First Things First? the Value of Originality

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We demonstrate that consumers prefer objects that are perceived as being original: Individuals prefer ‘authentic’ objects (e.g., the first stimulus in a sequence) and dislike mere derivatives. We show that the preference for original objects can be attributed to the value attached to independent creation: The appreciation of original objects is highly dependent on whether or not individuals adopt an independent (or "individualistic") mindset.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
We suggest in a series of studies that subtle indicators pointing to the originality of a product might increase its attractiveness. This may explain why brands often communicate to consumers when they originated. For example, Heinz states that its tomato ketchup dates back from 1869. Heinz’ label “since 1869” might not only indicate that Heinz has been around for a long time, but might also suggest that it was first, and thus original, in the ketchup category. Bolten (2006) proposes that people might have a kind of “folk wisdom” that being first (e.g., in invention, arts) is better and that “folk wisdom” leads to a positive evaluation of pioneers as they are “first” and therefore better. Swinyard, Rinne and Keng Kau (1990)

condition) or
interpretation in terms of preference for earlier stimuli entirely.

original orientation). Study 1b shows that participants rate an
consistent with the idea that digit alteration harms the perceived
led to believe that that same picture was photoshopped This is
of the level of poverty in a given society, but also of the societal
& Liu 2009), and it turns out that these rates are not only a function of
In study 1 we test the hypothesis that originality indicators
have a beneficial effect on preferences, which leads to a preference
for the original or “first” object among similar objects (hypothesis 1).
In study 1a, we presented abstract paintings in different rotations
and found that seemingly original rotations (0° & 360°) were preferred over any other rotation (although 90° was actually the real original orientation). Study 1b shows that participants rate an
‘original’ picture more favorably than other participants who were led to believe that that same picture was photoshopped This is consistent with the idea that digit alteration harms the perceived
originality of a picture. Summarized, study 1 demonstrates that perceived originality affects consumer evaluations.

It is important to note that originality has an all-or-none character (i.e., only one object can be the first and thus original): The presumed effect of originality differs from an effect in which earlier objects are preferred to later objects. In study 2, we test the hypothesis that in a set of similar objects the first, “original” product will be preferred, but not earlier to later objects (hypothesis 2). In study 2a, participants indicated their preference for one of two movies after seeing the two movie trailers. The movie trailers were labeled “Life on Earth I” and “Life on Earth II” (“originality” condition) or “Life on Earth II” and “Life on Earth III” (“earlier” condition). Participants preferred “Life on Earth I” to “Life on Earth II” but did not prefer “Life on Earth II” to “Life on Earth III” (hypothesis 2). We made use of nature documentaries to rule out the alternative explanation that one would need to watch the movies in proper order to understand ‘the plot’. Study 2b eliminates an interpretation in terms of preference for earlier stimuli entirely. Participants listened to two alternate versions of the same song, released in 1964 and 1967, but were told that another version existed. In the earlier condition, the third alternate version was presumably released in 1962 whereas in the control condition, this third version was presumably released in 1969. We predicted that the 1964 version would be preferred to the 1967 version in the control condition in which the 1964 version could be perceived as being first, but not in the ‘earlier’ condition in which the 1964 version was preceded by another (1962) version. This pattern of results was obtained. Perceived originality might explain why “earlier” stimuli—which are not the first—are not preferred to subsequent stimuli: only the very first stimulus may truly be considered original.

Study 3 aims to show that indicators of unoriginality have a strong detrimental impact on evaluations when consumers have an ‘individualistic mindset’, but not when consumers have a ‘collectivistic mindset’ (hypothesis 3). To test this hypothesis, Study 3 used the same design as study 1b, with one exception. Before seeing the pictures, participants were primed with individualism, collectivism or received no prime. In the no prime condition, we replicated the effect of study 1b, showing that participants rate an ‘original’ picture more favorably than other participants who were led to believe that that same picture was photoshopped. We obtained the same effect in the individualism condition. However, an unoriginality indicator did not have any effect in the collectivism condition: Evaluations of photoshopped pictures in this condition were as favorable as ‘original’ pictures in all conditions.

Our research might have practical implications as it shows that the use of originality indicators might be helpful to enhance consumer attraction. After all, we never observed negative effects of originality indicators, only indicators pointing to unoriginality appear detrimental for consumer evaluations. For several product categories, consumers are not able to identify which one is the ‘original’ or first brand on the market (Alpert & Kamins, 1995; Golder & Tellis, 1993; Kamins, Alpert & Elliott, 2000). For those categories, the potential power of originality indicators is enormous: Our research shows that any given brand/product may profit from the use of some sort of originality indicator to increase its attractiveness. On the other hand, the effect of originality indicators may be diluted as multiple brands are suggesting they are the one and only original. To address this latter issue, more research is needed.

REFERENCES

