Dissociative desire and conspicuous consumption: the mediating role of brand self-verification

Abstract

This research aims to analyze the relationship between social groups and consumer preferences for brand identifiers, and argues that the presence (*vs*. absence) of dissociative desire towards an out-group promotes preferences for products with prominent logos rather than subtle ones. We propose that dissociative desire activates self-verification processes, which, in turn, explain the greater preference for highly prominent logos. The results of two experimental studies supported our hypotheses and offer implications for brand theory and management.

Keywords: social groups, out-groups, conspicuous consumption, brand, self-verification.

Introduction

Firms support consumers in the process of communicating their identity by proposing different types of brand signs that can convey multiple symbolic meanings in terms of affiliation with certain social groups and of distinction from other ones. Firms can propose brand names or symbols characterized by a different degree of brand prominence (Han et al., 2010) or brand signal explicitness (Berger and Ward, 2010), offering their products with more prominent (or louder) or quieter (or subtler) signs. Nike's brand logo, Burberry's check pattern or Gucci's iconic details, such as the green/red/green ribbon or the mesh decoration, represent visible and recognizable brand elements. Companies such as Hermès or Bottega Veneta use less visible (or completely absent) brand marks, delegating the recognition of the brand to discreet elements such as particular patterns, specific materials or *tone-on-tone* colored logos.

The literature on brand prominence has studied the role of brand identification signs in the identity signaling process and has analyzed the reasons that lead consumers to prefer louder or subtler logos and the conditions under which such preferences prevail (e.g., Berger and Ward, 2010; Han et al., 2010; Lee and Shrum, 2012; Song et al., 2017). This article intervenes in the research stream that studies the determinants of preferences for specific brand signals, considering the goals of dissociation from social groups relevant to consumers in the process of identity communication (Berger and Heath, 2007; Chan et al. 2012). Whereas previous studies have focused on determinants related to the living conditions of consumers (e.g. economic well-being, cultural capital) and to the context of luxury products (e.g., Berger and Ward, 2010; Han et al., 2010), this research aims to extend the analysis of preference for loud *vs.* subtle logos in the context of the consumption of mass products relevant for identity communication.

This research proposes that the presence (*vs.* absence) of dissociative desire towards an out-group (i.e., a group to which one does not belong) determines the preference for products characterized by more prominent (*vs.* quieter) logos of brands relevant for an in-group (i.e., a group to which one does belong) and that such effect is mediated by increased *brand self-verification*.

Theoretical background and research hypotheses

The identity signaling function of brand signs describes the communication of symbolic meanings to specific social groups in order to associate with or dissociate from these groups (e.g., Escalas and Bettman, 2003 and 2005; White and Dahl, 2007). Although the literature has shown that (non-)conspicuous consumption can be driven by the search for psychological benefits (Belk, 1988), that is, intrinsic benefits such as self-realization or personal satisfaction (e.g., Cheah et al., 2015; Shao et al., 2019), the motivations underlying the use of brand signs are mainly attributable to the social benefits deriving from their power of symbolic communication towards general or specific audiences (e.g., Berger and Heath, 2007; Chan et al., 2012). According to this perspective, visibility in consumption makes products and brands effective vehicles of identity communication, allowing other individuals to draw desired inferences about consumer values, lifestyles, and personalities or to avoid unwanted ones. Whereas the more established theories of conspicuous consumption suggest that louder signs are more effective in the identity signaling process (Wernerfelt, 1990), more recent studies have supported the efficacy of subtler signs and the rise of non-conspicuous consumption (Eckhardt et al., 2015).

Previous studies have helped explaining consumer preferences for different types of brand signs by focusing primarily on luxury brands and high-end products. Berger and Ward (2010) showed that individuals with a greater cultural capital in a particular consumer domain (e.g., fashion) tend to prefer subtle logos. According to Han et al. (2010), consumer preferences for luxury

products with loud *vs.* subtle signs are determined by their level of well-being and the need to improve their social status.

Extending previous studies to mass brands and commonly used products, which can also be important vehicles for communicating identity (Roach, 2015), this research aims to analyze the effects of the presence (*vs.* absence) of dissociative desire towards a group which one does not belong to (out-group) on consumer preferences for brands that are relevant to a group to which one belongs (in-group). The presence of dissociative desire towards an out-group is defined as the desire of consumers to distinguish themselves from a dissociative group to which they do not belong and do not wish to belong. The absence of dissociative desire manifests itself towards an out-group to which consumers do not belong, but from which they do not want to distinguish themselves (White and Dahl, 2007). Assuming that membership in the in-group determines association goals towards group members, as demonstrated by previous studies (e.g., Escalas and Bettman, 2003 and 2005), this research proposes that the presence of dissociative desire towards an out-group generates more favorable consumer responses for products with more evident logos. In this case, consumers aim to project an image that is strongly distinct from the dissociative out-group to avoid unwanted inferences that could threaten their social identity. By using loud signs of brands relevant to their in-group, consumers manifest strong self-brand connections with these logos and, therefore, a greater desire to dissociate themselves from the out-group. Instead, the absence of dissociative desire generates more favorable consumer responses for products with less prominent logos. Strong self-brand connections with such logos do not communicate dissociation towards the out-group, a goal that is not relevant for these consumers. Formally:

H1: The presence (*vs.* absence) of dissociative desire towards an out-group generates more favorable consumer responses for louder logos (compared to subtler logos) of brands relevant for the in-group.

The effect of the presence (*vs.* absence) of dissociative desire on preferences for products with loud (*vs.* subtle) signs can be explained considering *brand self-verification* processes. According to the conceptualization proposed in the self-concept literature (Epstein, 1980), self-verification indicates an individual's tendency to confirm self-assessments and to preserve his identity. Individuals tend to adopt behaviors that are consistent with their current conceptions of themselves and to avoid situations that could threaten such identities. Self-verification plays an important role in group interactions (Swann and Read, 1981). Individuals use their social relationships as an opportunity for self-verification and are committed to ensure that their group experiences confirm their conceptions of themselves, showing signs that are consistent with their own identities. Therefore, the goal of confirming consumer identity in interactions with the reference social groups can guide preferences for products with different levels of brand prominence. In this context, the concept of *brand self-verification* can be defined as the ability of a brand to promote self-verification.

In presence of dissociative desire towards an out-group, consumers are keener to demonstrate their social identity to their in-group members, thus enhancing brand self-verification motives. Showing strong connections between the self and the brand used by the in-group becomes particularly relevant as consumption choices are then capable to communicate not only association with the in-group, but also dissociation from the out-group (Berger and Heath, 2007). In turn, the increased relevance of brand self-verification leads to choose louder logos of a relevant brand for the in-group. In absence of dissociative desire, however, the brand has only the role of demonstrating association with the in-group; therefore, the *brand self-verification* does not increase due to the additional desire to show distance from the out-group. These considerations lead to hypothesize that the presence (*vs.* absence) of dissociative desire

increases the brand's ability to lead to the verification of the self, which, consequently, increases the preference for more evident logos (compared to subtle logos). Formally:

H2: The effect of presence (*vs.* absence) of dissociative desire towards an out-group on preference for louder *vs.* subtler logos of brands relevant for the in-group is mediated by the brand self-verification.

Study 1

To test H1, we conducted a 2 (dissociative desire: present *vs.* absent, *between-subjects*) × 4 (product category: sweatshirts *vs.* hats *vs.* wallets *vs.* belts, *within-subjects*) mixed design experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two dissociative desire conditions and evaluated the four products.

Procedure. One hundred and twenty university students voluntarily completed the study. Initially, participants were asked to empathize with a student of an American college, which featured two student associations, Alpha and Beta. While Alpha represented an in-group, Beta was described as an association from which it was important *vs.* it was not important to dissociate. Subsequently, a fictional brand, *Yesdin*, was presented and described as very fashionable among the members of the Alpha association. Then, participants indicated their preference between five alternative versions of the four products, which progressively varied upon the prominence of the Yesdin logo, so as to form a 5-point scale (1 = *subtler logo*; 5 = *more evident logo*). In detail, the first version contained a small logo, positioned off-center (i.e., bottom left) and with color tones similar to those of the product. In the second version, the logo had the same size and position as the first version, but with the more evident and distinctive colors of the Yesdin brand. In the third version, the logo was positioned in the center of the product with the same size as the previous ones. In the fourth version, the logo was larger and, finally, in the fifth version it also contained the name of the Yesdin brand, positioned at the center of the product. Figure 1 reports the five options for the sweatshirt category.

Figure 1. The five alternative versions of the sweatshirt.

Participants chose their favorite version for each of the four products, presented in random order. After the choice task, the importance of dissociating from the members of the Beta association was measured (1 = *not at all important*; 7 = *very important*), as a manipulation check.

Results. The manipulation of the dissociative desire was effective. The application of a *t*-test showed that participants in the dissociative desire condition wished to dissociate more from Beta members than participants in the absent dissociative desire condition ($\Delta M = 3.602$, $t(118) = 12.440$, $p < 0.001$). A repeated measures ANOVA conducted on the preferred level of brand prominence confirmed the significant effect of dissociative desire ($F(1,118) = 11.414$, $p = 0.001$). The direct effect of product category was also significant ($F(3,354) = 15.671$, $p < 0.001$), but, more important, the interaction between dissociative desire and product category was not significant ($F(3,354) = 0.151$, $p = 929$). Planned comparisons showed that, for all the products,

the effect of dissociative desire was significant (sweatshirts: $\Delta M = 0.557$, $F(1,118) = 4.426$, $p = 0.038$; hats: $\Delta M = 0.406$, $F(1,118) = 3.057$, $p = 0.083$; wallets: $\Delta M = 0.531$, $F(1,118) = 7.743$, $p = 0.006$; belts: $\Delta M = 0.563$, $F(1,118) = 8.076$, $p = 0.005$). These results show that, in the presence of dissociative desire towards an out-group, consumers prefer more evident logos, providing support to H1.

Study 2
This study was aimed to test H2 and to provide further support to H1. One hundred and forty-seven university students completed the study in exchange for partial course credit. The procedure was similar to that of Study 1, but for the inclusion of the measurement of the *brand self-verification* scale, which identifies the brand's ability to promote self-verification. After choosing the preferred alternative for the four product categories (sweatshirts, hats, wallets, belts), participants completed a three-item *brand self-verification* scale (that we created based on the construct definition, 7-point Likert items, 1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*): "*Using the Yesdin brand, I could communicate my social identity*"; "*Using the Yesdin brand, my group identity would be clear*"; "*Using the Yesdin brand, I would express my collective identity*". A satisfactory Cronbach's Alpha value emerged from the reliability analysis of the scale ($\alpha = .753$) and the average of the three items was used in the subsequent analyses ($M = 4.850$; $SD = 1.348$).
Results. The application of a *t*-test showed that the manipulation of the dissociative desire was effective ($\Delta M = 3.362$, $t(145) = 14.527$, $p < 0.001$). The application of a repeated measures ANOVA provided further support to H1, showing significant direct effects of dissociative desire ($F(1,145) = 21.542$, $p < 0.001$) and product category ($F(3,435) = 14.708$, $p < 0.001$), and a non-significant interaction between dissociative desire and product category ($F(3,435) = 1.596$, $p = 0.190$). Planned comparisons showed that, for all the products, the effect of dissociative desire was significant (sweatshirts: $\Delta M = 0.952$, $F(1,145) = 14.148$, $p < 0.001$; hats: $\Delta M = 0.561$, $F(1,145) = 7.250$, $p = 0.008$; wallets: $\Delta M = 0.811$, $F(1,145) = 12.584$, $p = 0.001$; belts: $\Delta M = 1.036$, $F(1,145) = 20.488$, $p < 0.001$).
To test H2, which predicts the mediation effect of *brand self-verification* in the relationship between the presence (*vs*. absence) of dissociative desire and the preference for louder *vs*. subtler logos, we conducted a series of mediation tests (Hayes, 2018). While the independent variable (dissociative desire) and the mediator (*brand self-verification*) operate at the *between-subjects* level, the dependent variable is at the *within-subjects* level, since the same participant indicated the preferred version for all the products used in the study. To conduct a first global mediation analysis, which took into account all the products at the same time, we calculated the average of the choices for the four products, which was used as a dependent variable in the following analysis.
A first linear regression showed that dissociative desire is positively associated with preference for product versions with louder signs, indicating the expected significant total effect ($c = 0.840$, $t(148) = 4.641$, $p < 0.001$). A second linear regression of dissociative desire on *brand self-verification* showed a significant and positive effect ($a = 0.542$, $t(148) = 2.476$, $p = 0.014$). A third regression showed that *brand self-verification* is positively associated with the preference for product versions with louder signs ($b = 0.321$, $t(147) = 5.057$, $p < 0.001$), and a reduced direct effect of the dissociative desire on the preference for products with more evident brand logos, controlling for *brand self-verification* ($c' = 0.666$, $t(147) = 3.898$, $p < 0.001$). The results indicate that the indirect effect of dissociative desire → brand self-verification → preference for products with louder signs is positive and statistically different from zero (IE = 0.174, 95% Bootstrap CI [0.041, 0.341]). As a robustness check, we replicated the same analysis for each product category, obtaining similar outcomes. These results allow confirming H2.

Conclusions

This paper contributes to the research on the role of brand in consumer identity signaling, extending previous literature on brand signals, that has mainly focused on determinants of the choices of brand names for luxury products, to mass brands and more popular products. The results of two studies highlight the importance of aspects concerning the social reality of the consumer, such as the desire to dissociate from an out-group, which can influence the choices for louder *vs*. subtler brand logos through *brand self-verification* capability.

The paper offers a series of managerial indications. For brands that are relevant for identity communication, the adoption of products with louder logos is influenced by the presence of dissociative out-groups. Consumers who perceive the goal to dissociate from out-group as highly salient (e.g., young people and adolescents; club members) may be more attracted and prefer products with more evident logos. Furthermore, since in these scenarios the capability of brands to lead to self-verification increases, managers can emphasize the role of brands in communication activities directed to specific social groups.

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