What's in a Name? The Moderating Role of Public Self-Consciousness on the Relation Between Brand Label and Brand Preference

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Products with bargain-brand labels are generally considered to be cheap or inferior in comparison with products with national brand labels. Publicly self-conscious individuals might accept products with national brand labels and reject products with bargain brand labels to enhance their public images. A field experiment was conducted to test this hypothesis. Three hundred twenty adults, frequenting public locations, tasted and rated either national brand or bargain brand peanut butters that had either national brand or bargain brand labels. They also completed the Public Self-Consciousness scale (A. Fenigstein, M. F. Scheier, & A. H. Buss, 1975). Ratings of products with national brand labels were expected to be positively correlated with level of public self-consciousness, whereas ratings of products with bargain brand labels were expected to be negatively correlated with level of public self-consciousness. The author's results confirmed both predictions.

A name is simply a label that is used to identify something. The label originated from the necessity of identifying the contents of an opaque container. Today nearly everything in the world is labeled—products, streets, houses, motor vehicles, years, days, hours, people, and even hurricanes. Manufacturers use brands or marks on labels to help consumers distinguish between products. Generally, there are several brands of the same product, and the consumer must choose among the brands. Past research has shown that consumers do not choose brands randomly; consumers tend to be loyal to certain brands (e.g., Cunningham, 1956). Brand names like Coca-Cola, Ivory, Kodak, Lipton, Quaker, and Steinway have been around for about 100 years. With familiarity and repetition, a brand name can become an incantation.

Products are branded with either a national label or a private label (Fitzell, 1982). National brand products are owned by manufacturers and are sold publicly to the general trade. Private label products are owned by retailers, wholesalers, or distributors and are sold privately in their own stores. Occasionally, private label products are also sold, licensed, or exported to retailers in noncompetitive markets. Private label products are sometimes called bargain brands and are usually sold for less money than the national brands. Some examples of private labels are Safeway supermarket Scotch Buy products, Kroger supermarket Price Cutter products, and Wal-Mart discount store Sam's Choice products. In 1977, a new category of private label, the generics, was introduced. Generic products often use plain black-and-white labels and are called no-name brands. Generic products ordinarily have lower quality and price levels than the national label and private label brands, but they still offer customers value in terms of nutrition and acceptable quality.

What's in a name? Does the name on the product label make a difference? To answer this question one needs to know more about the person buying a product. Unfortunately, previous research has found little relation between personality variables and brand preferences. Kassel (1971) proposed three reasons that researchers have not found such a relation between personality and consumer behavior. First, the personality scales used in past research have low reliability and validity. Second, scales that were originally developed to measure gross personality characteristics (e.g., emotionality or activity) have been used to predict specific consumer behaviors (e.g., the brand of toothpaste chosen). Third, most researchers have used a shotgun approach and have not offered specific hypotheses or theoretical justification. In the present study I attempt to overcome these criticisms.

Over 100 years ago, William James (1890) discussed the consciousness of the self. James suggested that the empirical self, or the self that is known to the person, can be divided into three constituents: the material self, the social self, and the spiritual self. The material self consists of all the material possessions that form the basis of one's identity, including one's body, clothes, immediate family, home, and personal property. The social self consists of the recognition and attention one receives from others. James (1890) suggested that a person "has as many social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups" (p. 294). The spiritual self...
consists of a person's inner or subjective being. James (1890) described the spiritual self as "the entire stream of our personal consciousness" (p. 296). Contemporary researchers have paid the most attention to the social and spiritual constituents of the empirical self. The apppellations for these two components of the self, however, have changed: The social self is now called the public self, and the spiritual self is called the private self (Fenigstein, 1987; Lamphere & Leary, 1990).

The self, therefore, has different aspects that can become the focus of attention. Some people, when self-aware, tend to focus attention on the private aspects of self, such as their inner thoughts, feelings, desires, goals, and intentions. Other people tend to focus attention on the part of the self that others can observe and evaluate. Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975) developed the Self-Consciousness Scale to measure both types of tendencies. They called the former tendency private self-consciousness and the latter tendency public self-consciousness. Sample items from the Private Self-Consciousness scale include "I'm always trying to figure myself out" and "I'm generally attentive to my inner feelings." Sample items from the Public Self-Consciousness scale include "I usually worry about making a good impression" and "I'm concerned about what other people think of me." Private and public self-consciousness are not two ends of a single dimension but are two separate dimensions that correlate positively, albeit modestly (Scheier & Carver, 1981). Considerable evidence for the reliability and validity of the Private and Public Self-Consciousness scales has been accumulated (see Buss, 1980; Carver & Scheier, 1981; Scheier & Carver, 1981).

Publicly self-conscious persons are especially concerned about the impression they make on others. People who are high rather than low in public self-consciousness are more concerned about physical appearances and fashions (e.g., Miller & Cox, 1982; Ryckman et al., 1991; Solomon & Shopler, 1982); are more likely to use self-presentation strategies to gain approval from others (e.g., Doherty & Schlenker, 1991; Shepperd & Arkin, 1989); are more compliant with normative standards in social contexts (e.g., Froming & Carver, 1981); are more likely to distance themselves from negative reference groups (Carver & Humphries, 1981); and are more sensitive to interpersonal rejection (Fenigstein, 1979).

However, researchers have neglected to assess the role of public self-consciousness on consumer behavior. Products are often purchased and consumed in public. Products are assumed to have images determined not only by their physical characteristics but also by such factors as packaging, advertising, and price (Srigy, 1982). The label is perhaps the most conspicuous characteristic of a product. The public generally considers products with bargain brand labels to be cheap or inferior in comparison with products with national brand labels (Fitzell, 1982). In other words, national brand products have more favorable public images than do bargain brand products. Image is very important to publicity self-conscious individuals. Accordingly, in an attempt to improve their public images, publicly self-conscious people should accept national brand products and reject bargain brand products. I conducted a field experiment to test this hypothesis. Subjects, either alone or with others, were asked to participate in a taste-test study. Subjects tasted and rated either national brand or bargain brand peanut butters that had either national brand or bargain brand labels. Subjects also completed the Public Self-Consciousness scale. I predicted there would be a significant Public Self-Consciousness (continuous) X Label (national brand vs. bargain brand) X Audience (present vs. absent) interaction. I expected ratings of products with national brand labels to be positively correlated with level of public self-consciousness, whereas I expected ratings of products with bargain brand labels to be negatively correlated with level of public self-consciousness. The interaction between public self-consciousness and product label was expected to be stronger when an audience was present than when an audience was absent.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 160 college students (80 men and 80 women) and 160 other adults (80 men and 80 women) frequenting public locations (e.g., Iowa State University memorial union or the shopping malls). Two populations of subjects were sampled to increase the generalizability of the results.

Design

The design of the study was factorial, with variables of product (national brand vs. bargain brand), label (national brand vs. bargain brand), subject population (college student vs. other adult), and gender (male vs. female). All factors were between subjects. Public self-consciousness was treated as a continuous variable in the analyses.

Materials

Smucker's Natural chunky peanut butter was used for the national brand conditions; it received the highest rating among the 37 creamy and chunky peanut butters tested by Consumer Reports ("The Nutti-est," 1990). Billy Boy chunky peanut butter was used for the bargain brand conditions.

Procedure

Subjects were approached by a female experimenter and were asked if they would be willing to participate in a taste-test study. After obtaining written informed consent, the experimenter recorded the values for the nonmanipulated variables (audience, subject population, and gender) and assigned subjects to conditions using a random number table. The only restriction on the randomization procedure was that an equal number of subjects were required in each cell. Labels were switched when necessary to form four conditions: national brand peanut butter with national brand label, national brand peanut butter with bargain brand label, bargain brand peanut butter with national brand label, and bargain brand peanut butter with bargain brand label. Codes were used on the bottoms of the jars to keep the experimenter blind to the actual contents of the jars. After tasting the peanut butter, subjects were asked to rate the overall quality of the peanut butter on an 11-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 0 = unacceptable to 10 = excellent), to indicate whether they would buy the peanut butter (yes or no), and to state the amount of money they would be willing to pay for the peanut butter. As a comparison for the last measure, subjects were given the average cost for a jar of peanut butter the same size. Subjects also completed the
Public Self-Consciousness scale. Half of the subjects completed the taste-test questions first and the personality scale second, whereas the other half completed the personality scale first and the taste-test questions second. In this way, the personality and taste-test questionnaires were counterbalanced for order of presentation. In the audience-absent condition, the subject was frequenting the public location alone, the experimenter left the area while the subject completed the questionnaires, and the subject placed the questionnaires in an envelope after completing them. In the audience-present condition, the subject was frequenting the public location with at least one other person, the experimenter was present while the subject completed the questionnaires, and the questionnaires were not placed in an envelope after they were completed. After subjects completed the personality and taste-test questionnaires, they were debriefed and dismissed.

**Results**

**Dependent Variables**

The three dependent variables that were measured were highly correlated. The correlation between overall quality of product and willingness to buy product was .80, the correlation between overall quality of product and price willing to pay for product was .76, and the correlation between willingness to buy product and price willing to pay for product was .73 (all ps < .05). To simplify analyses, the three dependent variables were standardized and summed to create a variable that could be called **peanut butter preference**. I used this summed variable as the dependent measure in the study.

**Manipulation Checks**

**Order of presentation.** An analysis of variance revealed no significant effects on brand preferences for the order of presentation of the personality and taste-test questionnaires, so I combined the data for the two orders in subsequent analyses.

**Labels.** I expected ratings for peanut butters with national brand labels to be higher than ratings for peanut butters with bargain brand labels, regardless of the actual product tasted. As predicted, the brand label had a significant effect on the ratings, \( t(317) = 2.32, p < .05 \). The standardized mean difference for this effect was \( d = 0.26 \) (see Cohen, 1988). Subjects thought the peanut butter tasted better if it came from a jar with a national brand label (\( M = 0.36, SD = 2.73 \)) than if it came from a jar with a bargain brand label (\( M = -0.35, SD = 2.73 \)).

**Products.** On the basis of the Consumer Reports results ("The Nuttiest," 1990), I expected ratings for the national brand peanut butter to be higher than ratings for the bargain brand peanut butter, regardless of the label on the jar. Although it was in the predicted direction, the effect of the actual product on the ratings was not statistically significant, \( t(317) = 0.99, ns, d = 0.11 \). Subjects thought that the national brand peanut butter tasted only slightly better than did the bargain brand peanut butter (\( M_{\text{National}} = 0.15 \) and \( M_{\text{Bargain}} = 0.15 \) and \( SDs = 2.73 \) and 2.76, for the national brand and bargain brand peanut butters, respectively).

**Effects of Predictor Variables on Brand Preference**

I used regression analysis to test the effects of the predictor variables on brand preferences. In regression analysis, most researchers now advocate centering the predictor variables when testing for interaction effects (e.g., Aiken & West, 1991; Cronbach, 1987; Jaccard, Turrisi, & Wan, 1990; Kenny, 1985). I used this transformation, which reduces the correlation between the product term and the component parts of the term, in the present analysis. Initially, I included all predictor variables in the model. I also included two- and three-way interactions between the manipulated variables (i.e., product and label) and the measured variables (i.e., audience, gender, subject population, and public self-consciousness). Partial sums of squares were used to sequentially eliminate from the model those terms making nonsignificant unique contributions at the .05 level. One method of detecting multicollinearity, or correlation among the predictor variables, is by means of variance inflation factors (VIF; e.g., Neter, Wasserman, & Kutner, 1990). A maximum VIF value in excess of 10 is often taken as an indication that multicollinearity may be unduly influencing the least squares estimates.

The reduced regression model contained a significant label main effect, \( t(316) = 2.37, p < .05 \), and a significant Label \( \times \) Public Self-Consciousness interaction, \( t(316) = 4.05, p < .05 \). The label explained 2% of the variation in peanut butter preference. The joint effects of label and public self-consciousness explained an additional 5% of the variation in peanut butter preference. The maximum VIF for the model was 1.00; thus, the model terms were not highly correlated. As I noted previously, ratings were higher for the national-brand-label conditions than for the bargain-brand-label conditions. Level of public self-consciousness, however, moderated the label effect. There was a significant positive relation between public self-consciousness and preference scores if the peanut butter came from a jar with a national brand label (\( r = .21, df = 157, n = 159, p < .05 \)). In contrast, there was a significant negative relation between public self-consciousness and preference scores if the peanut butter came from a jar with a bargain brand label (\( r = -0.24, df = 158, n = 160, p < .05 \)). This interaction is depicted in Figure 1.

Although the Label \( \times \) Public Self-Consciousness \( \times \) Audience interaction was not statistically significant, it was in the predicted direction, \( t(315) = 1.28, ns \). The interaction between brand label and public self-consciousness was stronger in the audience-present condition, \( t(158) = 3.89, p < .05 \), than in the audience-absent condition, \( t(157) = 1.77, p < .10 \).

**Discussion**

What's in a name? A lot. The results of this study showed that individuals preferred peanut butters with national brand labels to peanut butters with bargain brand labels, regardless of the actual products they tasted. Level of public self-consciousness

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1 The public self-consciousness means obtained by Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975) for college men and women were 18.9 (\( SD = 4.0 \)) and 19.3 (\( SD = 4.0 \)), respectively. In the present sample, the corresponding values for college men and women were 16.9 (\( SD = 6.2 \), range = 28.0-2.0 and 19.1 (\( SD = 5.7 \), range = 28.0-4.0), respectively. Means for adult men and women from the general population were 17.0 (\( SD = 5.5 \), range = 28.0-4.0) and 18.8 (\( SD = 5.9 \), range = 28.0-3.0), respectively. The alpha coefficients for college men, college women, adult men, adult women, and the entire sample were .90, .89, .89, .90, and .90, respectively.
moderated the effects of brand label on brand preference. There was a significant positive linear relation between level of public self-consciousness and ratings of peanut butters with national brand labels. In contrast, there was a significant negative linear relation between level of public self-consciousness and ratings of peanut butters with bargain brand labels. These results are consistent with a priori predictions and with self-consciousness theory (Buss, 1980).

The strength of the Label × Public Self-Consciousness × Audience interaction effect may have been reduced by several factors. Recall that the data were collected in public places. Thus, even in the conditions without an audience present, subjects were never really alone. Perhaps the presence of other people in the area motivated subjects to try to make a good impression. In addition, subjects may have tried to impress the experimenter, who would later see their ratings. Another possibility is that an internalized audience is always present for those who are publicly self-conscious. According to self-consciousness theory, the actual presence of an audience is not necessary to induce public self-awareness. Public self-awareness can also be induced by imagining what would happen in the presence of others (Buss, 1980). It is possible that subjects who were alone were imagining how others (family or friends, etc.) would react to them using certain products.

Recall that Kassarjian (1971) criticized studies of personality and consumer behavior on three grounds. First, the personality scales used in previous studies were unreliable and invalid. Second, broad-covereage personality scales had been used to predict specific consumer behaviors. Third, the researchers had not specified how or why personality variables should be related to consumer behaviors. In the present study, I attempted to overcome these criticisms: The Public Self-Consciousness scale has been shown to be both reliable and valid (see Buss, 1980; Carver & Scheier, 1981; Scheier & Carver, 1981). The Public Self-Consciousness scale is not a broad-covereage personality scale; it was developed to measure the tendency to focus on those aspects of the self that others can observe and evaluate. Consequently, public self-consciousness should be related to behaviors that can be used to present favorable images to others. One such behavior is the endorsement of national brand products over bargain brand products. Finally, I have made a priori predictions regarding how and why public self-consciousness should moderate the effects of product labels on judgments of product preference.

Perhaps as a result of overcoming the criticisms noted by Kassarjian (1971), the effect sizes obtained in the present study were by no means trivial (see Cohen, 1988). Furthermore, the results appear to generalize across different populations of subjects. It is possible that the effects observed in the present study would be even stronger for other products. For example, publicly self-conscious people might be even more concerned about the brand of jeans or shoes they wear than they are about the brand of peanut butter they buy.

According to Tucker (1967), "there has long been an implicit concept that consumers can be defined in terms of either the products they acquire or use or in terms of the meanings products have for them or their attitudes toward products" (p. 139). Publicly self-conscious people appear to be well aware of this implicit concept. The results from this study suggest that labels have significant meaning for the publicly self-conscious consumer.

References


Received October 15, 1992
Revision received February 23, 1993
Accepted February 23, 1993

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