Group-Member Magnification: Brand Entitativity Polarizes Judgments of Products

Robert Smith, Ohio State University, USA

The mere knowledge that an individual is part of an entitative or unified group affects responses to that individual. Products that are part of entitative collections of products (i.e. brands) elicit polarized judgments and consumption amounts because these products seem to possess the meaningful essence of the brand.

[to cite]:


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Robert W. Smith, Ohio State University, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Products rarely stand alone in the mind of the consumer. A package of Tide detergent is not construed independently, but as a member of countless categories: Tide products, Procter & Gamble products, cleaning products, Kroger products, and so on. Being a part of a category imbues the individual with the characteristics of the category, such that a consumer who respects the cleaning power of the Tide brand would be likely to do the same for individual Tide products. Does being a member in a brand or other category affect judgments of the individual product in any other ways beyond the inheritance of characteristics from the overall category? Might reactions to products differ depending merely on whether they are seen as part of a unified or non-unified brand? More generally, how does being a member of a unified group affect judgments of individuals?

Previous research finds that, when assessing highly entitative groups, people focus their attention on the overall group (Yzerbyt, Rogier, and Fiske 1998). This results in more extreme reactions to entitative versus nonentitative groups (Smith, Faro, and Burson, 2013). Thus, brands and other marketplace entities that seem unified may elicit stronger judgments, but less is known about how entitativity affects judgments of individual group-members such as products, and different theories of entitativity predict different directions for this influence. On one hand, processing of entitative groups is generally associated with reduced attention to individual members. This implies that judgments of individual products and product experiences may be more muted for entitative brands. On the other hand, members of entitative groups seem representative of their group, and seem to possess the meaningful core essence of the group, which makes forming judgments about them more useful. This attribution of an underlying essence to entitative groups and their group members implies that reactions to the individuals may be intensified in the same way as reactions to the overall group.

Three studies show that individual products are judged with more extremity when they are thought to be part of an entitative brand or group of products. Consumers’ actual product experiences and consumption amounts vary depending on perceptions of the brand’s entitativity, with favorable products eliciting enhanced ratings and consumption and unfavorable products eliciting reduced ratings and consumption when associated with a highly entitative brand. Participants in study 1 read about a juice brand, sampled juice, and rated the samples and the brand overall. Perceptions of the brand’s unity affect judgments of individual group-members such as products, and highly rated when it was believed to come from a company with one product line, while the bad juice was consumed less and rated more negatively when it was believed to come from a company with one product line. These ratings and consumption were mediated by perceptions of the company’s entitativity.

Study 2 replicates this polarizing effect of brand-entitativity in a different domain using a manipulation of consistency and shared history amongst the products. It highlights crowdsourcing, an increasingly popular yet poorly understood means of content generation, as a factor that can vary entitativity perceptions for a brand. Participants in this study rated jokes that came from a website which was described as being put together by a single person or by a variety of people using crowdsourcing. The jokes were pretested to be either good or bad, yielding another 2 (entitativity: low or high) X 2 (valence: positive or negative) design. Results revealed a significant interaction on judgments of the jokes, with the entitative brand producing more positive ratings of the good jokes and more negative ratings of the bad jokes. A similar interaction was observed for the rating of the overall brand, and participants were also more confident in their rating of the brand in the high entitativity conditions.

Study 3 replicates these effects and provides insight into why they occur. Participants in study 3 read about a web-design company and rated web-sites. The unity of the company was manipulated by describing the company as a collaborative group with a consistent product line, versus web-designers working independently and producing a varied product line. Participants viewed and rated high quality or low quality web-sites. As in studies 1 and 2, a significant interaction emerged on the ratings of the products. A moderated mediation analysis revealed that brand entitativity significantly increases the perception that individual products represent the essence of the brand, and the effect of this representative essence on judgments of the individual products depends on their valence—the attribution of representative essence significantly improves good product experiences and hurts bad product experiences.

These findings show that perceptions of a brand’s unity affect actual consumption experiences with the brand’s products, even when nothing else is known about the brand. This research extends the theory of entitativity by exploring how perceptions of entitativity of a group affect judgments and experiences with the individual members of that group. They also have important implications for branding and other categorization-related phenomena such as stereotyping.

REFERENCES
