

Jan 1st, 12:00 AM

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Liu, Chuanlan, "InBranding American Alligator Leather with a Fashion Apparel Brand: Examining the Effects of the Ingredient Attributes" (2018). *International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA) Annual Conference Proceedings*. 128.

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InBranding American Alligator Leather with a Fashion Apparel Brand: Examining the Effects of the Ingredient Attributes

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Keywords: InBranding, co-branding, American alligator

Rationale. The alligator is a unique American product that is steadily increasing in value. For over a century, the skins of crocodylians have been used for the manufacture of exotic products. From 1967 to 1987, the American alligator was listed as endangered/threatened. Due to its commercial farming which began in the late 1980s, the population of wild and farm-raised alligator has reached to the highest ever. However, the domestic market for alligator leather has been limited to a very narrow range of products mainly targeting male consumers. Furthermore, the inventory of slightly flawed alligator skins has accumulated to a degree that has significantly affected the model of sustainable use of wildlife and the ecologically balanced alligator economy. Promoting slightly flawed alligator skins is a critical task for providing the stimulus to the development of the alligator economy while preserving the natural habitat of the American alligators.

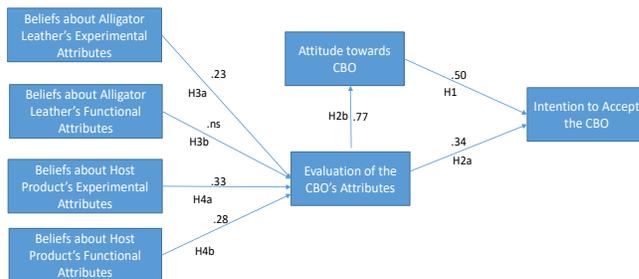
Brands create competitive advantages for companies and organizations and added-value for consumers. Established brands with high brand equity and a desirable image not only have advantages in attracting and retaining customers, but also can be leveraged to expand markets through brand extensions, and co-branding (Keller, 1993, Rooney, 1995). The value of intangible resources of brands has also been recognized by suppliers who produce ingredients and components that are incorporated into final products but are invisible to consumers. Since the late 1980s, companies and organizations have started accepting the concept and practicing Ingredient Branding (InBranding) to make their offerings visible to final consumers, establish and maintain a competitive advantage, and creating commercial success in the market (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006). However, to date, all the successful InBranding cases focus on functional attributes created by ingredients and functional values added to final products offered by host brands (Mazodier and Merunka, 2014). There is a lack of understanding on whether and how non-functional features from a component can be InBranded by creating added experiential value to the final consumer goods.

In fact, the fashion industry is full of self-expressive brands and emerging designer brands in all segments, providing great opportunities and strong drives for luxury components such as American alligator leather, to practice InBranding with a focus on symbolic and experiential value. To this end, the purpose of this study is to explore mass market potentials in the fashion apparel category for the slightly flawed American alligator leather through InBranding. Specifically, we attempt to answer the two research questions: (1) what are the valued features of American wild alligator leather as perceived by fashion consumers? (2) how do the attributes of the American alligator leather as a branded ingredient affect consumers' evaluation, attitudes and acceptance of a host brand's fashion apparel product?

Theoretical Background and Research Model/Hypotheses. InBranding is commonly implemented through co-branding with a host brand which offers final consumer products. Branded ingredient (InBrand) creates added-value for the host brands' customers and help the host brand differentiate itself to better compete in an increasingly overcrowded market (Desai and Keller, 2002). However, the

ultimate success of any new brand, innovative concept, and products, including symbolic innovations, depend on consumers' acceptance (Aaker, 2007, Atik and Firat, 2013, Mahajan et al., 1995). Prior research on functional ingredient co-branding (Desai & Keller, 2002; Na, Fang, & Jill, 2011) and exotic consumer product acceptance (e.g., Belleau and Nowlin, 2001, Xu et al., 2004) suggests that attitude toward the InBrand component and a host brand as well as the congruence between the InBrand and host brand are important drivers of the success of a co-branded product. Furthermore, according to Desai, and Keller (2002), the impact of ingredient branding will depend on the inherent importance of the ingredient itself. Ingredients may provide not only functional but also experiential value to final products. Fashion clothing has been considered as a means of non-verbal communication to deliver a message about the wearer's identity, social status, and lifestyle (Belk, 1988, Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 1992). Obtaining experiential value from a host brand and the branded ingredient is critical for fashion apparel consumers. Therefore, we propose a research model with hypotheses specified as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1. Research Model and Testing Results



Research Method. A pilot study was conducted with 128 participants recruited from a fashion design and merchandising program in a major university. This pilot study identified jeans as the most suitable fashion product category to add the luxury ingredient of American alligator leather. Also, the fashion brand Guess was identified as the suitable mass-market brand to be a

host brand to develop a Co-Branded Offering with the Ingredient of American alligator leather (i.e. InBrand). A line of Guess jeans was selected and alligator leather trim was added as the CBO using Photoshop. An online survey was designed and included multi-item scales adopted or adapted from previous research to measure participants' general beliefs about the attributes of alligator leather and jeans products. The participants were shown images of created CBO, a line of jeans with Alligator leather added as trims. Then individuals' evaluative perceptions, attitude, and acceptance intention of the CBO were assessed. A national sample of 212 participants was recruited from the panel of qualtrics.com.

Analyses and Findings. Exploratory factor analyses were conducted to examine the dimensionality, validity and reliability of all the research constructs. Results showed that two dimensions of functional attributes and experiential attributes emerged from scales measuring attributes of both alligator leather and jeans products respectively. An index variable was created by averaging all the scale items for each of the measures. Then, path analysis was conducted using AMOS to test the hypothesized relationships. Results showed that beliefs about host product categories' functional and experiential values affect an individual's evaluation of the CBO. However, only beliefs about alligator leather's experiential value, not the functional value, affect the evaluation of the CBO's attributes, which affects acceptance directly and indirectly mediated through attitudes towards the CBO. Research findings indicated that InBranding American alligator leather should focus on experiential attributes and the added experiential value to the Co-Branded products, and the host brand.

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