

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER:
THE IMPACT OF CONTROL OF INFORMATION
ON BRAND ATTITUDES

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Control of valuable resources has been linked with power. In the internet age, information may be as valuable as any physical resource and therefore, controlling information should be associated with power. We find that increasing perceptions a brand's control over information increases consumer perceptions of the brand's power. Furthermore, we find that having information hurts brands that have developed images in conflict with perceptions of power, namely warmth.

Knowledge Is Power: The Impact of Control of Information on Brand Attitudes

It is easy to imagine websites that tout that they have information on thousands of available singles, open jobs, service providers, products or even diseases. While these brands may be communicating their control of information in order to be seen by consumers as the one website that can provide all the answers...or the perfect match...taglines of this sort may have an unintended consequence. Communicating a control of information may also communicate power to consumers.

Control of Information as Power

Power has been defined as a control of valuable resources (Keltner, Gruenfeld and Anderson 2003; Magee and Galinsky 2008). Resources need not be physical, tangible objects in order to be considered valuable. Information is another valuable resource that can grant power through its control. Knowledge and information has been directly related to the concept of expert power (French and Raven 1975), and history demonstrates the power of controlling information through propaganda. Even prior to the rise of the internet, research demonstrated a link between power and controlling information as those motivated by power were shown to seek out positions that control information such as editor of a school newspaper (Winter 1973).

With the boom of the internet, the access to information has become greater than ever before. Therefore, brands with an ability to collect and distribute information hold greater power.

In the past, the brands with high information resources would have been traditional news sources such as the Wall Street Journal but now search engines like Google and social networking sites like Facebook have access to a wealth of data and information as well. Consumers are beginning to realize the power of these brands. Many consumers are aware of brands' abilities to control the content or information they see online based on information the brand has gathered (Francis 2015). Additionally, recent breaches in security and unauthorized releases of private information may also have made consumers aware of the power brands with information wield. For all these reasons, we hypothesize that increasing the perception of information a brand controls will also increase perceptions of that brand's power. If information increases perceptions of power as we hypothesize, communicating control of information may have a negative impact on brands that have built their image around traits that generally conflict with power such as warmth.

Brand Images of Power and Warmth

Brands have been known to differentiate themselves from competitors by creating a warm, kind, and generous brand image. Perceptions of warmth may also create positive and comforting associations with these brands for consumers. However, these brands may be in conflict with images of power that may be increased due to a communication of control of information by the brand.

Warmth has been shown to not only be a common dimension of social judgments (Fiske et al. 1999; Fiske et al. 2002) but also of perceptions of companies and brands (Aaker, Vohs and Mogilner 2010; Aaker, Garbinsky, and Vohs 2012; Bennett and Hill 2012). Given that

consumers regularly form humanlike relationships with brands and see brands as having humanlike traits (Aaker 1997; Fournier 1998), research from psychology may be applicable in identifying traits incompatible with a brand's image. Social judgments of a person's power have been demonstrated to be negatively related to perceptions of warmth (Fragale et al. 2011) leading us to hypothesize that these dimensions may be negatively related for brands as well.

Prior research in branding would also suggest that images of power may conflict with brand images associated with warmth. Prior literature that has applied the Schwartz structure of human values (Schwartz 1992) to brand concepts has demonstrated that brands adopting compatible values—those adjacent to one another on the Schwartz and Boehnke (2004) model—receive more favorable evaluations than brands that attempt to adopt incompatible values—those opposite to one another on the model (Torelli et al. 2012; Torelli, Monga and Kaikati 2012). Using this framework, a warm brand image would be associated with the higher order value of self-transcendence which includes items such as helpfulness, honesty, forgiveness and responsibility while communication of control of information and thus power would be associated with the value of self-enhancement and items such as success, capability, ambition, and influence on people and events (Schwartz and Boehnke 2004). Given that these are incompatible value dimensions, we would expect consumers to react negatively to brands that attempt to convey both of these values. We therefore hypothesize that brands with warm images will be negatively impacted more than brands with other images by brand messages that communicate their control over information resources.

We next outline three empirical studies which test and find support for our hypotheses. Study 1 demonstrates that brands that have greater access and control of information are seen as having greater power. Study 2 finds that communicating control of information can have a

negative impact on a brand with a warm brand image but not a brand that does not have a warm brand image. Study 3 replicates the findings of Study 2 using fictitious brands and a repeated measure format.

Study 1: Control of Information Leads to Perceptions of Brand Power

In Study 1, we find initial evidence that controlling information leads to perceptions of brand power. We use a fictitious job website brand and manipulate the amount of information participants believe the brand controls in order to explore how information is related to an association with brand power.

Method

Thirty seven undergraduate students at a large American university participated in a study on brand perceptions in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to either an information or no information condition.

All participation viewed information on a fictitious job search website brand called Job Werks. Participants in the information condition were told that the brand collected large amounts of information from both prospective employees and employers while in the no information participants were told that employees and employers were matched together using just a few simple questions. See Appendix for brand descriptions.

After reading the description of Job Werks, participants then completed four items to measure a general association with brand power: “how much power does Job Werks have?”,

“To what extent is Job Werks associated with power?”, “To what extent does Job Werks embody power?”, and “To what extent does Job Werks typify power?”. Participants responded to all four questions on a 1-7 scale where 1 = Not at all and 7 = Very much.

Results

A factor analysis revealed that the four items of associations with power loaded onto a single factor with all items having a factor loading great than .81, therefore, the items were averaged to create an overall index ($\alpha = .91$). An ANOVA revealed a significant effect of information in that participants who thought that the website had a lot of information associated the brand with power more than participants who believed that the website only had a small amount of information ($M = 4.79$ vs. 4.21 , $F(1, 35) = 2.98$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

Study 1 finds evidence that consumers see brands with more information as having greater power. Therefore for brands that have images that conflict with power, such as those with warm and caring images, communicating control of information may negatively impact consumer evaluations. We test this hypothesis in Study 2 using real brands.

Study 2: The Impact of Control of Information on Warm Brands

This study builds on the findings of Study 1 by demonstrating how communicating a brand’s control of information can negatively impact a brand with a warm image. In this study

we use two real world social networking brands in order to study the impact of communicating access to information resources.

Method

One hundred and fifty six undergraduate students participated in a study on brands in exchange for course credit. The experiment was a 2 (warm brand/non-warm brand) X 2 (information/no information) between subjects design.

Participants viewing the warm brand viewed a quote from the founder of Caring Bridge while those in the non-warm brand condition viewed a from the founder of Linked In. For those in the information condition, this quote was then followed by a statement about the amount of information on the website while in the no information condition the statement was about the number of users. See Appendix for stimuli.

After viewing the information about the appropriate brand, participants rated the brand on three items of favorability: “How much do you like <Brand>? 1 = Not at All/ 7 = A lot”, “My attitude toward <Brand> is... 1 = Unfavorable/ 7 = Favorable”, “I think that <Brand> is... 1 = Bad brand/ 7 = Good brand”.

Results

The three items of favorability were averaged together to come up with an overall favorability index ($\alpha = .92$). A factor analysis revealed that these factors all loaded onto a single factor with all item loadings greater than .88. An ANOVA revealed a main effect of information ($F(1,152) = 3.62, p < .05$). Participants liked the brand less when they were told how much information the brand controlled ($M = 5.35$ vs. 5.71). Pairwise comparisons showed that the

effect of information was one tailed significant for the warm brand, Caring Bridge, ($M = 5.70$ vs 5.21 , $F(1, 152) = 3.40$, $p < .05$); however, there was no impact of the information on LinkedIn, ($M = 5.72$ vs. 5.48 , $F(1, 152) = 0.74$, $p > .38$). Both the main effect of warm brand ($p > .43$) and the interaction of warm brand and information were not significant ($p > .51$) See Figure 1.

Discussion

Study 2 shows initial evidence using real brands that communicating information can detrimentally impact brands. Specifically we see that it can especially hurt brands that have developed an image based on warmth such as Caring Bridge. By using real brands, Study 2 provides realism to our findings; however, participants may bring their past experiences with the brand to the study and some other association with the brands may be the cause of our effect. In order to control for this, Study 3 uses a fictitious news channel to replicate the effect.

Study 3: The Impact of Control of Information on Fictitious Brands

Study 2 demonstrated the impact of communicating control of information on brand attitudes and showed that communicating control over large amounts of information is harmful. In Study 3 we replicate effect using a fictitious news channel and manipulating the perceptions of warmth about that channel. Additionally, Study 2 communicated that the brand had access to personal information—health or job information—in Study 3, the brand has more general information and so we expand the findings to include all types of information rather than just sensitive personal information.

Method

Forty-eight undergraduate students from a large American University participated in a study in exchange for course credit with participants being randomly assigned to view either a warm brand or a non-warm brand. All participants were told to imagine that there was a local news team which would be referred to as Channel 8 that covered the news for a large metro area. In the warm brand condition, Channel 8 was said to be known for being involved in the community and regularly participated in and reported on charity events. In the non-warm brand condition, participants were told that Channel 8 reported the news 4 times a day and were known for reporting the news in a very clear in understandable way.

After reading the description of the news channel, participants then rated the news team on the same three items of favorability as used in Study 2. After their ratings, all participants read a paragraph stating that a local newspaper recently ran a story about the large amount of information that Channel 8 has in its archives, including some interviews and information on stories that the news channel chose not to air and thus was never seen. See Appendix for complete description. Following this information, participants rated the news channel again on the same three favorability items.

Results

A repeated measure ANOVA with time as a within subjects factor and brand as a between subjects factor revealed a significant main effect of time ($F(1,46) = 9.89, p < .01$) with participants liking the news channel less after they learned of the amount of information that the news channel controlled ($M's = 4.24$ vs. 4.72). The main effect of brand of brand ($F(1, 46) = .00, p = .98$) and the time X brand interaction ($F(1, 46) = 2.04, p = .16$). were both not significant.

Pairwise comparison show that while liking for both brands dropped after participants read about the brand's control of information, this drop was only significant for the warm brand ($M's = 4.84$ vs. 4.13 , $F(1,46) = 9.89$, $p < .01$) and not for the non-warm brand ($M's = 4.61$ vs. 4.35 , $F(1, 46) = 1.54$, $p > .22$). See Figure 2.

Discussion

Taken together Studies 2 and 3 demonstrate that consumers have a negative reaction to brands that have control of information, both personal and general information. Additionally, we show that this negative reaction is more harmful for brands that have built a warm brand image.

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Figure 1: The Impact of Communicating Control of Information

on a Warm versus Non-warm Brand (Study 2)

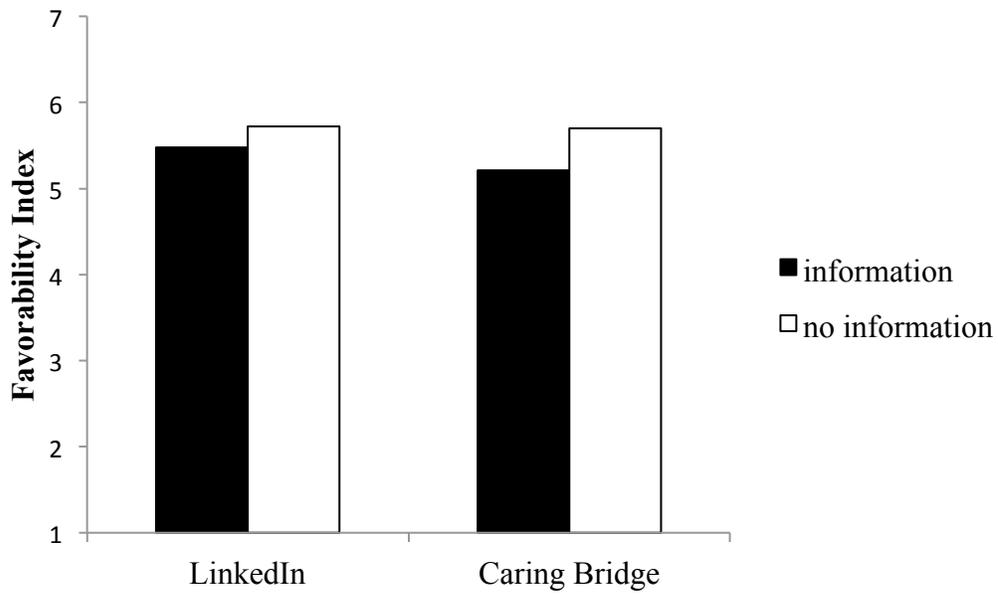
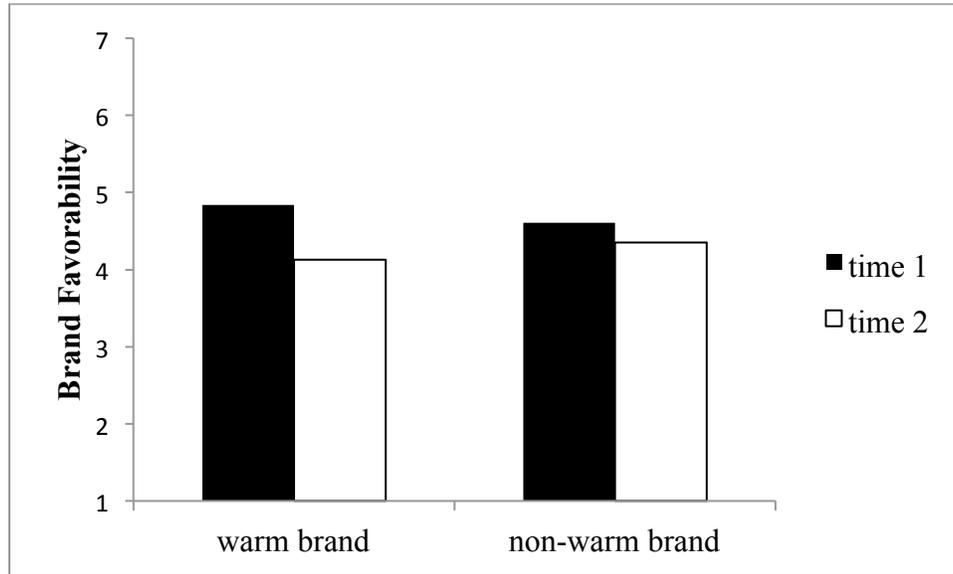


Figure 2: The Impact of Controlling of Information

on a Warm versus Non-warm Brand (Study 3)



Appendix

Study 1

Information

Job Werks is a company that helps to connect job hunters with an available job that fits well with their needs. Job hunters uploaded their past education and employment history as well as complete a lengthy questionnaire on not only their skills but also what they are looking for in a job. Prospective employers also upload a job description as well as many questions on what they are looking for in an ideal employee and information on their corporate culture.

No Information

Job Werks is a company that helps to connect job hunters with an available job that fits well with their needs. Job hunters and prospective employers answer a few simple questions to match them together. There is no uploading of lengthy resumes or job descriptions.

Study 2

Warm Brand

Information about caringbridge.org

“In 1997, good friends of mine had a premature baby, and they asked me to let everyone know what was happening. Instead of making dozens of emotional and time-consuming phone calls, I decided to create a website. The same night their baby Brighid was born, so was the idea that became CaringBridge.” – Sona Mehring, CaringBridge Founder and CEO

Information Condition: CaringBridge now has regularly updated health information on more than 500,000 people.

No Information Condition: CaringBridge now helps people connect with more than 500,000 sick loved ones

Warm Brand

Information about Linked In

"Ten years ago, I co-founded LinkedIn in my living room with the mission of connecting the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful. Inspired by the invaluable role relationships played in our own careers, we launched LinkedIn with the tagline "Relationships matter." -- Reid Hoffman, LinkedIn Founder

Information Condition: LinkedIn now has regularly updated career information on more than 500,000 people.

No Information Condition: LinkedIn now helps people connect with more than 500,000 other professionals.

Study 3:

Control of Information:

On a date last month, a local newspaper reported that Channel 8 has a wide variety of information in its archives. Sometimes Channel 8 collects interviews and information for stories which then are never chosen to be aired. Due to its ability to collect and disseminate information, Channel 8 has a large database with information on companies and persons, some of which viewers may have never seen.

Author Commitments: The authors of this manuscript confirm that this work is original and if accepted as part of the BBR Accelerator, Jennifer Stoner agrees to attend the full workshop and present this work.