

# DRAWN TO THE GROUP— THE IMPACT OF PRODUCT CATEGORY ON BRAND FOLLOWING

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## ABSTRACT

*As the concept of a brand has gone far beyond a simple distinguishable name for a product, it has begun to unite individuals on a deeper level. From an initial understanding of the evolution of brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) the next step in branding strategy may be taken, brand following. We define brand following as an individual's perceived sense of association to a group of persons, with an identifiable brand in common that fosters a strong bond to the group and in turn the brand. This research explores the concept of brand communities and looks to make this transition to a brand following. We also explore the impact that product category has on brand following. Our preliminary findings indicate that product category has an impact on a consumer's brand following. These findings are of interest to practitioners as well as academicians that study branding strategies.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of a brand has gone beyond a simple distinguishable name for a product as consumers look to gain more than fulfillment of needs or wants. A brand has become a mentality or way of life for its consumer following. It has become an extension of an individual, a reflection of them as a person. A brand has come to unite people who may share nothing in common besides their use of the same brand. From this evolution of a brand, arose Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) notion of a brand community.

A great deal of past research has been based off Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) brand community (such as McAlexander et al 2002) but today brand communities may be taken a step further. Well-established brand communities may go as far as exhibiting a cult-like behavior as these brand communities foster a strong bond between individuals associated with the same brand. Just as a brand serves as the focal point for its brand community followers (Muniz, Jr. and O'Guinn 2001), an idea or belief serves as the focal point for its cult followers. Individuals may form a strong bond between one another based on the ideas or beliefs of a cult. Individuals may revolve their lives and shape who they are around a single cult, becoming loyal followers bound to the group, just as some consumers may do so in a brand community. This cult-like mentality, created by a strong brand, may be adapted to the way consumers behave within this next step in brand community—*brand following*.

There has been a notion of cult brands (Munro 2006, p. 22) before but nothing empirically significant. Munro (2006, p. 22) argues that cult brands are something that require a little searching, do not have a marketing plan and are almost like a fad. This does not make sense from a sound marketing perspective. Bergami and Bagozzi (2000, p. 562) examine identity as a prestige issue “the perception a member of the organization has that other people, whose opinions are valued, believe that the organization is well-regarded (e.g. respected, admired, prestigious, well-known).” Along this reasoning towards a group, identity with a brand should be something that is well known and well admired. Therefore, the term cult brands should be disregarded for the purpose of this research and not confused with brand following.

The purpose of this research is to explore how a brand community transitions into a brand following to determine empirically if the notion of branding strategies leading to a cult-like following holds any validity. First, based on previous research, we describe the transition into brand following from brand communities and the relationship within their consumer following. From here, we delve deeper into the group relationships formed by individuals around a brand and the perceived sense of identity associated with this group, stepping away from this

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notion of brand community and transitioning into the notion of brand following. Finally, we examine the impact of product category on brand following. The results of our finding are of interest to practitioners as well as academicians that study branding strategies.

## **BRAND FOLLOWING**

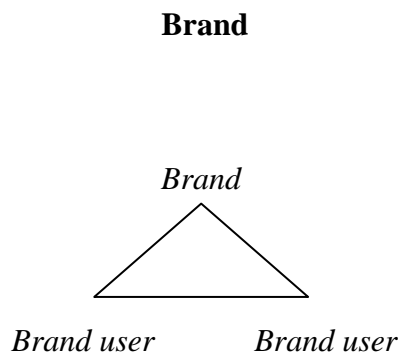
A brand community, such as Jeep Jamborees, is defined by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001, p. 412) as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand.” With this concept of a brand community, Muniz and O’Guinn bring a brand into the context of social interaction. As people begin to come together around a particular brand, they look to gain some meaning or fulfillment beyond just the brand itself. From this interaction between individuals, initiated by a brand, lies the foundation for the possibility of a group whose bond strengthens beyond that of a community. This is where a brand community may attempt to turn into something else.

Muniz and O’ Guinn (2001) identify three markers of a community exhibited by a brand community: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. All three of these markers make sense when forming a strong bond within a group centered on a brand. Shared consciousness or consciousness of kind most effectively looks at how brand communities’ social interaction among users moves a step further. Shared consciousness is, “the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, p. 413). This connection goes beyond just a simple interaction. It may not even be on a regular basis between users but a deeper underlying connection and sense of identity within the group. There is this sense where members feel a connection at some level even if they have never met (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, p. 417). With this comes a strong bond that goes beyond a simple communal sentiment and moves towards something new.

The existence of a brand community, along with its meaningfulness, inheres in the experience of the customer rather than simply the brand (McAlexander et al 2002, p. 39). It is with this move that a transition is made away from the idea that brand communities occur by coincidental interaction between common users, but instead are rooted in this connection and affinity that the customer gains. This experience comes from the group and group identity. From the relationships formed between members of a group centered on a brand, there may be an increase in the personal investment of a customer’s consumption of the product and brand (McAlexander et al 2002, p. 53). A strong affinity for the group becomes the driving force behind an individual’s behavior in all circumstances and environments.

Based on the preceding discussion and a composite of past research we define brand following as *an individual’s perceived sense of identity or association to a group of persons, with an identifiable brand in common that fosters a strong bond to the group and in turn the brand.*

The following figure displays the relationship created by a brand following as a brand is the unifying force between brand users.



Marketers need to understand the characteristics of a brand following to establish a strong consumer following based on conformity to the group. We now proceed to describe the empirical examination of our brand following construct and its relationship with product category.

## **METHODOLOGY**

We collected data from a convenience based random sample of college students for this pilot study. Based on experience, one of the authors is personally able to attest to the great influence certain brands have on the chosen subjects, college students. Additionally, the college student population represents a substantially large consumer market that firms try to appeal to with their products on a daily basis. Finally, college students tend to exhibit some of the key characteristics of brand following and consumer conformity discussed above, providing a naturally rich sample frame. Using a web-based survey allowed for easier access to a large college student population to represent the real-world college student population.

Before administration of the survey, we ran a pretest to evaluate how the survey flowed. Based on pretest data, the survey promised respondents that it took no longer than 7 minutes to complete. Each page of the online survey was limited to only a few questions, in an attempt to alleviate the risk of losing respondents' patience and participation in the survey. We used the Likert-type response scale with anchors of "strongly disagree — strongly agree."

Once the survey went live, we recruited subjects from college social networks, such as those supported by Facebook.com in an attempt to achieve a convenience-based sample. Respondents were contacted through email accounts, both student and personal. Using a web link collector, a uniform email request with a link to the survey was sent to each potential respondent through one of the authors own personal email client. Requests for responses went out in five waves, two of which were to fellow research colleagues who forwarded a link to the survey to any prospective respondents that they identified. Of approximately 3,500 invited subjects 518 responded to the survey rendering a response rate of 14.8%, which compares favorably with past studies using an on-line data collection methodology. The effective sample size used for this study is 410.

Based on previous work, this study employed the familiar Churchill (1979) paradigm for developing a measure of brand following (Carlson 2007, p. 288). A modified version of the Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) two-item measure of cognitive identification measured identification with both the brands and the brand followers in order to understand identification with the brand. We developed six items to form the brand following scale. These items reflect product branding, corporate branding, community affiliation, brand loyalty, and brand satisfaction, all elements that go into developing a strong brand following.

A table of brands separated into categories, apparel, electronics, food/beverage, web, automobiles, and television provided at the beginning of the survey asked respondents to keep one brand in consideration when completing the survey. The use of categories and limiting each respondent to one brand collected data for multiple brands from multiple categories so that this research did not apply to just one brand. This category of brands appeared once at the beginning of the survey and then again, in the middle of the survey in order to remind respondents of what brand they were thinking about to ensure respondents kept one brand in mind the entire time they completed the survey. One item required that respondents indicate the category of the brand they considered while undergoing the survey.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

We checked the reliability and validity of the brand following scale using the inter-item reliability tests. The brand following scale was a first time scale we developed for this study. The overall brand following scale was a six-item scale that performed very well and exhibited good psychometric properties (Cronbach's Alpha 0.881).

We looked to examine whether a consumer brand following changes depending on the product category. In running a one-way ANOVA at the .05 significance level, we were able to test this hypothesis. Results indicate that product category does have an impact on a consumer's brand following ( $F=3.204$   $p: 0.008$ ). Our results show that both electronics and television product categories demonstrate a strong and significant brand following.

The strong impact on brand following of electronics and television product categories may be reflective of our college student sample. College students may relate most to these product categories. Marketers dealing in these product categories should look to foster a strong brand following to target college students.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study contributes to marketing literature by examining theoretical constructs in an empirical setting. The scales developed for this study exhibited good psychometric properties for a pilot study and could certainly be refined and used in future studies. Additionally, the initial results from this study provide encouraging results regarding the theoretical construct of brand following.

The strong ties of a customer with the brand are further strengthened by providing a brand following with a group identity. Fostering a brand following will build stronger existing brands. Strengthening an already established brand, through an understanding of brand following, is less expensive, less of a risk, and far more strategically rewarding than trying to build new brands.

As with any research that relies on a limited student sample, the findings should be viewed with prudence. However, this research was actually enriched by a sample that showed distinct brand following and consumer conformity with the product categories that were researched. Future studies should focus on extending the preliminary findings of this research. Questions such as measuring the following among different product categories with specific brands would be of interest to brand managers. This research focuses on complex brands such as Harley or Saab, but it would be interesting to look at brand followings for convenience products. Additionally, one could seek to extend this study to enhance its generalizability on non-student samples, in international markets, and across cultural typologies.

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