Research Article

Saying no to the glow: When consumers avoid arrogant brands

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Abstract

Arrogant brands have a multifaceted influence on consumers: Although consumers appreciate arrogant brands as reflecting high status and quality, arrogance can also make consumers feel inferior. Consumers whose self is a priori threatened may consequently "say no to the glow" and avoid arrogant brands. Results from six experiments using fictitious or actual arrogant brands show that when consumers experience prior self-threat, they may avoid brands that convey arrogance in favor of a competing, less-arrogant alternative. Such avoidance helps self-threatened consumers restore their self-perceptions and feel better about themselves.
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Introduction

Consumers love brands (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Fournier, 1998; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010), and marketers in turn invest a great deal of effort and resources in making their brands appealing and powerful (de Chernatony, McDonald, & Wallace, 2012). One approach that marketers use to enhance brand image is the communication of *arrogance*—i.e., a display of superiority, often accomplished by disparaging others (Brown, 2012; Johnson et al., 2010; Tiberius & Walker, 1998). Examples include Mercedes's slogan "The best or nothing" (Taylor, 2012) or Arrogant Bastard Ale's "You're not worthy" (BrewDog, 2013).[1]

Why should marketers aspire to cultivate an arrogant image for a brand? The likely reason is that arrogance has positive connotations, such as heightened quality and status (e.g., Shariff

& Tracy, 2009; Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000; Williams & DeSteno, 2009), which appeal to consumers (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010). However, arrogance also has negative connotations, such as hubris and narcissism (e.g., Johnson et al., 2010; Tracy & Robins, 2007), which might pose a threat to consumers' self-perceptions by causing them to feel inferior (Tiberius & Walker, 1998). This dual nature of brand arrogance was confirmed in a pilot study, in which participants reviewed a list of brands associated with arrogant slogans. Participants perceived the associated brands as superior, but perceived themselves as inferior in the presence of those brands (see Table 2 in the Web Appendix A). In light of this duality, and in particular the negative connotations of arrogance, we propose that in some cases brand arrogance may lead consumers to avoid arrogant brands regardless of how high in quality and status they perceive those brands to be.

In the current research, we investigate the extent of, reasons for, and consequences of brand avoidance with respect to arrogant brands compared with less-arrogant competing alternatives. Relying on the dual nature of brand arrogance as a point of departure, we identify prior self-threat as a factor that may encourage consumers to avoid arrogant brands. Specifically, we suggest that consumers who a priori feel weak, powerless, or low

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[1] As illustrated by Arrogant Bastard Ale, brands may even incorporate "arrogant" into their names. Other instances of this practice include the clothing brand Arrogant Cat and the music brand So Arrogant. However, we focus on the communication of arrogance through brand slogans.

in self-esteem may be less able to tolerate the additional psychological threat inherent in arrogance (Markus & Nurius, 1986), and may therefore be more motivated to protect themselves from that threat (Baumeister, 1997; Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). We further suggest that the decision to avoid an arrogant brand may reflect not only passive, protective behavior (i.e., a withdrawal in the face of a psychological threat), but also an active means of restoring self-worth, via an expression of self-determination and free will (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Fitzsimons, 2000; Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004; Inesi, Botti, Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2011; Mogilner, Rudnick, & Iyengar, 2008; Ryan, Koestner, & Deci, 1991). Accordingly, we posit that arrogant brand avoidance may function as a means of rebuilding consumers' self-perceptions.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. We first review literature that illustrates the dual nature of arrogance and research on self-threat, which we build upon in formulating our predictions. Next, we test these predictions in six studies, in which we present participants with a variety of arrogant brands, taken from different categories, and examine their choices and consequent self-perceptions. We conclude by discussing the theoretical and managerial implications of our findings.

The dual nature of arrogance

Arrogance can be thought of as a cluster of behaviors that communicate, whether verbally or non-verbally, a supposed superiority relative to others (Hareli & Weiner, 2000; Johnson et al., 2010). That is, someone who is arrogant not only believes that his or her qualities, abilities, or achievements are exceptional, but uses those beliefs to infer that he or she is superior as a person to other people, and imparts those beliefs in interacting with others (Tiberius & Walker, 1998). Arrogance differs from self-confidence in that arrogance involves a sense of superiority toward others that causes the others to feel inferior, as opposed to merely a sense of the efficacy of one's own skills or abilities (Bearden, Hardesty, & Rose, 2001; Schunk, 1991). In turn, arrogance differs from pride or narcissism in that arrogance exists only in interpersonal contexts, because it necessarily involves external expressions that make others feel inferior (Johnson et al., 2010). In contrast, narcissism and pride are internal states that can exist without reference to others (Emmons, 1984; John & Robins, 1994; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Paulhus, 1998; Wink, 1991). Importantly, the accuracy of the person's beliefs is not at issue; it is how the individual expresses them that conveys arrogance (Tiberius & Walker, 1998).

Arrogance has rarely been given attention as an independent research topic. However, the literature dealing with pride (e.g., McFerran, Aquino, & Tracy, 2014; Shariff & Tracy, 2009; Tiedens et al., 2000; Williams & DeSteno, 2009) and narcissistic behavior (e.g., Kiesler, 1983; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Paulhus, 1998; Robinson, Ode, Palder, & Fetterman, 2012) provides insights on arrogance. This literature suggests that arrogance may have both positive and negative facets. On the positive side, the association between arrogance and pride suggests that arrogance, like pride, may function as a signal of high social status (e.g., McFerran et al., 2014; Shariff & Tracy, 2009; Tiedens et al., 2000) and personal influence (Williams &

DeSteno, 2009). Along these lines, there is evidence that displays of arrogance or pride may make an individual more memorable: Tice, Butler, Muraven, and Stillwell (1995) showed that individuals are more likely to recall interactions with strangers who present themselves in a self-enhancing rather than a modest manner. The negative facet of arrogance becomes prominent when pride is reflected in expressions of dominance, overconfidence, or aggression (Cheng, Tracy, & Henrich, 2010; McFerran et al., 2014; Tracy & Robins, 2007). Moreover, excessive self-enhancement is considered an identification mark of narcissistic individuals (Emmons, 1984; John & Robins, 1994; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Paulhus, 1998; Wink, 1991). Personality taxonomies and inventories often link arrogance with narcissism, and may even employ these terms interchangeably (e.g., Emmons, 1987; Kiesler, 1983; Wiggins, 1979; Wiggins & Broughton, 1991). The present research focuses on arrogance in marketing settings, and examines the effect of arrogant brand communications on consumers' attitudes and behaviors. We rely on the dual nature of arrogance as a point of departure, believing it may provide insight into why some marketers seek to cultivate an arrogant image for their brands, while some consumers avoid arrogant brands. In the context of brand communications, an arrogant image might function as a double-edged sword: Consumers may attribute high quality and high status to arrogant brands, and simultaneously may be put off by them.

Few studies thus far have explored the effects of brand arrogance on consumers. Toncar and Munch (2001) theorized that consumers would react negatively to arrogant ad messages, perceiving them as aggressive and unsubstantiated. In one empirical study, Brown (2012) explored effects of brand arrogance on consumers' attitudes, as moderated by brand ownership. In that study, exposure to arrogant brand communications negatively affected attitudes toward the ad, the brand, and the company among raters who did not own the brand's products, but not among raters who owned the brand's products. Brown's findings suggest that consumers might vary in their responses to brand arrogance. We propose the extent to which consumers are a priori self-threatened as a key factor that determines how susceptible their behavior is to brand arrogance.

Self-threat and consumer choices

Self-threat is an experience that calls into question one's favorable views about him or herself (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). Self-threat may arise following a variety of events that reflect negatively on the self, either with regard to fundamental human needs, such as self-esteem, power and control, or with regard to more specific important aspects of the self, such as intelligence or performance (Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash, 2010; Park & Maner, 2009; Shrum et al., 2014). People are motivated to protect, maintain, or enhance the positivity of the self, and therefore act in ways to counter and minimize self-threat when they experience it (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Crocker & Park, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Lee & Shrum, 2012).