Abstract

Products often imitate the package design of successful other products. Such imitation is meant to activate positive associations, in order to capitalize on the marketing efforts of the imitated brand. In this talk I will present a research program demonstrating (1) when product imitation is effective and (2) the underlying mechanisms causing this. So far, our research has uncovered several factors influencing copycat success, such as degree of similarity, type of similarity, and uncertainty. Here I will present another antecedent for copycat success: categorization. In several experiments, we show that, counter to common beliefs, that the same high similarity copycat is evaluated negatively when positioned in the core category of the imitated brand, but positively when positioned in a related, but different product category. The benefits accrue because consumers appraise the familiarity and similarity between copycat and imitated brand more positively in another, related category than in the core category, independent of the perceived familiarity and similarity itself. This is due to the reduced salience of norms about imitation in the related category. Taken together, this research reveals that out-of-category brand imitation may help copycat brands much more than has so far been considered, which has managerial and public policy implications.