

Communicating Authority through Symbols: A Case Study on Affecting Consumer Product Value-Perception

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Abstract

The large body of research surrounding the authority principle focuses predominantly on human-based authority figures. There is a gap in the literature regarding the authority base of symbols, so this study extends our understanding of the authority principle to encompass symbol-only authority. This paper considers the success of the Certified Angus Beef® label in projecting authority without association to an authority figure. A qualitative study utilizing the quasi-statistic interview results of over 150 consumer-participants revealed a strong connection to the Certified Angus Beef® label as a predominant purchase point. The authority principle helps us better understand why consumers gravitate to symbols with minimal introspective understanding as to why.

Keywords: Authority Principle, Symbol, Marketing, Applied Communication

1.0 Literature Review

The authority principle refers to the tendency of individuals to adhere to the recommendations or directions of authority figures, or people in positions of power (Cialdini, 2008). Authority figures generally gain status through education, experience, talents, or other means (Jung & Kellaris, 2006). The Milgram study (1974) contextualizes how authority can affect an individual: "...the extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority...the sheer strength of authority figures in the act of controlling our behavior"(Cialdini, 2008 p. 179). Both Cialdini and Milgram find that those who comply with authority figures often do so without consideration of their own personal judgment for a given matter; they default to the judgment of the authority figure because they ostensibly possess a greater understanding of the situation. Milgram also notes that concession to an authority figure can provide genuine advantages for the person being controlled, creating an incentive to obey. There is the constant expectation of good results from following an authority, so we continue to do so with every related action. The existence of authority develops structures that control resources, trade, and expansion that would otherwise be impossible.

To date, the literature regarding the authority principle discusses individual persons or groups of people as the primary sources of authority. Authority figures can garner their influence from various sources and routes, originally noted by French and Raven (1959) with their determination of the different bases on social power. Further examination of these power bases has led to them being challenged, differentiated, and updated over the years, but what remains consistent is that the authoritative figure is always a person with a certain level of credibility of hierarchal positioning. Further research shows the process of categorizing the different strategies deployed by those in authoritative positions based on their source of power: *soft power*, used by those considered experts in their field, and *harsh power*, utilized by those with hierarchy-based legitimate power (Koslowsky et al., 2001; Raven, Schwarzwald, & Koslowsky, 1998). Koslowsky and Schwarzwald find that the soft influences originate from factors such as credibility, and harsh influences derive from preexisting social structures, such as a government, the structure of a business, etc. Even through this analysis, it remains true that primary authority figures consist of exclusively people, along with their messages and ideals that disseminate amongst loyal followers.

Once there was a solid understanding of the authority principle and the ways that those in positions of authority use their influence, research began to uncover the potential implications for ethical and unethical uses of this influence. While Milgram (1974) finds that there are potential advantages for following the orders of authority figures, his studies reveal the potentially harmful consequences of when a person not in a position of authority poses as a legitimate authority figure (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Cialdini (2008) finds that the overuse of heuristics increases our susceptibility to those feigning expertise, leading to deception and exploitation of those targeted by one impersonating an authority figure.

Cialdini (2008) puts a large amount of effort into identifying symbols that can reliably trigger our compliance in the absence of the general substance of authority. He finds that we are just as susceptible to the symbols of authority as to the substance, and it is often the case that compliance professionals lack authentic substance to their message or directive, so they rely on symbols to enhance their message. Cialdini specifically isolates titles, clothes, and trappings as the main symbols that increase the perception of authority for a person. Once a person identifies with one of these symbols, they engage in what Cialdini calls “fixed-action patterns” (pp. 3, 184), which are sequences of behavior that occur in the same fashion and order every time a person responds to a certain trigger feature. A trigger feature is a specific part of an entire phenomenon that allows the person to identify the entire phenomenon. In this instance, the trigger feature is a symbol(s)—titles, clothes, or trappings—that make the person assume a representative to be an authority figure. The fixed-action pattern would then be to respond to the authority figure with unconditional obedience. It is worth noting with Cialdini’s analysis that each symbol either is carried by a supposed authority figure, or can be directly associated with that figure.

Often times, symbols in the forms of brands and logos carry the weight of the authority figure they represent. Brand recognition is the primary way in which marketers transfer authority to a person making a decision; the person recognizes the item, and links it to the original authority figure, along with the authority’s intention. Keller and Davey (2001) describe building brand recognition as the way of ensuring potential customers know the categories in which the brand competes. It is necessary for consumers with a certain level of involvement in the brand being advertised to have their interest sparked (Rath & Mousumi Singha, 2013). That interest is measured by the consumer’s memory, which is often measured by recall and recognition (Gillund & Shiffrin, 1984).

According to Rath and Mousumi Singha (2013), recall is the ability to reproduce previously presented items” and it occurs when long-term memory is searched and a word is independently retrieved. In this retrieval process, words that are strongly associated with preexisting schemata are more easily retrieved than words with a weak association (p. 83).

Wixted and Squire (2004) define recognition as “the ability to identify an item as having been recently encountered” (p. 58). Recall and recognition, in the context of the authority principle, would entail the consumer seeing the brand label, recollecting a set of words and phrases that describe that brand, and then recognizing the connection between those phrases and the direction of an authority figure that the consumer recently encountered. This process is crucial in order to gain market success for corporations that heavily rely on visual advertising. To meet this burden, marketing specialists create advertisements that link authority figures to brands, knowing that consumers will buy their product if endorsed by a perceived authority. One of the predominant examples of symbol/brand recognition today is the Certified Angus Beef® label.

1.2 Certified Angus Beef

Over the past decade, there has been an increased delineation of retail beef products seen in grocery stores and commercial restaurants. The demarcation of one kind of beef over another has shifted consumer sentiment regarding beef choices, overall affecting the composition of the beef industry. In 1978, the Certified Angus Beef® (CAB) program formed within the American Angus Association, offering information and marketing, promoting CAB promoted as the superior beef product (Certified Angus Beef, 2013).

In a time when consumers were far out-purchasing chicken and pork over beef products, the CAB team assisted the American Angus Association with a strong marketing design by marketing their beef as superior in palatability and quality. Within this marketing strategy, the CAB program sells 2.2 million pounds of Angus Beef per day, making it the largest, most sought-after beef product (Schumann, 2012). Even packer-house and independent stock buyers are paying a high premium for black cattle at the market (Schulz et al., 2009).

The CAB program relies heavily on the Black Angus cattle breed name, creating a consumer preference for CAB burgers (i.e. Black Angus Burgers) over traditional fast-food burgers that rose seven percent from 2007-2009 (Horowitz, 2009). According to Macarthur (2007), beef consumers are willing to pay more for quality, even if they do not even understand what makes something reportedly of higher quality. Executive Vice President of Marketing for Hardee's Brad Haley stated that after a 2003 survey of Hardee's consumers, it became clear that many patrons do not know what Angus is, but that it must be related to high quality (Macarthur, 2007). Scott Hume, Editor of burgerbusiness.com, a website dedicated to burger aficionados, stated that most consumers probably do not even know what an Angus is, and that a premium burger is simply any burger for which a restaurant can convince its customers to pay a premium. Hume goes on to say that marketers make the burger sound significant so that ignorant consumers fall in and pay the price (Horowitz, 2009).

Ironically, there are only a handful of qualifications a cow must meet to gain the CAB label and be sold as Black Angus beef. The most enlightening of these qualifications is that a cow must only have 51 percent black hide in order to be considered CAB, meaning a cow does not have to be purebred Black Angus (Certified Angus Beef, 2011). Furthermore, according to Taylor and Field (1999), "primary components of beef palatability are tenderness, flavor, and juiciness" (p. 323). Hereford (another cattle breed) beef also demonstrates high test results in tenderness, flavor, and juiciness (Brinks, Denham, and Schafer, 1992; Brinks, Denham, and Schafer, 1993; Schafer and Green, 1995). One study even shows Angus to be in fourth place regarding meat tenderness, one of the primary palatability factors (Smith 1993). Nonetheless, the CAB symbol charges forward as the leading beef label.

1.3 Rationale

There is a robust body of research regarding the influence of authority figures on consumer reactions. For decades, marketing firms have relied on the power of authoritative influence to increase consumer product consumption. Authoritative compliance is garnered through the use of celebrities or other authoritative figures, such as doctors, by way of endorsement. The literature seems to indicate authority figures are exclusively human, and even if a person makes a choice based on seeing a symbol, the recall and recognition process in the memory still relates that symbol to a person. Consumers associate a product label with the authority and therefore trust that the product is good, beneficial, etc.

However, there appears to be a gap in the literature regarding the use of symbols-only to create an authoritative presence among consumers. It is feasible that symbols can be sources of authority on their own; not requiring the memory to recall and recognize an external human-based authority figure in order to make a decision. Within the beef industry alone, the Nolan Ryan Beef label hoists a clear association with a national sports celebrity by hosting Ryan's picture as a part of the label. However, CAB labeled foods continue to grow in consumer-popularity without a clear connection to a human-based authority figure.

Based on the literature regarding the authority principle and current market trend for CAB, it is reasonable to assume that consumers make decisions based on the authority of symbols even in the absence of association to a human-based authority figure. Therefore, this study asks if symbols can act as a sources of authority without association to a human-based authority figure. As a model of discovery, this study focuses on the CAB label for a study example.

2.0 Methods

The study utilized a convenience sample of 156 participants divided into three age groups (18-25, 26-35, 36+) for analysis of a cross section of beef consumers. The participant pool consisted of 80 males and 74 females, with the 18-25 age-group comprised of 36 males and 33 females, the 26-35 age-group comprised of 24 males and 19 females, and the 36+ age-group comprised of 20 males and 24 females. Each participant answered a series of three questions in an interview format via Facebook, personalized emails, and face-to-face conversation.

These three interview formats were born out of necessity during the research data collection process. Initially, interviewees were sought via Facebook, but researchers soon learned that though Facebook offers a nearly endless pool of potential participants, reaching segregated pools poses a financial challenge to a non-funded research endeavor. Interviewers then moved from Facebook to email and face-to-face correspondence with networked and randomly selected participants based on the criteria of beef consumer interest.

The three open-ended questions asked of each participant were:

- 1) If given the choice in the store, would you purchase Black Angus Beef over another type of beef? Why or why not?
- 2) Provide an example of a time when advertising affected your beef decision.
- 3) What factors go into your decision to purchase beef?

We chose to utilize an interview format over a prepared quantifiable tool of data extraction, because we felt it offered a more robust understanding of the reasons why consumers chose to pay more for beef products. These somewhat open-ended questions foster responses to what Yin (2009) refers to as topics “too complex” (p. 52) to capture with a simple quantitative questionnaire. Instead, these qualitative interviews offered a hearty look into, and understanding of, the psychological process or reasoning of beef consumers and their interactions with marketing labels.

The results of these interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Dye’s et al. (2000) kaleidoscope model of qualitative data analysis. According to Dye et al., a researcher can effectively analyze qualitative data through a series of steps, beginning with a lump of data and moving from large to smaller groupings of thematic materials. In so doing, a researcher can begin to see thematic groupings, how themes reach across groupings, and overarching themes from the data.

However, the data analysis represented in this study goes a bit further than Dye’s et al. (2000) kaleidoscope model to utilize a form of quasi-statistical method. The quasi-statistical method of qualitative data analysis is a recognized form of qualitative experimentation developed by Becker (1970 pp. 39-62). As with most all qualitative data analysis, the focus is data “examination, pattern identification, and interpretation” (Richards et al., 2012 p. 207). Yet, the quasi-statistical model of qualitative data analysis offers researchers the opportunity to quantify qualitative data (Burgess, 2003; Fielding, 2012), such as interview transcription themes, which can bolster internal reliability (Maxwell, 1995) and “internal generalizability” of the findings (Maxwell, 2010 p. 478). For example, Zickmund et al. (2013) utilized the quasi-statistical method of data analysis in their socio-medical research regarding self-perceptions of cancer mortality. Once cancer patients were asked a series of qualitative interview questions, results were searched for themes, but also quantified for clarity and precision of resulting conclusions.

In the case of this study, interview transcriptions were analyzed by way of the overall participant pool, but also subdivided on the demographic line of age. This initial breaking-apart of the data was performed by a small group of trained qualitative researchers who divided the 156 interviews into three groups for ease of analysis load. Dividing the work load allowed each of the three researchers only 52 respective research interview data sets to analyze.

Dye et al. discuss moving from an overall data set to smaller data sets that share themes, but in the case of this study, the data was first divided into three demographically characteristic groups based on age (18-25, 26-35, 36+). Once divided into age groupings, “data bits” (Dyes et al., 2000, p. 4) from each respective interview question within each age group was categorized based on shared themes (Bruner, Goodnow, and Austin, 1972, pp. 168-190). Continuing along Dye’s et al. kaleidoscope model, each researcher then divided and subdivided interview responses for each of the three questions into themed categories within age groups.

The three researchers then worked together to combine and replicate the process of data analysis across all 156 participants in an effort to find both overarching and age-grouped responses across the three interview questions. Simply stated, researchers pooled their findings from the three groups to search out themes that might exist across all three. This method of double-analysis allows researchers to have both a singular-independent and group analysis process, leading to a more thorough look at the data set. After the data was analyzed, in an effort to gain a more robust understanding of sex-difference in beef quality perceptions, the data was divided between male and female responses.

A predominant reason as to why this method of data analysis is reflective of the quasi-statistical model is that data was not only pulled due to consistency of themes, but also quantified through simple numbering system. Enabling us to offer numbers of instances where, for example, participants noted a preference of high-priced beef over low-priced beef, researchers constructed detailed systems of data quantification. These numbers were broken down per interview question response and assisted in distinguishing age group and sex-difference responses.

This quasi-statistical model allowed us the ability to look back at our calculations and not merely identify a theme, but state numbers and percentages related to that theme, which seems to substantiate thematic claims. As a side note, since this research does not represent a study on mediated data collection, participant responses were not separated on the lines of, nor evaluated in consideration of their interview medium: Facebook, email, and face-to-face.

3.0 Results

The purpose of this research study is to evaluate the marketing strategies for CAB products and determine if they have a direct influence on consumer beef-purchasing decisions. From the survey results, there lies a consensus that CAB has a perceptually superior quality compared to other beef products on the market, agreed upon by most major demographics included in the analysis. Results also indicated that when participants choose CAB, they do so out of conviction of beef quality learned via CAB marketing.

Interview question one asked: If given the choice in the store, would you purchase Black Angus Beef over another type of beef? Why or why not? Overall answers to question one indicate that CAB is preferred over the competition because of its perceived primacy with quality, as well as the determination that it is a healthier option. Both males and females across all ages noted they would choose Black Angus Beef over other kinds of beef. Women, ages 18-25 were much more likely to favor Black Angus Beef than men, there was no difference in preference between sexes in the 26-35 age bracket, and men displayed a far greater preference for Black Angus Beef than did women in the 36+ age group. The most prevalent reasoning to this response was that Black Angus Beef represented the best quality. Others commented that Black Angus Beef tasted better than the other beef options, that it was a “cleaner meat”, or that it simply “sounds fancier”.

Interview question two asked participants to: Provide an example of a time when advertising affected your beef decision. Participants across both sexes and all age groups predominantly stated that marketing has no influence on their beef purchasing decision. However, numerous other participant comments tell a different story. Interviewees noted that they were most influenced by restaurant menus and grocery store packaging labeled CAB. Still others reminisced about the well-known “Beef, Its What’s For Dinner” campaign and slogan or the Mad Cow scare of the 1990s. Consumers seem to find a sense of safety in purchasing a product that is certified.

Interview question three asked: What factors go into your decision to purchase beef? Within the 18-25 age-group, beef-purchase decision factors descended in order from price to fat content to quality across both sexes. Similarly, within the 26-35 age-group, male beef-purchasing factors descended from price to quality and then to fat content, while females considered fat content more important than price and taste. Males, ages 36+ viewed price, fat content, and color or look of the meat as equal factors in beef-purchasing decision, whereas females of the same age-group considered fat content, price, and quality as far greater factors to consider than the color or look of the meat.

4.0 Discussion

From this study, it is evident that consumers place authority on the symbol in the absence of an authority figure. The success of the CAB label and consumer sentiment regarding the label prove there is more to the authority principle than previous research has allowed. Moreover, this research shows that given the opportunity either in the grocery store or restaurant, consumers will choose CAB even though they are somewhat unaware of why they are drawn to this symbol. The authority principle helps us better understand why consumers are drawn to such a symbol with minimal introspective understanding as to why.

Milgram (1967) and Cialdini (2008) discuss the strong effect of authority on participant reactions, which translates to consumer markets. However, in such cases, the authority figure is human-based. This research extends prior research on the authority principle by noting a robust consumer pull toward a symbol without association to human-based authority (i.e. the CAB label). Study participant responses illustrate the omnipresent nature of CAB advertising in both restaurants and grocery stores, stating, “Grocers do a good job in creating awareness in their print advertising...” and that they would “order a hamburger over chicken in a restaurant if advertised as an Angus burger.”

Applying this concept of authority to the marketing tools of CAB, we see a common trend in the consumer response to the CAB label. Through its placement in advertising mediums, consumers see a certified beef brand perceived to be of a higher quality, primarily due to the authoritative element contained within the label.

Advertisements and campaigns for CAB tell customers that in order to acquire the CAB label the meat in question has to go through a rigorous certification process, creating the idea that only the highest quality beef can earn the label. Ironically, the CAB program holds less than expected qualifications for beef used in Black Angus end-products such as upscale fast-food burgers.

Cialdini (2008) also posits that in many situations, when a legitimate authority presents itself and generates a certain idea or ruling to be followed, all other choices or options are irrelevant to the target audience. Similar to a high-end job title, the CAB label displays a large amount of perceptual authority, thus, there is blind obedience to what it advertises, resulting in higher sales. The label uses what Cialdini calls trappings to encapsulate its authoritative traits, such as the USDA Approved stamp. The difference in the CAB and USDA Approved labels is that one is backed by an authoritative entity (i.e. the U.S. Government) and one is created by a private, profit-driven business. Even though the majority of customers are unaware of the true differences between Black Angus beef and no-name beef, they are more likely to perceive CABbeef to be of a higher quality because of the labeling process and its authoritative subtext.

Furthermore, the American Angus Association uses heavy repetition with its label placement, utilizing publications, television ads, and restaurant settings to spread the authoritative message that CAB holds primacy in the market. When the label imprints into the consumer's everyday lifestyle, it has influence on their decision-making process. Cialdini (2008) argues that this is a symptom of the liking process. When a person has a large amount of contact with another person, an object, or idea, they tend to prefer that product more than something deemed irregular or foreign. The familiarity with the label allows for a shift in decision-making in regards to beef product choice, therefore, CAB generates more revenue because their label is more recognizable. This amount of influence on the consumer feeds into the authority complex for the label; the more it is recognized, the more consumers deem it the superior product.

This finding offers an important extension of previous research regarding the authority principle. Consumers gravitate to authoritative appeals from both human-based authority figures and symbols-based authority. Milgram (1974) finds there are potential advantages for following the orders of authority figures, yet his studies reveal the potentially harmful consequences of perceived authority figure abuse (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Cialdini (2008) finds that the overuse of heuristics increases our susceptibility to those feigning expertise, leading to deception and exploitation of those targeted by one impersonating an authority figure.

Instead of focusing on the generalizability of these results, we hold that qualitative example results such as this oftentimes carry what Guba and Lincoln (1989) referred to as transferability. Transferability is the idea that a theory developed via qualitative data analysis of an example may not be generalizable to the overall population, but the concepts and characteristics therein are transferrable in aligning situation. Thus, we argue that our theory concluding that labels (a form of symbols) offer an independent source of authority to consumers is transferrable to like-situations, from tennis shoes to toilet paper brands. There are sure to be other tangible instances representative of symbol-authority in the absence of a human-based authority figures. Therefore, this paper calls for further investigation into the both legitimate and illegitimate use of symbol-authority.

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