When and How Consumers Defend Their Psychological Possessions

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We show that consumers may respond territorially when they feel high psychological ownership of a target and receive signals of another individual’s psychological ownership of the same target. This effect is attenuated when others ask permission or the consumer fails to signal ownership, and intensified in consumers high in narcissism.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The concept of psychological ownership (a feeling that “It is mine!”; Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2003) has recently garnered significant attention in the marketing literature, largely due to its positive implications for marketers, such as willingness to pay more (Peck & Shu, 2009). In the present research we draw attention to the edgier side of psychological ownership (PO): its potential to engender territorial responses (Brown, Lawrence, & Robinson, 2005).

We propose that consumers perceive infringement, or threat, with respect to a psychologically owned target when they believe that another person is signaling PO of the same target. That is, consumers’ perceptions of infringement and subsequent territorial responses are stronger when they infer that another individual is signaling control over, investment of self in, or intimate knowledge of their psychologically-owned target. Further, we argue that these effects are more intense when consumers believe they have strongly signaled their own PO of a target (i.e., their territory) in advance.

Across five studies, we manipulate a consumer’s PO of a target product and/or their communication (marking) of that PO. We also vary another person’s PO signal of the same target. We then measure the consumer’s infringement perception and observe and document their territorial behaviors. Contributing to the PO and territoriality literatures, this research provides the first demonstration of the role of the antecedents of PO in ownership signaling, as well as the first evidence that consumers’ territorial responses depend on their own PO of a target, their communication of that PO, and others’ PO signals. In so doing, we contribute to the nascent literature on consumer territoriality (Ashley & Noble, 2014) by demonstrating the anticipatory and reactionary defenses that result.

Study 1 was a laboratory experiment in a restaurant context in which we elicited high PO of a cup of coffee and then manipulated a server’s (the other’s) PO signal by having the server move (not move) the participant’s coffee cup. Observers recorded participants’ behaviors; participants were invited to tip the server, and infringement perception and additional territorial responses were measured. Among other responses, participants whose coffee cup was moved by the server tipped the server less, were less likely to respond positively to the server, and were more likely to move the coffee cup toward themselves and to exhibit a negative nonverbal expression. Territorial responses were mediated by participants’ infringement perception.

Touch elicits PO through its effect on perceived control (Peck, Barger, & Webb, 2013). Accordingly, another individual’s touch should signal their PO and thus trigger infringement perception on the part of a consumer. In study 2, participants either imagined wearing (high PO) or evaluating (low PO) a sweater at a retail store checkout counter (Spears & Yazdanparast, 2014). They were then told that the customer behind them touched the sweater, either seeking (no PO signal) or not seeking (control-oriented PO signal) prior permission.

Infringement perception was greater when the sweater was touched without (versus with) prior permission, but only when PO of the sweater was high (versus low). Additionally, infringement perception triggered anticipatory and reactionary defenses (Brown, 2009) including putting down the separator bar, not telling the infringer about money they dropped (retaliation), giving the other consumer a nasty look, perceiving the other customer to be “crazy” or ill-mannered, and picking up or moving the sweater.

In study 3, participants volunteered for a nonprofit organization in a lab setting and either copied an artistic design (low) or created their own (high PO). The assistant signaled (did not signal) ownership of the design by stating “That looks like my design” (stating nothing). Replicating prior results with an intangible target of ownership, participants exhibited reactionary defenses such as not picking up the assistant’s dropped pen, less positive word-of-mouth intentions, and lower donation intentions. They also exhibited anticipatory defenses by indicating they would leave more quickly and be more likely to post a selfie with their design on social media.

Study 4 was a field experiment that builds on research suggesting that individuals feel ownership for the space around them and may respond territorially when their space is invaded (Altman, 1975). Passers-by on a busy thoroughfare in a city were given $3.00 and asked to purchase a snack in the university convenience store. A confederate customer invaded their personal space either saying nothing, or saying “Excuse me, sorry.” Both reactionary (e.g. not picking up the infringer’s dropped pen) and anticipatory (e.g. leaving more quickly) defenses were observed.

Narcissists are more likely to overestimate the degree to which others find them physically attractive (Carlson, Vazire, & Oltmanns, 2011), and they likely also overestimate others’ assessment of their psychological ownership of an attractive target. These exaggerated metaperceptions should lead narcissists (but not non-narcissists) to perceive infringement even in the absence of clearly marked territory.

In study 5, participants imagined locating a pizza stand intentionally (high) or by chance (low PO). Anthropomorphization of an inanimate object transforms the object into a social entity (Beggan, 1992), and thus should enhance others’ perceptions of intimate knowledge of an ownership target. Therefore, participants were told that while they were looking at the pizza, a stranger approached and said either “I am not familiar with this pizza” (no PO signal) or “I know this pizza well. I call this pizza Antonio” (intimate knowledge-oriented PO signal).

Replicating prior results, infringement perception was greater when the consumer’s PO was high than when it was low, but only when the other customer signaled PO of the pizza by naming it. The interaction was significant for participants who were high, but not low, in narcissism. Territorial responses triggered by infringement perception included leaving the pizza stand quickly, responding negatively to the other consumer, and classifying the other’s behavior as “weird” or “mentally ill.” A posttest confirmed the positive association between narcissism and psychological ownership metaperception.

Across five studies in different contexts, these results demonstrate when and how psychological ownership signals of others, both consumers and employees, can result in consumers’ territorial responses, and what kind of reactions may occur.

REFERENCES


