“It’S a Bit of a Mask, It’S Not Pure…It’S Not What I Thought”: How Doppelganger Brand Images Attack Brand Authenticity

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This paper presents an interpretivist analysis of how consumers process negative information projected from doppelganger brand images in relation to perceived brand authenticity. Analysis indicates how different identity benefits (control, connection and virtue) and institutional legitimacy motivate consumers to re-evaluate brand authenticity and form a four-step brand judgement process model.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The search for authenticity is one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003). Marketers invested heavily in advertising trying to project a sense of authenticity around their brands (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink, 2008). However, little is known about the strength of brand authenticity given the rise of anti-branding movement via anti-brand websites (Bailey 2004; Holt 2002; Krishnamurthy and Kucuk 2009) and brand focused parodies (Bergh et al., 2011; Zinkhan and Johnson 1994). Consumers and activists use these uncontrolled communication to project their discontent and exchange anti-branding information. Consider an ad for BP suggesting a better life with vision of beyond petroleum. Then imagine the same ad being parodied with a strong indication of ‘brown is the new green’. Consider Starbucks Corp’s brand being parodied reading “Evil Empire” and “Frankensbucks Coffee”. These alternative source cues provide a deliberate attack on the perception of what is real and genuine, hence perception of an inauthentic brand. Despite these damaging activities, there is limited research in understanding how negative brand images and stories affect perceived brand authenticity.

Extant research has focused nearly exclusively on management issues, whether to fight or walk away (Earle 2002; Fielding 2006; Mortimer 2008) and a few studies have focused on the outcome and the link between anti-branding movement and brand value (Krishnamurthy and Kucuk 2009). In this paper, we explore how consumers process doppelganger brand images which are described as ‘a family of disparaging images and meanings about a brand’ (Giesler 2012; Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel 2006). In the time of uncertainty, consumers try to relieve this by seeking authenticity in their daily lives in the brands they consume (Bruhn et al., 2012).

Prior research studies on authenticity show how consumers actively create personal brand meaning in order to achieve desired identity goals, such activities involves acts of imagination, suspension of disbelief, projection, selective information processing and negotiation of paradox (Beverland et al. 2008; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Kate 2004; Rose and Wood 2005). Research has also examined that consumers are less forgiving when trusted brand violates their emotional branding promises (Aaker et al. 2004) as it is viewed as inauthentic. Given the emergence of doppelganger brand image partly fuelled by emotional discontent with a brand, a key question that arises is how do loyal consumers process negative information projected by doppelganger brand images in relation to authenticity?

In this study, we used interpretive and qualitative research design, using semi structured in-depth interviews (McCracken 1988, Miles and Huberman 1994) to investigate informant’s life world, identity, intentions, desires and their association with marketing offerings (Thompson 1997). In total, 23 in-depth, face to face interviews were conducted with Dove consumers from various backgrounds at which point it was felt that ‘saturation’ (Glasner and Strauss 1967) had been reached. Informants were asked to share their perceptions of selected four Dove’s campaigns ranging from 2006 to 2013, and a brand parody; focusing especially on how these perceptions may have changed their perceived authenticity of the brand. To introduce the case, photo-elicitation techniques were used (Collier 1957). Each interview was transcribed and analysed following the interview and initial themes and responses helped to inform the questioning of subsequent interviews (Straus and Corbin 1998).

Our findings contribute in a number of ways. First, we extend our understanding on how consumers judge doppelganger brand images in relation to brand authenticity. We identify that in re-evaluating the brand authenticity, consumers use their original goals (control, connect and virtue) as an anchor to determine if the brand continues to be true, genuine and real (Beverland and Farrell 2010). To understand the process of how consumers formed judgement on doppelganger brand images, our findings show consumers go through a four stage process such as ‘Selection of judgement criteria’, ‘Information search’, ‘Cognitive processing’ and finally ‘Outcomes’. The need for judgement, which is the starting point of brand authenticity judgement process, arises due to exposure to doppelganger brand images. The degree of motivation generated by the need to make a judgement about the brand has an important effect on the consumers’ cognition. This means that high motivation promotes extensive information search and ‘rational’ evaluation; whereas low motivation favours the use of heuristics and other “short cuts” that can simplify those decisions (Kruglanski 2001). The lack of information available to assess the situation and alternative ‘authentic’ product can potentially force consumers to take cognitive biases in processing this negative information. In doing so, they tolerate the brand inauthenticity or transgression as they search for the information initially used to form the brand attitude (Pham and Muthukrishnan 2002). Following search and alignment model (Pham and Muthukrishnan 2002), it is not surprising how some consumers are more forgiving of the doppelganger brand images as they return to the root of the brand which is about ‘moisturising’. The doppelganger brand image which appears to attack the ‘real beauty’ and ‘self esteem’ campaign clearly has little effect on these informants. However, for other consumers which initial experience of the Dove is relate to ‘real beauty’, this doppelganger brand images is weighted more heavily.

Contrary to conventional understanding of consumer loyalty, we also find little evidence of loyal consumers strongly defending the brand. Dove used emotional-branding story to achieve competitive advantages and arguably successful in functioning as an authenticating narrative for consumers’ identity project. However, existing brand parodies on Dove causes loyal consumers to avoid Dove as the emotional branding promises are viewed as inauthentic. We find evidence that suggests a clearer transfer of previously positive relationships to predictably negative responses towards these images. However with the growth of anti-branding movement, it is more increasingly difficult for loyal consumers to avoid these images in mainstream media. Johnson, Matear and Thomson (2011) also argue that this self-relevance actually make consumer more vulnerable.

REFERENCES


