Saying Yes to the Dress But No to the Glow: Why Consumers Resist Arrogant Brands

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In five studies, we demonstrate the multifaceted effects that brand arrogance has on consumers and their brand choices. We identify diminished self-concept as a factor that may increase consumers’ vulnerability to brand arrogance, thus encouraging them to resist arrogant brands. Resisting arrogant brands further helps consumers to repair their self-concept.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

One approach that marketers use to enhance brand image is the communication of arrogance—an exaggerated sense of superiority, which is often accomplished by disparaging others (Brown 2012; Johnson et al. 2010). Examples of this practice include Mercedes’s slogan “The best or nothing”, as well as brands with “arrogant” names such as Arrogant Cat. The aspiration to cultivate an arrogant brand image might be motivated by the positive connotations of arrogance, such as high status (e.g., Shariff and Tracy 2009). Arrogance, however, also has negative connotations, such as aggression and narcissism (e.g., Tracy and Robins 2007). Thus, we propose that in some cases brand arrogance may backfire, leading consumers to “say no to the glow”: to resist pursuing an arrogant brand, even when they perceive that brand as of high quality.

We investigate the reasons for, and consequences of, such resistance of arrogant brands. Specifically, we identify diminished self-concept as a factor that may encourage consumers to resist arrogant brands. We suggest that an arrogant brand, which conveys superiority, threatens consumers’ self-concept. Consequently, vulnerable consumers, who have prior experience feelings of low self-esteem, weakness, and powerlessness, are likely to react against the arrogant brand (i.e., resist it), because the arrogance might magnify their negative feelings. We further suggest that arrogant brand resistance has an important and counterintuitive impact on consumers’ well-being: by “saying no” to arrogant brands, consumers may repair their self-concept, because such an act can be seen as an expression of self-determination and free will (e.g., Ryan et al. 1991). Five studies provide support for our hypotheses.

In study 1, we induced participants (n=60) to have either diminished or undiminished self-concept, and then asked them to evaluate an arrogant clothing brand and choose between that brand and a competing neutral-image brand (we provided no information about the latter brand’s image). Results demonstrate the dual nature of arrogant brands: Participants assigned high value (i.e., quality and status) to the arrogant brand (M=5.44; significantly higher than the scale’s midpoint, t(59)=10.49, p<.001) but did not like it (M=3.57; significantly lower than the scale’s midpoint, t(59)=1.79, p=.08). The results also confirmed that participants with diminished (vs. undiminished) self-concept were less likely to choose the arrogant brand (37% vs. 64%, χ²(1)=4.20, p<.05).

Study 2 confirms that the effect observed in study 1 can be attributed to brand arrogance rather than to other brand features. We induced participants (n=96) to have either diminished or undiminished self-concept, and then asked them to choose between a fictitious smartphone brand, which we manipulated to be either arrogant or non-arrogant, and an alternative neutral-image brand. As expected, we found an interaction effect on brand choice (χ²(1)=2.85, p<.09): Participants with diminished self-concept were less likely to choose the focal brand when it was arrogant (37.5%) than when it was not arrogant (84.4%, χ²(1)=9.58, p<.01). In contrast, arrogance level did not affect choices of participants with undiminished self-concept (p>.4).

If consumers resist arrogant brands in order to repair their self-concept, then those whose self-concept has been previously restored by other means should be less likely to resist arrogant brands. To test this hypothesis, in study 3, we first induced all participants (n=45) to have diminished self-concept, and then manipulated the degree to which they restored their self-concept through changing their relative height perceptions (Duguid and Goncalo 2012). Participants then chose between a fictitious arrogant watch brand and a competing neutral-image brand. As predicted, tallness perceptions (i.e., restored self-concept) suppressed participants’ resistance to the arrogant brand; participants who felt relatively tall chose the arrogant option at a higher rate than participants who felt relatively short (73% vs. 39%; χ²(1)=5.14, p<.05).

Study 4 investigated whether arrogant-brand resistance assists consumers in reestablishing their self-concept. We randomly assigned participants (n=151) to one of two conditions. These conditions determined the order in which each participant completed the following two tasks: reporting one’s self-esteem (Heatherton and Polivy 1991), and making a selection between a fictitious arrogant sunglasses brand and a competing neutral-image brand. As expected, among participants who resisted the arrogant brand, self-esteem reported after making the choice was significantly higher than self-esteem reported before making the choice (5.90 vs. 5.08, t(54)=3.01, p<.01). In contrast, among participants who chose the arrogant brand, there was not a significant difference (p>.9).

Finally, in study 5 we focused on a real brand, and investigated whether reactions that express self-determination and free will but that do not relate to actual brand selection—specifically, having the option to state whether one likes or dislikes that brand—can repair self-concept. We randomly assigned participants (n=76) to one of two conditions: in one condition participants had the option to express their opinions about an arrogant brand; and in the other condition participants did not have that option. Participants watched a video that described the positioning of a known fashion brand, which had been criticized for being arrogant. After watching, half of the participants were asked to mark whether they “like” or “dislike” the brand, and the other half were not. Then, to measure self-concept, we asked participants to mark the rung on a ladder that best matched their self-perception at that moment (1 to 7). As expected, participants who could express their opinion positioned themselves higher on the ladder than did those who could not express their opinion (5.59 vs. 5.00, t(74)=2.57, p<.05).

In sum, our findings provide strong support for our conceptualization and the assumptions on which it is based.

From a practical perspective, our findings may suggest that marketers should exercise caution when considering the adoption of an arrogant image for their brands. Our findings may also have important implications for consumers, by making them more aware of the influences that a brand’s image and communications may exert on their feelings, decisions and behavior. By suggesting that the act of “saying no” to an arrogant brand helps consumers feel better about themselves, our research can potentially contribute to consumers’ wellbeing.

REFERENCES


