Mental Visual Imagery, Authenticity and Consumers’ Attitude Formation Towards Licensed Brands

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Licensed brand refers broadly to any brands that are manufactured and marketed by someone other than the brand owner. In order for the licensed brand to be perceived as authentic, the cues for communicating authenticity are crucial between marketers and consumers. A person construes the cues via the formation of mental visual image before further deriving his/her perception about the authenticity of a licensed brand. This research examines different types of visual mental image, attributes and assessment of authenticity and consumers’ attitude formation associated with licensed brand.

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We designed an experiment to test these predictions. The study employs a 2 (salesperson vs. friend) x 2 (no-instruction vs. instruction to correct) between-subjects design. The dependent variables were choice and willingness to purchase the product. Measures regarding persuasion knowledge and ulterior motives were also included.

Participants (N=71) read a written scenario (adapted from Campbell and Kirmani 2000) describing a situation in which they imagined they were looking for a jacket. In the salesperson condition, the salesperson makes a comment about one of the two jackets the participant imagines trying on (the target jacket); in the friend condition, the participant’s friend makes the same comment. In the no-instruction condition, participants answered the questions immediately after reading the scenario; in the instruction condition, participants were told to “try their best not to let the salesperson’s (the friend’s) opinion influence their own opinion.” Participants then chose between the non-target and the target jacket and completed the other measures.

As predicted, the salesperson was perceived as more persuasive than the friend (Ms=6.21, Mf=4.58), indicating a main effect of source (F (1, 67)=22.13, p<.001). Participants also perceived the salesperson as being more manipulative (F (1, 67)=11.79, p<.001), less trustworthy (F (1, 67)=54.57, p<.001), and less sincere than the friend (F (1, 67)=16.94, p<.001). Consistent with their desire to resist the salesperson’s influence, we found that in the salesperson condition participants chose the jacket that had not been recommended by the salesperson (the non-target jacket) marginally more often (15% of the time) than in the friend condition (7% of the time) (χ²=3.127, p<.07).

In the no-instruction condition, participants indicated that they tried harder to resist the salesperson’s influence than the friend’s influence (Ms=4.5, Mf=2.83). However, when they were instructed to correct, they tended to resist the salesperson’s influence less and the friend’s influence more (Ms=3.71, Mf=3.77), resulting in a significant interaction (F (1, 67)=4.6, p<.05).

Consistent with participants’ perceptions of their resistance, participants in the salesperson condition tended to prefer the non-target jacket relative to the target jacket in the no-instruction condition. However, when they were instructed to correct, there was no difference in their willingness to purchase the two jackets. The opposite pattern was observed in the friend condition, resulting in a significant three-way interaction (F (1, 67)=4.23, p<.05). Participants in the friend condition were more willing to purchase the recommended jacket in the no-instruction condition; the difference was not significant in the instruction condition.

Our findings show that when they are not instructed to correct their judgments, participants tend to comply with their friends and resist the salesperson’s influence, choosing the recommended jacket more when it was recommended by the friend than when it was recommended by the salesperson. Instruction to correct decreased choice of the recommended jacket in the friend condition and increased choice of the recommended jacket in the salesperson condition, making the proportion of choice equal.

This research builds on earlier research on source effects and on correction by showing that providing instructions to correct can moderate source effects. Notably, when people attempt to correct for a source’s influence the persuasiveness of a less trusted source such as a salesperson can actually increase. Despite the advantages of a friend in perceived trustworthiness, manipulativeness and sincerity, a simple reminder to a consumer to avoid being influenced by a third party can make a salesperson just as effective as a friend.

References

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Many researchers (e.g. Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Thompson et al. 2006) have noted that brand licensing undermines the value of the brands. However some examples suggest differently. Haier, a global brand in home electronics began its ascent in China by licensing refrigerator technology and the brand from German Liebherr Corp. Sanyo Fashion House Inc. obtained license to manufacture and distribute “blue label” Burberry products in Japan. Despite their licensee image, they have both achieved strong brand value internationally.

In this paper, we ask the question “when and how licensed brands achieve the same or even higher value than original brands?” and we reason that consumers’ assessment of authenticity may hold the key to this question. Most researchers agree that authenticity is not
an attribute inherent in an object and is better understood and assessed by a particular evaluator in its particular context (Grayson and Martinec 2004). However, little research has studied the antecedents and consequences of authenticity. This is particularly relevant in brand licensing, as the cues for communicating authenticity of a licensed brand will help consumers’ assessment of the value of the licensed brand, and these cues may or may not be related to the attributes of the original brands. This research intends to make three related contributions. Firstly, we attempt to develop multidimensional measures for authenticity in brand licensing. Secondly, we will empirically test whether mental visual imagery influence consumers’ perception of authenticity. Thirdly, we are to test the link between the types of authenticity and consumers’ attitude formation of licensed brands.

**Indexical and Iconic Authenticity**

Grayson and Martinec (2004) identified two dimensions of authenticity based on the semiotic model developed by Peirce (1998): the indexical authenticity and iconic authenticity. Indexical authenticity refers to the physical or psychological link which distinguishes the “real thing” from its copies (Grayson and Shulman 2000). Iconic authenticity refers to the preexisting knowledge or expectations which a person perceives something being similar to something else. In order for the licensed brand to be perceived as authentic, the cues for communicating authenticity are crucial, and this process of understanding and specifying these cues is called the negotiation of meaning (Grayson and Martinec, 2004).

**Mental Visual Imagery**

Past research (e.g. Adeyemo, 1990; Dahl and Chattopadhyay, 1999; MacInnis and Price, 1987) has shown that mental visual imagery is one of the mental processes which one uses to make sense of cues. Mental imagery is a form of internal representation in which information about the appearance of physical objects, events and scenes can be depicted and manipulated (Richardson 1999, P. 3). Research in marketing has distinguished different types of visual mental imagery: the image based on memory and imagination (Dahl and Chattopadhyay, 1999; MacInnis and Price 1987). These authors define memory image as the event or occasion that a person has personally experienced or observed whereas imagination imagery is a new, never-before-experienced event.

**The link between authenticity and mental visual imagery**

Assessment of authenticity involves a complex perceptual process (Belk and Costa 1998; Pen’aloza 2001). A person construes the cues via the formation of mental visual image before further deriving his/her perception about the authenticity of a licensed brand. Iconic authenticity may be achieved when cues are congruent with their memory. Because to view something as iconically authentic, a perceiver must have some preexisting knowledge or perceived similarities of a licensed brand with something he or she is familiar with, memory imagery can be interpreted as the cue which links consumers preexisting knowledge with the perceived iconic authenticity about the licensed brand. Therefore:

- **H1:** Consumers’ memory imagery is positively correlated with perceived iconic authenticity.

  Imagination imagery involves the creation of previously unseen image and the capacity of imagination imagery determines one’s ability to negotiate meaning out of novel information (Adeyemo 1990). To view something as an index, a perceiver must believe it actually has the “factual” and “spatio-temporal link” that is claimed (Grayson and Shulman 2000). Imagination imagery can be interpreted as acceptance of marketing communications from the licensee toward the perception of indexical authenticity by consumers. Therefore:

- **H2:** Consumers’ imagination imagery is positively correlated with perceived indexical authenticity.

- **H3:** The more the licensed brand is perceived with iconic cues, the more licensed brand will be perceived as authentic.

- **H4:** The more the licensed brand is perceived with indexical cues, the more licensed brand will be perceived as authentic.

  Although both iconic and indexical cues are likely to encourage consumers to believe that a licensed brand is authentic, iconic cues are likely to be more powerful because consumers possess some preexisting knowledge about the licensed brand or perceive similarities with something they are familiar with. Therefore:

- **H5:** Iconic cues have greater influence than indexical cues on consumers’ assessment of authenticity.

  Finally, we examine whether assessment of authenticity will in turn influence consumers’ attitude toward the licensed brand. Attitude towards a brand can be defined as consumer’s overall brand evaluation (Aaker and Keller, 1990). Cognition is part of the belief formation and the salience of beliefs in term form attitude (Ajzen, 2002). Assessment of authenticity is one type of cognitive associations assisting consumers to negotiate the meaning of brand licensing. Therefore:

- **H6:** Perceived authenticity is positively correlated with consumers’ attitude formation toward licensed brands.

**Methods and Measures**

There are two stages of data collection in this research: exploratory focus group studies and controlled experiments.

**Exploratory Focus Group Studies**

The focus group studies were completed. The purpose of the focus group studies is twofold. Firstly, we hoped to gain deeper understanding about how consumers perceive the connections among our three focal concepts and to develop a set of hypotheses. Secondly, it would help with the development of relevant measures to be used in the controlled experiments.
Three focus group interviews were designed and conducted based on the guideline from Krueger (1994) and Yin (1984). Twenty-six informants (20 to 35 years of age) were recruited from both undergraduate and postgraduate students in a west midland university in the United Kingdom. Each focus group lasted around 60 minutes. The informants, 51% of which are female, have Chinese origin. These informants were recruited for the consistency with second stage of data collection in China. The focus group results were content analyzed according to the guideline of Yin (1984). The results shown that, firstly, the distinction between the use of memory and imagination imagery is important to assess authenticity of licensed brands. Secondly, there exist different antecedents for the two dimensions of authenticity (detailed findings will be reported in the full paper).

Controlled experiments

A set of controlled experiments will be employed to test our derived hypotheses. Brand selection criteria are based on Aaker and Keller’s (1990), i.e. relevance to the subjects, generally perceived as high quality, able to elicit relatively specific associations. Two hundred students will be recruited from a Chinese university to participate in the study. Chinese market is chosen because of its market size and rapid growth in licensing activities (LIMA, 2005).

The independent variables are visual mental imagery and authenticity. Visual mental imagery types will be manipulated by instructing participants to rely on either imagination or memory when evaluating authenticity. The measurements for manipulation check will be adopted from Dahl and Chattopadhyay’s (1999) 7-point scale. Two 7-point authenticity measures were developed based on focus group findings:

(a) Indexical authenticity in brand licensing: novelty, level of involvement of the brand owner, and perception about distribution.
(b) Iconic authenticity in brand licensing: quality, country of origin, and trademark.

The dependent variable is attitude toward the licensed brand. To measure attitude toward licensed brand, we will adopt Kind and Smith’s (2001) 7-point semantic differential scale. Two experimental factors (imagery types) will be manipulated. Experimental design will consist of a 2 (imagery type) x 2 (authenticity type) + 1 control mixed model. Imagery types are between-subjects variables, with subjects exposed to a set of either memory or imagination stimuli. Authenticity types are crossed within-subject, so that all subjects will be exposed to all levels of these variables.

References


