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Can Brands Move in From the Outside: How Moral Identity Enhances Out-Group Brand Evaluations

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In-group favoritism and out-group hostility are well-established in both psychology and marketing. However, factors that may overcome out-group hostility, thereby improving out-group brand evaluations are not understood. Drawing upon the moral identity literature, we theorize that moral identity can enhance out-group (but not in-group) brand evaluations through decreased psychological distance.

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Can Brands Move In from the Outside: How Moral Identity Enhances Out-group Brand Evaluations

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT:

Consumers tend to evaluate out-group brands less favorably than in-group brands. Though in-group favoritism and out-group hostility are well-established in the literature, little is known about how out-group brand evaluations can be improved. However, as the number of niche brands with small customer segments expand (Aaker 1991; Erdem and Sun 2002), brands that are perceived as the outgroup or are seeking to increase their customer base by appealing to more customer segments will need to overcome the less than favorable attitudes toward their brands. As such, marketers need to understand how consumers' out-group brand evaluations can be improved. To address this issue, we theorize that moral identity (hereafter, MI) will aid marketers of out-group brands in overcoming out-group hostility by enhancing brand evaluations.

MI is a self-regulating construct that fosters one's moral actions (Aquino and Reed 2002). Prior research on MI suggests that individuals with high self-importance of MI have more expansive group boundaries (Reed and Aquino 2003). However, this expansive effect of MI has focused on prosocial and moral behavior toward out-groups (Hardy et al. 2010; Reed and Aquino 2003) without considering whether these psychological characteristics of MI may extend to brands. Recognizing the role that morality may play in personal relationships (Hart et al. 1998; Reed and Aquino 2003) and the relationships that consumers have with brands (Aaker 1997) suggests that MI can be extended beyond moral behavior. Specifically, MI may influence consumers' responses to brands, which hold important social and reference group associations for consumers.

We theorize that MI will act as a conduit that reduces the perceived distance between a consumer and his or her out-group brands, thereby enhancing out-group brand evaluations. More specifically, consumers with high MI will more favorably evaluate their out-group brands compared to those with low MI such that MI moderates the effect of group membership on brand evaluations. Given the existing tendency to favor in-group brands (Escalas and Bettman 2005; White and Dahl 2007), we propose that MI will not influence in-group brand evaluations. Furthermore, we theorize that this effect will be mediated by the psychological distance, the "subjective" perception regarding how close or far an object is from the self (Trope and Liberman 2010), between consumers and their out-group brands.

We conducted four studies to test our theorizing. Study 1 examined the moderating effect of MI on brand evaluations by measuring the chronic self-importance of MI. First, participants self-identified one in-group and one outgroup and then listed a brand associated with each group, which followed Escalas and Bettman's (2005) procedure. After a 20 minute unrelated task, participants evaluated (using 4 items; e.g., unfavorable/favorable on a 7-point scale) the two brands that they identified earlier among several other filler brands and completed the Self-Importance of Moral Identity Scale (Aquino and Reed 2002). As theorized, the results revealed that consumers' MI enhanced attitudes toward out-group brands but did not affect attitudes for in-group brands.

To assess whether this effect occurred due to MI rather than related constructs, study 2 replicated these results using temporarily salient MI (Aquino et al., 2009). We primed participants with either MI or a student identity (SI, hereafter). Those primed with MI should temporarily have MI salient and those primed with SI should tem-

porarily have their SI salient, and thus temporarily low salience for MI, such that those in the MI condition would evaluate out-group brands more favorably than those in the SI condition, but identity prime would have no effect on in-group brand evaluations. Results were consistent with this theorizing.

Studies 3 and 4 investigated the underlying process by examining the mediating role of the psychological distance between the consumer and the brand. To measure the psychological distance between a consumer and a brand, we utilized the Inclusion of Others in Self scale (IOS; Aron et al. 1992). In study 3, a 2 (brand group membership: in-group vs. out-group) within-subjects design was used with MI measured continuously. All participants evaluated the pre-designated in-group (i.e., Nike, Polo) and out-group (i.e., TOMS, Old Navy) brands, which were pretested and presented in random order. The findings of Study 3 replicated the results of the first two studies, demonstrating the positive influence of consumers' MI on out-group brand evaluations but no effect of MI on in-group brand evaluations. More importantly, the effect of MI was mediated by the psychological distance such that consumers with high MI were more likely to expand their boundaries to outgroups than where those with low MI.

Study 4 sought to demonstrate the practical implications of these findings for out-group brands seeking to improve their brand evaluations. Thus, we primed MI versus business identity (BI) in an advertisement for a hypothetical brand. Though previous studies on MI (e.g., Reed et al. 2007) manipulated participants' MI through priming tasks, to the best of our knowledge, this study is the first attempt to show that MI can be temporarily primed through an advertisement. A 2 (brand group membership: in-group vs. out-group) X 2 (primed identity: BI vs. MI) between-subjects design was used. The results replicated the moderating effect of MI on brand group membership on brand evaluations as well as the mediating role of psychological distance such that brand evaluations of a hypothetical out-group brand were more favorable when participants were exposed to the brand with an advertisement eliciting temporarily accessible MI.

This research extends both the marketing and MI literature by addressing the role of MI in consumers' brand evaluations. First, we identify the role of MI in everyday consumer judgments that do not regard moral decision-making. Though it may be obvious that MI would influence prosocial behavior and brand evaluations for brands engaging in CSR or other moral behaviors, we demonstrate that the effects of MI extend beyond prosocial behavior to marketplace judgments such as brand evaluations irrespective of the moral behaviors of the firm. Furthermore, brand managers seeking to overcome the less favorable perceptions associated with out-group brands may benefit from drawing upon consumers' MI in their marketing communications.

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