

Love Thy Enemy – Exploring The Benefits of Brand Rivalry

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Abstract

Community is all about conflict and lines drawn in the sand. However, rather than seeking ways to embrace conflict, the marketing literature focuses on the negative consequences of brand rivalries, such as schadenfreude, trash talk and hostility. We propose that rivalry, although a threat to a person's identity in the first place, exerts a range of positive consequences for consumers, like enhanced identification with the favorite brand, disidentification with the rival brand, distinctiveness, cohesion and collective self-esteem. The smart management of rivalry could eventually help brands to build identity, create distinction and generate awareness.

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Introduction

Whether it is Apple vs. Microsoft, Pepsi vs. Coke or BMW vs. Mercedes – for some brands, rivalries have become an integral part of their identity (Lemonde, 2014). But rather than seizing the opportunity to draw a clear line between the ingroup and the rival outgroup, most brands seem to avoid conflict (Fournier & Lee, 2009, p. 108). If branding is all about creating differences, this must be considered a missed opportunity. Sociologists have long maintained the benefits of conflict. Simmel (1908) claims it strengthens the feeling of distinction and therefore boosts group identity, and Coser (2009, p. 113) believes conflict activates energies among group members and hence increases internal cohesion. In social identity theory it is well established that people need a strong and salient outgroup to positively compare against (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Apart from identifying with an entity, disidentifying from a rival or enemy is an additional way to build a positive self-concept (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002). This is especially relevant in the world of sports where fans take great pleasure in derogating the rival. Generally, games between archrivals (e.g., Yankees vs. Red Sox) create the biggest fan, television and media attention. Likewise, Zhang (2014) finds that brand rivalries can be worth millions in buzz and brand awareness because, if played right, they attract a lot of attention. Starr (2014) suggests that the ultimate winner of brand rivalries will be consumers because companies, in the truest sense of the word, will sooner or later be fighting for their attention.

Rivalry and conflict certainly have the potential to thrill consumers in a very special way. Yet the literature offers no guidance for brands to exploit such potential. The brand rivalry research has focused almost exclusively on the negative consequences. Hickman and Ward (2007) studied the relationship between identification with a brand community and such “dark behaviours” as intergroup stereotyping, trash talking and the feeling of pleasure at the misfortune of rival brands and their users. In a netnographic study among Ford and Holden

communities, Ewing, Wagstaff and Powell (2013, p. 7) investigated how, where and why rivalry or oppositional loyalty would manifest itself. They found this to be the case in the form of humour, epithet, ridicule and sometimes even outright hostility. Melancon and Dalakas (2014) examined whether highly identified consumers of brands experience negative feelings towards brand competitors. They detected that brand identification with Apple was positively related to schadenfreude toward rival Microsoft. Due to the exponential rise of social media, they conclude that an organisation with a highly identified and dedicated consumer following could have a detrimental and far-reaching impact on a rival brand in the social universe. They suggest that organisations drawn into a rivalry “may want to attempt to diffuse the rivalry, rather than launching a counter-attack” because comparative advertising has traditionally spurred the rival brand to respond “emotionally, for hostilities to escalate”.

Indeed, due to their ambivalent nature, rivalries are considered a double-edged sword with conflicting consequences (Kilduff, 2010). In marketing, the positive consequences have been under-researched. Hence it is our goal to explore the potential beneficial effects of brand rivalries. In the world of sports, Berendt and Uhrich (forthcoming) most recently found a positive relationship between rivalry and identity-related constructs such as identification with the own team, disidentification with the rival, distinctiveness, cohesion and public collective self-esteem. We seek to investigate whether the findings hold in a marketing context.

The research is relevant because the management of conflict harbours huge potential for brands to engage and strengthen the bond with consumers. According to Woisetschlaeger, Hartleb and Blut (2008), existing literature on how to implement and manage company-run brand communities is rare. There is reason to believe that the smart management of rivalry could help certain brands to build identity, create distinction, generate awareness and be authentic.

Theoretical background

A brand community has been defined as a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Generally, consumers derive meaning and identity from what and how they consume. Community members can also take an adversarial view of competitors, defining themselves not only in terms of who they are, but who they are not, i.e., what and how they do not consume. Also, some consumers state their opposition to the competing brand by initiating playful rivalries and degrading the other brand (Muniz & Hamer, 2001).

In general, the concept of rivalry seems to be negatively connoted. It has been described as destructive competition that shares many characteristics with hostility (Vogler, 2011, p. 59), with envy and jealousy considered subcategories (Rost, 1994, p. 39).

In social psychology, rivalry has most recently been conceptualized as “a subjective competitive relationship that an actor has with another actor that entails increased psychological involvement and perceived stakes of competition for the focal actor, independent of the objective characteristics of the situation” (Kilduff, Elfenbein & Staw, 2010, p. 945). This means that rivalry is inherently relational and subjective. It exists primarily in the minds.

White and Dahl (2007) contest that not all outgroups are created equal. They distinguish between neutral and dissociative reference groups. For example, for sports fans, all opponents are outgroups, while the archrival is a dissociative reference group. Victories feel sweeter, and losses hurt more, something Uhrich (2014) describes as intensifying. Like no one else, the rival has the ability to hurt the self-concept. In line with social identity and social categorization theory, Tyler and Cobbs (2015, p. 7) define a rival as “a highly salient outgroup that poses an acute threat to the identity of the ingroup or to ingroup members’ ability to make positive comparisons between their group and the outgroup.”

The conceptualization of rivalry as an identity threat is appealing – but needs to be further explored at the brand level. While there is no widely accepted definition of identity

threat (Petriglieri, 2011, p. 644), Breakwell (1983, p. 13) notes that “any thought, feeling, action, or experience that challenges the individual’s personal or social identity is a threat.” A highly-involved Apple consumer will seek positive comparisons against Samsung consumers, thriving for positive distinctiveness. Put differently, it is reasonable to believe that Samsung, either directly or indirectly, has the ability to hurt the self-concept of an Apple consumer. Also, the undermining of the group’s value is one class of an identity threat (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 1999, p. 36). Rival brand communities undermine each other’s value most of the time, as evidenced by the aforementioned detrimental behavior such as schadenfreude or oppositional brand loyalty. Hence we conceptualize rivalry as a threat to the consumers’ identity stemming from a dissociative reference group. Next we will derive five positive and one negative consequence of brand rivalry.

Development of hypothesis

Brand rivalry and identification

In social psychology, it is well established that identity threats can increase identification. Based on a study among people with body piercings, Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt and Spears (2001, p. 1208) show that “intergroup hostility galvanizes ingroup solidarity” and that the costs of being discriminated are compensated for by the psychological benefits of higher ingroup identification. This is in line with findings from Ethier and Deaux (1994) as well as the rejection-identification model by Branscombe, Schmitt and Harvey (1999), which advocates that attributions to prejudice have a direct negative effect on well-being but at the same time increase ingroup identification.

Mael and Ashforth (1992, p. 103) define organizational identification as “a perceived oneness with an organization and the experience of the organization’s successes and failures as one’s own.” Organizational identification increases when a competitor becomes more salient because awareness of out-groups reinforces awareness of the in-group (Pratt 1998, p. 188;

Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 25). In war and sports, the enemy is obvious, and conscious efforts are undertaken to nurture rivalries and increase the significance of competition (Mael & Ashforth, 2001, p. 206). Likewise, a rival brand is highly salient threat for certain consumers.

H1: The stronger the perception of the brand rivalry, the higher the identification with the favorite brand.

Brand rivalry and disidentification

Rivalry provides consumers with an additional avenue to build a positive social identity. The concept of organizational disidentification suggests that people not only build a positive self-concept by identifying with a certain organization, but especially by disidentifying with organizations from which they perceive their identities to be separated. This involves a negative categorization of organizations into groups such as rivals or enemies, whose failures are celebrated as personal successes. Hence people not only define and affirm their social identity by showing who they are, but also by showing who they are not (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). A fierce rivalry seems to be a key driver of disidentification.

H2: The stronger the perception of the brand rivalry, the higher the organizational disidentification with the rival brand.

Identification and disidentification

Rather than opposite ends of a construct, identification and disidentification are qualitatively distinct (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2003, p. 28). Between consumers of rival brands, the former is likely to precede the latter. In most cases, a person would first become a member of a brand community to then find out that part of being a member—and part of the community's culture—is to hate the rival. In sports, Havard (2014, p. 247) reports that fans “were taught which team to root against, or disidentify, from” by their socializing agents. Likewise, in a brand community, one could imagine similar pressure to dislike the rival brand. Hence we propose

H3: Identification with the favorite brand is positively related to disidentification with the rival brand.

Brand rivalry and distinctiveness

Petriglieri (2011) notes that an identity threat could cause members to stress the positive distinctiveness of their group. According to optimal distinctiveness theory, social identity is fuelled by two fundamental human needs, the need for group belonging and the need for distinctiveness from others (Pickett & Brewer, 2001, p. 342). Distinctiveness is important because self-enhancement can only occur when one sees the group as distinct from the other group (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004, p. 258). People therefore seek membership in positively distinct groups. The uniqueness and distinctiveness of a group can be threatened by very similar outgroups (Riek, Mania & Gaertner, 2006, p. 339). With a rival brand, this should not be a concern. There will always enough ground for distinction. In competition “group lines are drawn more sharply, values and norms are underscored and we/they differences are accentuated” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 25). We propose that rivalry boosts the uniqueness of the ingroup. The consumers will perceive themselves to be different and positively distinct from consumers of the rival brand.

H4: The stronger the perception of the brand rivalry, the bigger the perceived distinctiveness of the ingroup.

Brand rivalry and cohesion

Kilduff (2010, p. 33) suggests that rivalry “may foster greater in-group cohesion.” In a review of psychological literature, Stein (1976, p. 152) notes that “various studies suggest that in groups under threat cohesion does indeed increase.” Positive consequence include the perception of the ingroup as more cohesive or homogenous (Doosje, Ellemers & Spears, 1995; Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 1997; Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 1999, p. 48). More

specifically, Ellemers, Spears and Doosje (2002, p. 176) note that “highly committed group members, when facing an identity threat, on an affective level may display even stronger group affiliation, express their loyalty to the devalued group and emphasize group cohesiveness.”

On an organizational level, Pratt (1998, p. 188) notes that “external threats make groups more cohesive.” The intergroup threat literature also expects group cohesion to increase as a result of a threat (Stephan, Ybarra & Morrison, p. 53), a view shared by sociologists, who believe that conflict with outgroups activates energies among group members and hence increases internal cohesion (Coser, 2009, p. 113). Between rival brands, a common enemy also brings consumers closer together. Hence

H5: The stronger the perception of the brand rivalry, the bigger the ingroup cohesion.

Brand rivalry and collective self-esteem

Social identity is a function of both how one personally evaluates the ingroup and how others evaluate the ingroup (Luhtanen & Croker, 1992, p. 304). People have the need to feel as though one's group is a good group (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004, p. 258). Hence they assess how other people evaluate the ingroup, which is referred to as public collective self-esteem. It is related to concept of organizational prestige, which captures one's perception whether his organization is respected, admired, prestigious and well-known (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000, p. 562). We believe that a strong rivalry contributes to being respected by the general public. It creates the belief that the own ingroup matters, that they are a relevant outgroup and a threat to someone.

H6: The stronger the perception of the brand rivalry, the higher the public collective self-esteem stemming from neutral outgroups.

It is important to distinguish between the public collective self-esteem stemming from neutral outgroups and the dissociative reference group. Obviously, with all the aforementioned detrimental behavior, one could not expect consumers to think they are held in high regard

among the consumers of the rival brand—much on the contrary. The existence of a dissociative reference group that disdains the ingroup is first and foremost a negative consequence of rivalry.

H7: The stronger the perception of the brand rivalry, the lower the public collective self-esteem stemming from the rival brand.

Pilot Study

We are in the process of conducting a pilot study to test the hypothesis. Undergraduate students that are either owners of Apple or Samsung smartphones are about to participate in an online survey. The independent variable—the perception of the brand rivalry—will be measured on the established single-item scale “How intense do you think is the rivalry between Apple and Samsung” on a seven-point scale with 1 = not very intense to 7 = very intense). The use of single-item scales is appropriate if the construct is sufficiently narrow, one-dimensional and clear to the participants (Wanous & Hudy, 2001). All other constructs will be measured on multi-item scales from the literature featuring seven-point rating scales (anchored at 1 = do not agree, 7 = strongly agree). Brand identification will be adapted from Mael and Ashforth (1992). It will be measured on four items, e.g., “Apple’s successes are my successes”. Disidentification with the rival brand will be measured on three items adapted from Bhattacharya and Elsbach (2002), e.g., “Apple’s failures are my successes”. Group distinctiveness, adapted from Postmes, Haslam and Jans (2013), will be measured on three items, e.g., “There is something that makes the Apple fan community unique in comparison with other Bundesliga fans”. Cohesion will be measured on three items adapted from Postmes et al. (2013), e.g., “There is great togetherness in the Apple fan community” As for collective self-esteem, we will adapt items from the public dimension of Luhtanen and Croker’s (1992) public collective self-esteem scale. We distinguish between the source of the collective self-esteem. General collective self-esteem (GCSE) measured the esteem stemming from the neutral reference groups, i.e., the general public. Rival collective self-esteem (RCSE) measures the esteem stemming from the dissociative reference

group, i.e., the rival consumers. Both will be measured on three items, such as “Samsung consumer respect the Apple consumers” for RCSE resp. “Except for Samsung consumers: The general public respects Apple consumers” for GCSE.

Outlook

The data collection will be finished by the end of April and results will be presented at the conference. However, the study only serves as the starting point for the investigation of brand rivalries. More thought will be put into the adaption of the social identity and disidentification framework to the world of brand communities.

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Author Commitment

I hereby confirm that the work is original and that, if accepted, I agree to attend the full workshop and present the work.

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