

PRIMING BUSH (VS. OBAMA) INCREASES FAVORABLE EVALUATIONS OF
AMERICAN BRANDS: AN INTERSUBJECTIVE VALUE PERSPECTIVE

BY

LETTY YANYEE KWAN

THESIS

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Advisers:

Professor Ying yi Hong
Professor Chi Yue Chiu

ABSTRACT

Although the effects of iconic culture priming are well documented, it is unclear *how* it works. The intersubjective approach posits that a cultural icon activates intersubjective values (values that are perceived to be widely shared among others) and elevates evaluations of attitude objects that stand for these values. Results from two studies reveal that Americans believe that George Bush and iconic American businesses embody the same intersubjective values (Study 1). Moreover, priming Bush increases Americans' evaluations of iconic American businesses and priming Obama decreases it, despite the fact that Americans generally like Obama more and do not endorse the values Bush and American businesses represent (Study 2).

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INTRODUCTION

Inspired by the dynamic constructivist approach to culture (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000), research using the culture priming paradigm has shown that incidental exposure to icons of a certain culture increases the cognitive and behavioral responses that are normative in the culture, provided that the participants have extensive knowledge of the primed culture (e.g., Fu, Chiu, Morris, & Young, 2007; Sui, Zhu, & Chiu, 2007; Wong & Hong, 2005). For instance, individuals with extensive experiences with both American and Chinese cultures endorse individualist values (values privileged in American culture) more and make more internal attributions (a normative response in American culture) following incidental exposure to American cultural icons (e.g., Lincoln). These individuals also endorse collectivist values (values privileged in Chinese culture) more and make more external attributions (a normative cognitive response in Chinese culture) following incidental exposure to Chinese cultural icons (e.g., Confucius; Hong, Chiu, & Kung, 1997). These effects occur because cultural icons are “magnets of meaning” connecting many diverse elements of cultural knowledge (Betsky, 1997); they are symbols created or selected for their power to evoke in observers a certain frame of mind in a powerful and undifferentiated way (Ortner, 1973).

Although the effects of iconic culture priming are well-documented (see Chiu & Hong, 2007), an unanswered question is *how* they occur. Two competing answers to this question are: (a) a cultural icon activates the personal preferences (e.g., traits, attitudes, values, beliefs) that widely shared in the pertinent culture, which in turn trigger their attendant cognitive and behavioral responses; and (b) a cultural icon activates the preferences that are *widely assumed* to be shared in the pertinent culture, which in turn trigger their associated responses. The first answer reflects the widely accepted assumption that culture affects behavior through internalized cultural preferences; and the second answer reflects an emerging view that culture influences via

shared assumptions about cultural norms (Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010; Wan et al., 2007; Zou et al., 2009).

The preferences that are generally assumed to be highly popular in the culture (*intersubjective preferences*) may not be highly popular in the culture. For instance, most Poles believe that Poles value collectivism more than Americans do, although an average Pole does not value collectivism more than an average American does (Zou et al., 2009). Moreover, many cultural differences in cognition and behaviors are mediated by intersubjective preferences rather than personal preferences (Shteynberg, Gelfand, & Kim, 2009; Wan et al., 2007; Zou et al., 2009). For instance, in the domain of evaluative judgment, recent research reveals that individuals often base their judgment on the assumed preferences of the group rather than personal preferences. In the 2004 U.S. Presidential Election, Americans voted for the candidate who embodied the values that were *assumed* to be the core values (but not the most widely endorsed values) in the voters' political party (Wan, Tam, & Chiu, in press). Thus, intersubjective preferences can sometimes override personal preferences when rendering evaluative judgments.

Therefore, we hypothesize that the effects of iconic culture priming are by the activation of intersubjective preferences: Icons of a culture cue retrieval of intersubjective preferences in the culture, render them cognitively accessible, and trigger their attendant responses. A recent study has linked intersubjective preferences to evaluative judgments of cultural icons. In the U.S., among those who perceive Tom Hanks to be an American icon, liking for him increases after learning that he has performed behaviors that are consistent with intersubjectively important values in America (Wan, Torelli, & Chiu, 2010). However, there is no direct evidence for the mediating role of intersubjective (vs. personal) preferences in iconic culture priming. The present

research aims to fill this gap. In two separate studies, we test whether iconic culture priming affects evaluative judgment via the associations of the icons with intersubjective preferences or personal preferences.

Psychological Reactions to Cultural Icons

We will address this research question by examining the effects of priming George W. Bush and Barack Obama on evaluations of iconic American brands. This research was inspired by three observations. First, our studies were conducted when Obama just started his presidency. At that time, Americans clearly preferred Obama to Bush: Obama had a 68% approval rating, compared with 34% for Bush just before the end of his presidency (Gallup poll, 2009). Second, although Bush and Obama are both American icons, they are perceived to be associated with different values. Obama, the first biracial President of the United States, is perceived to be a symbol of *change* or the *best hope for change*. In contrast, George Bush is perceived to represent the core values of American businesses. For example, David Boaz (2001), Vice President of the Cato Institute, links the American values Bush represents to the iconic brands of America, commenting that people who attack these values are also against the symbolic significance of iconic American brands:

“They hate the culture of markets and liberalism. They hate the Enlightenment and modernity. They hate reason, science, technology, individualism, pluralism, tolerance, progress and freedom. And to be more specific, they hate Wall Street, Hollywood, McDonald's, Starbucks, Microsoft, Ralph Lauren ads, and the casual joy of American freedom.”

Thus, if the effect of iconic culture priming is mediated by the activation of personal preferences, priming Obama (vs. Bush) should increase positive evaluations of

iconic American brands because Americans have a more favorable attitude towards Obama. In contrast, we argue that Bush and American iconic businesses are linked to the same set of intersubjective values. Thus, if the effect of iconic culture priming is mediated by the activation of intersubjective values, priming Bush (vs. Obama) should increase the endorsement of the values that Bush is believed to embody, which are also the values American businesses are believed to represent. Hence, priming Bush (vs. Obama) should increase positive evaluations of iconic American brands. In short, the intersubjective approach would receive the strongest support if (a) the positive attitude Americans personally have towards Obama does not result in increased liking for iconic American businesses, and (b) activating Bush increases evaluations of iconic American businesses even when the participants do not like Bush personally or do not identify with the values Bush stands for.

In Study 1, we verified the assumption that Bush and iconic American businesses are perceived to embody the same intersubjective values. In Study 2, we tested the intersubjective hypothesis using an evaluation priming task. If the intersubjective hypothesis is borne out, it would illuminate the mediating role of intersubjective preferences in iconic culture priming effects. In addition, it would show that the effect of making a cultural or political icon more accessible can be transferred to seemingly unrelated attitude objects (commercial brands) via intersubjective values.

STUDY 1

Method

To verify the assumptions behind our hypotheses (personal and intersubjective values are distinct concepts; Bush and Obama are American icons; Bush and iconic American businesses are linked to the same intersubjective values), we had 126 Caucasian American undergraduates (42.1% male) from a public university in the Midwest rated their personal liking of Bush and Obama on six evaluation items (good-bad, unpleasant-pleasant, foolish-wise, awful-nice, unintelligent-intelligent and dislike-like; $\alpha_{\text{Bush}} = .92$; $\alpha_{\text{Obama}} = .95$), each on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). Next, participants rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) on how much Obama and Bush could represent (a) Americans and (b) America.

This was followed by ratings of perceived iconicity of seven American iconic brands (*American Express, Ford, Apple computer, Walmart, Starbucks, Coke and Nike*; $\alpha = .71$) and seven non-iconic brands in matched consumption domains (*BIC pen, Chrysler, Gateway computer, Heinz Ketchup, Caribou coffee, Coffeemate, and New Balance*; $\alpha = .80$). We selected these brands based on the brand iconicity ratings obtained in previous research (Torelli, Keh, & Chiu, 2009).

Finally, participants responded to the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS; Schwartz, 1992)—a comprehensive survey of seven major clusters of cultural values (conservatism, intellectual autonomy, affective autonomy, hierarchy, egalitarianism, mastery, and harmony), and estimated how much most Americans would endorse each SVS value. Participants were debriefed and awarded course requirement credits at the conclusion of the study.

Results and Discussion

The results are consistent with our assumptions. First, consistent with the Gallup poll results, the participants liked Obama more than they did Bush ($M_{\text{Bush}} = 3.15$; $M_{\text{Obama}} = 4.77$), $t(125) = 8.70$, $p < .001$. Second, both Bush and Obama were seen as icons of Americans ($M_{\text{Bush}} = 4.45$; $M_{\text{Obama}} = 5.00$) and America ($M_{\text{Bush}} = 4.40$; $M_{\text{Obama}} = 5.26$); all mean ratings were significantly above the midpoint (4), $ts > 3.37$, $ps < .001$. Obama received higher iconicity ratings than Bush on both American representativeness, $t(121) = 3.06$, $p = .003$; and America representativeness, $t(120) = 5.02$, $p < .001$. Third, the iconic American brands were indeed perceived to be more iconic than the non-iconic American brands ($M = 4.23$ vs. 3.13), $t(124) = 15.75$, $p < .001$.

Fourth, judging from participants' personal value endorsements, egalitarianism was the most popular value and hierarchy the least popular one among the participants (Table 1). However, participants perceived hierarchy and affective autonomy to be the most popular values among Americans. This result replicated the previous finding regarding the dissociation of personal and intersubjective values (Wan et al., 2007).

Finally, perceived popularity of the two intersubjectively important values (hierarchy and affective autonomy) correlated significantly with perceived liking of Bush among Americans ($r = .22$, $p = .01$) and perceived iconicity of iconic American brands ($r = .18$, $p < .05$), but not with perceived liking of Obama among Americans ($r = .07$, $p = .42$) and perceived iconicity of non-iconic American brands ($r = .01$, $p = .92$). These results confirm our assumption that Bush and iconic American businesses were perceived to share the same set of intersubjectively important American values.

STUDY 2

Having established the validity of our assumptions, we now tested our hypothesis regarding the effect of priming Bush versus Obama on evaluations of iconic (vs. non-iconic) American businesses.

Method

Caucasian undergraduates ($N = 102$) from a large public university in Midwest America participated in this study in exchange for course requirement credits. They performed a computer-administered priming task individually in separate experimental cubicles. In each of the 72 trials during the priming phase of the experiment, participants saw the name of a famous person on the computer display and identified the gender of the person by pressing a designated key on the keyboard as fast as they could. There were six male and six female target persons, and each person was shown six times during the priming phase in a random order. Bush (Obama) was one of the target persons in the Bush (Obama) condition. In the control condition, we did not include Bush or Obama on the stimulus list. After the priming phase, participants were presented with the seven iconic American brands and the seven non-iconic American brands used in Study 1 in a random order. They rated on a 5-point scale how much they liked each brand. Finally, participants rated on a 7-point scale how American each brand was ($\alpha = .77$ for both iconic and non-iconic ones).

Results and Discussion

Iconic brands ($M = 6.21$) were rated as more American than non-iconic ones ($M = 5.58$), $t(101) = 8.16, p < .001$. Iconic brands ($M = 3.49$) also received more favorable evaluations than did non-iconic ones ($M = 3.23$), $t(101) = 4.87, p < .001$.

More important, priming Bush increased the preference for iconic (vs. non-iconic) brands, whereas priming Obama decreased it. To control for individual differences in response bias in brand evaluations and to capture relative preference of iconic over non-iconic brands, we subtracted the mean evaluation of non-iconic brands from that of iconic ones. Priming had a significant effect on this measure, $F(2, 99) = 4.57, p = .01, \eta^2_p = .085$. As shown in Figure 1, relative liking of iconic brands was the highest in the Bush condition ($M = 0.43$), followed by the control condition ($M = 0.27$) and the Obama condition ($M = 0.03$). Contrast analysis revealed that the linear increase from the Obama condition to the control and Bush conditions was highly significant, $t(99) = 3.02, p = .003$, whereas the quadratic contrast was not, $t(99) = 0.38, p = .70$. Furthermore, participants preferred iconic brands more than they did non-iconic ones in the Bush condition, $F(1, 37) = 21.42, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .367$, and the control condition, $F(1, 35) = 11.06, p = .002, \eta^2_p = .240$, but not in the Obama condition, $F(1, 27) = 0.10, p = .76$.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Results from the two studies indicated that iconic culture priming effects are mediated by the intersubjective values associated with the icons. First, although values such as hierarchy may not be the most popular values among Americans, many Americans *believe that* these values are the most popular ones in the U.S. (Study 1). Second, Americans who see Bush to be likable among Americans tend to perceive greater popularity of these values in the U.S. (Study 1). Third, Americans who believe that iconic American businesses embody the same set of values that Bush represents tend to see these businesses as symbols of America (Study 1). Finally, probably because of the common associations of Bush and iconic American brands with these values, reminding Americans of Bush increases liking for iconic (vs. non-iconic) American brands (Study 2).

Although Boaz correctly discerned that the cultural symbolism of politicians is linked to liking of iconic American businesses, our results showed that liking of American businesses is not tied to Americans' personal values. Instead, it is tied to the perceived preferences in American culture (Chiu et al., 2010; Wan et al., 2007): Our participants liked American businesses more following the Bush prime (independent of their personal values and disapproval of Bush) because they overestimated the popularity of certain values (e.g., hierarchy) in the U.S. and perceived a consensus among Americans that both Bush and American businesses represent these values. Likewise, although our participants felt that Obama was more likable than Bush, priming Obama decreased liking for iconic (vs. non-iconic) American brands because Obama was not perceived to represent the values iconic American businesses embody. However, this result should not be taken to imply that Americans see Obama as less representative of America than Bush. Indeed, Study 1 results showed that Obama is regarded as highly representative of

America. Perhaps in the participants' mind, Obama represents a changing America rather than what America is believed to be.

In conclusion, our results underscore the importance of separating the intersubjective reality from the objective reality and locate the source of iconic culture priming to the activation of intersubjective preferences.

FIGURE AND TABLE

Figure 1

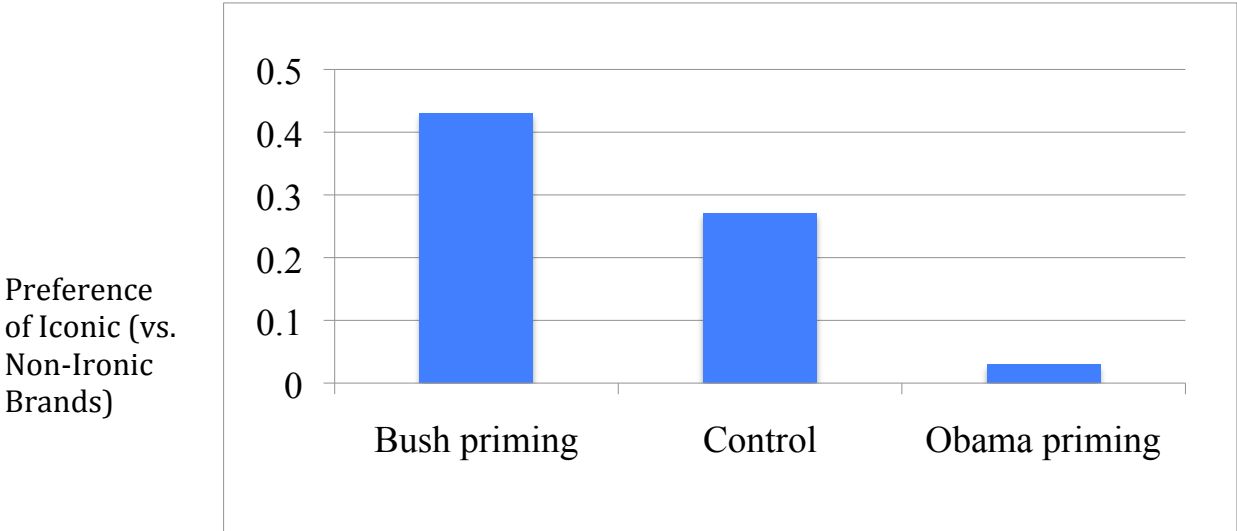


Figure 1. Preference of iconic (vs. non-iconic brands) in the three priming conditions.

Table 1

Self-Endorsements and Perceived Popularity of Seven Clusters of Values

	Hierarchy	Affective autonomy	Master y	Egalitarianism	Conservatis m	Intellectual autonomy	Harmon y
Mean self- endorsem ent [#]	5.43 ^c	6.74 ^a	6.76 ^a	6.95 ^a	6.77 ^a	6.68 ^a	6.01 ^b
Perceived popularity *	6.83 ^a	6.50 ^{ab}	6.22 ^{bc}	6.12 ^c	5.91 ^{cd}	5.74 ^d	4.97 ^e

Note: ^{#/*} Means with different superscripts were significantly different from each other.

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