be able to perceive fit easily between the parent brand and its extension, without resorting to dialectical thinking, thus attenuating the effect of life-role transition on brand extension response. Stated formally,

H₁: For distant (i.e., low- or moderate-fit) brand extensions, consumers under life-role transition will report higher fit perceptions and more favorable attitudes compared to consumers who are not under life-role transition. This effect will be attenuated for near (i.e., high-fit) brand extensions.

H₂: The effect of life-role transition on responses to distant brand extensions will be mediated sequentially by perceived self-concept ambiguity and dialectical thinking.

Two types of brand architecture have been identified in prior research: “direct brands” which directly extend a brand name to a new product category (e.g., Tropicana cola) and “sub-brands” in which a new brand name is associated with an existing one (e.g., Quencher by Tropicana cola; Sood and Keller 2012). While direct brands emphasize a close association between a parent brand and its brand extension, sub-brands imply less association between a parent brand and its brand extension (Milberg, Park, and McCarthy 1997). The lower association between a parent brand and its brand extension in sub-branding evokes a “sub-typing” process (Milberg, Park, and McCarthy 1997; Sujan and Bettman 1989), such that inconsistent information is not integrated into the existing brand category, and instead placed in a subcategory that is separate from but still linked to the original brand (Weber and Crocker 1983). Consequently, sub-brands allow consumers to be more accepting of distant brand extensions, which implies that there is less of a need to use dialectical thinking to reconcile the inconsistencies and contradiction between a parent brand and its extension. We predict that the effect of life-role transition on brand extension responses will differ depending on the nature of the brand architecture employed. Specifically, for direct brands, consumers undergoing life-role transition would provide more favorable brand extension responses than would consumers undergoing no transition. However, for sub-brands, there is less of a need to engage in dialectical thinking to reconcile the dissimilarities and conflict between a parent brand and its brand extension. If dialectical thinking indeed plays a role in driving brand extension evaluation, then the observed effect of life-role transition on brand extension response will be attenuated when the extension is sub-branded. Stated formally,

H₃: The effect of life-role transition on responses to a distant brand extension will be attenuated for sub-branded (vs. direct branded) extensions.

We hypothesize that the effect of life-role transition on brand extension responses is driven by perceived self-concept ambiguity. Prior research suggests that resources to cope with life-role transition (e.g., training offered to new employees) can help people stabilize the threatened self-view and restore self-concept clarity (Birdi, Allan, and Warr 1997; Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009). Such resources that are directly relevant for restoring self-concept clarity are indeed effective (unlike resources like money that are not relevant for coping). For example, training provided for hospitality students in their internship programs boosted their self-views and confidence toward their future career (Ko 2008). If self-concept ambiguity is responsible for the effect of life-role transition on brand extension response, we should expect to see that the effect is weakened when resources to cope with life-role transition (e.g., training provided to new hires) are provided, which is likely to reduce the perceived self-concept ambiguity during the life-role transition. Aligned with this idea, prior research suggests that coping resources (e.g., perceived support from social network) can greatly help people to transition smoothly into parenthood (Alexander et al. 2001) and career change (Stoltz et al. 2013). Stated formally,

H4: For distant brand extensions, the effect of life-role transition on brand extension evaluation will be attenuated when coping resources for life-role transition are available.

STUDY 1

In our first study, we provide initial evidence for the effect of life-role transition on brand extension fit and evaluation, with life-role transition being induced using advertisements. By doing so, we present a tool readily available to managers to leverage life-role transitions.

Procedure

One hundred and sixty-eight US undergraduates participated in this study. Data from 5 participants were dropped for failing our data screening criteria, leaving 163 participants (63 males, $M_{age} = 19.97$) for analyses. (See Web Appendix A for explanations of our data screening criteria, and the comparison of the results of focal effects before and after the data exclusion for all studies). Participants were randomly assigned to conditions of a 2-cell (life-role transition: transition vs. no-transition) between-subjects design.

We selected Honda as the parent brand based on its worldwide recognition and familiarity. “Honda Furniture” was used as a low-fit brand extension based on a pretest ($M = 2.35$; scale anchored at 1 = *does not fit with Honda* and 7 = *fits with Honda*; $N = 49$). Under the cover story of an advertisement evaluation task, participants were asked to evaluate an advertisement for a brand extension. Participants in the *life-role transition* condition were shown an advertisement with the headline “Life is like a journey. Think about your life-transition from being an undergraduate student to a working adult ... What are you thinking? What are you feeling?” and depicting Honda Furniture; in contrast, in the *no-transition* condition participants were shown an advertisement with the headline “Life is like a journey. Think about your life as an undergraduate student ... What are you thinking? What are you feeling?” and depicting the same brand extension (see Web Appendix B for the ads used). A pretest among a separate group of participants from the same pool ($N = 88$) confirmed that the transition advertisement elicited greater perceived life-role transition than the no-transition advertisement and the two advertisements did not differ in terms of perceived control, mood state, and stress level (see Web Appendix C for details).

In the main study, participants evaluated the brand extension on two 7-point scales (1 = *poor/unfavorable*, 7 = *excellent/favorable*; $r = .92$, $p < .001$; Monga and Gürhan-Canli 2012) and

indicated perceived fit on two 7-point scales (“I think that Honda Furniture is:” 1 = *inconsistent with Honda/does not fit with Honda*; 7 = *consistent with Honda/fits with Honda*; $r = .93$, $p < .001$; Monga and Gürhan-Canli 2012). Finally, participants rated perceived quality of the advertisement (1 = *very bad quality*, 7 = *very good quality*), brand attitude (1 = *poor*, 7 = *excellent*), and brand familiarity (1 = *not at all familiar*, 4 = *extremely familiar*).

Results

Evaluation. As anticipated, results of a one-way ANOVA showed that participants in the life-role transition condition ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.69$) reported more favorable evaluation for Honda Furniture than those in the no-transition condition ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.52$; $F(1, 161) = 4.73$, $p = .031$, $\eta^2 = .03$).

Fit perception. As anticipated, results of a one-way ANOVA showed that brand extension fit perceptions were higher in the life-role transition condition ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.62$), compared to the no-transition condition ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 1.23$; $F(1, 161) = 6.65$, $p = .011$, $\eta^2 = .04$). Bootstrapping analyses (PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrapping samples; Hayes 2012) revealed successful mediation, such that the indirect effect of life-role transition on brand extension evaluation was mediated by fit perception (95% CI: .0280 to .2575).

The two advertisements did not differ in perceived quality ($M_s = 3.58$ vs. 3.74 ; $F(1, 161) = 1.59$, $p = .209$), and when perceived quality of the advertisement was included as a covariate, the effect of life-role transition on brand extension evaluation ($p = .015$) and fit perception ($p = .025$) persisted. Similarly, the effects remained when brand attitude and familiarity were included as control variables (extension evaluation: $p_s < .031$; fit perception: $p_s < .012$).

Discussion

Confirming our hypothesis, Study 1 temporarily induced thoughts regarding life-role transition using a realistic marketing tool (advertisement), which subsequently elicited more favorable brand extension fit and evaluation for a distant brand extension.

STUDY 2

We designed Study 2 to demonstrate that life-role transition boosts perceived brand extension fit and evaluation for distant extensions, but not for near extensions (H1). Following prior research (e.g., Arnett 1997; Mathur, Moschis, and Lee 2008), life-role transition is measured by asking participants to indicate whether they are undergoing a series of life-role transitions. To avoid the possibility of the life-role transition measure artificially highlighting the transition experience, we measured participants' life-role transition after measuring brand extension responses. We rule out the possibility that stress and mood (Lucas 2005; Noble and Walker 1997) explain our findings.

Procedure

Three hundred and twenty-one US undergraduates participated in a 3-cell (brand extension fit: low vs. moderate vs. high) between-subjects design, with life-role transition as a measured independent variable. Data from 15 participants were dropped for failing in our data screening criteria, leaving 306 participants (156 males, $M_{\text{age}} = 20.21$) for analyses.

Three brand extensions with different degrees of fit with Honda were identified based on a pretest among a separate group of participants from the same pool ($N = 137$): "Honda

Furniture” for low-fit brand extension ($M = 2.35$), “Honda Forklifts” for moderate-fit brand extension ($M = 4.21$), and “Honda Mini Sedan” for high-fit brand extension ($M = 5.75$; scale anchored at 1 = *does not fit with Honda* and 7 = *fits with Honda*; $ps < .001$ for contrasts between any two levels). In the main study, participants were first asked to indicate their opinions about the parent brand – Honda, along with several filler brands (i.e., Gillette, Coke, Pizza Hut), on a 7-point scale (1 = *poor* and 7 = *excellent*). Next, participants were told that there was a new product being developed, and the company would like to get their first impressions towards it even though they have not had the opportunity to try it. Then, participants were introduced to the brand extension. Only the name of the brand extension was provided, similar to many situations in which consumers encounter brand extensions (e.g., grocery store’s weekly ads, mystery ads etc.). Participants then completed brand extension evaluation ($r = .90, p < .001$) followed by fit perception ($r = .95, p < .001$) measures as in Study 1.

Then, we measured participants’ life-role transition by adopting the approach used in prior research (e.g., Arnett 1997; Mathur, Moschis, and Lee 2008). Specifically, in an ostensible “Life Event Survey,” participants were asked to think about their current life for the time being and indicate whether they were undergoing any of the listed ten life-role transiting events (e.g., “starting a new relationship,” “just quitting from a student society/union;” 1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*; see Web Appendix D for the full scale). The sum of life-role transition events that each participant was experiencing, ranging from 0 to 10, served as an objective life-role transition index, with higher scores reflecting more life-role transition. To ensure that we captured most life-role transitions, a pretest with a similar sample ($N = 45$) asked participants to write down the life-role transitions that happened in their lives, which were coded and summarized into the measure.

Next, participants completed measures of stress (i.e., “stressed,” “nervous,” “anxious;” 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; $\alpha = .86$; Cohen and McKay 1984), mood (i.e., “good,” “bad (reversed),” “pleasant,” “unpleasant (reversed);” 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; $\alpha = .89$; Duclos, Wan, and Jiang 2013) and brand familiarity (1 = *not at all familiar*, 4 = *extremely familiar*).

Results

To analyze our dependent measures, fit condition was dummy coded because it involved three levels ($Z_1 = 0, 1, 0$ and $Z_2 = 1, 0, 0$), indicating low-fit extension [$Z_1 = 0$ and $Z_2 = 1$], moderate-fit extension [$Z_1 = 1$ and $Z_2 = 0$], and high-fit extension [$Z_1 = 0$ and $Z_2 = 0$]. Following the procedures of Cohen et al. (2003), participants’ brand extension responses were regressed on the life-role transition index, dummy variables Z_1 and Z_2 for fit conditions, and the interactions of life-role transition index $\times Z_1$ and life-role transition index $\times Z_2$.

Evaluation. Consistent with our prediction, there was an overall interaction between life-role transition and fit condition, as indicated by the marginally significant change R^2 after entering the interaction terms ($\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(2, 300) = 2.64$, $p = .073$). To probe the interaction, we conducted additional regression analyses at each level of fit. Life-role transition led to higher brand extension evaluation for the low-fit brand extension ($\beta = .23$, $t = 3.56$, $p = .001$) and the moderate-fit brand extension ($\beta = .15$, $t = 2.27$, $p = .025$), but not for the high-fit brand extension ($t < 1$, *NS*) (see Figure 1A). These effects remained when brand attitude and familiarity were included as covariates.

Fit perception. Consistent with our prediction, the overall interaction between life-role transition and fit condition was significant, as indicated by the significant change R^2 after entering the interaction terms ($\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(2, 300) = 3.18$, $p = .043$). Follow-up analyses

revealed that life-role transition led to higher fit perception for the low-fit brand extension ($\beta = .23, t = 3.17, p = .002$), and the moderate-fit brand extension ($\beta = .20, t = 2.67, p = .009$), but not for the high-fit brand extension ($t < 1, NS$). These effects remained when brand attitude and familiarity were included as control variables.

Mediation analysis. Consistent with prior research (Monga and Gürhan-Canli 2012), brand extension fit perception significantly influenced brand extension evaluation ($\beta = .58, t = 15.89, p < .001$). Bootstrapping analyses (PROCESS Model 8 with 5,000 bootstrapping samples; Hayes 2012) revealed successful moderated mediation such that the indirect effect of life-role transition on brand extension evaluation through fit perception was moderated by fit condition. Specifically, the effect of life-role transition on brand extension evaluation was mediated by brand extension fit in low-fit condition (95% CI: .0465 to .2126) and moderate-fit condition (95% CI: .0386 to .1908), but not in high-fit condition (95% CI: -.0722 to .0703).

Stress and mood. Regressions showed that transition and fit condition had neither significant main effects nor significant interaction effect on stress ($ps > .120$) and mood ($ps > .614$). These findings confirm that stress and mood did not account for our results.

Filler brands. To ensure that the observed effect is unique to brand extensions, and not to all kinds of products or brands, we examined the effect of life-role transition on evaluations of three filler brands (i.e., Gillette, Coke, Pizza Hut). No effects emerged ($ps > .250$).

Discussion

Consistent with H1, Study 2 demonstrated that for distant brand extensions, but not for near brand extensions, life-role transition predicted perceived fit, as well as brand extension evaluation. Notably, brand extension fit mediated the effect of life-role transition on brand

extension evaluation for the low- and moderate-fit brand extensions, but not for the high-fit brand extension. As the effect of life-role transition dissipates for high-fit brand extensions, we focus on distant brand extensions in the remaining studies. Since brand attitude and brand familiarity showed null effects in studies 1 and 2, they will not be discussed further.

In addition, results showed that our life-role transition manipulation does not lead to stress or negative mood, which is consistent with prior research showing that even though many life events (e.g., those that mark transitions to new life roles such as spouse or parent) require changes and adaptations, they may not always elicit stress and negative mood (e.g., Mathur, Moschis, and Lee 2008). Finally, while prior research indicated that life-role transitions can trigger a variety of changes in consumption (Andreasen 1984), the null effect on filler brands' evaluations indicated that the observed effect of life-role transition is specific to brand extensions, and does not extend to evaluations of general brands and products.

STUDY 3

In Study 3, we tested the idea that for direct branded extensions, consumers undergoing life-role transition would provide more favorable brand extension responses than would consumers undergoing no transition. However, this effect would be reduced for a sub-branded extension (H3). To increase the robustness of our findings, we manipulate life-role transition by simulating a major life-role transition period that consumers commonly encounter (i.e., becoming a parent), among participants who have experienced this transition (i.e. actual parents). During the transition to parenthood, the sudden coexistence of a parental identity with other

existing identities (e.g., a friend, husband/wife, or professional identity) can lead to self-concept ambiguity (Ladge, Clair, and Greenberg 2012).

Procedure

Two hundred and two current parents (who had at least one child under the age of 18) were recruited from MTurk to participate in the study in exchange for a nominal payment. Data from 10 participants were dropped for failing our data screening criteria, leaving 192 participants (65 males; $M_{\text{age}} = 37.56$) for analyses. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions of a 2 (life-role transition: transition vs. no-transition) \times 2 (brand architecture: direct brand vs. sub-brand) between-subjects design.

All participants were introduced to an ostensible “Life Survey.” Life-role transition was manipulated by simulating the liminal period when they switched from being a non-parent to a parent. Specifically, participants in the *life-role transition* condition were first asked to think about their key life or social roles, identities and behavioral patterns *before* becoming a parent, and answer a set of filler decision-making questions related to their behavior at that time (e.g., “how likely were you to pay attention to children’s products while shopping?”). Then, they were asked to think about their lives again, but this time they were asked to think about their roles, identities and behavioral patterns *after* becoming a parent, and answer a second set of filler decision-making questions (e.g., “how likely are you to follow through on an impulsive thought to travel to a remote country?”) based on their current feelings and thoughts. That is, life-role transition participants did *both* before and after tasks. In contrast, participants in the *no-transition* condition were asked to think about their key roles, identities, and behavioral patterns *after* becoming a parent, and answer the same two sets of filler decision-making questions based on

their current feelings and thoughts (see Web Appendix E for details). According to a pretest conducted among a separate group of participants in the same pool ($N = 50$), the manipulation effectively increased perceived life-role transition, and did not influence stress, positive and negative mood (see Web Appendix F for details).

In the main study, all participants were presented with a press release for Coke Shampoo, which is similar to many situations in which brands make announcements about new products (see Web Appendix G for details). To identify a suitable sub-brand name, a separate group of parents from the same pool ($N = 38$) rated several fictitious brand names on familiarity, likability, and wrote down any associations (e.g., company, celebrity, product) that come to mind. The name “Rasso” was chosen eventually because it was relatively unfamiliar to the participants ($M = 1.18$; $1 = \textit{not familiar at all}$, $7 = \textit{extremely familiar}$), had a relatively neutral likability ($M = 3.61$; $1 = \textit{not likable at all}$, $7 = \textit{extremely likable}$), and did not generate any specific associations such as celebrity, product, or ingredient etc. We thus manipulated brand architecture by using either the brand name “Coke Shampoo” (direct brand) or “Rasso Shampoo by Coke” (sub-brand) similar to standard manipulations in the branding literature (Milberg, Park, and McCarthy 1997; Sood and Keller 2012). A separate pretest ($N = 117$) validated our theoretical argument that consumers have less of a need to reconcile and integrate the inconsistencies between the brand extension and its parent brand “Coke” in the sub-brand condition than in the direct brand condition. In addition, the sub-brand extension had lower perceived fit with its parent brand “Coke” than the direct brand extension (see Web Appendix H for details).

In the main study, as we have established and replicated the relationship between extension fit and evaluation in studies 1 and 2, we focused exclusively on brand extension

evaluation in this study. Thus, participants were asked to complete measures of brand extension evaluation ($r = .97, p < .001$) only.

Results

A 2 (life-role transition: transition vs. no-transition) \times 2 (brand architecture: direct brand vs. sub-brand) between-subjects ANOVA on extension evaluation revealed a significant main effect of brand architecture ($M_{\text{direct}} = 2.23, SD = 1.50$ vs. $M_{\text{sub-brand}} = 2.78, SD = 1.52$; $F(1, 188) = 6.49, p = .012$), qualified by a significant interaction ($F(1, 188) = 5.01, p = .026, \eta^2 = .03$). As anticipated, planned contrasts showed that for the direct brand, the brand extension evaluation was more favorable in the transition condition ($M_{\text{transition}} = 2.55, SD = 1.72$), compared to the no-transition condition ($M_{\text{no-transition}} = 1.91, SD = 1.71$; $F(1, 188) = 4.28, p = .040, \eta^2 = .02$). However, for the sub-brand, the effect of life-role transition disappeared ($M_{\text{no-transition}} = 2.95, SD = 1.51$ vs. $M_{\text{transition}} = 2.62, SD = 1.52$; $F(1, 188) = 1.18, p = .279$) (see Figure 1B).

Discussion

If dialectical thinking indeed contributes to the effect of life-role transition on brand extension responses, the effect should be reduced for sub-branded extensions for which a “sub-typing” process leads to less of a need to relate the parent brand to the brand extension (Sujan and Bettman 1989), thus attenuating the need for dialectical thinking. Study 3 confirmed this possibility by temporarily simulating the life-role transition that parents have experienced during their entry into parenthood. Indeed, we found that life-role transition led to more favorable brand extension evaluations than no-transition, for the direct brand extension. However, for a sub-branded extension, for which a “sub-typing” processing elicited less of a need to integrate the

inconsistency and resolve the contradiction between the brand and the extension (as validated by a pretest) the effect disappeared. One could speculate that instead of the lesser need for dialectical thinking in the sub-brand condition (as we have proposed), a higher perceived fit for the sub-brand (vs. direct brand) could explain our effects. However, our pretest results show that this was not the case. Taken together, our results confirm that—a sub-brand, which lessens the need to resolve the contradiction (i.e., dialectical thinking) eliminates our effect.

STUDY 4

In Study 4, we directly test our proposed mechanism (H2) through sequential mediation and rule out several alternative explanations. We theorized that life-role transition triggers self-concept ambiguity, which subsequently results in greater dialectical thinking and increased brand extension fit and evaluation. Dialectical thinking, however, is one of four distinct dimensions of analytic-holistic thinking (the other three being *locus of attention*, *perception of change* and *causality*; Choi et al. 2007; Nisbett et al. 2001). We examine all four dimensions to see whether dialectical thinking is the unique dimension driving our effect. Further, we rule out the possibility that feelings of control (Cutright, Bettman, and Fitzsimons 2013) and construal level (Meyvis, Goldsmith, and Dhar 2012) are driving our effects.

Life-role transition was manipulated in the context of career change—a transition specifically related to the change of identity and role that a person holds in workplace (Stephens 1994). Career change has been increasingly happening in people's lives mainly driven by the emergence of new industries, the unwillingness of organizations to sponsor entire careers, and the rise of the “protean self” who actively experiments with diverse roles and identities (Ashforth

2000). We encourage participants in the life-role transition condition to focus on career change, which is a kind of transition less biased by valence (i.e., it can lead to either positive or negative outcomes) and perceived control (i.e., people change careers voluntarily or involuntarily).

Procedure

One hundred and twenty participants were recruited from MTurk and completed the online survey for a small monetary compensation. Data from two participants were dropped for failing our data screen, leaving 118 participants (52 males, $M_{\text{age}} = 39.20$). Our hypothesis was tested in a 2-cell (life-role transition: transition vs. no-transition) between-subjects design.

Under the cover story of an “Imagination Task,” participants in the *life-role transition* condition were asked to imagine they were currently in transition from one career to a different one with quite different roles and identities involved, whereas those in the *life-role no-transition* condition were asked to imagine they were currently continuing with their existing career, and were not in transition (see Web Appendix I for details). Participants were instructed to describe their imagination in detail. A pretest conducted among participants from the same pool ($N = 63$) confirmed that the participants perceived greater life-role transition (measured with the same items used in Study 3 pretest) in transition (vs. no-transition) condition ($p < .001$).

All participants were presented with a low-fit brand extension, “Gillette Shoes,” validated by a pretest ($M = 2.13$; scale anchored at 1 = *inconsistent with brand* and 7 = *consistent with brand*; $N = 48$). To examine the proposed mechanism, we followed prior research to assess mediators and dependent variable in their reverse causal ordering (Iacobucci, Saldanha, and Deng 2007). Thus, participants were first asked to complete the set of measures as in previous studies for brand extension evaluation ($r = .96, p < .001$) and fit perception ($r = .96, p < .001$).

Next, to measure the potential mediator—dialectical thinking, we instructed participants to indicate their agreement with a set of four statements (e.g., “I can believe two things that contradict each other;” 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .85$; Choi et al. 2007; Spencer-Rodgers et al. 2015). Next, we measured self-concept ambiguity, by asking participants to indicate their agreement with a set of twelve statements (e.g., “even if I wanted to, I don't think I could tell someone what I'm really like;” 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .94$; Campbell et al. 1996; see Web Appendix J for the full scale).

Then, participants were instructed to complete various measures for alternative explanations in randomized order. Specifically, participants responded to measures for the other three dimensions of analytic-holistic thinking: causality (e.g., “everything in the universe is somehow related to each other;” 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .88$); perception of change (e.g., “every phenomenon in the world moves in predictable directions;” 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .82$); locus of attention (e.g., “It is more important to pay attention to the whole context rather than the details;” 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .86$; Choi et al. 2007). They rated perceived control (e.g., “I can do just about anything I really set my mind to;” 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*; $\alpha = .85$; Cutright, Bettman, and Fitzsimons 2013; Lachman and Weaver 1998) and Behavior Identification Form (BIF) to assess construal level (Fujita et al. 2006; see Web Appendix J for details).

Results

Evaluation. One-way ANOVA revealed that participants in the life-role transition condition had more favorable brand extension evaluation ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.71$) than those in the no-transition condition ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.81$; $F(1, 116) = 6.12$, $p = .015$, $\eta^2 = .05$).

Fit perception, dialectical thinking, and self-concept ambiguity. A series of ANOVAs indicated that, compared with those in the no-transition condition, participants in the life-role transition condition had higher brand extension fit perceptions ($M_{\text{transition}} = 2.87$, $SD = 1.99$ vs. $M_{\text{no-transition}} = 1.96$, $SD = 1.77$; $F(1, 116) = 6.76$, $p = .011$, $\eta^2 = .06$), engaged in more dialectical thinking ($M_{\text{transition}} = 4.00$, $SD = 1.35$ vs. $M_{\text{no-transition}} = 3.11$, $SD = 1.35$; $F(1, 116) = 12.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .15$), and experienced greater self-concept ambiguity ($M_{\text{transition}} = 3.85$, $SD = 1.63$ vs. $M_{\text{no-transition}} = 2.68$, $SD = 1.49$; $F(1, 116) = 16.46$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$).

We predicted that life-role transition would lead to higher self-concept ambiguity and higher dialectical thinking, which would result in higher perceived brand extension fit and subsequently higher brand evaluation (i.e., life-role transition \rightarrow self-concept ambiguity \rightarrow dialectical thinking \rightarrow brand extension fit perception \rightarrow brand extension evaluation). Bootstrapping analyses (PROCESS Model 6 with 5,000 bootstrapping samples; Hayes 2012) confirmed the significant indirect effect for the mediation through self-concept ambiguity, dialectical thinking, and brand extension fit perception (95% CI: -.3037 to -.0151). As a further check, we ran the analysis with the two mediators in a reversed order (dialectical thinking first and self-concept ambiguity second). The indirect effect was not significant (95% CI: -.1676, .0658), demonstrating that the latter mediation model was not supported.

To estimate the necessity of the sequential mediation model, we computed the R^2 change from simpler models dropping either self-concept ambiguity or dialectical thinking in the regression. There was a significant improvement in the amount of variance explained when both mediators were included (from $R^2_{\text{dropped self-concept ambiguity}} = .56$ to $R^2_{\text{full model}} = .58$, $F_{\text{change}}(1, 114) = 6.23$, $p = .014$; from $R^2_{\text{dropped dialectical thinking}} = .55$ to $R^2_{\text{full model}} = .58$, $F_{\text{change}}(1, 114) = 8.23$, $p = .005$).

Ancillary analysis. For the other three dimensions of analytic-holistic thinking, a series of one-way ANOVAs revealed that while life-role transition did not predict perception of causality ($p = .817$) and locus of attention ($p = .486$), it led to higher perceived change ($M_{\text{transition}} = 3.11$, $SD = 1.30$ vs. $M_{\text{no-transition}} = 2.62$, $SD = 1.11$; $F(1, 116) = 4.86$, $p = .029$). However, bootstrapping analyses (PROCESS Model 6 for “life-role transition \rightarrow self-concept ambiguity \rightarrow perceived change \rightarrow brand extension fit perception \rightarrow brand extension evaluation” with 5,000 bootstrapping samples; Hayes 2012) indicated that perceived change did not mediate the effect (95% CI: $-.1189$ to $.1038$).

In addition, life-role transition did not significantly impact participants’ perceived control ($p = .987$) or construal level ($p = .930$). Finally, dialectical thinking was ruled-in (i.e., standing out as a mediator) when alternative explanation variables were put into the model simultaneously (95% CI: $-.4284$ to $-.0145$). (See Web Appendix K for a summary of mediation analyses).

Discussion

Study 4 provides evidence for our proposed underlying mechanism by sequential mediation: life-role transition creates a sense of self-concept ambiguity, which prompts dialectical thinking, which subsequently enhances perceived brand extension fit, and leads to more favorable brand extension evaluation. In addition, our analysis of the necessity of the sequential mediation model indicated that both self-concept ambiguity and dialectical thinking are integral components of our conceptual model, and our results cannot be explained by simpler models. In addition, we ruled out perceived control and construal level as alternative accounts.

Importantly, Study 4 pinpointed that dialectical thinking as opposed to the other three dimensions of analytic-holistic thinking as our underlying mechanism. Prior research illustrated

that holistic (vs. analytic) thinking leads to more favorable attitude towards low- or moderate-fit brand extensions (Monga and John 2007; 2010). Our proposed mechanism of dialectical thinking boosting brand extension evaluation is consistent with this research, in the sense that dialectical thinking is one of four distinct dimensions of analytic-holistic thinking (Choi, Koo, and Choi 2007; Nisbett et al. 2001). However, our research is different from Monga and John (2007; 2010), who rely on the “locus of attention” dimension (Choi, Koo, and Choi 2007) to develop their predictions about how Easterners pay more attention to context and complementarity when assessing brand extensions than Westerners. In contrast, our research focuses on the “dialectical thinking” dimension, which is about being accepting of contradictions. One could speculate that the effect of life-role transition on brand extension evaluation rests on a gestalt-level process in which life-role transition activates a general prediction and acceptance of change. However, this was not the case as the “perception of change” dimension could not account for our results.

STUDY 5

Study 5 aims to demonstrate that life-role transition (instead of general change) underlies our findings. While life-role transition reflects a process of change between roles, one may wonder whether the effect is specific to life-role transition or can be applicable to any type of general life change that does not involve role or identity changes (e.g., changes in physical surroundings at a job, or changes in the type of physical exercise one engages in). Based on our theorizing, life-role transition influences brand extension responses for distant brand extensions due to perceived instability of roles and identities in the transition period. Thus, our effect cannot be generalized to changes in people’s lives that do not involve role or identity changes.

Procedure

Three hundred and fifty-nine US participants were recruited on MTurk to participate in an online survey in exchange for a nominal payment. Data from eleven participants were dropped for failing the data screen, leaving 348 participants (192 males, $M_{age} = 31.83$) for the main analyses. Our hypothesis was tested in a 2 (transition: transition vs. no-transition) \times 2 (domain: life-role vs. general) between-subjects design.

Participants in the two *life-role* conditions were instructed to imagine transitioning between two different careers or staying with one, as in Study 4. In contrast, participants in the *general transition* condition imagined that they were currently in transition from one office location to another with totally different physical surroundings, but their roles and identities in the workplace stayed exactly the same, whereas those in the *general no-transition* condition imagined that they were continuing with their existing office location and their roles and identities in the workplace stayed exactly the same (see Web Appendix I for details). Participants were instructed to describe their imagination in detail.

A pretest conducted among participants from the same pool ($N = 133$) confirmed that the participants perceived greater change in transition (vs. no-transition) condition for both life-role and general domains, but perceived change did not differ between life-role and general transitions. They also thought both transition and no-transition situations described in the life-role domain were more role-related than those described in general domain. In addition, perceived control, perceived valence (i.e., whether the situation described was positive or negative), mood, and stress did not differ across the four experimental conditions (see Web Appendix L for details).

In the main study, participants saw a low-fit brand extension, “Honda Furniture,” and completed brand extension evaluation ($r = .97, p < .001$) followed by fit perception ($r = .97, p < .001$) measures. To prevent our proposed mediators from having an undue advantage, participants completed the mediators *and* alternative explanation measures in randomized order: self-concept ambiguity ($\alpha = .93$), dialectical thinking ($\alpha = .76$), and the other three dimensions of analytic-holistic thinking ($\alpha = .81$ for causality, $\alpha = .87$ for perception of change, and $\alpha = .76$ for locus of attention).

Results

Evaluation. A 2 (transition: transition vs. no-transition) \times 2 (domain: life-role vs. general) between-subjects ANOVA on brand extension evaluation revealed a significant interaction ($F(1, 344) = 8.08, p = .005, \eta^2 = .02$). As anticipated, planned contrasts showed that in the life-role domain, brand extension evaluation was more favorable among those in the transition condition ($M_{\text{transition}} = 5.14, SD = 1.19$), compared to those in the no-transition condition ($M_{\text{no-transition}} = 4.48, SD = 1.49; F(1, 344) = 9.63, p = .002, \eta^2 = .03$). However, in the general domain, the effect did not emerge ($M_{\text{transition}} = 4.61, SD = 1.56$ vs. $M_{\text{no-transition}} = 4.81, SD = 1.35, F < 1, NS$).

Fit perception, dialectical thinking, and self-concept ambiguity. ANOVAs indicated that in the life-role domain, compared with those in the no-transition condition, participants in the life-role transition condition had higher brand extension fit perceptions ($M_{\text{transition}} = 4.56, SD = 1.56$ vs. $M_{\text{no-transition}} = 3.97, SD = 1.78; F(1, 344) = 5.57, p = .019, \eta^2 = .02$), engaged in more dialectical thinking ($M_{\text{transition}} = 4.78, SD = 1.15$ vs. $M_{\text{no-transition}} = 4.27, SD = 1.24; F(1, 344) = 8.29, p = .004, \eta^2 = .02$), and experienced greater self-concept ambiguity ($M_{\text{transition}} = 4.39, SD = 1.17$ vs. $M_{\text{no-transition}} = 3.89, SD = 1.43; F(1, 344) = 6.48, p = .011, \eta^2 = .02$). However, the effect

of transition disappeared in the general domain (fit: $M_{\text{transition}} = 3.74$, $SD = 1.58$ vs. $M_{\text{no-transition}} = 3.99$, $SD = 1.68$; $F = 1.03$, $p = .311$; dialectical thinking: $M_{\text{transition}} = 4.02$, $SD = 1.15$ vs. $M_{\text{no-transition}} = 4.18$, $SD = 1.15$; $F < 1$, *NS*; self-concept ambiguity: $M_{\text{transition}} = 3.84$, $SD = 1.25$ vs. $M_{\text{no-transition}} = 3.89$, $SD = 1.34$; $F < 1$, *NS*). Bootstrapping analyses (customized PROCESS Model with 5,000 bootstrapping samples; Hayes 2012) confirmed the significant indirect effect of life-role transition on brand extension evaluation through self-concept ambiguity, dialectical thinking, and brand extension fit perception (i.e. life-role transition \rightarrow self-concept ambiguity \rightarrow dialectical thinking \rightarrow brand extension fit perception \rightarrow brand extension evaluation; 95% CI: .0172 to .1661) for the life-role domain; but not for the general domain (95% CI: -.0833, .0544).

Discussion

Study 5 demonstrated that our observed effect on brand extension evaluation is specific to life-role related transition (e.g., career change), but cannot be extended to general changes in consumers' lives (e.g., changing the physical surroundings at a job). To corroborate the results of Study 4, a series of bootstrapping analyses were further conducted to confirm that the indirect effect of life-role transition was not mediated by any of the other three dimensions of analytic-holistic thinking (See Web Appendix N for details; See Web Appendix K for mediation analyses). To further validate that life-role transition instead of general change leads to favorable brand extension evaluation, we conducted a supplementary study with different operationalization of general change (i.e., a person changes the type of physical exercise he or she engages in). Results for transition \times domain were consistent with those in Study 5. In the Supplementary Study, we also ruled out several alternative explanations relating to the consequences of life-role transition identified in prior research (e.g., openness to change,

openness to innovation, higher risk-taking; Andreasen 1984; Parker et al. 2018) (see Web Appendix M for details).

STUDY 6

We argued earlier that the observed effect of life-role transition would be mitigated when consumers undergoing life-role transition have resources to cope with the self-concept ambiguity encountered (H4). This would confirm the process mechanism.

Procedure

Two hundred and thirty-nine undergraduates at an Asian university participated in an online survey for a small monetary compensation. Data from eleven participants were dropped for failing our data screening criteria, leaving 228 participants (61 males, $M_{\text{age}} = 21.82$). Our hypothesis was tested in a 3-cell (life-role transition: transition vs. transition-with-coping-resources vs. no-transition) between-subjects design.

We selected “Pizza Hut Wafers” as the low-fit brand extension validated by a pretest ($M = 2.91$; scale anchored at 1 = *inconsistent with the brand* and 7 = *consistent with the brand*; $N = 28$). Similar to Study 1, we manipulated life-role transition under the cover story of an advertisement evaluation task, and participants were presented an advertisement in which the product to be promoted (i.e., Pizza Hut Wafers) is set in a life situation described in the headline. The participants in the *transition (transition-with-coping-resources)* condition were shown an advertisement of the same (similar) headline with that in Study 1’s transition condition. In the *transition-with-coping-resources* condition, additional information that “the firm that you have

joined is providing extensive training and orientation to facilitate the start of your career” was added in the headline. In the *no-transition* condition, participants were exposed to an advertisement with the same headline used in Study 1’s no-transition condition (see Web Appendix O for details). A pretest among a separate group of participants from the same pool ($N = 101$) confirmed that the transition and the transition-with-coping-resources advertisements elicited greater perceived life-role transition than the no-transition advertisement, with the perceived degree of change not differing between the first two conditions (see Web Appendix P for details). In the main study, participants then completed measures for brand extension evaluation ($r = .96, p < .001$) and fit perception ($r = .92, p < .001$). Next, participants were asked to rate self-concept ambiguity ($\alpha = .85$) and dialectical thinking ($\alpha = .75$) in randomized order using the same scales used in studies 4 and 5.

Results

Evaluation. A one-way ANOVA on participants’ brand extension evaluation showed a significant effect of life-role transition ($F(2, 225) = 4.25, p = .016, \eta^2 = .04$). As anticipated, participants in the transition condition ($M = 4.65, SD = 1.60$) had more favorable brand extension evaluation than did those in the transition-with-coping-resources condition ($M = 4.08, SD = 1.40; F(1, 225) = 5.50, p = .020; \eta^2 = .04$), and in the no-transition condition ($M = 3.99, SD = 1.50; F(1, 225) = 7.16, p = .011; \eta^2 = .04$). The evaluations in the transition-with-coping-resources and no-transition conditions did not differ ($F < 1, NS$).

Fit perception, dialectical thinking, and self-concept ambiguity. A series of ANOVAs indicated that compared with those in the transition-with-coping-resources and no-transition conditions, participants in the life-role transition condition had higher brand extension fit

perceptions ($M_{\text{transition}} = 4.70$, $SD = 1.63$ vs. $M_{\text{transition-with-coping-resources}} = 4.04$, $SD = 1.62$; $F(1, 225) = 6.76$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = .04$; $M_{\text{transition}} = 4.70$, $SD = 1.63$ vs. $M_{\text{no-transition}} = 4.15$, $SD = 1.46$; $F(1, 225) = 4.53$, $p = .032$, $\eta^2 = .03$), engaged in more dialectical thinking ($M_{\text{transition}} = 4.48$, $SD = .97$ vs. $M_{\text{transition-with-coping-resources}} = 4.01$, $SD = 1.08$; $F(1, 225) = 8.60$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .05$; $M_{\text{transition}} = 4.48$, $SD = .97$ vs. $M_{\text{no-transition}} = 4.13$, $SD = .97$; $F(1, 225) = 4.51$, $p = .035$, $\eta^2 = .03$), and experienced greater self-concept ambiguity ($M_{\text{transition}} = 4.49$, $SD = .94$ vs. $M_{\text{transition-with-coping-resources}} = 4.05$, $SD = 1.01$; $F(1, 225) = 7.83$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .05$; $M_{\text{transition}} = 4.49$, $SD = .94$ vs. $M_{\text{no-transition}} = 4.04$, $SD = .93$; $F(1, 225) = 7.87$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .05$).

Bootstrapping analyses (PROCESS Model 6 with 5,000 bootstrapping samples; Hayes 2012) confirmed the significant indirect effect of life-role transition on brand extension evaluation through self-concept ambiguity, dialectical thinking, and brand extension fit perception (95% CI: $-.1406$ to $-.0085$ for transition vs. transition-with-coping-resources; $-.1427$, $-.0099$ for transition vs. no-transition).

Discussion

Replicating prior studies, life-role transition (vs. no life-role transition) led to greater self-concept ambiguity and dialectical thinking, which subsequently resulted in more favorable brand extension fit perception and evaluation. Consistent with H4, the effect of life-role transition on brand extension responses dissipated when participants perceived they had coping resources that lessened self-concept ambiguity experienced (and subsequently dialectical thinking). These results support our conceptual model and show evidence for the process mechanism.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across six studies, this research demonstrates that life-role transition leads to increased brand extension fit and evaluation, using either low- or moderate-fit extensions with a variety of brands and product categories (i.e., Honda Furniture, Gillette Shoes, and Coke Shampoo, Honda Forklifts) that were presented in different formats (i.e., extension names, press release, advertisements). Study 1 provided initial support for the effect of life-role transition on brand extension evaluation and fit perception using a tool readily available to managers—an advertisement that induced life-role transition. Study 2 showed that measured objective role transition led to higher perceived brand extension fit and evaluation for distant extensions (low- and moderate-fit), but not for near (high-fit) brand extensions. Study 3 demonstrated that the effect of life-role transition on brand extension evaluation disappeared when a sub-branded extension that lessened the need to engage in dialectical thinking to resolve the inconsistency and contradiction was used. Next, studies 4-6 provided direct evidence for self-concept ambiguity and dialectical thinking as sequential mediators for the observed effect. In addition to this, studies 4 and 5 further ruled out alternative accounts including the other three dimensions of analytic-holistic thinking. Study 5 validated that the effect on fit perception and brand extension evaluation is unique to life-role transition, but not for general changes in consumer's lives that do not involve role or identity changes. Finally, Study 6 demonstrated that the effect of life-role transition on brand extension evaluation was attenuated when consumers had resources to cope with the transition that lessened the self-concept ambiguity triggered by the life-role transition.

Conceptual Contributions

Our findings suggest that a consideration of life-role transition is essential for understanding how consumers respond to brand extensions. Prior research has identified many factors that influence how brand extensions are evaluated (Chun et al. 2015; Cutright, Bettman, and Fitzsimons 2013). To our knowledge, this research is the first to introduce life-role transition to the area of branding. It reinforces the proposition that in addition to parent brand characteristics (e.g., high vs. low company competence), an understanding of consumer characteristics (i.e., dynamics of their life stage) is critical for determining how consumers react to brand extensions. Although recent research has focused on determinants of responses toward distant brand extensions (Cutright, Bettman, and Fitzsimons 2013; Johnson et al. 2019; Meyvis, Goldsmith, and Dhar 2012; Parker et al. 2018), the current research differs from them and contributes by identifying new mechanisms influencing brand extension evaluation. For example, it differs from Cutright, Bettman, and Fitzsimons (2013) who show that perceived control decreased evaluation for distant brand extensions, as our operationalization of life-role transition did not impact perceived control.

As to dialectical thinking, our research is the first to empirically delineate its role in boosting brand extension evaluation vis-à-vis other dimensions of analytic-holistic thinking, and therefore provides a more nuanced understanding of how styles of thinking influences brand extension evaluation. The identification of “dialectical thinking” instead of the “perception of change” dimension of analytic-holistic thinking suggests that the effect of life-role transition on brand extension evaluation rests on an adaptive process involving reconciling ambiguity and inconsistency instead of a gestalt-level process associated with a perception that all things can change what they are. Future research can examine additional empirical evidence to support our process (e.g., longer processing time while reconciling ambiguity). In studies 1 and 2, we found

that adding brand attitude as a covariate did not impact the observed effect. Thus, the effect of life-role transition on responses toward distant extensions is not due to different levels of parent brand attitude transfer between life-role transition and no-transition conditions. Instead, the observed effect rests on dialectical thinking under life-role transition that resolves contradiction. This is consistent with research showing that reaction to a brand stretch depends on consumers' ability to resolve the presented deviation (Ahluwalia 2008; Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989).

Within consumer behavior, only a few studies have explored consumers' life-role transitions (Nobel and Walker 1997; Schouten 1991), and most of them have been from a qualitative perspective (Appau, Ozanne, and Klein 2020; Belk 1988; Mick, DeMoss, and Faber 1992; Schau, Gilly, and Wolfinbarger 2009). The prevalence and inevitability of life-role transition suggests that it can occur across a broad range of consumption activities, so an understanding of its influence on consumption behavior has broad implications. Importantly, the number of transitions experienced in the lifetime of any individual is increasing, with more dynamic lifestyles via technological advancements (e.g., AI, VR). Furthermore, the recent Covid-19 global pandemic has ushered in more life transitions (e.g., losing jobs or engaging in a career change). Our research responds to a call for understanding how consumers evaluate brand extensions in everyday situations (Klink and Smith 2001), thus increasing the ability of managers to apply various findings from this arena (Völckner and Sattler 2006).

This research adds new insights to the self-concept ambiguity literature by identifying it as a novel consequence of life-role transition, and by proposing dialectical thinking as a way of coping. The areas of self-concept threat and coping have attracted considerable research attention (Mandel et al. 2017). One strategy identified in prior research is symbolic self-completion, in which people cope with self-concept threat by performing behaviors that signal symbolic

mastery on the dimension that is being threatened, without direct or actual resolution of the threatened dimension (Rucker and Galinsky 2013). We speculate that engaging in dialectical thinking to reconcile the self-concept ambiguity may not directly address the threat originating from self-concept ambiguity, but only symbolically alleviate the problem. While prior research investigating self-concept ambiguity focuses more on direct resolutions (e.g., keeping unused subscriptions in Savary and Dhar 2020), our research contributes to the literature by depicting a form of symbolic compensatory coping in the context of self-concept ambiguity.

Managerial Contributions

Research shows that brand extensions can not only extend parent brand equity, but also contribute as much as 30 percent to parent brand sales (Nielsen 2012). Thus, identifying potential determinants of brand extension evaluation could provide insights to help managers estimate how far they can (or should) stretch their brands (e.g., Aaker and Keller 1990; Full Surge 2019). Our focus on distant brand extension is also supported by the observation that many attractive markets for strong brands are in categories that are quite different from their current products (e.g., BMW's extension from automobiles to skateboards; Chun et al. 2015). Our findings suggest that distant brand extensions will be particularly attractive to people undergoing life-role transitions and managers can advertise new brand extensions on wedding websites, relocation websites, or job-hunting websites. Alternatively, introducing brand extensions during periods when target consumers are in the midst of life-role transitions is a possibility (e.g., graduation season). Managers can induce life-role transition experiences: for example, capturing the scene of life-role transition pertaining to target consumers as we have done. Notably, some brands (e.g.

Pampers, De Beers) and products (e.g. baby diapers, wedding rings) are naturally linked with life-role transition, and they could have an advantage in launching brand extensions.

Notably, our finding that sub-brand names can increase the responses of no-transition consumers to the level of transition consumers suggests another important tool available for managers. Our results show that sub-branding is an effective way to make no-transition consumers respond as favorably as transition consumers. However, sub-branding has its limitations: the high costs of promoting the new sub-brand, the difficulty of accommodating the new sub-brand and its identity, and the greater failure rate of sub-brands (e.g., Aaker 1997; Marchak 2015). Thus, the use of sub-branding needs to be carefully assessed, and directly inducing life-role transition in advertisements, as we have done, is an important way forward.

Future Research Directions

Our findings also suggest several directions for future research. Firstly, researchers could investigate whether the effect of life-role transition on brand extension responses could be attenuated for those who undergo one type of life-role transition recurrently (e.g., those who split with their partners several times, getting separated a second time may not be as disruptive and they may have less self-concept ambiguity). The current research focused on life-role transitions, in which consumers enter into a new role without abandoning their existing roles (e.g., becoming parents without abandoning their roles of being husbands/wives; Study 3), and those in which consumers drop their previous roles and identities (e.g., becoming a working adult is associated with a dropping off his/her identity as a college student; studies 1 and 6). Future research can explore possible different psychological and behavioral consequences under the two types of life-role transitions. Prior research has identified “sleeper transition” (Merriam 2005), in which

the transition occurs gradually, perhaps goes unnoticed for a while, and research could investigate whether the effects uncovered here may be attenuated for such “sleeper transitions.”

Secondly, future research could investigate whether the nature of the parent brand moderates the relationship between life-role transition and brand extension evaluation. In contrast to functional brands (e.g., Toyota), prestige brands (e.g., BMW) are known to be more abstract and hedonic and are therefore able to accommodate diverse extension categories that share few features (Hagtvedt and Patrick 2009; Park, Milberg, and Lawson, 1991). We would expect that the effect of life-role transition would be attenuated for prestige brands, which would allow both transition and no-transition consumers to respond equally favorably. While we found parent brand attitude did not influence the effect of life-role transition, future research can assess the persistence of the effect under positive versus negative brand attitude. Similarly, while we found life-role transition influences consumers’ evaluation and fit perception for both moderate- and low-fit extensions, future research can further investigate whether there are subtle differences in underlying mechanisms between these types of brand extensions. Because moderate-fit brand extensions are ambiguous, life-role transitions are likely to increase their acceptance because of their impact on coping with ambiguity, whereas the acceptance of low-fit extension may be driven by their impact on coping with inconsistencies and contradictions.

While the current research expositis an adaptive process of balancing and reconciling two conflicting roles during life-role transition, future research can investigate when life-role transition might lead to compensatory consumption (e.g., Rucker and Galinsky 2008)—a less adaptive process of highlighting the foregone or the new identity during life-role transition. Thus, the area of life-role transition and consumer behavior is a fertile area for future research.

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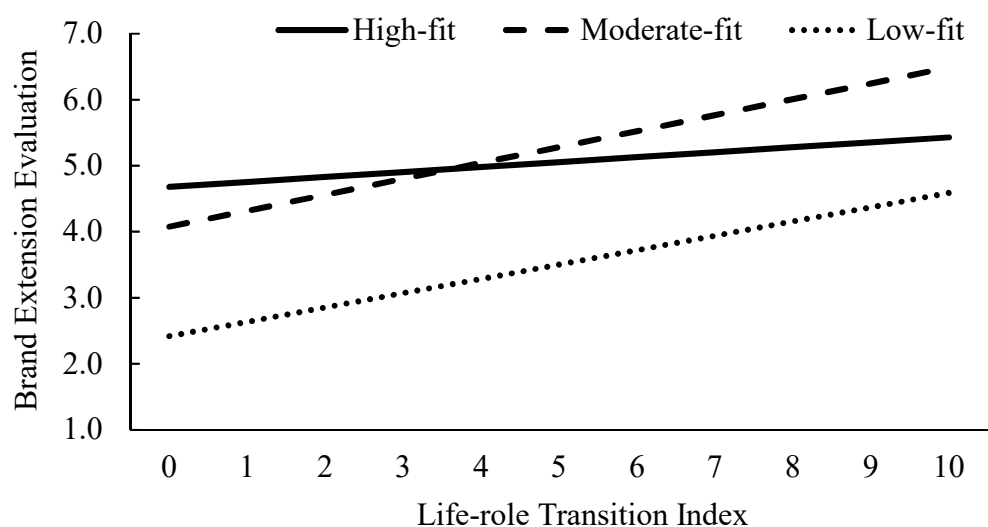
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FIGURE 1

PANEL A: STUDY 2: LIFE-ROLE TRANSITION POSITIVELY INFLUENCES BRAND EXTENSION EVALUATION FOR LOW- AND MODERATE-FIT BRAND EXTENSIONS BUT NOT FOR HIGH-FIT BRAND EXTENSIONS.



PANEL B: STUDY 3: LIFE-ROLE TRANSITION INFLUENCES BRAND EXTENSION EVALUATION FOR DIRECT BRANDED EXTENSIONS BUT NOT FOR SUB-BRANDED EXTENSIONS.

