



Brand rivalry and community conflict[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Conflict and rivalry are among the main reasons why human beings form groups and they determine what goes on within and between groups. However, why is threatening competition such a strong driver of brand community? How, where and why does rivalry or oppositional loyalty manifest itself within and between brand communities? A netnographic study addresses these research questions by drawing on social identity, social comparison, self-categorization and brand culture theory among Ford and Holden (GM) communities in Australia. Findings suggest that rivalry between brand communities overtly manifests itself in the form of humor, epithets and ridicule for the most part, but also tips over into malice and outright hostility on occasion. While the underlying rivalry and conflict are continuous (and deep-rooted), certain events and occasions serve to heighten latent tensions between communities. Another unique dimension to this particular brand rivalry is vicarious alignment with one or other community even from non-users of either brand.

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1. Introduction

In sociology, the concept of community leads to significant scholarly debate. Over half a century ago, nearly a hundred discrete definitions of the term were in use (Hillery, 1955). Throughout the past decade social psychologists, consumer researchers and brand culture theorists discuss what constitutes a community (e.g., a brand community), how such communities arise and evolve, and the impact that communities exert on the members of that community (e.g., Muñiz & O'Guinn, 1995; Schroeder & Salzer-Mörling, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity mechanisms contribute to the development of in-group identification and loyalty that lead to greater conformity, at the same time as strengthening differences with the out-group through comparison and contrast. Comparison and contrast in turn set up conflict and rivalry between groups to the extent that oppositional loyalty becomes a powerful force that may reveal a dark side.

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Despite promising early work on oppositional loyalty (Muñiz & Hamer, 2001; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001), questions remain as to where, why and how oppositional loyalty manifests itself. To address this issue, the present study focuses specifically on the rivalry between two competing mainstream brand communities and the emergence of a darker side. This research explores both the interplay and outcomes that arise when strong oppositional loyalty is present between two well-established brand communities. By addressing these questions, academics and brand custodians will better understand why and how brand rivalry manifests itself and how to harness or neutralize this rivalry.

The study also explores the degree to which new communication technologies provide forums for the expression of rivalry, which in turn contributes to an increased understanding of the role played by online communities. The remainder of the manuscript is set out as follows: first, a review of the theoretical foundations of brand community, group conflict, self-categorization, the social identity tradition and oppositional loyalty. Next is the introduction of the context for the study: the automotive brands Ford and Holden (General Motors) in Australia. Then an outline of the research design, method and findings, followed by discussion. Conclusions are drawn, limitations noted and future research directions proposed.

2. Theoretical foundations

Consumer researchers define brand community as “a specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). They conclude that a brand community has a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions and a sense of moral responsibility. Brand communities also have a heightened sense of commitment to the brand and responsibility to support fellow owners, actively recruit new

owners (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001), and forgive brand transgressions (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004).

While a community may form around any brand, communities are more likely to form around brands with a strong image, a rich and lengthy history and threatening competition (Muñiz & Hamer, 2001). Brand communities contribute positively to building brands and encourage brand owners to support communities as a way to create and share meaning (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006). While companies might own brands, studies highlight the importance of understanding the cultural codes of branding in order to delve more deeply into who and how shared meaning of the brand evolves (Schroeder, 2009; Schroeder & Salzer-Mörling, 2006). According to Schroeder (2009), a brand cultural perspective takes into account the history, images, myths, art and theater that influence brand meaning and contribute to brand value in the market place. This view is consistent with the findings of Schau, Muñiz, and Arnold (2009), who conclude that a series of positive practices towards and around a brand contribute to value creation for a firm.

Social psychologists draw on social identity theory to explain how belonging to a group engenders the social “we” rather than the personal “I” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity is the cognitive mechanism underlying group behavior and through identification with the in-group, “us” in contrast to “them” (Haslam et al., 2006).

Social identity involves people articulating their social self not only personally but also socially and then using the social context to identify or categorize themselves, for example, by gender, ethnicity, supporter or detractor (Cornelissen, Haslam, & Balmer, 2007; Haslam, 2004; Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds, & Turner, 1999).

Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) assert that consumers become advocates for the brands with whom they identify but interestingly they find that association and not necessarily ownership or usage of the brand can adequately fulfill self-definitional identity.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) posits that a fundamental component of human nature is to compare one's self with others as an adaptive mechanism for survival. That is, as a way of sizing up one's competitors, one compares one's own abilities and opinions with theirs. Individuals will then group together where they find similarities and will undertake behavior that will reinforce conformity. This suggests that belonging to a brand community will result in the reinforcement of opinions and behaviors that first lead the individual to become a member.

Given the potential role of brand communities in postmodern social structures, the nature of social comparison deserves further scrutiny. Indeed, social comparison is a central feature of human social life. Virtually everyone engages in social comparison, mostly because such comparisons can fulfill fundamental functions such as providing useful information about where one stands in the social world and helping one to feel better about oneself (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). If perceived differences between the in-group and the out-group are not as pronounced, in-group stereotyping will take place to search for and emphasize in-group distinctiveness (van Rijswijk, Haslam, & Ellemers, 2006).

Self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), a recent development of the social identity tradition, proposes a relationship between changes in self-concept and immediate social context. Drawing on SCT, Levine, Prosser, Evans, and Reicher (2005) utilize the rivalry between Manchester United and Liverpool football clubs to explore the role of identity in emergency helping. In one experiment, a supposedly injured stranger wearing an in-group team shirt is more likely to receive help than one wearing a rival or unbranded shirt — giving credence to the phrase, “birds of a feather”.

2.1. Oppositional loyalty and brand rivalry

Admiration for the brand within a brand community is a positive force that contributes to brand loyalty. Similarly, self-identification

with other users of a focal brand and social comparison with rival brand users contributes to building community. However, many of the brand communities studied to date have no direct competitors or no overt rivalry between competing brands (e.g., Apple, Harley-Davidson). The brand community's focus is on sharing information and experiences and fostering a positive sense of allegiance.

Collective pride or group egotism is an essential source of strength in conflict. Groups develop feelings of superiority and honor through a range of means, such as deriding and ridiculing rivals (Vincent, 1911). Oppositional loyalty arises when members of a brand community take an adversarial view of competitors (Muñiz & Hamer, 2001; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Thompson & Sinha, 2008). Not surprisingly oppositional loyalty involves community members defining themselves not only in terms of who they are, but who they are not (Muñiz & Schau, 2005).

In other instances, strong rivalry relates to marked differences in consumers' moralistic identity when they align as participants in competing but related activities. For example, tensions exist between skiers and snowboarders (Edensor & Richards, 2007). Rivalry born of moral conflict appears in discussions on lifestyle choices, for example between Hummer supporters and detractors (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010) or Starbucks drinkers versus independent café coffee drinkers (Thompson & Arsel, 2004).

Oppositional loyalty reduces the likelihood of support for the rival and is further encouragement to develop brand communities, especially in highly competitive markets. In some instances, the strength of social identification with the brand and against the rival brand leads to negative word of mouth, based on intense feelings of rivalry and a sense of outrage. Luedicke et al. (2010) report on the intensity of the flame wars on Hummer and anti-Hummer websites. Hickman and Ward (2007) identify and measure this rivalry as trash talk, an example of the dark side of brand community identification.

Other dark behaviors include inter-group stereotyping and feeling pleasure at the misfortune of rival brands and their users. “Schadenfreude” is a German word to describe the malicious pleasure in the misfortune of others. Social psychologists address the phenomenon (Feather, 1999; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Hareli & Weiner, 2002) but not in the context of brand rivalry.

2.2. The power of context: Holden and Ford in Australia

“The hatred they felt for the opposition was only matched by the loyalty they felt for their own company.” So says Bedwell (2009, p. 12), when discussing the rivalry that existed between executives employed by the two companies in the 1970s. The strength of company loyalty felt by employees to their respective employers is one perspective, easily matched by the loyalty felt by brand owners to their brand. What was the origin of this brand commitment and how did this strength of feeling arise?

Holden grew out of a carriage upholstery company established in Adelaide, Australia in the 1850s and they completed the first custom-built car bodies in 1916. Wartime restrictions on international trade imposed during the First World War ensured the success of Holden as a local manufacturer of car bodies, and by 1924, Holden was manufactured more than 50% of all car bodies produced in Australia (Wright, 1998). However, the Great Depression saw a major decline in the demand for cars, and Holden merged with General Motors in 1931 to survive this economic downturn. General Motors-Holden, henceforth referred to as Holden, invested in new production facilities, and in 1948, the engineers and managing director at Holden achieved their dream of producing the first all-Australian car.

In parallel, the Ford Motor Company imported Model Ts into Australia in 1904 from Canada, another Commonwealth country, in order to avoid import taxes. Nevertheless, Ford did not release an all-Australian car until 1967, almost two decades after the Holden launch.

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