The Untouchables: the Sacredness of Brand Logos
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We find that brand sacredness is a distinct construct that can uniquely predict how protective consumers are of a brand’s logo, so that a collective understanding about brand sacredness can drive consumers’ personal experience of moral outrage in reaction to logo redesigns, even when there is a weak consumer-brand connection.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Companies spend millions of dollars redesigning their logos, often only to revert to the old logo, given consumer backlash. Tropicana, for example, spent $35 million to unveil a drastically new design, only to go back to the old logo after consumers complained. While Tropicana might be a well-known example, it is hardly the only one. That is not to say that all logo redesigns fail. So what determines whether a brand’s logo is “untouchable”? In this research we propose and find evidence that one determinant of how protective consumers are of a brand’s logo is the extent to which the brand is collectively considered sacred.

We define brand sacredness as the extent to which brands are perceived as having an extraordinary dimension and are associated with an endless time and space (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Kesebir, Chiu, and Pyszczynski 2011). Additionally, brand sacredness is conceptualized here in terms of consumers’ views about the shared understanding of such transcendence and boundlessness meanings. We propose that brand sacredness is a construct that exists in the mind of consumers, which emerges from an understanding of how sacred meanings are collectively drawn by consumers to construct crucial parts of the self (see McCracken 1986). Thus, we focus on brand sacredness that emerges through external sanctioning by experts and reference groups, i.e., the collective understanding of brand sacredness, instead of on sacredness that might emerge through personal experiences (e.g., rituals, gift giving, or inheritance, Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, 1989).

We propose and find evidence in five studies that brand sacredness is a distinct construct that can uniquely predict how protective consumers are of a brand’s logo, so that a collective understanding about a brand’s level of sacredness can drive consumers’ own personal experience of moral outrage as a response to changes to the brand’s logo, even when there is a weak connection with the brand. Furthermore, we find evidence that the process underlying this effect is consumers’ desire to protect the essence of a brand perceived to have high levels of sacredness.

Given that past research on sacredness consumption has focused more on consumption experiences in general as opposed to brands in particular, we conducted Study 1 with the goal of developing a reliable and valid measure of brand sacredness. A first sample rated different brands on a 5-item sacredness scale. An EFA showed that all items loaded on a single factor, with a high level of internal consistency. A second sample rated another set of brands on sacredness, self-brand connection (SBC), and cultural symbolism (CS). A CFA with the three constructs as separate factors offered a good fit to the data and better than a model with a single factor, suggesting that brand sacredness is a distinct construct that is partially correlated with the other two brand measures.

Study 2 was designed to investigate the impact of brand sacredness on the outrage in response to the logo redesign of a familiar brand (Under Armour). Participants rated the brand in terms of brand sacredness, SBC, and CS. Participants were then shown visual representations of changes to the brand’s logo and were asked to rate their own personal emotions (anger and disgust) towards them. Results demonstrate that after controlling for self-brand connection and collective beliefs about cultural symbolism, brand sacredness predicts consumers’ experience of moral outrage in response to changes to the symbols of a brand.

Study 3 was designed to provide further evidence of our main prediction using a more controlled environment by manipulating perceptions of sacredness of an unfamiliar brand of chocolates (Milka). Participants were randomly assigned to either the sacredness condition, where they read brand information aimed at manipulating collective beliefs of brand sacredness, or to the control condition (neutral information). Then participants rated the brand in terms of sacredness and reviewed 2 different changes to the most visible element of the brand (i.e., color of the logo). Results from an ANCOVA on ratings of emotions toward the changes with manipulated sacredness as a fixed factor (SBC and CS as covariates) demonstrated that participants in the sacredness (vs. control) condition experienced stronger negative emotions toward the proposed changes to the logo.

Study 4 aimed to provide initial process evidence, namely the desire to protect the essence of the brand. To rule out that the effect is just driven by the possibility that a logo change is simply perceived as ill-conceived to the marketing of the brand, participants rated their reactions to hypothetical changes to the logo as well as other similar ill-conceived changes to the brand strategy as related to new products and target market expansions—that we argue are less essential and central to the brand meaning. As predicted, simple contrasts for the logo-related actions revealed that collective perceptions of brand sacredness were positively related to feelings of anger and disgust in response to changes to the brand logo and not to ill-conceived changes to less essential elements of a brand strategy.

To obtain direct evidence of the underlying mechanism, participants in Study 5 rated the Columbia brand in terms of sacredness (as well as on SBC and CS) and then indicated their anger and disgust toward several changes to the brand’s logo. Immediately after, they also indicated their level of agreement with statements that reflect a desire to protect the brand’s essence (e.g., “It is important for Columbia to protect its brand essence”). A mediation analysis with SBC and CS as covariates suggested that the heightened desire to protect the brand’s essence mediated participants’ negative emotions toward the logo changes of a more (vs. less) sacred brand.

This research aims to contribute to the brand logo literature by empirically investigating a novel construct, namely brand sacredness, to help determine when a brand’s logo redesigning efforts might backfire, regardless of consumers’ personal connection to the brand. Furthermore, our work has important managerial implications. Every year companies spend millions of dollars redesigning their logos. Our research provides guidance on when these efforts should be avoided, which could prevent a situation like Tropicana’s.

REFERENCES