BRAND RIVALRY AND COMMUNITY CONFLICT

by

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ABSTRACT

Conflict and rivalry are among the main reasons why human beings form groups. They also largely determine what goes on within the groups (Vincent, 1911). But why is ‘threatening competition’ (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) such a strong driver of brand community? How, where and why does rivalry, or ‘oppositional loyalty’, manifest itself within and between brand communities? Drawing on social comparison theory and recent extensions, a netnographic study is undertaken among Ford and Holden (GM) communities in Australia to address these research questions. Findings suggest that rivalry between brand communities overtly manifests itself in the form of humour, epithets and ridicule for the most part, but also reaches malice and outright hostility in the extreme. While the underlying rivalry and conflict is continuous (and deep rooted), certain events and occasions serve to heighten latent tensions between communities. Another unique dimension to this particular brand rivalry context is that even non-users of either brand are variously aligned with one or the other community.

KEYWORDS

Brand rivalry, conflict, social comparison theory, netnography
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Introduction

In sociology, the concept of community has led to significant debate, with sociologists yet to reach consensus on a definition. More than half a century ago, there were ninety-four discrete definitions of community (Hillery, 1955). Much has been written about what constitutes a ‘brand community’ and what impact it exerts on its members. Unlike their cousins in sociology, marketers have been quick to accept the (first) definition of brand community, as proposed by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001): “a specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand.” In their research, based on Ford F250, Saab and Macintosh, they conclude that a brand community exhibits shared consciousness, rituals and traditions and a sense of moral responsibility. Shared consciousness was described as participants in the community adopting a ‘we’ versus ‘them’ stance with a focus on rituals and traditions that celebrated their brand’s outstanding performance. There was also a heightened sense of commitment to the brand and responsibility to support fellow owners and actively recruit new owners. While a community may form round any brand, it is more likely to form round brands with a strong image, a rich and lengthy history and threatening competition (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001).

Algesheimer, Dholakia and Hermann (2005) examined European car clubs and concluded that brand communities contributed positively to building brands and should be encouraged by brand owners. Similar conclusion were reached by McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) and Thompson and Sinha (2008). This present study focuses specifically on the rivalry between two competing brand communities and how a darker side has begun to emerge as members of brand communities compare themselves and their brands against each other. The purpose of the research is to explore both the interplay and outcomes that arise when strong rivalry is present between brand communities. By addressing these questions academics and brand custodians will be better able to understand why and how rivalry manifests itself and how to harness or neutralize it. In the process of examining these focal research questions, the study will also explore the degree to which new communication technologies provide fora for the expression of rivalry, which will in turn contribute to an increased understanding of the role played by online communities.

Theoretical foundations

Collective pride or group egotism is an essential source of strength in conflict. Groups cultivate a sense of honour and superiority by devices of symbol and phrase as well as scorn and ridicule of rivals (Vincent, 1911). Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) posits that it is human nature to compare one’s self with others as an adaptive mechanism for survival, that is, as a way of sizing up one’s competitors, one will compare one’s own abilities and opinions with theirs. As comparisons are made individuals will group together where they find similarities and will undertake behaviour that will reinforce conformity. This suggests that belonging to a brand community will result in the reinforcement of some opinions and behaviours that first lead the individual to become a member. However further work has been done on social comparison of opinions by Suls, Martin and Wheeler (2000) and this resulted in a triadic model that suggests there are 3 types of roles played out within the group. People who are similar in related attributes, who could be termed corroborators, provide the most meaningful information for evaluating preference (Do I like X?). People who have more expertise are preferred for belief evaluation (Is X correct?), and people who have already
gained experience and exhibited a consistent history of preferences are useful for preference prediction (Will I like X?). These 3 roles exert different levels of influence within the group and it might be suggested they may exert power against other groups.

Self categorization theory (SCT: Turner et al., 1987), a recent development of the social identity tradition, proposes that changes in self concept are related to changes in immediate social context. Drawing on SCT, Levine et al. (2005) utilized the rivalry between Manchester United and Liverpool football clubs to design two experiments to explore the role of identity in emergency helping. In experiment 1, an “injured” stranger wearing an in-group team shirt (Man U or Liverpool) was more likely to be helped than one wearing a rival team shirt or an unbranded shirt – giving credence to the phrases ‘look after our own’ and ‘birds of a feather’. In their second experiment, the authors adopted a more inclusive social categorization and found that help was extended to those who were previously identified as out group members but not to those who do not display signs of group membership (Levine et al., 2005). The findings from the second experiment raise questions in particular about why Toyota, who is in fact now market leader in Australia, is not party to the Ford-Holden rivalry. In other words, why is the brand rivalry dyadic and not tripartite?

**Brand rivalry**

Admiration for the brand within a brand community could be seen as a positive force which results in loyalty to a brand. Many of the brand communities studied to date have no direct competitors or there is no overt rivalry between competing brands. The brand community’s focus is on sharing information and experiences and a positive sense of allegiance is fostered. However the concept of ‘oppositional’ loyalty has been identified whereby members of a brand community took an adversarial view of competing brands (Muniz and Hamer, 2001; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Thompson and Sinha, 2008). This oppositional loyalty will reduce the likelihood of purchasing any rival brands. This is a further reason for brand owners to support the development of brand communities especially in highly competitive markets where any protection is welcomed. In some instances the strength of social identification with the brand and against the rival brand lead to negative word of mouth which was not based on experience with the rival brand but on intense feelings of rivalry. Hickman and Ward (2007) identified and measured this as ‘trash talk’ and an example of the ‘dark side’ of brand community identification. Other dark behaviours that were apparent in their research included inter-group stereotyping and feeling pleasure at the misfortune of rival brands and their users. Schadenfreude is a German word to describe the malicious pleasure in the misfortune of others. Social psychologists have recently re-examined this phenomena (Feather, 1999; Feather and Sherman, 2002; Hareli and Weiner, 2002) but it has rarely been examined in the context of the strength of brand rivalry.

**The power of context: Holden and Ford in Australia**

“The hatred they felt for the opposition was only matched by the loyalty they felt for their own company.” So says Bedwell (2009) in his book, *Holden vs Ford*, when discussing the rivalry that existed between the sales executives employed by the two companies in the 1970s. The strength of company loyalty felt by employees to their respective Ford or Holden employers is one perspective, easily matched by the loyalty felt by brand owners to their brand. What was the origin of this brand commitment and how did this strength of feeling arise?
Holden, the automotive company grew out of a carriage upholstery company established in Adelaide, Australia in the 1850s. They made their first custom-built car bodies in 1914. The advent of the first World War ensured the success of Holden as a car body manufacturer. Initially the motor bodies were fitted with imported engines from General Motors in the USA. To survive the Great Depression in the 1930s Holden merged with General Motors. Investment was made in production facilities yet it was not until 1936 that the first completed cars were produced in Australia. The second World War intervened and the GMH car assembly plant was diverted to producing a wide variety of machinery for the war effort including aircraft, marine and land engines, armoured cars, troupe carriers. It had been the dream of engineers and the MD to produce the ‘all Australian car’ and this dream came to fruition in 1948 when the Australian Prime Minister Ben Chifley launched the car with the words, ‘She’s a beauty!’

In parallel, the Ford Motor Company’s Model Ts were first imported into Australia in 1904 from Ford Canada, another Commonwealth country, in order to avoid import duty and taxes. Dealerships were set up and initially it was hard to keep up with demand. However the impact of the first World War on Ford was extreme with reduced demand and an oversupply of imported stock that was only moved with deep price cutting towards the end of the war. In an effort to avoid taxes on fully imported vehicles, cars and engines were assembled in many locations around Australia. However this was a haphazard business with little attention paid to quality control and was of such concern to Ford executives that in 1925 they opened the first company-owned assembly plant at Geelong. However it took until 1960 for Ford to produce its first all Australian car – the Falcon, twelve years after the Holden launch.

Journalists were the first to pit the two brands against each other directly and openly, comparing and contrasting their performances on paper. The ‘Bathurst 500’ race allowed the two rivals to compare and contrast themselves on the racetrack. The Bathurst was originally a 500 mile one-day race held at Philip Island. It moved to Mt Panorama racetrack, Bathurst in 1963 and increased in distance to 1000 kilometres in 1973. Factory sponsored race cars, sponsorship and charismatic drivers did the rest. In the 1970s Alan Moffat and Peter Brock competed for Ford and Holden respectively and polarised the viewing public who now followed the race closely on television. Alan Moffat was Canadian by birth, steely and focussed, Peter Brock was Australian, flamboyant and gifted.

Other drivers, models and races may have come along and blurred some of the direct rivalry between Ford and Holden but a pattern of intense competition had been established that is clearly remembered. Within the Australian public there still exists a distinct sense of allegiance to one or the other brand whether or not one is a Ford or Holden brand owner. Attendance at the racing venue Bathurst and television audience ratings continue to indicate healthy interest in car racing and vehicle performance (Skula, 2009; OzTAM.com.au). However it is interesting to note that many of the conversations that once would have happened at the circuit, at barbecues and gatherings, at motor shows and new model launches and in magazine letters and motoring correspondents’ comparisons are now occurring online.
Research design and methodology

Following Clandinin and Connelly (1981), this research project involved online ethnographic participant observation, which is a popular and recommended method in studies of online environmental experiences (Boellstorff, 2008; Hansen, 2009). Talamo and Ligorio (2001) suggest that being connected as a participant in cyberspace research allows the researcher to operate within the culture of the participants, allowing for a study of emic dimensions. More specifically, co-operative inquiry as a form of participant observation implies that researchers both engage with and observe subjects online. Thus, the researchers are not just outsiders observing the action of others; rather, the researchers are actually participating in the virtual exchange that is being studied.

Co-operative inquiry, according to Reason (1981), is a valid approach to research with persons because it rests on a collaborative encounter with experience.

Three main principles of qualitative research were adhered to in this ethnographic effort to understand brand rivalry. First, the focus was on depth or quality of insight rather than sheer number of participants (cf. Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Second, following Altheide (1986), the effort was to establish reasonable coverage of the phenomenon to ensure understanding. Finally, data gathering was ceased at the point of redundancy and when no new information was emerging (Lincoln and Guba, 1986).

Following Borghini et al. (2009), we formed a multinational, multi-age, bi-gendered research team of three that observed and participated, to varying degrees, in the lived online experience of the Ford and Holden brand communities. Over a 12-month period we conducted intermittent participant-observational fieldwork online. Following a more passive, descriptive and observational phase in 2009, we began to engage and interact more directly with participants in 2010. In a sense, we began to dig deeper and probe why, having already begun to establish what and when.

Findings

Whilst many other product categories generate high levels of conversation and commentary in the blogosphere, motor sports do not rank in high levels on blogging indexes, such as Technorati. Most of the online conversations are taking place in traditional “forums” – threaded discussion groups, where participants contribute to existing discussion topics, or commence new ones by posting an opening, and sometimes controversial, comment on a topic of interest.

Recently, an increasing level of conversation on each of the brands has been taking place on Facebook, both on grass-roots fan pages, and on company-sponsored group pages. These conversations, consistent with the typical behaviours on Facebook, are less structured than in the more traditional forums. Fans will post brief comments (often only one short sentence), sometimes in response to another user’s previous posts, yet often with a disconnected comment, relevant to the theme of the page, but not part of an ongoing conversation.

Facebook provides an insight into the role of company-driven brand communities, versus grass-roots, fan-based brand communities. The largest “unofficial” Holden fan page on Facebook has in excess of 15,000 fans, compared with the official Holden Facebook group, with approximately 18,000 fans. Discussion in each of these two areas is quite different, with serious product-based conversations taking place on the official page, as opposed to the “tribal rivalry” which is often occurring in the unofficial space. The profile pictures of these two pages also set the scene for the mode of conversation within each. The official page
maintains a corporate look and feel with its well-known company logo and “Go better” by-line. This contrasts sharply with the unofficial page’s imagery, featuring the familiar Holden lion proudly resting its front paw on the Ford insignia, and the slogan “Look what the cat dragged in” openly encouraging oppositional loyalty. Unsurprisingly, anti-Ford “trash-talk” takes place regularly in the unofficial page, but not on the Holden-endorsed page.

The search term ‘Holden versus Ford’ generated an astounding 9.9m hits on google.com.au (in a country with a total population <21m), 1,600 images on flikr.com and 14,100 YouTube videos.

**The role of ridicule**

The social nature and function of ridicule deserve greater attention than they have received from the sociologists (Vincent, 1911). Ridicule also tends to spread the "dragnet” by the swift contagion of a popular jest. Laughter affords a relief from undue strain; it prevents the group from taking itself too seriously at all times; it mollifies group antagonism and helps to keep it on a higher plane (Vincent, 1911).

As of March 2010, the search phrase ‘Ford Holden jokes’ garnered 248,000 hits\(^1\) on google.com.au. Ridicule is clearly a central and fundamental avenue by which brand community is forged and rivalry fostered.

**The nature of the rivalry**

Much online conversation focuses on the positive aspects of the Holden and Ford brands, sometimes based on rational brand attributes such as performance or technical specifications, but often reflecting pure subjective bias towards the brand:

- **the New HSV GTS E2 looks like (pardon my french) SEX and lots of it**
- **The mighty falcon has been around for nearly 50 years**

However, the inter-group stereotyping is never far away, as the fans often revert to personal attacks on the opposing group:

- **God created Ford, to keep dickheads out of Holdens!**
- **Ford supporters are passionate, there (sic) not sheep following something cause everyone else does**

Consistent with the “trash talk” identified by Hickman and Ward (2007), each of the opposing brand communities make frequent use of acronyms to describe the rival brand (see Table 1). Whilst these insults are often directed towards characteristics of the competing brands, such as “Holes, Oil Leaks, Dents and Engine Noise” and “Fast Only Rolling Downhill”; other

remarks are directed towards owners and drivers of those brands, such as “Heaps of Losers Drive ‘Em Now” and “Full Of Raving Dickheads”. It’s not surprising that fans often respond to these jibes with their own positive acronyms (“First On Race Day”) – however, it was unusual that no positive Holden acronyms were able to be found in the online content review.

In the extreme, rivalry boils over to hostility. The following quote off YouTube is offensive, but not at all uncommon in terms of frequency, passion or profanity:

Post:
Its simple .... Holden hold all the records both on the track and in the sales yard, and have done for many years. Even Ford are considering dumping the Falcon.

Reply:
Mate let me tell you something, you've given me all this info .... I DONT GIVE A FUCK. Ford has the fastest production car....the fastest 6 cylinder SUV....and for over 20 years from 1960's to the 80's the fastest 4-door cylinder in the WORLD the Ford GT. SO fuck you and fuck Holden and fuck your pathetic list of cars.

The sheer intensity, sense of history and emphasis exhibited above extends beyond common ‘trash talk’ and is unlikely to occur between Saab and Volvo owners, for example. Similarly, is discussing Microsoft’s brand hegemony, Cromie and Ewing (2009) found that open source software users consciously eschewed direct comparison with Microsoft. They would not stoop to dignify a company they clearly dislike with any derogatory inferences.

The power of Holden as a unique Australian brand

The “Holden” brand is unique to Australia, whereas the “Ford” brand is international. As a result, Australian Holden fans appear to have a greater sense of brand identity. This provides them a certain strength against their Ford counterparts, whose community appears to be somewhat diluted by the international spread of fans. Phase two of this study will explore this phenomenon in more detail to determine if the country-of-origin effect and consumer ethnocentricity are significant. Australia has a history of strong rivalries in many spheres of its public life, be they social, economic, religious, geographic, business or sporting rivalries. A consideration of national identity and character may suggest a basis for this predilection (Archer, 2001; Walsh and Karolis, 2008).

In an interesting series of postings, it was observed that over a short period of time, the Facebook conversation was dominated by a group of female Holden enthusiasts. Their conversation revolved around comparing their “babies” with each other, including sharing of photos and descriptions:

Monique: “Wow thats a sexy ute your using as a main pic, the VX in the background is pretty nice too LOL”

Shona: “I lurve the ol girls all the way. My ol HZ never let me down! Look forward to havin a hotted up EH, FJ etc on day even a Torana SLR5000”

Melissa: “yeah i noticed they all look hot, kinda regret putting mine in , lmao”

Monique: “Melissa, never regret anything about your car, as long as its a Holden its all good.”
Emily: “Red VY V8 SS. She goes by the name of NOICE”

Racquel: “omg.....thats wicked.”

Linda: “love my holden .still have 1975 hj wagon .never misses a beat.just brought a captiva great car”

Clare: “clare just bought a lj torana speedway car.love it”

When does the rivalry occur?

The latent rivalry is omnipresent. However, there are particular occasions that fuel the debate. New product launches and other company announcements (and associated journalistic deliberation) stoke the fire (refer back to Figure 1). Historically, conversations within and between each brand community have been fuelled by events and rituals relevant to those brands. The annual “pilgrimage” to Mount Panorama at Bathurst each October continues (see Figure 2), although we are now witnessing a “virtual pilgrimage” to online brand-based conversations. Data from Facebook, for example, now shows an increase in Ford and Holden conversation in October of each year, most notably for the Holden brand, which is uniquely Australian. The Ford conversation levels, which also peak during the big race, are also affected by other global issues, such as financial downturns (May/June 2008) and other big company announcements, such as Ford’s recent sale of the Jaguar and Land Rover brands to Tata. Over coming years, as we see the use of online communities continue to increase, these occasion-based fluctuations in conversation are likely to become more pronounced.

(INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE)

Conclusion

The long history of rivalry in Australia between Ford and Holden continues today, with online conversations providing a new space for brand enthusiasts to connect, share their passions, and openly ridicule the opposing brand and its followers.

Brand conversations are increasing online, including conversations reinforcing intense rivalry between the communities to the extent that it is a more primitive tribal exchange, possibly driven by the perceived safety of anonymity, or the ability to hide behind a pseudonym or avatar.

For more than half a century Australians have gravitated one way or the other. No middle ground. From one generation to the next. On Sundays at the races and Mondays at the water cooler. Even Mercedes, Mazda and Mitsubishi owners would align would have a blue or red allegiance. Labor vs. Liberal, Sydney vs Melbourne, NRL vs. AFL, republicans vs. monarchists, Ford vs. Holden - the ultimate brand rivalry

(INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE)
References


Vincent GE. The Rivalry of Groups Publications of the American Sociological Society 1911; V: 241-256

### Table 1 – Common acronyms used by brand communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Holden</th>
<th>Ford</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive</strong></td>
<td><strong>Negative</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None identified</td>
<td>Holes, Oil Leaks, Dents &amp; Engine Noise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First On Race Day</td>
<td>Heavy Overrated Ludicrous Dinosaur Engineed Neanderthalmobile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Only Real Drivers</td>
<td>Heavily Overrated Ludicrous Dinosaur Excites Neanderthals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat Out Racing Demon</td>
<td>Homosexuals Only Like Driving Engineering Nightmares</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fucking Orsome Ride Daily</td>
<td>Hope Our Luck Doesn’t End Now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favourite Of Racing Drivers</td>
<td>Hold On Lads Damn Engine’s Nackered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Found On Rich Driveways</td>
<td>Heaps Of Losers Drive Em Now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative</strong></td>
<td>Hey Our Lads Don’t Engineer Nuthin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None identified</td>
<td>Heap Of Litter Dumped Every Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First On Race Day</td>
<td>Horrendous Object Loved Dearly by Extreme Numbnuts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Only Real Drivers</td>
<td>Heaps Of Loud Distorted Engine Noises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat Out Racing Demon</td>
<td>Heaps Of Loud Deafening Engine Noise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fucking Orsome Ride Daily</td>
<td>Hauled Off to Local Dump Every Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favourite Of Racing Drivers</td>
<td>Homos Out Lay Dykes Every Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Found On Rich Driveways</td>
<td>Heaps Of Losers Driving Everyone Nuts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative</strong></td>
<td>Never Enough Dollars Left On Hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None identified</td>
<td>Driver Returns On Foot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First On Race Day</td>
<td>Fucked On Race Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Only Real Drivers</td>
<td>Found On Rubbish Dumps (and Glued Together) “GT”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat Out Racing Demon</td>
<td>Fixed Or Repaired Daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fucking Orsome Ride Daily</td>
<td>Fast Only Rolling Downhill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favourite Of Racing Drivers</td>
<td>Fail On Race Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Found On Rich Driveways</td>
<td>Full Of Rusty Dents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative</strong></td>
<td>Full Of Raving Dickheads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None identified</td>
<td>Failed On Registration Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First On Race Day</td>
<td>Federation Of Rust Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Only Real Drivers</td>
<td>Found On Rednecks Driveway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat Out Racing Demon</td>
<td>Fails On Rainy Days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fucking Orsome Ride Daily</td>
<td>For Only Retarded Drivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favourite Of Racing Drivers</td>
<td>Failure Of Research and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Found On Rich Driveways</td>
<td>Factory Ordered Road Disaster</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Image of Holden vs Ford poster](image_url)

**Figure 1.** 200th issue of Australian classic car
Figure 2. The annual Bathurst 1000 race: An iconic Holden vs. Ford battle.

Figure 3. Facebook profile images: Holden-pages

Official Facebook group profile picture: Unofficial Facebook fanpage profile picture:

Holden. Go better.

Figure 4. Facebook “Lexicon” data, October 2007 – July 2009
Figure 5. Another way to express Holden loyalty and fuel the rivalry