

Consumer Response to Brand Appropriation

**Johnny Graham
Doctoral Student
Fox School of Business
Temple University**

Abstract

In this paper I explore the contextual consequences of brand appropriation. Brand appropriation is the public adoption of a brand by non-target market consumers, who attach their own unique set of associations to the brand. In recent years, Burberry, PBR Beer, Cadillac, and many other brands have been confronted with such circumstances, in which a brand may experience a temporary increase in sales, but original customers may react negatively and alienate the brand. I develop a conceptual model that considers the effects of a consumer's relationship with a brand, and individual traits on response to brand appropriation behavior.

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Conceptual Background

Defining Brand Appropriation

Brand appropriation is the public adoption of a brand by non-target market consumers, who attach their own unique set of associations to the brand. Brand appropriation is not new. In the early 2000s, the “chavs,” a group perceived to be lower class and obnoxious adopted the famous Burberry checkered pattern as a part of their uniform. In the 1990’s, young, urban, hip-hop customers adopted fashion brand Tommy Hilfiger, which initially targeted preppy, rich consumers. When non-target consumers challenge established brand associations, a brand may experience a temporary increase in sales, but their original customers may react negatively and alienate the brand. In some cases, the brand rebounds while in other cases the brand appropriation causes the demise of the brand.

Past literature has acknowledged that consumers construct their self-identity and present themselves to others through their brand choices, based on the congruence between brand-user associations and self-image associations (Escalas and Bettman 2003). But brand appropriation involves consumers choosing brands that do not represent their self-image associations. This phenomenon is theoretically related, but unique from several previously established constructs.

Co-creation theory has identified that consumers have a role in the creation of brand value (Vargo and Lusch, 2005). Part of this brand value comes from the strength of brand associations (Aaker, 1992). But the co-creation literature acknowledges firms working with consumers to create brand value as invited participants, with positive effects. Brand appropriation presents a scenario in which some uninvited consumers can create value amongst themselves, potentially having damaging effects that could lead to the destruction of value for other consumers. This literature does not fully

address the potential negative implications of consumers creating associations in disagreement with firm established associations.

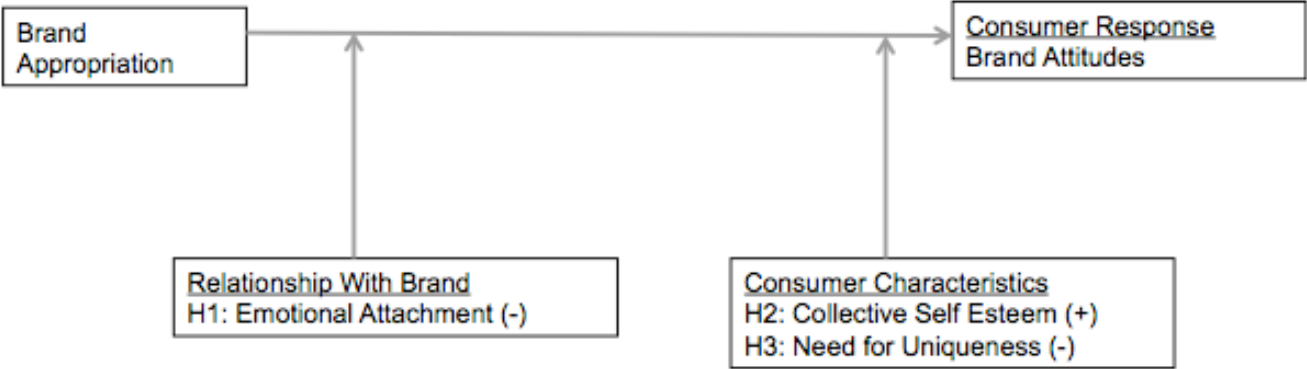
The resultant incongruity of brand appropriation differs from previous studies in that it involves the introduction of new brand associations by consumers, a form of consumer-generated incongruity. The congruency of brand associations refers to the match between attributes, benefits, and attitudes linked to a brand (Keller, 1993). These associations can be firm driven (brand identity) or held in the minds of consumers (brand image). Conventional branding wisdom tells us that brands should strive for congruity between brand identity and brand image, but the implications of disagreement between them has been addressed in theory. Although previous literature has explored consequences of incongruity when created by the firm (Lee and Mason, 1999, Kirmani and Shiv, 1998), there is little research that explores detailed consequences of consumer-generated incongruity. Consumer generated incongruity could possibly lead to a diffuse brand image, which occurs where there is little congruence among brand associations for consumers (Keller, 1993). A diffuse brand image can create confusion and increase the likelihood that consumers will discount or overlook relevant brand associations in making brand choices (Keller, 1993).

The target marketing literature has addressed the possibility of non-target market adoption, but it has not considered the reactions of core consumers or the effect of challenging brand associations. Crossover refers to the process of a product or brand designed for one target segment being met with attraction and acceptance in another segment (Grier, 2006). This phenomenon has traditionally been explored as the movement of a product or brand from marginal groups to the mainstream. While crossover and brand appropriation both involve the acceptance of a brand by a non-targeted segment or group, crossover research only assesses the situation in which associations are kept the same and

congruent with previously established associations. Brand appropriation introduces the possibility of these non-target consumers creating incongruent associations.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

When established brand associations are challenged, the self-image associations of current customers may no longer be strongly represented in that brand. The incongruent nature of brand appropriating can create a diffuse brand image in the minds of these consumers. Additionally, the reference group literature shows that individuals may have a greater tendency to avoid products associated with certain groups (White and Dahl, 2006). When confronted with brand appropriation, at what point does this new group brand adoption and the attachment of new associations become so bothersome that consumers feel the need to abandon a brand? There may be a possibility that the increased popularity causes current customers to be even more supportive of the brand. In the following conceptual model, I consider the effects of an individual’s relationship with a brand and an individual’s inherent traits.



Brand Relationship: Emotional Attachment

Emotional Attachment

Attachment reflects the emotional bond connecting an individual with a specific target object (Bowlby, 1979). Stronger attachment to a particular target (i.e. a brand) induces a state of emotion that influences behavior (Holmes, 2000). Past studies have shown that in regards to brand extensions and the attitude towards the parent (original) brand, emotional attachment has a strong effect on purchase intentions and willingness to pay (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park, 2005). The greater the degree to which a particular brand is a part of an individual's self-concept, the higher the degree of emotional attachment (Malar et al, 2011). Since brand appropriating could potentially challenge one's self-concept, those who are high in emotional attachment, may be more likely to be affected. Therefore I propose:

H1: Emotional attachment will moderate the relationship between brand appropriation and brand attitudes. Emotional attachment will have a significant negative effect on brand attitudes for those with a high level of emotional attachment, but not for individuals with a low level of emotional attachment.

Individual Characteristics: Collective Self-Esteem & Need for Uniqueness

Collective Self-Esteem (CSE)

Consumers motivated to protect and maintain feelings of self-worth alter their product evaluations and choices to avoid a threatened aspect of their own social identity. To operationalize self-worth, I consider collective self-esteem. Whereas those low in collective self-esteem (CSE) tend to exhibit such identity avoidance effects, those high in CSE maintain associations with an identity-linked

brand even when that social identity is threatened (White and Argo, 2009). Since those low in collective self-esteem are less likely to maintain associations when their social identity is threatened, I propose:

H2: Collective self-esteem will moderate the relationship between brand appropriation and brand attitudes. Brand appropriation will have a significant negative effect on brand attitudes for those with a low level of collective self-esteem, but not for individuals with a high level of collective self-esteem.

Need for Uniqueness (vs. Need for Conformity)

Consumers establish their uniqueness through various behaviors in response to environmental inputs that increase or decrease their perceptions of similarity to others (Tian et al., 2001). For groups of consumers, a collective need for uniqueness drives group members to pursue dissimilarity through consumption in an effort to develop a distinctive self and social identity (Tian et al. 2001, Ruvio and Shalam 2007). An individual with a higher need for collective conformity, instead of uniqueness, is more likely to base their behaviors on the thoughts, feelings and actions of others. They tend to follow social norms because they are motivated by a desire to be positively evaluated or avoid being negatively evaluated by others. When brand appropriation occurs, individuals with a high need for uniqueness may be more willing to against the group, and leave a brand. Therefore I propose:

H3: Need for uniqueness will moderate the relationship between brand appropriation and brand attitudes. Brand appropriation will have a significant negative effect on brand attitudes for those with a high need uniqueness, but not for individuals with a low need for uniqueness.

Method & Preliminary Results

Two experiments have already been conducted with either contrived or actual scenarios of brand appropriation behavior to test the conceptual model. Each experiment considered whether there was a significant difference in the effect of brand appropriation on brand attitudes compared to other constructs and varying conditions of incongruity.

Study 1

Pre-Test

To help design potential brand appropriation scenarios for these experiments, I conducted a pre-test, gauging the familiarity of several brands and assessing which groups consumers were most likely to disassociate and associate with these brands. The pre-test included 7 brands (Wrangler Jeans, FUBU, Harley Davidson, Louis Vuitton, Under Armour, Cadillac, Forever 21), and 14 different socio-demographic and psychographic consumer groups (Urban Youth, Males, Females, Elderly, Rich, College Students, Young Professionals, Rich, Poor, Moms, Dads, Teenagers, and Hipsters). For each brand, the participant, rated on a five-point scale, how much they agree with the statement: “I associate this brand with <insert group here>”, for each group.

Amongst the 155 participants acquired via Amazon Mechanical Turk, the most familiar brands in the survey were Harley Davidson (4.09 average score), Wrangler Jeans (4.06), Louis Vuitton (3.70), and Cadillac (3.67). For the purposes of this research I am most concerned with the groups that are least likely to be associated with each brand. An average score below three was used as indicator of a group likely to be disassociated with the brand. For instance, Moms (2.50), Poor (2.56), Hipsters (2.67), and Females (2.73) were the least likely to be associated with Harley Davidson. For each of the four most familiar brands a dissociative group was selected to engage in appropriation behavior for the purposes of Study 1. For Harley Davidson the group selected was Moms (2.50), for Louis Vuitton the

group selected was Lower Class Consumers (2.39), for Wrangler Jeans the group selected were Hipsters (2.89), and for Cadillac the group selected was Rural Outdoorsmen (2.59).

Method

The first study took into consideration the effect of traits that were pertinent to consumers (need for uniqueness, collective self-esteem) and the effect of consumers' relationship with brands (emotional attachment). In the study, participants were confronted with a news headline (See Appendix 1) from one of the four conditions (to which they were randomly assigned): non-target adoption with new brand associations (brand appropriation condition), non-target adoption without new associations (crossover condition), target market adoption with a change of associations (target incongruity condition) or target market adoption (control condition). The same non-target consumer group was used in the brand appropriation and crossover condition, with the only difference being the attaching of new associations in the brand appropriation condition. At the start of the survey, participants chose the brand featured in the headline, by selecting the brand (Harley Davidson, Wrangler Jeans, Louis Vuitton, and Cadillac) they felt most connected to. The participants' brand attitudes were calculated both before and after being confronted with the headline. Brand attitudes were measured using a four item, seven level Likert scale, which asked participants to what degree they agreed with statements such as "I accept this brand" and "My attitude toward this brand is positive". Also, after seeing the headline, participants were asked whether they were more likely to purchase more from the brand, less from the brand, more from a competitor of the brand, or keep their purchasing behavior the same. The change in brand connections was measured as well using the SBC scale (Escalas, 2004). To examine our moderators, the ten-item Thomson, MacInnis, and Park (2005) scale was used to measure emotional attachment and the 16-item Luhtanen and Crocker (1992) scale was used to measure collective self-esteem. A two-item measure was used to measure need for uniqueness.

Results

One hundred ninety seven participants completed the experimental survey via Amazon Mechanical Turk. The results of this experiment did show that brand appropriation had a significantly different negative effect on brand attitudes, when compared to both the control condition (-.347, $p=.027$) and the target incongruity condition (-.360, $p=.019$). The effect of brand appropriation on brand attitudes was not significantly different from the effect of the crossover condition (-.186, $p>.05$). The results of the moderators were a bit more concrete. For those low in collective self-esteem, brand appropriation had a significant relationship on brand attitudes, when compared to each group; the effect of brand appropriation was significantly different from the effect of the control condition (-.388, $p=.043$), target incongruity condition (-.407, $p=.029$), and crossover condition (-.383, $p=.043$). All of these effects were non-existent at the high collective self-esteem level. But I did also discover, using a multinomial logistic regression, that when confronted with brand appropriation, those with a high level of collective self-esteem were significantly more likely to purchase more from the brand in response to brand appropriation.

An inverse result was found regarding the moderating effect of need for uniqueness. For those with a high need for uniqueness, there was a significant negative effect of brand appropriation on brand attitudes when compared to each of the other conditions. Again, the effect of appropriation was significantly different from the control (-.645, $p<.001$), target incongruity (-.622, $p=.001$), and crossover (-.511, $p=.006$). These significant relationships did not exist for the low need for uniqueness group.

For those high in emotional attachment brand appropriation did have a significant effect on brand attitudes when compared to the control (-.430, $p=.038$) and target incongruity condition (-.425, $p=.046$), but not compared to the crossover condition (-.324, $p=.011$). There was no significant effect for those low in emotional attachment.

Discussion

The results of this study provided support for Hypotheses 2 and 3, as the effect of brand appropriation were significantly different from the effects of each of the other conditions, when moderated by collective self-esteem and need for uniqueness. Hypothesis 1 was partially supported, as the effect of brand appropriation was significantly different from every condition, except the crossover condition, when moderated by emotional attachment. These results suggest that the internal traits of consumer (collective self-esteem and need for uniqueness) as well as their relationship with the brand (emotional attachment) can influence the effect of brand appropriation on consumers. The internal traits may determine the significant effect of new additional associations on brand appropriation response, since these moderators created a significant difference between the crossover and brand appropriation conditions. This may be something for brands to consider when confronted with the brand appropriation conundrum. If the brand's core customers are generally low in collective self-esteem or very independent (high need for uniqueness, they may be more likely to leave the brand when the brand is "appropriated". An interesting finding was that individuals with a high level of collective self-esteem were more likely to buy more from the brand. Theoretically this makes sense, as individuals with a high level of collective of self-esteem generally feel a sense of pride about the groups to which they belong. These customers may be more likely to defend "their brand" through more purchases when confronted with brand appropriation.

Study 2

A key differentiation of brand appropriation from other previously explored phenomena is that is a consumer-led behavior, and not firm initiated. While past literature has observed the effects of

firm-generated incongruity it has not considered consumer-generated incongruity. While our second study showed a significant difference in effects when target consumers versus a new consumer group introduced incongruent associations, this study focuses on comparing the effects of brand appropriation (consumer generated incongruity) with firm generated incongruity.

Method

To initiate more visible examples of appropriation behavior, the stimuli included in this experiment featured a tweet, accompanied by a picture. Each participant was confronted with a tweet from one of two conditions. The manipulation between both conditions was the source of the appropriation behavior mentioned in the tweet. One condition featured incongruity initiated by a new consumer group, while the other featured the firm targeting the new group with those same new associations. The brand mentioned in the tweet was either Louis Vuitton or Wrangler Jeans, dependent on which was selected by the participant. The tweet came from the same fictitious source on the same date, with the same picture link. The picture featured in the Louis Vuitton condition was a car covered in Louis Vuitton, while the image of jeans hanging below someone's waist was used in the Wrangler Jeans condition. Brand attitudes were measured again prior to and after seeing the tweet.

Results

Of the 160 participants, 113 chose Wrangler Jeans, while 47 chose Louis Vuitton. Half were assigned to the consumer-generated incongruity (brand appropriation) condition, and half to the firm-generated incongruity condition. The consumer-generated incongruity did produce a negative effect on brand attitudes that was significantly different than the effect of firm generated incongruity (.4281, $p=.009$), but the effect was greater in the firm incongruity group. For participants low in collective self esteem (CSE) this effect remained true (.510, $p=.005$), but not for those high in CSE. The effect was

true for those high in need for uniqueness, but not for those with a low need for uniqueness (.449, $p = .017$). Emotional attachment was not measured in this study.

Discussion

The results of this study established an even stronger robustness in distinguishing the unique effects of brand appropriation. The experimental outcome showed that brand appropriation has a significant negative effect on brand attitudes, but the effect of firm generated incongruity is even more damaging. The moderating effect of need for uniqueness and collective self-esteem were confirmed again as well. These results suggest that when brands are confronted with brand appropriation it may be more useful for firms to do nothing and not to embrace brand appropriation, unless they are willing to lose core customers.

Research Contributions

This research has the potential to contribute to theory development in branding, and to contribute practical implications for brand management. The results of several studies confirm that brand appropriation is a distinct construct, with its own unique effects on the brand evaluations of consumers. It differs from firm-generated incongruity, crossover behavior, and target marketing. The studies are also expected to show that the components of brand appropriation (non-target market adoption and the changing in associations) can have separate and significant effect on brand attitudes. Several moderators have preliminarily demonstrated an influence on the effect of brand appropriation, providing depth to the development of the construct. Consumers low in collective self-esteem, high in need for uniqueness, or high emotional attachment were shown to exhibit the negative relationship between brand appropriation and brand attitudes.

Overall, these studies were able to extend the implications of non-target market adoption, incongruity effects, and co-creation. The co-creation literature identifies consumers as brand value creators, but brand appropriation considers circumstances under which these co-creators work against the brand. The incongruity literature has examined the firm as incongruity creators, but brand appropriation introduces the effects of consumers as incongruity creators. And the target marketing literature has considered non-target market adoption but only from an antecedent perspective; this brand appropriation research considers the consequences of non-target market adoption.

Several improvements can be made upon this research to both extend its implications and improve its robustness. One issue within the experimental design of each study was that all participants were acquired via online Amazon Mechanical Turk. I intentionally stayed away from a student sample so that I could have a diverse group of participants, and avoid potential biases. In the future, it may be useful to do an experiment with just students, including brands that are very important to them specifically. Conducting a field experiment with one brand in particular could be a beneficial next step towards further establishing this research area as well. The inclusion of a moderator that actually increases brand attitudes would be an integral element to add to this conceptual model. It may be useful to consider the age of a brand as a possible moderator; past research has indicated that incongruity can have positive effects for mature brands. The study of mediators such as implicit attitudes and threat to social identity would also be useful to extend the implications of this phenomenon.

The results of this research can be very vital to brands that are currently confronted with brand appropriation. Since brand appropriation is consumer-created, the brand is not in control of the inception of this phenomenon, but the brand can partially control the response. The results of this research identify the characteristics of customers that may be more likely to negatively react, or not

react at all. This can assist in helping firms decide whether to introduce brand extensions or change their branding to either encourage or alienate these new consumers. With the increasing amount of cross-cultural contact, especially with the increasing level of social media usage as a means for consumer information (i.e. online customer reviews, forums, social networks), brand appropriation is likely to become even more of a challenge for firms in the future. It will become much harder for consumers to be ignorant of the views of other consumers, and their usage of their favorite brands. This research shows that whether brand appropriation discourages how a consumer feels about the brand depends on a number of contextual factors. The ongoing concern is that brand appropriation behavior overall can be detrimental to a brand.

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Author Commitments

I confirm that the research described in this proposal is original. If accepted, I agree to attend the full workshop to present the work.