ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

Emergence of Shared Representation of Brand Users

Shirley Y. Y. Cheng, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA
Chi-yue Chiu, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

Knowing that one's brand choice was favored only by a few people motivates individuals to seek connections among fellow brand users, which leads minority (vs. mainstream) brand users to perceive fellow brand users to be a homogenous and desirable group. Minority brand users would therefore be more likely to have a shared representation of who they are and what they are like. In five experiments, we found that both the need to seek connections and ingroup communication are critical for individuals to form shared representations of group members. The findings contribute to our understanding of how brand culture emerges.

[to cite]:

Shirley Y. Y. Cheng and Chi-yue Chiu (2009) ,"Emergence of Shared Representation of Brand Users", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 36, eds. Ann L. McGill and Sharon Shavitt, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 108-111.

[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14207/volumes/v36/NA-36

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.

SYMPOSIUM SUMMARY

Brand Symbolism and Reference Groups: Perspectives on the Identity Value of Brands

Carlos Torelli, University of Minnesota, USA

SESSION OVERVIEW

People buy products not only for what they do, but also for what the product means; thus brands can be symbols that become part of the individual identities of consumers (Levy 1959). McCracken's (1988) model of meaning transfer states that such meaning originates in the culturally constituted world and moves into brands through several instruments such as advertising, the fashion system, and reference groups. In particular, reference groups shape brand meanings via the associations consumers hold regarding the groups of individuals who use the brand (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). These meanings can move to consumers, as consumers appropriate brand meanings for constructing their individual identities (Escalas and Bettman 2005). How do brands achieve the highest levels of symbolism and become icons of a group? How do consumers use iconic brands for signaling their identity? When do consumers feel more motivated to seek connections among fellow brand users? How do group norms impact the identity value of brands? This symposium unites under a common theme of providing insights on the dynamic processes underlying the transfer of brand meanings via reference groups and the appropriation of these meanings for constructing consumers' self-identities.

The first paper by Torelli, Chiu, Keh, and Amaral examines how brands become icons of a cultural group and how consumers use iconic brands to manage their social identity. Adopting a shared reality perspective (Hardin and Higgins 1996) to the study of the cultural significance of brands, these authors define brand iconicity as the degree to which a brand symbolizes the values, needs, and aspirations of the members of a particular cultural group. They further reason that for these brands to become culturally influential their symbolic meanings should be widely and durably distributed in the culture (Sperber 1996). Through the sharing of these meanings in an ongoing, dynamic process of social verification, they become a shared reality. In five studies, the authors develop a reliable and cross-culturally general measure of brand iconicity. They show that consumers may use preference for iconic brands over non-iconic ones as a self-symbolizing strategy. They also show that for likable brands, if their cultural significance is widely known in the community, they are more likely to become cultural icons. This research not only provides insights into the social verification process by which symbolic group meanings get transferred to iconic brands, but show how consumers use iconic brands to manage their social identity and use social information to judge the level of iconicity of brands.

The second paper by Cheng and Chiu explores how brand patronage can facilitate perceptions of group interconnectedness and homogeneity. Cheng and Chiu suggest that knowing that one's brand choice was favored only by a few people motivates individuals to seek connections among fellow brand users. They further argue that this need to seek connections motivates minority (vs. mainstream) brand users to perceive fellow brand users to be a homogenous and desirable group, and to emphasize commonalities when they talk among each other. Minority brand users would therefore be more likely to have a shared representation of who they are and what they are like. In five experiments, they found that both the need to seek connections and ingroup communication are critical for individuals to form shared representation of group members. This stream of research provides an important insight into how brand-group associations get established and how abstract group meanings can get transferred to a brand.

The final paper by Ng and Lau-Gesk enhances our understanding of the dynamic processes underlying the appropriation of brand meanings via reference groups. Ng and Lau-Gesk suggest that the identity value of a brand can be diminished by highlighting the conflict between individual identity-signaling desires and important group values. In three experiments, the authors find that when the conflict between consumers' desire to signal status through brand usage and the group norms disapproving such behavior are made salient, consumers are less likely to choose products that feature (vs. not) brand logos prominently. This effect is particularly strong for brand choices that are made in public (vs. in private), and even extend to situations involving counterfeit products.

This session discusses a very important topic that has amazing potential to both inform consumer researchers about the antecedents of self-brand connections and help branding professionals make better decisions. We anticipate this session will attract not only those interested in branding issues, but those interested in group-processes and the cultural meanings of brands. Jennifer Escalas, an expert in the study of consumer narrative processing and brand symbolism, will integrate the implications of the three streams of research and provide a roadmap for future research about the dynamic processes underlying the transfer of brand meanings via reference groups and the appropriation of these meanings for constructing consumers' self-identities.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

"Brand Iconicity: A Shared Reality Perspective"

Carlos Torelli, University of Minnesota, USA
Chi-yue Chiu, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA
Hean Tat Keh, Peking University, China
Nelson Amaral, University of Minnesota, USA

That certain brands reach an iconic status in society is a notion widely accepted by marketing practitioners and consumers alike. Although recommendations to build iconic brands are not uncommon, very little research has been devoted to basing these recommendations upon any theoretically grounded conceptualization of brand iconicity. Recently, Holt (2004) conceptualized iconic brands as consumer brands that become "consensus expressions of particular values held dear by some members of a society" (p. 4). Iconic brands carry a heavy symbolic load for consumers, who frequently rely on them to communicate to others who they are or aspire to be. For these brands to become culturally influential, their symbolic meanings should be widely and durably distributed in the culture (see Sperber 1996). Through the sharing of these meanings on an ongoing, dynamic process of social verification, or shared reality (Hardin and Higgins 1996), their symbolism becomes an objective reality. It is precisely this shared understanding of the symbolic meaning of an iconic brand that facilitates the communication of ideals and aspirations to others through brand usage or consumption.

We define brand iconicity as the degree to which a brand symbolizes the values, needs, and aspirations of the members of a particular cultural group. Brands high in iconicity have the power to connect diverse elements of cultural knowledge and can act as reminders of culturally-relevant values and beliefs. In the five studies reported here, we developed a measure of brand iconicity and provided evidence for its reliability and validity. These studies also show how consumers use iconic brands to manage their social identity and use social information to judge the level of iconicity of brands.

In study 1, we developed a scale to measure brand iconicity (BIS) and provided evidence for its reliability and cross-cultural generality using samples of American and Chinese consumers. Brand iconicity was shown to be a construct that is distinct from, and yet correlated with, involvement. Although iconic brands are very familiar ones, brand iconicity is uncorrelated with brand familiarity.

In studies 2 and 3, we demonstrated the validity of the BIS. In study 2, we asked American participants to write a story describing American culture. Participants were further instructed to use brands either high or low in iconicity as an aid in writing the story (a control condition, in which no brands were mentioned, was also included for comparison purposes). They subsequently rated the fluency in idea generation. Results showed that including iconic brands identified through the BIS when writing about their associated culture increases fluency in idea generation and the number of important cultural values mentioned in the essay. These effects remained even after controlling for participants' level of involvement with the brands. In study 3, participants were either reminded of a recent ban on a symbolic marker of their group identity (University mascot) or completed a control task. They subsequently evaluated brands with varying levels of iconicity. Results showed that consumers preferred iconic brands over non-iconic ones as a self-symbolizing strategy. They used this strategy to compensate for a tarnished group identity upon the reminder of the ban on the University mascot.

Finally, studies 4 and 5 investigated the shared reality processes that underlie judgments of brand iconicity. Participants were led to believe that a majority (vs. a minority) of fellow participants associated either a likable or a dislikable brand (in this case a celebrity name) with culturally-relevant values. They subsequently rated the brand in terms of iconicity. Results showed that for likable brands, if their cultural significance is widely known in the community, they have an increased likelihood of becoming cultural icons. However, for dislikable brands, public awareness of their cultural meanings does not increase their iconicity scores.

Findings from this research suggest a relationship between brand evaluation, public awareness of the brand's cultural significance, and brand iconicity. At least for likable brands, it is possible to increase their iconicity by strengthening its associations with important cultural values and broadening the public awareness of such associations. This idea is congruent with Holt's (2004) assertion that brands that are successful in addressing the collective desires of a cultural group are the ones raised to an iconic status. In contrast, for dislikable brands, even when the consumers know that these brands are widely known to embody important cultural values, they do not consider these brands to be iconic. This finding is consistent with theories of intergroup behavior (e.g., Tajfel 1982), which posit that people adopt a certain group identity to fulfill their need for positive distinctiveness of the self. Thus, it would be unlikely that consumers would accept a dislikable brand as an icon of their culture, as doing so may contrast with the perceived positivity of the culture.

Findings in this research carry important implications for global branding. Consumers who are aware of the symbolism of a foreign brand in its associated culture might bring to mind its attendant cultural meaning. For example, a Chinese consumer may think about the individualist values characteristic of American culture while passing in front of a Starbucks outlet in downtown Beijing. If the consumer values an independent self-identity, the activated cultural associations upon seeing the iconic American brand may increase purchase intention.

In combination, the studies in this research not only provide insights into the social verification process by which symbolic meanings associated with a group get transferred to iconic brands, but show how consumers use iconic brands to manage their social identity and use social information to judge the level of iconicity of brands. The present paper offers a framework to better understand the impact of the cultural meanings associated with consumer brands on brand perceptions and the fulfillment of identity goals.

"Emergence of Shared Representation of Brand Users"

Shirley Y. Y. Cheng, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA
Chi-yue Chiu, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

One major feature of brand communities is the "consciousness of kind" (Gusfield 1978), which is the "intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community" (p. 413, Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Intrigued by the observation that many brand communities are centered at minority brands (e.g., Apple-Mac or Harley Davidson) instead of mainstream brands, we looked into how being in a minority group may contribute to forming a shared representation of fellow brand users.

Specifically, we examined how brand users become aware of some distinctive characteristics that are shared among fellow brand users. These distinctive characteristics *define* the group, and differentiate members from non-members of the community. We proposed that the motivation to seek connections among fellow brand users and the opportunity for in-group communication contribute to the emergence of the shared group representation.

Minority brands and the motivation to seek connections. Optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer 1991) posits that people need to see themselves as being different from others and being connected to others at the same time. For minority brand users, knowing that their brand choice is shared only by a small group satisfies the need to be different more than the need to connect, which would motivate to seek connections to others in order to restore the optimal level of distinctiveness. Motivation to seek connections would lead minority brand users to perceive commonalities among fellow brand users. For majority brand users, knowing that a majority shares their brand choice heightens the need to be different. They are motivated to perceive differences instead of commonalities among fellow brand users.

Communication as a critical mechanism. Communication is an important mechanism for forming shared representation (Latané 1996). We maintain that communication among brand users is responsible for crystallizing distinctive group characteristics. Minority brand users (because of the heightened need to connect) would be more likely to emphasize commonalities when they talk about fellow brand users. Majority brand users, however, would be more likely to emphasize the differences among fellow brand users. Therefore, we hypothesize that minority (vs. majority) brand users would be more likely to form a shared group representation.

Experiments 1 and 2–Emergence of distinctive group characteristics. In these experiments, we manipulated group membership by giving participants a choice between two brands. They were told that their choice was either popular (majority condition) or unpopular (minority condition) among previous participants, which would lead to relatively lower versus higher levels of need for connections respectively. Next, participants read information about "the most enjoyable activity of 20 other participants who made the same choice." These activities varied in the degree to which they represented openness to experience, and there was a slightly higher number of activities high (vs. low) in openness. Using this information, participants wrote an essay to communicate their impression of these participants (referred thereafter as the target group) to another participant who would also choose the same brand. Two independent coders classified each essay in terms of whether it captured a global impression of the target group or not, and in terms of whether this global impression reflected openness to experience as the main theme. As predicted, participants in the minority (vs. majority) condition were more likely to communicate a global impression of the target group and to characterize it as high in openness.

Participants also rated the target group on group homogeneity and openness. Again as predicted, participants in the minority (vs. majority) condition rated target group members as being more similar to one another and as being more open to experience, although participants in the two conditions rated openness as equally desirable. To rule out an alternative interpretation based on information representativeness, experiment 2 replicated the findings of experiment 1, but using this time a smaller target group (i.e., information about five instead of 20 participants).

Experiments 3 and 4–Testing the proposed model. These experiments were designed to show that the need to seek connections and ingroup communication are critical for forming shared group representations. In experiment 3, participants performed the same tasks but without making the initial brand choice, which presumably prevented them from associating with the target (i.e., taking an outsider's perspective). They were simply instructed to read the same 20 most enjoyable activities of participants who chose either a minority or a majority brand and wrote an essay about these participants. As expected, participants who wrote essays about such groups did not perceive a minority group to be more homogeneous or open. In fact, reversing the pattern found in previous studies, minority (vs. majority) users were perceived to be less homogeneous and less open. These results suggest that the need to connect with fellow group members may be a prerequisite for forming a shared group representation. In experiment 4, participants made the same brand choice as in experiment 1, but were prevented from communicating their impressions (i.e., they did not write an essay describing the target group) before rating the group. Congruent with the notion that ingroup communication is necessary for forming shared group representations, participants in the minority (vs. majority) condition perceived the target group to be equally homogeneous, and even perceived it as being less open.

Experiment 5–Crystallization of distinctive group characteristics. This experiment studied serial communication as an antecedent of the crystallization of brand user representations. Participants here followed the same procedure used in experiment 1, but read a sample of the essays written by the participants in experiment 1 instead of the 20 most enjoyable activities. As predicted, participants in the minority (vs. majority) condition perceived the target group as being more open, homogenous, cohesive, and trustworthy.

Results here show that minority (vs. majority) brand users perceive and talk about fellow brand users with a greater emphasis on the commonalities among them. This contributes to forming a shared representation of the distinctive group characteristics. Existing reference group research mostly focuses on how perception of a reference group affect consumers' brand choice (e.g., Escalas and Bettman 2003). Extending this stream of research, our findings show that brand choice can affect the perceptions of the reference group by group members, which might subsequently impact the meaning of being a brand user.

"One Trait, Two Images: Impact of Impression Management Goal Conflict on Brand Choice"

Sharon Ng, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
Loraine Lau-Gesk, University of California, Irvine, USA

Consumers frequently use brands as a means to express a desired self image. Brands, indeed the more successful ones, tend to be associated with images that consumers would like to be associated with in order to help managing the impressions they make on others (Escalas and Bettman 2005). To highlight these associations, most branded products are designed such that the brand logo is prominently featured on the product (e.g., the monogram bags sold by Louis Vuitton, the logo featured on all Ralph Lauren apparels, etc). One purpose of these logos is to highlight the brand and fulfill the impression management purpose of its users.

Many brands in the marketplace, however, possess complex trait associations where more than one meaning can develop and evolve over time. A brand may possess a conflicting image through a single trait. Take prestige, for example. On the one hand, the prestige of a brand may in itself entice consumers to purchase it in view of its associated meaning of personal success and status. On the other hand, consumers may find prestige as undesirable if they think about negative group perceptions of being overly materialistic and shallow as opposed to modest and grounded. These multiple meanings associated with a single brand trait can lead consumers to experience tension balancing personal desires (e.g., showing success) with societal values (e.g., demonstrating modesty, Goffman 1959, Leary and Kowalski 1990).

Though many brands with conflicting meanings exist in the marketplace, the literature remains silent about how brand conflict could impact brand choice. To address this gap in the literature, the present research examines situations where a single brand trait arouses oppositely-valenced responses, forcing consumers to choose between satisfying personal identity-signaling desires or fulfilling important group values. We examine how this type of conflict affect consumers' choice between products that feature the brand logo prominently and those that do not feature the logo. Our findings will help firms better understand how conflicting brand image and societal norms affect consumers' choices. In addition, we extend our theory to understand consumers' purchase of counterfeit products.

Specifically, drawing from the impression management literature, we propose that saliency of the conflicting associations triggered by the purchase or use of a brand would make people more hesitant to use the brand for impression management purposes, which would ultimately impact brand choice. To test this hypothesis, study 1 manipulated the degree to which the conflict between consumers' desire to signal status through brand usage and the group norms disapproving such behavior were made salient. Those in the low conflict condition were told that signaling status through brand usage was a widely accepted behavior in their groups, whereas those in the high conflict condition were told that such behavior was in conflict with group norms. As predicted, we found that people were less likely to choose products that featured the brand logo prominently (vs. those without the brand logo) when the conflict was made salient.

We further propose that the impact of conflicting associations on one's brand choice is moderated by the extent to which the decision is made in the public or the private domain. When the decision is made in the public domain, the conflict would take on greater weight in affecting one's decision. To test this hypothesis, study 2 adopted a 2 (Evaluation Condition: Private vs. Public) X 2 (Conflict: Low vs. High) between subjects design. As expected, we found that when the decision was made in the public domain, participants were more likely to choose products that did not feature the brand logos prominently (versus those that featured the brand logos prominently). In the private domain, there was no significant difference in the choices made. Thus, findings from studies 1 and 2 supported our contention that making salient the conflict between individual identity-signaling desires and important group values do affect consumers' choices, and this effect is particularly evident when the decision is made in the public domain.

Building on studies 1 and 2, study 3 examines how conflicting associations would affect people's attitudes towards counterfeit products. Very little research has been devoted to understanding the psychological processes underlying the purchase of counterfeit products. We propose that our findings can shed light on some of these processes. Consumers may buy counterfeit products in an attempt to signal status through brand usage without having to pay a higher price. However, these consumers may also perceive that the usage of counterfeit products is a practice that is not accepted by their groups and may negatively impact how group members perceive them. This conflict between personal goals and important group values (i.e., to leverage the brand's image to impress others and societal disdain on the purchase of counterfeit products) should affect attitudes toward counterfeit products. Specifically, we argue that when such conflict is made salient to the consumers, they would exhibit a less favorable attitude towards counterfeit products. Furthermore, this effect will be stronger when the decision is made in the public (vs. the private) domain. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a 2 (Evaluation Condition: Private vs. Public) X 2 (Conflict: Low vs. High) between subjects experiment in a counterfeit product context. Results supported our prediction.

In summary, findings from three studies suggest that the use of brands for impression management purposes may be more complex than it was previously known. Brand attributes that satisfy individual identity-signaling desires may be in conflict with values that are important for the group. Making this conflict salient can impact consumers' attitudes and choices.

SELECTED REFERENCES

Brewer, Marilynn B. (1991), "The Social Self: On Being the Same and Different at the Same Time," *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 17 (5), 475-82.

Escalas, Jennifer Edson and James R. Bettman (2005), "Self-Construal, Reference Groups, and Brand Meaning," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32 (3), 378-89.

Hardin, Curtis D. and E. Tory Higgins (1996), "Shared Reality: How Social Verification Makes the Subjective Objective," in *Handbook of Motivation and Cognition*, Richard M. Sorrentino and E. Tory Higgins, Eds. Vol. 3: The interpersonal context. NY: Guilford Press, 28-84.

Holt, Douglas B. (2004), *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Muniz, Albert M. and Thomas C. O'Guinn (2001), "Brand Community," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27 (4), 412-32.