The Art of Brand Name-Dropping: a Dual Attribution Model of Conspicuous Consumption

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The present research proposes a dual attribution model of conspicuous consumption. Name-dropping expensive luxury brands increases perception of status, but decreases likeability. Social outcomes depend on which of these signals observers use in their decision-making. However, these attributions are reversed when the brand name-dropper is perceived as aspirational.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Brand name-dropping—the act of explicitly mentioning brands in a conversation—appears commonplace in society. From the music industry and social media to television shows and everyday consumer interactions, brands appear to often find their way into conversations. A number of these brands appear to be expensive and prestigious. In this work we examine how brand name-dropping of expensive and prestige brands affect observers’ perceptions of the actor (i.e., name dropper). With few exceptions (Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2013), little work has studied conspicuous brand usage, which includes the more specific act of brand name-dropping.

At one level, brand name-dropping can be viewed as a specific instance or means of displaying status, commonly referred to as conspicuous consumption. As discussed by Thorstein Veblen (1899), a central idea behind conspicuous consumption is to portray one’s wealth to others. More than a century later, a renewed interest has emerged in the benefits of conspicuous consumption with respect to its signaling value (Griskevicius et al. 2007; Nelissen and Meijers 2011; Sundie et al. 2011; Wang and Griskevicius 2014) and means of addressing psychological needs, such as a desire for power and status (Rucker and Galinsky 2008, 2009; see also Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2012). This prior work suggests that conspicuous consumption is largely positive or produces favorable social outcomes. However, recent work introduces the notion that conspicuous consumption carries with it social costs such as negative attitudes toward the consumer (Ferraro et al. 2013). These two streams of work produce an interesting tension as to when conspicuous brand name-dropping produces positive versus negative consequences. The present work provides theoretical scaffolding for understanding when displaying one’s brands has positive versus negative outcomes and helps explain the complexities of conspicuous brand name-dropping.

Whereas past research has studied individual signals of conspicuous consumption with regard to increased status or decreased likeability, we build on the multi-dimensional perception of social categories such as the warmth-competence perspective of person perception (Fiske et al. 2002; Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007) and the more general framework of agency-communion (Bakan 1966; Abele and Wojciszke 2014) assertiveness, decisiveness. We introduce a novel dual-attribution model for conspicuous brand name-dropping. In support of our model, and inconsistent with alternative models considered (e.g., halo effects), we find people perceive the conspicuous brand name-dropper as having higher status and lower likeability compared with no brand name-dropping. Moreover, we demonstrate the social consequences of conspicuous brand name-dropping depend on the signal that is more diagnostic for the situation. Furthermore, we demonstrate that brand name-dropping does not inevitably lower likeability and increase status; in fact, sometimes the opposite occurs with brand name-dropping increasing likeability but lowering status. We outline four supporting experiments below.

Experiment 1

Participants (N = 194) were assigned to read an ostensibly real blog post, which described an individual’s night out at a club, with reference to either conspicuous brand names or just the products. In both conditions, the individual did not own the mentioned brand or product. We find that participants perceived the target individual to have higher status (F(1, 190) = 30.81, p < .001) but lower likeability (F(1, 190) = 6.40, p = .012) after conspicuous brand name-dropping, compared with the no name-dropping condition. This experiment sets the stage for exploring when brand name-dropping may have negative or positive consequences.

Experiment 2

The second experiment aimed to show when brand name-dropping would have negative social consequences (i.e., when communality or likeability is important). Participants (N = 101) were assigned to read a job applicant profile with either conspicuous brands or products mentioned in the hobbies section for an account manager position, which required “maintaining relationships with different clients”. We find that conspicuous brand name-dropping negatively impacted the candidate’s likelihood of being hired for a job position (β = -0.56, t(99) = -2.92, SE = .19, p = .004), mediated by applicant likeability (95% CI around the mediator [-1.21, -0.60]).

Experiment 3

The third experiment aimed to show when brand name-dropping would have positive social benefits (i.e., when agency or status is important). Participants (N = 118) were assigned to rate the likelihood of admitting potential customers into an exclusive nightclub. Half read statements from the customers with conspicuous brand names mentioned while the other half read the same information with just the product name. As expected, we show that conspicuous brand name-dropping positively impacted the potential customer’s likelihood of being admitted into the nightclub (β = 0.71, t(116) = 4.09, SE = .17, p < .001), mediated by perceived status (95% CI around the mediator [0.02, 0.29]).

Experiment 4

This final study demonstrates a boundary condition for the effects of brand name-dropping. Participants (N = 101) were assigned to read excerpts from ostensibly real interviews. Half read about interviewees who brand name-drop by bragging about owning the brand while the other half read similar information with the brand name-dropping construed as aspirational by talking about future ownership of the brand. We test and confirm the hypothesis that the perception of high status and low likeability observed in experiments 1-3 are reversed when the brand name-dropper is perceived as aspirational rather than as bragging (F(1, 93) = 78.24, p < .001).

The present work offers several contributions. First, we demonstrate evidence for a dual attribution model of brand name-dropping. As such, we demonstrated that, depending on the social context and what signals are diagnostic of the situation, conspicuous brand name-dropping has predictably favorable or unfavorable outcomes for the consumer. Critically, these effects are not inevitable; the status and likeability attributions are reversed when the brand name-dropper is perceived as aspirational rather than as bragging. These results resolve what might be viewed as contrasting findings in the conspicuous consumption literature via the introduction of a more integrated framework.
REFERENCES