Risky “Big”Ness: How Conspicuously Signaling Persuades the Self But Dissuades Others

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This research argues that conspicuous signals are more effective internally rather than externally. The results of three studies demonstrate that while conspicuously signaling may degrade the perceptions of others, doing so actually enhances the sender’s belief that they embody the trait they are signaling.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

People often use cues to convey information about themselves that is not directly perceivable. These cues vary in magnitude (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010) and can take the form of brands (Han et al. 2010; Nelissen and Meijers 2011; Wang and Griskevicius 2014; Wernerfelt 1990), products (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982; Berger and Heath 2007; Holman 1981; Rucker and Galinsky 2008), or behaviors (Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2013). Whatever the strength and medium, the purpose of signals is to indicate traits that are not easily observed, such as wealth, power, intelligence, femininity, romantic devotion, etc. (Han et al. 2010; Nelissen and Meijers 2011; Park and John 2010; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Wang and Griskevicius 2014).

At its core, signaling is a communication process where information can be both sent and received. A sender has a message (“I am generous.”) that he wishes to send to a receiver and does so by encoding the message (e.g., leaving a large tip). This communication process is interactional, in that a senders’ own perception is affected by what she predicts will be the reaction of the receiver and a receiver’s interpretation may be skewed by what he perceives to be the intentions of the sender (Calder and Burnkrant 1977; Holman 1981). Thus, there are two important communication outcomes of signaling: what the receiver thinks of the sender (“She is (not) generous.”) and what the sender thinks of himself (“I am (not) generous.”).

The present research focuses on this interplay by examining the signal’s interpretation from both the receiver’s perspective, and the sender’s perspective. Furthermore, we demonstrate that this interplay between both the sender and receiver on the signal’s interpretation is influenced by the strength of the signal (i.e., conspicuousness) and the familiarity between the senders and receivers. Specifically, we find that unfamiliar receivers degrade the trait information contained in conspicuous signals; this same conspicuous signal enhances the sender’s belief in the extent to which he possesses the trait.

Our research differs from previous research on signaling and conspicuous consumption in several significant ways. First, past research has predominantly focused on questions of when and why signaling occurs, who is more likely to signal, and what types of products serve as better signals (Belk 1981; Berger and Heath 2007; Shavitt and Nelson 2000). In contrast, we examine the communication outcomes of signaling, from both the sender and receiver perspectives, and the moderating roles of signal strength and audience familiarity. Research on senders’ interpretations of signaling has been limited, and has primarily focused on general stereotypical attributions (e.g., “Describe people who purchase this brand.”); Belk et al. 1982; Haire 1950; Shavitt and Nelson 2000). A couple of exceptions have focused on signals of specific traits, such as partner devotion (Wang and Griskevicius 2014) and wealth (Nelissen and Meijers 2011). Both of these papers, however, utilized expensive luxury products as signals. Interpretation of these signals is relatively straightforward and somewhat reliable. Expensive products offer a highly objective signal as they indicate a sufficient level of discretionary wealth needed to purchase. The present research focuses on a variety of sender-specific traits (e.g., intelligence, creativity) which are less reliable signals than wealth in that they are easily imitable.

Some of the variance in subjective interpretations of signals can be attributed to whether receivers perceive a signal as being an authentic representation of the sender (Ferraro et al. 2013). We build on this foundation in three important ways: (1) by extending receivers’ evaluations of the sender beyond general attitudes to the actual trait being signaled, (2) by examining two important moderators of receivers’ signal interpretations – the conspicuousness of the signal and sender/receiver familiarity, and (3) by not only examining the robustness of a signal from the receiver’s perspective, but also the sender’s perspective. This last point is novel, given that, to the best of our knowledge, no research has examined the effect of signaling on the senders themselves. Although research has demonstrated that brand personalities can rub off on consumers (Park and John 2010), research has yet to examine whether signals, be they brands, products, or behaviors, can increase the extent to which consumers’ feel they possess the traits they are signaling. In sum, this research fills an important gap in signaling research by examining the influences of both signal strength and sender/receiver familiarity on the entire signaling process, from the perspectives of both the sender (i.e., signaler) and receiver (i.e., observer).

Signaling as a Communication Process

The communicative properties of brands and products have long been known (Holman 1981). Consumers often purchase and use brands and products to express aspects of both their individual self and their social identities (Belk 1988; Birdwell 1968; Dolich 1969; Dommer, Swaminathan, and Ahluwalia 2013; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Kassarjian 1971; Landon 1974; Levy 1959; Oyserman 2009; Wernerfelt 1990). Receivers incorporate this signaled information (i.e. the products or brands being used, and how an individual uses these products) into their evaluations and personality assessments of others (see Holman 1981 for a review). In other words, individuals use objects and behaviors to encode information about the self, which receivers then decode.

Signaling with brands, products, and/or behaviors is a precise form of identity self-expression that is typically used to convey information about the self that is not directly observable (Spence 1974). Thus, at its core, signaling is a communication process between a sender (i.e., signaler) and a receiver (i.e., observer). The message is the unobservable trait which the sender encodes through the brand/product/behavior (i.e., signal).

In general, signals can take many forms with varying levels of reliability. For example, GMAT scores tend to be a reliable measure of intelligence. These types of signals are called indices, as they are usually highly correlated with the trait they represent and thus offer a more objective measure of an unobservable attribute (Smith and Harper 1995). Brands, products, and many behaviors, however, are less reliable signals that are easily imitable by those who wish to give the impression of possessing a trait without actually having it (Han et al. 2010). This complicates interpretations for receivers, as they must not only accurately decipher the encoded information, but must also determine its authenticity.

Receivers’ Interpretations of Signals

Unreliable signals, by definition, may or may not be an accurate portrayal of the sender. Receivers may choose to believe the signal (“He drives a Prius so he must care about the environment.”) or believe that the signal is the result of an ulterior motive (“He doesn’t care about the environment. He just drives a Prius to impress others.”). Perhaps as a result, Berger and Ward (2010) find that subtle,
specialized signals (e.g., small logos) may more reliably communicate information to an expert audience. These subtle signals may be more reliable as only a small audience understands them. On the other hand, consumers prefer conspicuous goods when they want to signal to superiority (Han et al. 2010) or adequacy over a larger audience (Rucker and Galinsky 2008). In sum, consumers may favor conspicuous signals when they are trying to pose as someone they are not, while using inconspicuous signals to protect their honest signals from imitation. As such, receivers believe a sender has ulterior motives when conspicuously signaling (Ferraro et al. 2013).

We suggest, however, that the effect of signal conspicuousness on receivers’ interpretations will be moderated by the familiarity between the sender and receiver. In general, we expect good people to perform good actions (Heider 1958). When we like someone we are more likely to attribute their actions to their internal characteristics as opposed to external factors (Regan, Straus, and Fazio 1974). The tendency to attribute positive behaviors internally and negative behaviors externally is less present among strangers compared to friends (Taylor and Koivumaki 1976). Therefore, strangers should be more likely than friends to attribute conspicuous signaling to ulterior motives as opposed to internal traits of the sender.

In summary, we expect audience familiarity to moderate the relationships between signal conspicuousness and the receiver’s interpretation of the signal. Specifically, we believe there will be a negative relationship between conspicuousness and a receiver’s perception that the sender possesses the trait when the receiver is a stranger, but not when the receiver is a friend. Furthermore, we propose that perceptions of authenticity will mediate the relationship between signal strength and sender/receiver familiarity on the receiver’s belief in the signal.

**Senders’ Interpretations of Signals**

Although conventionally construed to communicate unobservable information to others, the process of signaling impacts the sender as well. After all, in the communication process senders’ perceptions are affected by how they predict receivers will react (Calder and Burnkrant 1977). Thus the signals we send to the world are also subjected to our own interpretations and therefore influence how we feel. For instance, while displaying symbolic brands consumer may acquire and feel some of that brand’s personality or traits represented by the brand (Escalas and Bettman 2003; Gao, Wheeler, and Shiv 2009; Park and John 2010; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Rucker and Galinsky 2009; Swaminathan, Stilley, and Ahluwalia 2009). Furthermore, self-perception theory suggests that much of what we know of ourselves comes from what we think of our own behaviors (Bern 1972). In sum, signals send messages of unobservable traits not only to external audiences, but also internally through a self-perception process.

More conspicuous signals should result in greater feelings of trait possession by the sender. Visibility facilitates construction of our own identities (Berger and Ward 2010; Han et al. 2010). Furthermore, consumers use conspicuous signaling to compensate for inferiorities (Rucker and Galinsky 2008) and to express superiority (Dommmer et al. 2013). In fact, given that people adopt the perspective of an outside observer when interpreting their own actions (Bern 1972), they may believe more conspicuous signals provide more evidence that they possess the trait.

As the sender’s internal interpretation depends on the action itself (i.e., the conspicuousness of the signal) and context in which the action takes place (i.e., the audience; Bern 1972), we predict that the familiarity between the sender and the audience influences the sender’s internal interpretation as well. According to self-perception theory, senders will infer information about themselves by taking the perspective of others. Senders likely acknowledge that signals of any magnitude will only minimally adjust an established identity that is held by a familiar audience (Cohen & Reed 2006). However, senders may realize their identity is more incomplete with strangers (Braun and Wicklund 1989). Unfamiliar audiences have no preexisting identity to adjust and signaled information is likely believed to provide an identity basis. As signals become more conspicuous, senders should feel more confident that their signals are heard and attended to and as a result feel more confident that they possess the trait. In sum, we expect that audience familiarity will moderate the relationships between signal conspicuousness and the extent to which the sender feels he possesses the signaled trait. Specifically, we expect a positive relationship between conspicuousness and a sender’s felt levels of the trait when the receiver is a stranger, but not when the receiver is a friend. Finally, we believe that trait salience will mediate the relationship between signal conspicuousness and sender/receiver familiarity on the extent to which a sender feels he possesses the signaled trait.

**Study 1: From the Receiver’s Perspective**

Eighty-one MBA students (69% male; Mage = 30.5) participated in a 2 (sender: friend vs. stranger) x 2 (signal: conspicuous vs. inconspicuous) between-subjects experiment. Participants either imagined that they noticed (inconspicuous condition) a friend or stranger’s Rolex watch or a friend or stranger showed them his Rolex watch (conspicuous condition). Afterwards, participants rated the extent to which the friend or stranger was powerful, respected, and influential on a seven-point scale (1 = “not at all,” 7 = “very much so”; α = .92).

An ANOVA with sender familiarity and conspicuousness predicting perceived status revealed a marginally significant interaction of familiarity with conspicuousness (F(1, 77) = 4.49, p < .06; see table for all means.) Strangers who signaled conspicuously were perceived as less powerful than strangers who signaled inconspicuously (F(1, 77) = 4.49, p < .06). There was no effect of conspicuous signaling in the friend condition (F(1, 77) = .27, p > .60). The pattern of results from study 1 support our prediction that conspicuous signals lead to lower perceptions of status for unfamiliar audience, but not those that are familiar with the sender.

**Study 2: From the Sender’s Perspective**

Ninety-one students (55% male) participated in a two-condition between-subject lab experiment. Participants in the friend (stranger) imagined they would be starting a new job within their company at the same (a new) location, and would be primarily working with people they knew (didn’t know). Then, participants were asked to “decorate” their office by drawing a business award that they had won on their new bookshelf. We used the size of their drawing as evidence for their new job. In general, we expect good people to perform good actions (Heider 1958). When we like someone we are more likely to attribute their actions to their internal characteristics as opposed to external factors (Regan, Straus, and Fazio 1974). The tendency to attribute positive behaviors internally and negative behaviors externally is less present among strangers compared to friends (Taylor and Koivumaki 1976). Therefore, strangers should be more likely than friends to attribute conspicuous signaling to ulterior motives as opposed to internal traits of the sender.

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We mean-centered the award area and included it and audience condition in a full factorial model predicting business ability. The main effect of audience was significant (F(1, 86) = 4.92, p < .03) but the main effect of award area was not (F(1, 86) = 1.91, p > .17). The interaction of audience with award area was significant (F(1, 86) = 4.56, p < .04). Importantly, as predicted, the effect of award area was significant and positive in the strangers condition (b = .08, t(86) = 2.44, p < .02) but not in the friends condition (b = -.02, t(86) = -.54, p > .58).
This pattern of results suggests that participants felt like they had greater business abilities when they displayed an award conspicuously, but only when they imagined the award would primarily be viewed by strangers. For participants who imagined working with friends, the conspicuousness of the award (i.e., award area) had no effect on their felt business ability.

**Study 3A and 3B: Workplace Signaling**

In our final two studies, we sought to replicate the results of the previous studies, but in a similar context where the signal was manipulated in the same manner for both senders and receivers. In both studies, we manipulated the conspicuousness of the business ability signal by altering the conspicuousness of where the award was displayed in an office (either prominently on the front of the desk, or subtly on a bookcase in the back of the room).

**Study 3a: Receivers**

Two hundred and seventy-six Amazon’s Mechanical Turk workers participated in a 2 (sender: friend vs. stranger) x 2 (signal: conspicuous vs. inconspicuous) between-subjects experiment. Participants were asked to imagine that they were going to the office of someone they knew (didn’t know) for a meeting. Then, participants were shown a picture of the person’s office whom they were meeting with a business award display prominently (subtly). Afterwards, participants responded to measures relating the office inhabitant’s authenticity and perceived business ability (perceived intelligence, diligence, and competence).

In an ANOVA with sender and signal in a full factorial model predicting business ability there was a significant interaction of sender with signal (F(1, 275) = 4.94, p < .05; see table for all means). An examination of unfamiliar coworkers, demonstrated that those who prominently displayed the award were perceived to have less business ability (F(1, 141) = 8.15, p < .01), yet there was no effect of conspicuousness when the signal was sent to a familiar audience (F(1, 134) = .69, p = .79).

A similar pattern occurred for perceived authenticity. The interaction of sender with signal was significant (F(1, 275) = 12.84, p < .001). This interaction which was predominantly driven by the influence of conspicuousness on authenticity in the unfamiliar condition (F(1, 141) = 36.70, p < .001) and not the familiar condition (F(1, 134) = 1.79, p = .18).

To examine whether authenticity mediated the effect of sender familiarity and signal conspicuousness on business ability, we used Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS model 8. In a 5,000 bootstrapped sample, the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of the interaction did not include zero (-.4686, -.0705).

**Study 3b: Senders**

One hundred and sixty-three participants from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk completed a similar 2 (audience: friend vs. stranger) x 2 (signal: conspicuous vs. inconspicuous) between-subjects experiment. Participants began by reading the same audience manipulation as in study 2 (i.e., a new job in a new or old location). Participants in the conspicuous (inconspicuous) condition then read, “You have put an intelligence award you received for winning a business intelligence competition on the front of your desk (side of your bookcase).” Participants saw a picture of an office with the award placed in the designated area and were asked to click on the award to ensure that they saw it.

Then participants completed the same measures of business ability from study 2 (α = .82). To measure trait salience, participants were asked to think about how large a part of their identity was based on their business ability and to choose a filled-in circle that best represented this importance. A larger circle represented their overall identity, and smaller filled-in colored circle represented the amount of their identity that pertained to their business ability. The larger the filled-in portion of their identity, the greater the trait salience.

We ran a full factorial ANOVA with receiver (friends vs. stranger) and signal (conspicuous vs. inconspicuous) predicting the participants’ felt business ability. The interaction of receiver with signal was marginally significant (F(1, 159) = 3.60, p < .06; see table for all means). In the strangers condition, participants felt they had greater business abilities when they imagined conspicuously displaying their award (F(1, 159) = 12.94, p < .001). There was no effect of conspicuous in the friend condition (F(1, 159) = 1.14, p > .28).

One participant did not complete the trait salience measure so differences in degrees of freedom from this point on are due to this participant not being included in the analyses. In a full factorial ANOVA with receiver and signal predicting trait salience the only significant effect was the interaction of receiver with signal (F(1, 158) = 7.73, p < .01). In the strangers condition, those who imagined conspicuously displaying the award reported greater trait salience than those who imagined inconspicuously displaying the award (F(1, 158) = 3.51, p = .06). Interestingly, in the friends condition, the opposite pattern emerged with those who imagined conspicuously displaying the award reporting lower trait salience that those who imagined inconspicuously displaying the award (F(1, 158) = 4.22, p < .05). To examine whether trait salience mediated the effect of conspicuousness on felt intelligence in the stranger condition, we used Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS model 8. In a 5,000 bootstrapped sample, the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of the interaction did not include zero (-.4686, -.0705).

**CONCLUSION**

The results of three studies suggest that conspicuous signals are less likely to be believed by unfamiliar receivers, but conspicuously signaling to unfamiliar receivers actually enhances senders’ beliefs in the extent to which they possess the trait. As a communication process, identity signaling has the ability to convey information that is otherwise unobservable. Yet, the manner in which these signals are sent and the familiarity between both members in the communication process illustrates an interactive component of the signaling process. The understanding of this interactive component supplied by this research demonstrates when and why conspicuous signals can be beneficial or detrimental depending on whether you take the perspective of the sender or receiver. Furthermore, by accounting for heterogeneity in a signal’s audience, we further validate our theoretical framework by demonstrating that the process for these effects is moderated by the familiarity between the sender and the receiver.

**REFERENCES:**


