WHAT IS BRAND MIMICRY? A CONCEPTUAL INVESTIGATION IN THE LUXURY BRAND INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Copying, imitation, counterfeiting and knock-offs have been considered to be detrimental to the global economy and to innovation. While Mimicry has been applied to various areas of sciences such as engineering, biomimetics and behavioural sciences or even in areas of Management, it is however rarely applied in Marketing. Based on the Theory of Mimicry, the mimicry phenomenon that animals use in nature is a direct reflection of what is occurring in our marketplace, specifically the luxury brand industry. It can be observed that copying extends beyond direct counterfeiting and there are established and well known luxury brands who are participants of various degrees of brand mimicry – which is the copying of style, design or even product. The presence of mimicry can be applied to facets of the marketplace. It is of interest that the study examines whether mimicry inhibits innovation, or which type of mimicry would be better evaluated. As such, mimicry in Marketing is defined and various levels of mimicry reflected in our marketplace will be categorized according to the biological definitions. Real life marketing examples will serve as the stimulus through an experimental design. A conceptual model is developed which can be applied and test across various types of mimicry. The model also explores how the degree of mimicry would affect perception of luxury and consumer evaluations between the original and the mimic brand. Various theories from biology, sociology and psychology are used to explain the mimicry phenomenon. The implications of the study will contribute conceptually, methodologically and managerially.

KEYWORDS

Theory of mimicry, mimicry, innovation, luxury brands

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The proposed research objectives are as follows:

1. To conceptualize the theory of mimicry and apply the theory into Marketing, more specifically into the area of luxury brands.
2. To examine the theory of mimicry and to draw parallels between the world of the "wild" and the world of "marketing" using real life marketing examples.

3. To investigate the influence of mimicry on perception of luxury and product evaluations.
4. To examine the influence of personality traits (i.e. need for uniqueness and status consumption) on product evaluations towards mimicry.
5. To investigate the mediation and moderation relationships that exists between perception of luxury, consumer personality traits and product evaluations.
6. To develop a presence of mimicry scale to measure the degree of similarity and the perceived product similarity between the "model" and the "mimic" brand.

BACKGROUND

Evolution of human beings, animal kingdom and our surrounding ecosystem is a process dating as far back as 3.8 billion years (Bar-Cohen, 2005). While Darwin has discovered and theorized natural selection as part of evolution, the success of the theory of natural selection lies in the discovery of mimicry (Sheppard, 1959). While mimicry in nature has been widely observed and classified (Pasteur, 1982), there has also been observed parallels and similarities between the "wild" and marketing which to date receive little to no attention (Sherratt, 2008). In other disciplines such as Psychology, Biomimetics, Aerotechnology, it has been observed that mimicry is adopted by drawing inspiration from nature (i.e.invention of the aero plane is an inspiration from the birds).

In the past, literature examining imitation and counterfeiting have often shed a negative light on the phenomenon of "copying". However, Levitt (1966) commented many decades ago that innovations in our modern day are only "imitative innovations". This is due to the fact that the new product introductions do not change consumption patterns (Gatignon and Robertson, 1985). Therefore, this suggests that many "new" products are either only a copy to some degree or a mimic of an existing product with some improvements.

Mimicry defined

Mimicry is broadly defined as a system that involves three living organisms, model, mimic and signal-receiver (dupe) in which the mimic gains in fitness or is advantaged by the signal-receiver perceiving and identifying the mimic as the model (Pasteur, 1972; Vane-Wright, 1980). There have been a number of identified reasons for why organisms mimic, the common three are: 1) predation (i.e. to attract their prey) 2)

protection (i.e. to survive and sustain within the environment) 3) reproduction (i.e. to reproduce and sustain) (Pasteur, 1972; 1982).

Through the adaptation of the definition of mimicry, it is defined that brand mimicry is the act or art of copying or close imitation of a brand (usually a well known brand) in terms of packaging, design and concept, and brand name in order to generalize similar brand origin, company origin and attributes. This is usually with the intention to survive in the market, enter the market and to compete within the industry.

It has been noted that mimicry in the marketplace extends beyond just convenience goods, but is prevalent in the luxury brand and the fashion industry. In actual fact, the industry thrives on mimicry as it allows new entrants into the market place, therefore spurring a healthy competition. Due to the perception that there is monopoly amongst the major corporations, mimic brands could well be the motivation to spur growth and innovation (Hilton et al., 2004). Raustiala and Sprigman (2006) commented that even though copying is rampant, competition, innovation and investment are still un-ending. The response to copying from the major designers is to change designs from season to season so that it is harder for the mimic brands to keep up, and to limit distribution and production (i.e. special edition). Although the IPR struggle is a constant tug-of-war for fashion firms (Hilton et al., 2004), they have accepted design copying as a fact of life. In some cases, design copying is treated as a form of homage rather than piracy. For example, companies such as H&M thrived on copying of fashions that are “fresh” off the catwalk, yet they have opened 1000 stores globally as a sign of their success (Raustiala and Sprigman, 2006).

Classification of mimicry systems

Based on literature from areas of Biology and Ecology and the observed parallels in Marketing, three different types of mimicry are identified. The three types of mimicry are deemed to draw closest parallels and also most commonly observed. Their individual characteristics are delineated below followed by the marketing parallel.

Wicklerian-Eisnerian mimicry

A form of aggressive mimicry: the mimic resemble a harmless model, which allows them to approach and prey on the model itself and or on unsuspecting third parties (Eisner et al., 1978)

The Sabre-tooth Blenny takes advantage of its extremely close resemblance with a cleaner fish to approach the 'clients' (Yellow Tang) and bite off lumps of their flesh (Pasteur, 1982; Wickler, 1968).

Vavilovian mimicry

Weeds that mimicked the first crops of man (dupe), such as rye (mimic) in barley (model) fields. Rye was inevitably harvested and inadvertently submitted to the selection practiced on barley for big seeds, rigid panicles, and other useful traits. (Pasteur, 1982). It is an unintentional selection by human beings due to the close similarity between mimic and model (Barrett, 1983)

Batesian mimicry

The Bee Orchid the female bee through copying the shape of the female bee in order to attract the male bee to "mate" with it. Mimic and model are considered indistinguishable to the bee. The male bee then helps the bee orchid by pollinating the pollen that is attached to its body when it "mated" with the mimic. (Schaefer and Ruxton, 2009; Dafni, 1984; Schiestl, 2005).

RESEARCH GAPS

The presence of mimicry is in every facet of the consumer marketplace. However, no study has examined this phenomenon by incorporating established theories. As such, the following research gaps are identified based in the preceding literature:

1. The theory of mimicry has been widely used in other disciplines but not marketing - observed parallels (Bar-Cohen, 2006; Blume and Easley, 2002; Sherratt, 2008)
2. No model has been developed to explain the mimicry phenomenon in marketing. (Sheratt, 2008)
3. Various forms of mimicry (i.e. imitation, counterfeiting, lookalikes) have been studied independently – but not holistically using a model (Kapferer and Thoenig, 1992; d'Astous and Gargouri, 2001).

4. Convenience goods have been studied widely in terms of mimicry (imitation, counterfeiting, etc), but luxury brands have not received as much attention. (d'Astous and Gargouri, 2001; Zaichkowsky, 1999).
5. Copying and imitation have often been addressed from point of view of original brands, but it has often been overlooked that mimic brands play a huge role in the marketplace. Hence little implications have been drawn for mimic brand owners or managers (Warlop and Alba, 2004; Nia and Zaichkowsky, 1999).
6. Consumer's need for uniqueness has often been studied using convenience goods, but minimal studies have examined the relationship between consumer's need for uniqueness with luxury brands, and none have been conducted in the context of mimicry (counterfeiting, imitation, etc). (Tian et al., 2001; Wilcox et al., 2009)

Key Constructs

The study identified various key constructs and the various relationships will be investigated as depicted in the proposed research model.

- Perception of Luxury (Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Sheth et al., 1981; Cordell et al., 1996) ,
- Product Evaluation (Meyers-Levy and Tybout, 1989; Cohen and Basu, 1987; Sujan, 1985; Lefkoff-Hagius and Mason, 1993; Mukherjee and Hoyer, 2001)
- Consumers' need for Uniqueness (Snyder and Fromkin, 1977; Tian et al., 2001; Knight and Kim, 2007)
- Status Consumption (Veblen, 1899; Packard, 1959; Mason, 1981; Scitovsky, 1992; Eastman et al., 1999)
- Brand Familiarity (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987)

UNDERPINNING THEORIES

Primary Theories

Theory of Mimicry

The superficial resemblance of one organism to another in order to gain fitness or advantage for reasons such as predation, survival, or reproduction, to name a few. There are often three protagonists involved which is 1) the model, 2) the mimic and 3) the signal-receiver (or dupe) (Pasteur, 1972; 1982; Vane-Wright, 1980).

Classical Conditioning: Stimulus Generalization

Refers to the degree to which a response conditioned to a particular stimulus is also evoked by similar stimuli (Till and Priluck, 2000; Zaichkowsky and Simpson, 1996). The theory explains the transferability and generalization of negative reactions or past experiences that share similar physical attributes (Miaoulis and D'Amato, 1978; Rozin et al., 1986). Commonly mimic brands imitate through style and design using colours and shapes, thereby affecting the evaluation of attributes of products (Zaichkowsky and Simpson, 1996). In addition, the use of similar brand names generalize similar brand origin (i.e. Model brand = Diesel; Mimic brand = Diesel Exchange) (Kerby, 1967).

Cue Utilization Theory

The theory postulates that it is not necessary to copy the established product's presentation, merely to ensure that the cue pattern the consumer perceives when glancing along the aisle is similar enough to evoke the imagery created by the mimic (Davies, 1998). Mimic brand often imitate through evaluative (descriptive elements i.e. themes) or descriptive (i.e. colours) attributes. It is more commonly seen that mimic brands copy visual appearances that relates to favourable consumer associations and positive evaluations as a form of association to the original brand (Dodd and Zaichkowsky, 1999).

Categorization Theory

It is explained that beliefs about an object or attitudes can vary based on how the object is categorized (Sujan and Bettman, 1989; Rajagopal and Burnkrant, 2009). For example, a mimic brand with a similar brand name as the original brand name will be categorized to be from the same family of brands (Boush et al., 1987).

Signalling Theory

People often diverge/converge to ensure that others form desired identity inferences about them (Berger and Heath, 2007). Products, attitudes, brands, and preferences (tastes) act as signals of identity (Wernerfelt, 1990). The signaling theory postulates that brands connects and communicates identity to groups who share similar tastes or use similar products.

Anchoring Theory

It is defined as a process by which new knowledge, ideas, and opinions are proven by a social group if they fit into a pre-existing categorization scheme (Penz and Stottinger, 2008). In the case of mimic brands, consumers may anchor the mimic brand with pirated brands or counterfeits, or it may be anchored with an original/parent brand.

Secondary Theories

Spillover Effects

The theory suggests that key properties of a product will spill over to the product in which it is perceived to be associated (Hagtvedt and Patrick, 2008). More commonly, the spillover effects concerns specific content (physical attributes, designs, concepts, brand) of the product or general connotations (what it represents and the symbolic value).

Rarity Principle

Theorizes that the "scarcer" the brand, the more valuable it is based on rarity principle (Dubois and Paternault, 1995; Mason 1981; Phau and Prendergast, 2000). In the luxury brand industry, rarity expresses exclusivity and self image. Furthermore, Giacalone (2006) noted that volume of production and rarity of the product are in conflict.

Theory of Social Representations

It is defined as the influence of a social group on the opinions and values of its members through the collective elaborations of a social object (i.e. subject of common interest) (Moscovici, 1963; 1984). Brands (original/counterfeit) are sought for what they represent in social environment (Cordell et al., 1996; Cova, 1997; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998) and these beliefs and values which are developed within the social environment and are expressed by shared common-sense representations (Stewart and Lacassagne, 2005).

HYPOTHESES

This research will investigate the following hypotheses:

Primary Hypotheses		Wicklerian-Eisnerian A	Vavilovian B	Batesian C
H1	Presence of mimicry → perception of luxury	-	+	+
H2	Perception of luxury → product evaluation	-	+	+
H3	Presence of mimicry → product evaluation	-	+	+
H5	Consumer's need for uniqueness → perception of luxury	+	+	+
H6	Consumer's need for uniqueness → product evaluation	+	+	+
H7	Status consumption → perception of luxury	-	+	+
H8	Status consumption → product evaluation	-	+	+
H9	Brand familiarity → perception of luxury	-	-	+
H10	Brand familiarity → product evaluation	-	-	+

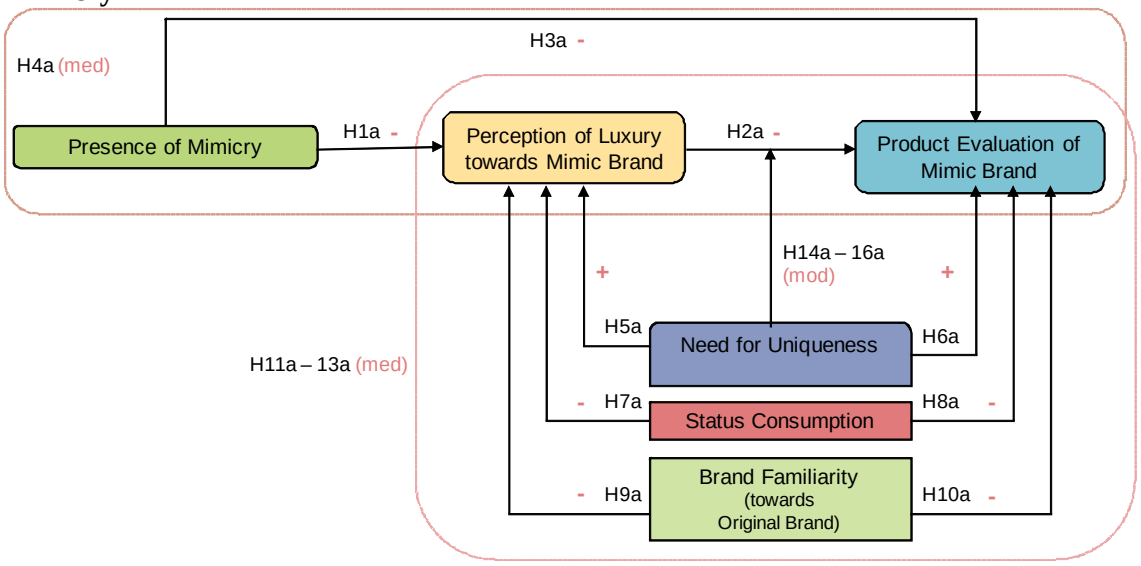
Secondary Hypotheses		
H4	**a, b, c**	Perception of luxury mediates the relationship between presence of mimicry and product evaluation
H11	**a, b, c**	Perception of luxury mediates the relationship between consumer's need for uniqueness and product evaluation
H12	**a, b, c**	Perception of luxury mediates the relationship between status consumption and product evaluation
H13	**a, b, c**	Perception of luxury mediates the relationship between brand familiarity and product evaluation
H14	**a, b, c**	Consumer's need for uniqueness moderates the relationship between perception of luxury and product evaluation
H15	**a, b, c**	Status consumption moderates the relationship between perception of luxury and product evaluation
H16	**a, b, c**	Brand familiarity moderates the relationship between perception of luxury and product evaluation

The above hypotheses lead to the formulation of the Research Model:

Proposed Research Model

One conceptual model will be applied across the three different types of mimicry, namely Wicklerian-Eisnerian mimicry, Vavilovian mimicry, Batesian mimicry. However, due to the nature of the individual type of mimicry in question, the relationships between the variables vary accordingly.

Wicklerian-Eisnerian Mimicry (A) – To be applied across Vavilovian and Batesian Mimicry



SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Conceptually, the study contributes by:

1. Conceptualization of mimicry in Marketing - extension of theory in Marketing
2. Parallels to explain marketing – highlight and contrasting similarities, build and extend theory from other discipline
3. Rigorous theory building using established theory - draw on likes of classical conditioning etc, to explain theory of mimicry

Methodologically, the study contributes by:

Investigating brand mimicry using real life marketing examples, thus improving generalizability and ecological validity of the study.

Collecting data using a mixed mode method and the use of actual consumers improve ecological validity

1. Developing a scale to measure the presence of mimicry.

Managerially, the study contributes by:

More often than not, existing studies in the area of counterfeiting, imitation, lookalike studies have stated implications from the point of view of luxury brand owners, however, little studies have identified implications for the "mimic" brand owners as well. As such this study contributes by providing implications for luxury brand owners, mimic brand owners as well as policy makers in the following aspects:

1. Parallels of nature and marketing – better formulation of strategies and pre-empt through natural selection through successful examples (Lacoste and Crocodile). Replicate natural selection in marketplace.
2. The "fittest" to survive and continuously being innovative (i.e. Ipod and Creative – Natural Selection)
3. Global strategies and first mover advantage (i.e. developing countries).
4. Consumers with different personality traits (i.e. need for uniqueness) - segmentation and market expansion. Mainstream and niche?
5. Outline the potential of collaboration rather than imitation. It outlines potential areas for brand development.
6. Legitimacy of mimicry – formulation of strategies and regulations to safeguard consumers and corporations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

SCOPE OF STUDY

The study will be based on Australian consumers across all states in order to capture a cross section of consumers in order to improve ecological validity (Goldberg, 1995; D'Souza and Rao, 1995).

Sample Selection

Using a cross sectional approach to reach consumers across Australia will be the sample group selected for the study.

Using real life consumers will improve the ecological validity of the study (D'Souza and Rao, 1995). The marketing examples that will be tested for mimicry or each category of mimicry will be real life marketing examples (Table 1). For example, marketing examples that were delineated in Table 1 will be utilized as the stimulus for the study. The original Crocs will be considered as the model, the Kmart "Crocs" as the mimic, and lastly consumers are the signal-receiver (dupe) in the case of the Wicklerian-Eisnerian. The study will be using a experimental approach with a 3 (types of mimicry) x 2 (product category) factorial design. Each group will only be assigned to 1 condition, 1 type of mimicry and 1 type of product category. Furthermore, it is the aim to collect 200 respondents for each cell. The sample size will be approximately 1200 respondents for the main study fulfilling the needs of intended Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) as the main method of data analysis in this study (see Hair et al. 1998; Holmes-Smith et al. 2004).

Data Collection Method

Data will be collected using convenience sampling with the assistance of the collaborating university. Data will be collected using a mixed mode approach, comprising 50% mail survey and 50% mall intercept.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument for part one of the study (scale development) is constructed by following guidelines set out mainly by Churchill (1979), DeVillis (1991), Li, Edwards and Lee (2002), and, Spector (1992). Part two of the study will consist of the scale developed in part one of the study in addition to the instruments discussed in the following section (Scales and Measurements). In conjunction, a section of questions as relating to demographics and background variables will be included.

Scales and Measurements

A total of 5 previously established scales will be used for the study. The table presented below provides the number of items in each scale as well as the reliability from earlier adaptations.

Scale	Source	No. of observed items	α
Presence of Mimicry	To be developed	N/A	N/A
Perception of Luxury	Adapted from Hagtvedt and Patrick (2008)	4 items	.94
Product Evaluation	Adapted from Hagtvedt and Patrick (2008)	4 items	.92
Consumer's Need for Uniqueness	Tian et al. (2001)	31 items	.85
Status Consumption	Eastman et al. (1999)	5 items	.86
Brand Familiarity	Simonin and Ruth (1998)	4 items	.80

Data Analysis Method

Data analysis will make use of a series of techniques including exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, multivariate analysis (such as ANOVA, discriminant analysis, etc) and structural equation modelling (SEM) (AMOS package).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF STUDY

- Only luxury brands are examined, future studies should examine mimicry of convenience goods.
- The study only categorized three types of mimicry, other types of mimicry and parallels to marketing are not examined.
- Australian consumers may have less exposure to certain brands.
- Culture and individualism/collectivism is not examined and could have an influence on consumer evaluations and the effect of mimicry.
- The model that is developed in the study can be applied and validated in other countries.
- The use of fictitious brands in future studies could reveal other findings.
- Future studies can examine other variable such as – COO, brand credibility, price, retailer, and involvement.
- Future studies should test for novelty-seeking as it is dissimilar to consumer innovativeness and the relationship between can be tested.

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