A Brand in Hand: Symbolic Props in Self-Presentation

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Prior research suggests that individuals use verbal and bodily expressions to manage the impression others have of their abilities and traits. We empirically test the proposition that brands in one’s possession may be tactically managed to the same end, applying a symbolic self-completion framework. Participants with low self-evaluations on a situationally salient and desirable personality trait displayed (obscured) a brand that possessed symbolic meaning congruent (incongruent) with that trait, consistent with an acquisitive or self-enhancing impression management strategy. A second study saw a reversal in this pattern towards protective self-presentation when the salient trait was perceived to be ‘riskier’ to impression manage.

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Fighting with Feathers and Bubbles: Consumer Resistance and the Urban Playground Movement

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Current perspectives on consumer movements define them as ideologically laden, organization-centered and well structured actions focused on fighting particular market and industry practices. However, as markets become increasingly politicized and public spaces increasingly commercialized, less structured forms of consumer resistance emerge. By looking at a series of diverse, fluid and sporadic actions undertaken by consumers in metropolitan cities, we attempt to enrich our understanding of political consumerism. Through an ethnographic investigation of the urban playground movement, we examine how consumers engage in playful interventions while subverting the norms and rules that structure public and market spaces.

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Considerable evidence exists that people tactically manage verbal communication and bodily expressions to convey a desired impression of the self—and sometimes deceive others in the process (e.g. Argo, White and Dahl 2006; Feldman, Forrest and Happ 2002; Jones and Pittman 1982). Research building on symbolic self-completion (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1981) finds that individuals who feel situationally under-endowed on a desirable personality trait will be more likely than well-endowed individuals to socially display a brand that is congruent (incongruent) with positive identity on that trait. This prediction is consistent with recent findings that when one’s real abilities are perceived to be difficult to defend in verbal presentation, people may prefer to tell the truth or protective in signaling traits with a brand possession rather than risk being caught in an act of acquisitive or self-enhancing impression management (Arkin 1981; DePaulo 1992; Swann, Pelham and Krull 1989).

Study 1

The first study entailed a 2 (Brand: high vs. low symbolic meaning on a specific personality trait) x 2 (Self: high vs. low self-evaluation on the same trait) design. Pretests identified brand pairs for which differences existed in selected personality traits for individuals possessing the brands and for the brands themselves. Two magazine brands were selected that measured high vs. low in the trait of “amiability” (In Touch Weekly and The Economist, respectively), similar in selected other traits, and not different on measures supporting posited alternatives (e.g. awareness, likeability, purchase intent).

A cover story delivered a branded object into participants’ possession in a manner meeting Schlenker and Weigold’s (1992) criteria for actor, audience and situational factors in self-presentation. Participants were individually told that they would be entering a room to be judged in an interview. Through a ruse regarding “additional studies” to take home with them, participants found themselves in
possession of two file folders (delivery order was counterbalanced). One folder had a blank cover. The second had one of the two target brands printed prominently on the cover. Participants completed a bogus test and self-evaluation of their own amiability and then entered the interview room carrying the folders with them. The observed dependent variable was whether the brand printed on one of the folders was displayed or obscured (for example, by placing it beneath the blank folder) by the “interviewee” when it was set down on a table in front of the “interviewer”. The observer of the DV was blind to condition and specific hypotheses.

We found the predicted interaction of amiability self-evaluation and brand (β=.06, Wald(138)=6.00, p=.01) and a main effect for brand (β=.90, Wald(138)=6.19, p=.01) driven by differences within the low amiability condition only. Spotlight analysis (Aiken and West 1991) produces comparable results (+1SD amiability: β=.009, t=.145, p=.89; -1SD amiability: β=-.411, t=-3.51, p<.01). To enhance interpretability, we report the rate of display behavior by amiability self-evaluation median split versus a mean chance expectation (MCE) 50% display / 50% obscure as “chance” as a conservative test for the behavior. Individuals with low amiability self-evaluations displayed the high amiability brand (In Touch Weekly) (72.2% vs MCE; χ²(1,36)=13.69, p<.001) and obscured the low amiability brand (The Economist) (28.1% vs MCE; χ²(1,32)=8.92, p<.01) from social view. In summary, the brand was displayed (obscured) when it enhanced (detracted from) a desirable self-presentation for those under-endowed in the salient trait. In contrast, individuals with high amiability self-evaluations did not display or obscure either brand at a rate different from chance (MLow Amiability Brand=59.5%, MHigh Amiability Brand=58.8%, p>.25). This pattern is consistent with a symbolic self-completion account of brands as alternative symbols for their possessor’s traits or abilities.

Study 2
We subsequently sought a preliminary moderator test regarding enhanced social risk of being “caught in a lie” of acquisitive or self-enhancing impression management. A pretest identified intelligence as a socially desirable trait for which a person’s ability to verbally convince others of high ability in the interview situation was more difficult than amiability, and highly difficult overall. The design of Study 2 was similar to Study 1 except participants were assigned to either hard or easy intelligence test manipulations, and were told they would be judged by a group rather than a single interviewer.

We again found a significant interaction between the trait manipulation conditions and brand on the rate of display/obscure behavior observed (β=-2.20, Wald(120)=8.36, p<.01), but in the opposite direction. As predicted and in contrast with Study 1, participants in the low intelligence condition were now more likely to display the low vs. high intelligence brand (66.7% vs 33.3%; χ²(1,60)=6.67, p<.01). Again, individuals with high self-evaluations on the salient trait did not display or obscure either brand at a rate greater than chance (MLow Intelligence Brand=36.7%, MHigh Intelligence Brand=56.7%, p’s >.10). The second study’s findings provide preliminary support for the argument that contextual perceptions of risk in delivering a believable impression may moderate acquisitive self-presentation using symbolic props (such as brands), motivating more protective and/or self-concept congruent impression management behavior. We are currently planning a third study to better isolate this moderator between subjects within a single experiment and to replicate current findings with different brands.

Preliminary Conclusions
These studies provide evidence that individuals with low self-evaluations on situationally salient trait dimensions may tactically manage the social visibility of brands in their possession. We find that people display (obscure) a brand possessing positive symbolic trait meaning when they feel relatively under-endowed in that trait, but only when abilities on that trait are perceived to be relatively easy to support in verbal self-presentation. To our knowledge, this paper provides the first direct experimental support regarding the use of objects in self-presentation.

References