

## Copycat Strategies Influencing Consumer Product Evaluations

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*This study examines consumer perceptions of copycat strategies - types of imitation, brand names, and package design. It also explores the impact of marketing knowledge and educational attainment on consumer evaluations of copycat products in a comparative shopping environment. The research posits that the presence of leading brands, brand familiarity, and the level of similarity influences consumer purchasing decisions. The investigation encompasses 11 product categories. This cross-sectional study adopts an exploratory approach, incorporating a correlational analysis with a sample of graduate and postgraduate female business students. One semi-governmental organization is selected through judgmental sampling, and data is collected via self-administered questionnaires during the research experiment, resulting in a usable demographic sample of 174 respondents out of the planned 250. The findings are consistent with the persuasion-naïve theory, suggesting that consumers perceive copycat strategies negatively when a leading brand is present. Consumers evaluate Featural imitation types more positively, while brand names featuring meaningful elements receive more favorable evaluations. In terms of package design, featural designs are more positively evaluated. Interestingly, personal characteristics like marketing knowledge and education do not significantly influence consumer evaluations of copycat products. Managerial implications are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Copycat, featural, thematic, featural imitation, thematic imitation, comparative mode.*

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The emergence of copycat brands offering enhanced product quality presents significant hurdles for original brands. This paper offers a comprehensive insight into consumers' affinity and inclination towards copycat brands compared to superior product attributes. While previous research has provided some understanding of consumer evaluations of copycat brands, there is a notable gap in exploring how original brands can strategically influence consumer preferences by leveraging brand identity cues (Nguyen, 2018). Prior findings consistently highlight the influence of brand identity cues, leading to a decline in market share for original brands when identical copycat brands capitalize on superior product attributes.

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Choy (2013) put emphasis on the dangers caused by copycat brands on the market-leading brands and items. The author explained that the copycats more identical to the parent brand adversely affect the original brand and its worth. The research also studied whether the copycat brand affects the consumer perception of the existing brand or not. The associative network theory explains how a new brand affects an existing brand.

Copycatting is a prevalent phenomenon and a commonly employed branding strategy. It can undermine long-standing investments in leading brands and result in significant financial losses (Zaichkowsky, 2006; Mitchell & Kearney, 2002). Conversely, copycat behavior is widespread, as evidenced by a national survey of US supermarkets, which found that half of store brands imitated leading brands in terms of packaging color, size, and shape (Morton & Zettelmeyer, 2004). According to Braxton (2019), the success of 'copycat' products can be attributed, at least in part, to the positive association they garner from their connection to national leader brands (NLBs). The author suggests that negative publicity and scandals surrounding NLBs can contribute to favorable evaluations of copycat products by consumers. Many studies conducted in a comparative mode employ comparative evaluation strategies (such as consumer information processing modes), demonstrating that copycat products are often evaluated positively when presented alongside NLB products. However, negative perceptions and evaluations arise when NLBs are distanced from their lookalikes.

Copycat mostly selects brand logos that copy the actual image of any brand name along with its effect on the mind of the consumer. Hence, in past studies, only a few authors have listed the impact of copycats on the mind gameplay of consumers (Din, 2015). The success of copycatting is frequently attributed to brand confusion, wherein individuals positively assess copycat products due to their striking resemblance to the original brand (Howard et al., 2000; Kapferer, 1995a; Loken et al., 1986; Simonson, 1994). Recent research has presented evidence that overt and transparent copycats tend to be perceived negatively, primarily due to psychological reactance triggered by imitation (Steenkamp & Geyskens, 2013; Van Horen & Pieters, 2012a, 2012b; Warlop & Alba, 2004). The blatant copycats are charged for trademark infringement (Simonson, 1994). When trademarks are infringed by the copycaters they are known as trademark infringement (D'Amato & Miaoulis, 1978).

Previous literature highlighted the impact of copycatting more in detail than how the copycatting strategy results in positive or negative evaluation. Based on "How," the Work done by Horen et al. (2009, 2010, 2012, 2012b) highlighted that consumer evaluation of brand imitations mostly focuses on comparative and non-comparative modes. The findings suggested that high-similarity copycats (blatant) were evaluated negatively in comparison mode and positively in non-comparative, whereas the opposite was for moderate-similarity copycats. However, there is no imperial evidence of the likability of the consumers regarding the uniqueness in the form of brand names and package designs.

Copycat brands replicate the name, logo, and/or packaging design of a prominent brand to leverage the positive associations and marketing endeavors of the original (Foxman et al., 1990; Kapferer, 1996; Loken et al., 1986; Simonson, 1994; Zaichkowsky, 1995). Existing literature discussed different types of imitation, from which the most commonly imitated strategy is a featural strategy, in which the copycat imitates the letters of leader brands and other attributes directly linked with leader brands. The strategy that imitates not only the features but also holds some meaning is termed feature with meaning. Another effective strategy is thematic, which is subtle and diffusing in nature and mostly imitates the underlying meaning of the leader brand. Other important forms of imitation include mimicking brand names and the package design elements of the leader brands. The brand name similarity allows copying the literal similarity and the underlying meaning of the leader brand.

Not only do different types of imitation create confusion, but consumers also face varying degrees of uncertainty when making purchase decisions about the quality of available

alternatives. In such unfamiliar scenarios, consumers lack knowledge about the brands in the market, their performance, and how they compare to others (Downey & Slocum, 1975; Howell & Burnett, 1978; Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997). Situations of uncertainty evoke unpleasant feelings, prompting coping responses aimed at reducing them through persuasion techniques (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982; Loewenstein, 1994). Recent research has shown that the link between familiarity and positivity is particularly valued in uncertain and unsafe contexts but to a lesser extent in certain and secure contexts (Bornstein, 1989; Jacoby et al., 1989).

The influence of mood and environmental context is crucial in determining whether consumers evaluate lookalike products positively or negatively. Individuals tend to prefer familiar category prototypes when experiencing negative moods, which indicate an unsafe environment. Conversely, these effects are diminished in a happy mood, signaling a safe and secure environment. Similarly, a blatant copycat may evoke a favorable response in an unfamiliar environment, whereas, in a familiar setting, the same copycat may prompt a negative reaction. Based on the preceding discussion, it is evident that when consumers recognize the use of an imitation strategy, similarity may be perceived as a deceptive tactic aimed at misleading consumers about product quality (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Warlop & Alba, 2004).

A copycat research study (Ma, 2011) noted that copycats of major brands could enhance the overall perception of the leader brand. However, customers who are loyal to the copycat brand react unfavorably when their preferred brand exhibits imitative behavior. The dual nature of brand loyalty's impact on responses to copycats suggests that while brand loyalty can have positive effects in certain situations, it may have negative consequences in others for both the copycat and the brand being imitated. Moreover, consumer evaluation varies as the context changes. Consumer evaluation of copycats depends on the positive or negative associations in the consumer's mind that are activated through similarity; the visual similarity activates a more distinct or less distinct representation of the leader brand. Then, consumers may correct for the positive feelings stemming from similarity (Van Horen & Pieters, 2012a, 2012b).

According to Kaspersky and Kim (2011), consumers feel bad and unpleasant as being a target of persuasion attempts. Consumer cognitive process differs from individual to individual. More or less, brand knowledge affects consumer evaluation in a comparative mode. The literature at hand illustrates that when the leader brand is present alongside the copycat's consumer feelings, association, familiarity, experience, and exposure, their evaluation is different yet negative due to persuasion knowledge. Wright (1985) discussed this topic informally, referring to persuasion Knowledge as a "schemer schema. Some may look at copycats as a cheap substitute for a leader brand, and some get confused due to similarities and end up thinking of copycats as a product of a leader brand. Existing literature shows the level of consumer liking and dislikes on the similarity index rather than just how positively or negatively copycats are interpreted.

Previous research has failed to incorporate various product types when assessing consumer evaluations of the leader versus copycat brands. The understanding of this phenomenon remains incomplete due to the lack of examination of underlying variables of interest across different product types, leading brands, respondents, and contexts. Furthermore, while some studies have indicated that personal characteristics such as involvement with the product category and product familiarity influence consumers' perception of brand imitations (e.g., Foxman et al., 1990), these studies did not investigate consumer evaluations. Additionally, other individual characteristics appear relevant. Therefore, to address these gaps, this study explores the role of consumer personal characteristics, such as marketing knowledge and educational level, on copycat evaluation across various product types.

Based on the above elaborations, keeping consumer evaluation in mind, the current study aims to empirically investigate the hypothesized relationship of copycat strategy with consumer attitude and evaluation. The study attempts to find consumer copycat evaluation as (a) a marketing strategy, (b) imitation types, (c) brand names, (d) package design, (f) in general, (g) the role of personal characteristics, i.e., marketing knowledge and educational level. The study contributes to consumer behavior and marketing literature and opens a new horizon of category-based copycatting tactics for the researchers. In the following sections, the paper exhibits the theoretical background of the study, and then the methodology is presented with future findings, conclusions, and implications revealed.

This study explores how marketing background and personal characteristics impact consumer copycat evaluation in the presence of NLB. By exploring copycatting strategies, researchers can significantly contribute to the consumer behavior literature and provide knowledgeable insights for theory and practice in understanding consumer attitudes. Specific research questions of the study are: How do consumers evaluate copycat as a marketing strategy? How do consumers evaluate copycats as imitation types with the leader brand? How do consumers evaluate copycat brand names with the leader brand name? How do consumers evaluate copycat package design with the leader brand name? How do consumers evaluate copycat strategy in general?

The current study is significant for researchers and practitioners; the former focuses on the impact of copycat strategy on consumer attitude during evaluation Luo and Sun (2011). The consumer market is significantly populated with branded products, both national and international. Consumers are more aware than before, and their spending has also increased on branded products Luo and Sun (2017). It is equally important to understand the culture; the culture in the country is changing, and so are consumer preferences. Understanding the changing consumer tastes of buying has become an important area of interest for researchers in this country. Moreover, in the current study, ten leading national and international brands are incorporated. The brands selected for the study are based on consumers' more or less brand knowledge. The respondents in the study are youth, specifically females at the university level. Previous literature explains the underlying variables in the Western context, which is different from our culture and shopping environment (Muthukrishnan & Wathieu, 2009)

## Literature Review

### *Copycat Evaluation*

The assessment of copycats relies on the accessibility and transfer of knowledge associated with the leader brand. Additionally, evaluation is influenced by inferences drawn from "cognitive feelings" triggered by similarity. As noted by Zajonc (1968), feelings of familiarity often arise following repeated exposure. Moreover, Copycat evaluation depends on singular evaluation (assimilation) and comparative judgment (contrast). Assimilation takes place when the consumer judgment moves towards the comparative anchor. Contrast occurs when the consumer judgment moves away from the comparative anchor (Schwarz & Bless, 1992; Sherif et al., 1958). Research in social cognition suggests that Assimilation occurs when accessible information guides the interpretation of target stimuli, causing a shift toward the activated information due to knowledge accessibility (Stapel, 1997). Therefore, during assimilation, the favorable information associated with the leader brand is interpreted and incorporated into the perception of the copycat, leading to a more positive evaluation. However, if the positively perceived Skippy brand serves as a benchmark for comparison, the imitation copycat will be contrasted against it and consequently assessed negatively. Consequently, the copycat appears inferior to the leader brand (Carpenter & Nakamoto, 1989).

In order to understand how copycats are evaluated, it is important to know which determinants consumer evaluation is based on. According to Campbell and Kirmani (2000), the evaluation of copycats is influenced by the accessibility and transfer of knowledge from the leader brand, along with inferences drawn from "consumer cognitive feelings" activated by similarity. One such cognitive feeling is familiarity, which individuals interpret as indicating something known or remembered. In line with the knowledge accessibility theory, the extent of imitation and the strength and uniqueness of the leader brand hold significance. Previous studies have elucidated that the effects of higher and lower degrees of similarity on copycat evaluation are contingent upon consumers' mode of evaluation (Olsen, 2002). Contrast effects occur when information is used as a standard for comparison in evaluation, resulting in a deviation from accessible information (Herr & Paul, 1989).

The present research posits that both similarity and the evaluation approach consumers adopt play pivotal roles in marketing literature. Evaluations can occur in a non-comparative or comparative manner (Oakley et al., 2008). Non-comparative evaluations are conducted without an explicit comparison, likely guided by the activation of positive feelings, associations, and attitudes surrounding the leader brand. Consequently, copycats with higher degrees of similarity are expected to be evaluated more positively, activating more positive associations that readily "spill over" (Murphy & Zajonc, 1993) and are "included" (Schwarz & Bless, 1992) in the representation of the copycat.

However, high-similarity copycats may be evaluated differently in a comparative evaluation context. When the copycat is explicitly compared to the imitated leader brand and similarity is high, consumers are more likely to become aware of the strong resemblance with the leader brand and perceive that their judgments may be biased by positive feelings derived from the leader brand. In such cases, they are likely to adjust their response considering this influence by referring to their naive theories of persuasion (Boush et al., 2009).

The categorization of product assortments may also influence the evaluation mode. The comparison mode is activated when consumers are exposed to narrow rather than broad categories (Ülkümen et al., 2010). A variety of assortments influences the consumer quantities. The author suggested that when the assortments are organized, they require more shelf space, and the consumption quantity increases, whereas assortments presented in an unorganized form decrease consumption quantity (Kahn & Wansink, 2004). Evaluation is also affected by organized rather than disorganized categories. Mogilner et al. (2008) explained the categorization effects that increase consumers' perception of assortment variety and outcome satisfaction. According to Poynor and Diehl (2010), consumers prefer a benefit-based structure as it heightens consumer perception of similarity amongst the assortment.

The extent of similarity between the copycat and leader brand, including the extent and type of imitation, significantly impacts copycat evaluation. Various authors have discussed how high-similarity copycats can lead to consumer confusion (Howard et al., 2000; Miaoulis & d'Amato, 1978), affect consumer predispositions to confusion (Foxman et al., 1990), and contribute to the development of metrics for measuring consumer confusion (Kapferer, 1995; Simonson, 1994). Moderate similarity tends to receive more positive evaluations, consistent with the findings of Meyers-Levy and Tybout (1989) in the context of new product evaluation.

Moreover, the type of imitation, such as brand names, package design, etc., also influences copycat evaluation and the degree of imitation. In addition to that, the copycat evaluation also depends on brand presence and on a specific mindset and is not solely dependent on how good the imitation is, but also on factors like the goodness of imitation type, presence/absence of leader brand, context (shopping, environment), store image (good/poor), physical arrangements of brands, product type (convenience/luxury), uncertainty levels, consumer cognition (Horen et al., 2010).

## *Leader Brand, Copycat, and Copycat Marketing Strategy*

Leader brands earn their status through factors such as brand usage, image, consumption patterns, likability, associations, and, notably, their equity. A leader brand is distinguished by its visual appeal, which triggers consumers' positive associations and favorable evaluations. It is often supported by strong extrinsic cues suggesting prior quality, which consumers assume to be favorable. These brands are well-established in local and international markets, characterized by unique and easily recognizable trade dress and features. In cases of imitation, the copied company may resort to legal action against the copycat company (Miceli & Pieters, 2010).

Copycats are products showing similar aspects in their package designs as other (often leader) brands. Copycats are also referred to as lookalike products. The lookalike products show some degree of similarity with other products but are less alike and possess less similarity in comparison to leading brands (Zaichkowsky, 1995, 2006). Alternatively, in these scenarios, copycats capitalize on brand attributes by replicating semantic meanings or inferred characteristics of a brand (Van Horen & Pieters, 2012b). Copycat behaviors often emerge as a natural reaction, particularly when firms encounter significant uncertainty in their operating environment (Lieberman & Asaba, 2006).

Copycatting strategy is an old concept of interest to leading companies, but still, more research is needed from a consumer perspective. Companies employing this strategy of imitation replicate the logo, package design, and/or name of a competing brand or product with the aim of persuading consumers to purchase their own products (Van Horen & Pieters, 2012a). The copycat strategy is defined as a "form of unfair competition or misleading commercial practice, which is deemed unlawful, and extreme cases of imitation can result in charges of trademark infringement." The copycat strategy can be best described as imitation, which involves copying elements from an original brand so closely that the copycat resembles the leader brand (Murakami, 2008). In most cases, imitators tend to be small manufacturers and occasionally private-label retail brands. However, it is also observed that more familiar brands copying less familiar brands in the past studies. Sinyaeva (2015) gives the latest knowledge about the current trends of copycat strategies among supermarket chains and retail stores. The author suggested reviewing the Classical Conditioning theory to define the influence of copycats on the basic understanding level.

### *Imitation Types, Brand Names, and Package Design*

Different brand attribute studies discussed evaluative and descriptive attributes that distinguish the features and themes of one brand from another. (Barwise and Ehrenberg, 1985; Hoek et al., 2000; Romaniuk and Sharp, 2000). In the copycat domain, there are mainly two *types of copycats*: one that imitates visual and descriptive elements and the other that imitates the meaning of the targeted leader brand. Copycat brands follow the overall look of the brand, its design, color, packaging etc. Copycat normally works in the main product category following the category of the main brand under the copy category follow-up. The study explains that brand imitation helps the copycat brand damage the original parent brand and its status in the consumer perception and mind (Qin, 2015).

Past studies have addressed two *types of imitations*. The first type is attribute-based, also known as featural imitation. Attribute-based imitation involves replicating perceptual elements, such as shapes, colors, fonts, names, etc., in their own products or logos. The second type is theme-based imitation, which encompasses more abstract characteristics and semantic attributes, such as feelings and atmosphere. Objects are taxonomically similar if they belong to the same category because of shared features (Farjoun & Lai, 1997; Tversky, 1977). Other

than the two main copycat types, the other copycat types include mimicking the letters and the meaning of the leading brand simultaneously. This type of copycat is known as the feature with meaning copycats.

In legal terms, *brand names* are defined as “when a copycat brand name mimics the letters of the leader brand it is likely to activate a more complete and distinct mental representation of the leader brand as compared to a copycat brand” (Loken et al., R.L., 1986; Mitchell & Kearny, 2002; Tversky, 1977; Zaichkowsky, 2006).

*Package design* is legally defined and operationalized by how many aspects are imitated. (Zaichkowsky, 1995; 2006) and in the legislative literature (Jacoby, 2001; Mitchell & Kearny, 2002). Copycat packaging' is the practice of designing a leader brand's product packaging in such a way that it overall gives the general feel and look of a competing market leader. R Coelho do Vale (2015) found that the higher is the package design similarity between the national brand (NBs) and the private brands (PLs) In the copycat strategy, the greater the similarity between private labels (PLs) and national brands (NBs), the more probable it is that consumers perceive PL products as being manufactured by NBs. This perception enhances the perceived quality of PL products, particularly when there is a high level of similarity in packaging. Consequently, consumers are more inclined to consume PLs, especially when selecting utilitarian products over hedonic ones.

### *Personal Characteristics: Marketing Knowledge, Educational Level*

Consumer's know-how regarding certain key/basic marketing and branding fundamentals may vary with personal characteristics. According to Forster et al. (2008), the consumer processing mindset on judgment depends on the ambiguity of the target regardless of the (comparative and noncomparative mode. Hong and Sternthal (2010) discussed the effects of consumer prior product knowledge and processing strategies in judging product types. The influence of mood also impacts consumer evaluations of leader brands vs copycats (Horen & Pieters, 2013). No literature has yet developed to explore consumer marketing subject knowledge in evaluating leader brands compared to copycats. This study is the first to explore this phenomenon; the researcher's motive for segregating marketing and non-marketing students is to examine the impact of a student's subject background in copycat evaluation.

Noori and Esmaeili (2016) studied the effect of consumer's mindset on copycatting strategy by considering the moderating role certainty and uncertainty levels. Previous studies have discussed consumer attitudes and sensitivity to salient persuasion tactics (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). No attempt is made to test the copycat evaluation from a consumer's educational level perspective. In the current study, the researcher aims to analyze consumer opinion and perception regarding key/basic marketing and branding fundamentals based on their degree level. Based on the above elaborations on study variables. The current study's research questions aim to explore consumer evaluation in detail, an area of concern.

### *Consumer Evaluation Theories*

The naïve theory of persuasion also called the persuasion knowledge model, is historically contingent and develops throughout a consumer's lifetime. Especially during consumer interaction in social surroundings, conversations about how people feel, behave, and think is how the consumers as persuasion targets change their opinions, which in turn affects their evaluation (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). Copycat presence causes deception in the marketplace, thus confusing the consumer in their buying decision (Friestad & Wright, 1994). To escape from marketers' deliberate tactics, consumers use these beliefs to counter marketers' persuasion attempts (Boush et al., 2009), including how they entice consumers to buy a product through similarity. A study by Wegener and Petty (1995, 1997) proposed The Flexible Correction Model,

which attempts to explain consumers' use of naive theories in forming their own perception of bias in a judgment setting, and these theories play a significant role in the correction and removal of bias. (Sherif and Holland, 1961). Moreover, the *knowledge accessibility theory* posits that the accessibility of the representation of the leader brand and its associated knowledge depends on factors such as the quantity, intensity, and distinctiveness of associations. When leader brand knowledge is highly accessible, there is a greater likelihood of transferring attributes such as performance, reliability, quality, or other positive meanings associated with the leader brand to the copycat (Finch, 1996; Ross et al., 1986; Zaichkowsky, 2006). Such endeavors may result in national brand manufacturers experiencing a decline in sales while also potentially causing irreparable damage to their brand equity by altering consumers' perceptions regarding the uniqueness of the national brand (Zaichkowsky & Simpson, 1996).

Hasapoulos et al. (1986) demonstrate that different brands with similar packages are indeed rated as similar in quality and perceived performance, which in turn positively influences consumer evaluation of copycats. This is how the knowledge accessibility theories suggest how liking can turn into disliking or the opposite.

### *Research Questions*

If two brands exhibit extrinsic similarities and share physical attributes that evoke product resemblance, this will likely enhance consumers' affinity for and purchase of the copycat. Additionally, according to the knowledge accessibility theory, the more accessible the knowledge about the leader brand, the greater the likelihood of transferring attributes such as performance, reliability, quality, or other positive meanings associated with the leader brand to the copycat (Finch, 1996; Ross et al., 1986; Zaichkowsky, 2006). However, limited research has been conducted to predict consumer evaluations of the copycat as a marketing strategy, prompting the first research question (RQ):

*RQ 1: How consumers evaluate copycat as a marketing strategy?*

Perception literature distinguished between two main types and processes of consumer copycat evaluation, i.e., comparative and non-comparative mode (Horen et al. 2010, 2012a, 2012b). The type of imitation, either featural or thematic in assimilation or contrast, affects consumer evaluation of copycats in the leader's absence or presence. There is a lack of considerable work in certain comparative modes reflecting consumer evaluation of known leader brands in copycat presence, leading to the development of the second research question:

*RQ 2: How do consumers evaluate copycats as imitation types with the leader brand?*

Brand theorists highlighted another important strategy, “brand names,” which plays around imitating the name of the renowned leadership brand. Copycat's powerful brand names act as a signal allowing consumers to consult their persuasion knowledge. The persuasion Knowledge Model is activated under comparative mode due to the marketer's accessible ulterior motive and tactics (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). Friestad and Wright (1994) characterize a persuasion attempt as the recipient's perception of an agent's deliberate actions when conveying information with the intention of changing or influencing someone's behavior. Wei, Fischer, and Main (2008) further categorize persuasion attempts into covert and overt methods. However, there has been relatively little research conducted to comprehend consumer perceptions of likability and uniqueness for copycats, leading to the formulation of the third research question:

*RQ 3: How do consumers evaluate copycat brand names with leader brand name?*



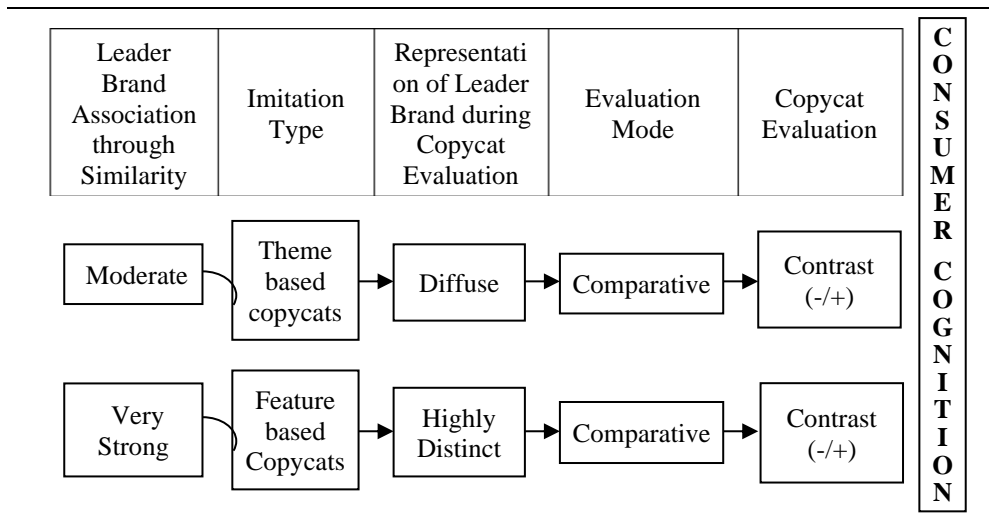
Another powerful imitation strategy is to imitate the package design (Abbamonte & Giuseppe, 2008). Packaging is the medium to communicate with consumers through distinguishing designs and on-pack communications through graphics, logo images, colors, messages, and product information. Extreme or moderate copycat packaging leads to consumer rejection or acceptance under evaluation mode. Rafiq (2006) discusses the copycat issues being faced by brands in the multinational and retail industries. The previous also explained that consumers face problems by store, product, and no shopping. The best way to keep the consumers safe is to buy only those brands having labels and proper brand names and titles. There is less significant work on consumer evaluation of the package design of renowned leader brands versus its copycats on design attractiveness, similarity, imitation strategy activated, and persuasion attempt, which creates a need for investigating the fourth research question:

*RQ 4:* How do consumers evaluate copycat package design with a leader brand name?

Results of past literature indicated that consumer likability of the copycat strategy is based on high product similarity interims of features and meanings. According to Solomon et al. (2016), an affective behavioral cognitive model 3rd component suggests that a “consumer cognitively-based attitude exhibits his/her thoughts about object property. (i.e., copycat). The interrelationship between these three components is important because it is not possible to determine the attitude toward an object by only identifying a consumer's beliefs about it (Solomon et al., 2010).

Previous research conducted by Hynes (2013) suggested that retailers use this sneaky marketing technique to ‘borrow’ the easily recognizable packaging from big leader brand products including its overall coloring, design, fonts, wording, shape or size – for their (cheaper) own-label goods (lookalikes). The current research is the 1st to examine consumer cognitive information on the basic reality ground of likability and dis-likability of the copycat brands, thus giving rise to the formulation of the fifth research question:

*RQ 5:* How do consumers evaluate copycat strategy in general?



**Figure 1: Theoretical Model of the Study**

Consumers' prior knowledge and the content conveyed in a message contribute to the message's impact (Alba & Hutchins, 2000; Bettman & Sujun, 1987). The effects of prior

knowledge suggest that consumers with extensive domain knowledge feel a sense of urgency in achieving their goals (Lewandowsky & Kirsner, 2000). As a result, they tend to follow established and procedural solution paths (Spence & Brucks, 1997; Wiley, 1998), are selective in their information search (Bettman & Park, 1980; Schraagen & Leijenhorst, 2001), and prioritize information relevant to their goals. Previous literature has detailed how consumers' prior knowledge of product categories, brand judgments, and their processing of message information contribute to the favorability of their evaluations.

The model shows that comparative evaluation may offer a supplementary push to the consumer to evaluate the copycats in leader brand presence, resulting in contrast. In the present research, comparative evaluation is induced, and evaluations are made from the consumer perspective.

## Research Methodology

The current study is descriptive and exploratory in nature to test the constructed research questions. The analysis is done through independent sample t-tests and paired comparisons to establish results. The study is conducted in a non-contrived setting at Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore, Pakistan. There is maximum interference on the researchers' part. The expected participants are business students with heterogeneous age groupings. Judgmental nonprobability sampling techniques are used, with data collection completed in about a month under cross-sectional settings. A total of 11 consumer packaged products of leader brands of different natures and their developed copycats were included to carry out the study. There are four independent variables (parameters= $p$ ) to explain three dependent variables. Considering the brand studies in consumer behavior, we concluded that a sample of 174 is included for each of the selected products, which may sufficiently serve the study purpose. Researchers believe that business students can effectively be utilized to obtain marketing information based on psychological buying and evaluation processes and are knowledgeable enough to give appropriate responses regarding copycats in experimental design. Convenience nonprobability is used to gather the data from the marketing students.

At first, the author visited all classes to identify all users and complete contemplation was made to know which classes were best for conducting research. The undertaken students belonged to M.Phil and bachelors enrolled in disciplines of marketing and management. The questionnaires were distributed, and the students were primarily informed about the experimental study. Of the 250 participants (planned sample), 190 completed the survey; 16 questionnaires are not useable. Therefore, the final sample includes 174 (female) respondents, resulting in a response rate of about 70%. Of the 174 female respondents ( $M_{age} = 1.94$ ,  $SD = .605$ ); about 72% are below 25 years (about 10% for the age bracket 26–40 and 18% are below 20). Since the research is conducted within an educational institution, a large proportion of the participants are students by occupation. Specifically, approximately 54.6% of the participants are bachelor's students, and roughly 62% belong to the upper economic class. The findings reveal that most students have previously studied marketing (approximately 61.5%), while around 39% lack a background in marketing.

## Measures

Copycat General Strategy (CGS) is measured by 5 items proposed by Horen et al. (2012). 5 sample items ( $\alpha$ , 0.36) for CGS include 'insincerity vs. sincerity, unacceptable vs. acceptable, unfair vs. fair, and untrustworthy vs. trustworthy, unreliable vs. reliable.

Imitation Types are measured by 3 items ( $\alpha$  0.816) proposed by Horen et al. (2012). The questionnaire has incorporated two copycats (featural and thematic). The leading brands used in respective product categories are Habib, cooking oil, Head and Shoulder, Bertoli, Puma,

Snuggle, Red Bull, Cadbury Dairy Milk, Nutella, and Nestle. Two copycats are developed for each product type. The sample items include association (yes, no), likability (1=dislikable, 7=likable), and similarity (1= not similar, 7= very similar).

Brand Names are measured by 3 items (alpha 0.835) proposed by (Horen et al., 2012). Three imitation brand types (featural, thematic, and feature with meaning) and one differentiated brand were developed compared to 2 leader brands, i.e., ‘Yogurt and Shoe apparel.’ Imitation type is manipulated in the following way: - For featural imitation, “Pestle is created for Nestle and Luma for Puma.” For thematic imitation, “Jaguar is created for Puma and Lush Liebi for Nestle.” For features with meaning imitation, “Restle for Nestle and Fuma for Puma.” For no imitation, “Imeko is created for Nestle and Tarron for Puma.” The sample items include familiarity (1=unfamiliar, 7=familiar), opinion (1= very bad, 7=good), and theme (1=unique, 7= whole category) of copycat with the leader brand suggested by (Horen et al., 2012).

Package Design is measured by using 7 point scale based on 7 items indicating their brand usage (1=never, 7=often ), feeling for leader brand (1=negative,7=positive), copycat package design attractiveness (1=unattractive/bad/ uninteresting,7=attractive/good/interesting), copycat package design similarity (1=low, 7=high), copycat imitation strategy (1=okay, 2=fair. 3=allowed), leader brand recall (1=No,7=very much) and copycat persuasion tactics (1=definitely not, 7= definitely Yes ) suggested by Horen et al ( 2012) with (alpha 0.807) constructed by Horen et al., (2012, 2010b). The product category chosen for this study is “Coffee”. Three package designs are systematically developed with two copycats and one differentiated brand. “Bufcafe” is created for featural, “Lezonge is created for thematic imitation, and Ceremelous is created for no imitation. The sample items include brand usage, leader brand evaluation, copycat package design attractiveness, copycat package design similarity, and copycat persuasion tactics. The reliability statistics for the total of 76 sample items indicate a high level of reliability (alpha=0.925). These values exceed the threshold of 0.7, which is considered acceptable for reliability statistics, according to Nunnally (1967). Therefore, we can conclude that the constructs are reliable.

## Results

The descriptive statistics show significant mean values for copycat strategy, imitation types, brand names, and package design, ranging from 2.58 to 4.74.

**Table 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	SD
1. Copycat Strategy	1.00	6.40	3.51	1.29
2. Featural Copycat	1.00	6.30	4.11	1.19
3. Thematic Copycat	1.00	6.30	3.87	1.15
4. Featural Brand Name	1.67	6.67	4.20	1.07
5. Thematic Brand Name	1.33	6.00	3.95	0.97
6. Feature with Meaning Brand Name	1.33	6.50	4.31	1.20
7. No Imitation Brand Name	1.00	7.00	3.11	1.13
8. Featural Package Design	1.57	6.29	4.74	0.99
9. Thematic Package Design	1.00	5.71	3.68	0.95
10. No Imitation Package Design	1.00	6.29	2.58	1.04
11. Featural Copycat Strategy	1.85	6.00	4.35	0.83
12. Thematic Copycat Strategy	1.80	5.81	3.83	0.78

In light of the research question of how consumers evaluate copycats as a marketing strategy, participants were asked to express their opinions regarding copycats as a marketing strategy. Participants evaluated fair marketing strategy with low mean scores (M=3.3) and acceptable strategy with high mean scores (M=3.6). However, it may be noted further that all the mean values of the five dimensions fall below the scale midpoint (4.00). Group comparison are made for consumers marketing subject background (with/without) and educational background (masters/bachelors) have no significant effect on the evaluation of copycat marketing strategy. Table 2 depicts how consumers view the copycat marketing strategy.

**Table 2**  
**Consumer Evaluation of the Copycat Strategy**

S#	Copycat strategy is viewed as	Mean	One Sample t-test
1	Sincere	3.454	**
2	Acceptable	3.684	**
3	Fair	3.391	**
4	Trustworthy	3.494	**
5	Reliable	3.517	**

In light of the research question, how do consumers evaluate copycats as an imitation strategy for the leader brand? Participants evaluated the thematic imitation type with mean scores (M=3.87) and the featural imitation type with mean scores (M=4.10). Group comparisons are made for participants marketing knowledge (with/without), and educational level (master/bachelor) shows no significant impact on their evaluation of both imitation types. However, featural copycats are liked by both groups, with a mean ranging (from M=4.08 to 4.15). Table 3 depicts how consumers view the types of imitation.

**Table 3**  
**Consumer Evaluation of the Imitation Type**

S#	Imitation Type	Mean	One Sample t-test
1	Featural	4.106	ns
2	Thematic	3.868	**

In light of the research question, how do consumers evaluate copycat brand names with the leader brand? Participants evaluated least as no imitation type (3.11) and relatively higher the featural with meaning brand name (4.31). To test the statistical significance, one sample t-test is applied, which indicates that participants' evaluation regarding no imitation and thematic brand names is below the midpoint (4.00, i.e., test value). Group comparisons are made for participants' marketing knowledge (with/without), and educational level (master/bachelor) shows no significant impact on their brand name evaluation; however, features with meaning copycats are liked by both groups with a mean ranging (M=4.12 to 4.36). Table 4 depicts how consumers view the types of imitation.

**Table 4**  
**Consumer Evaluation of the Imitation Type**

S#	Imitation Type	Mean	One Sample t-test
1	Featural	4.197	ns
2	Thematic	3.951	**
3	Feature with Meaning	4.310	ns
4	No Imitation	3.110	**

In light of the research question, how do consumers evaluate copycat package design with the leader brand? Participants evaluated least to no imitation type (M=2.58) and relatively high

to feature with meaning brand name (M=4.74). To test the statistical significance, one sample t-test is applied, which indicates that participants' evaluation regarding no imitation and thematic brand names is below the midpoint (4.75, i.e., test value). Group comparisons are conducted indicating that consumer marketing subject knowledge (with/without) and educational level (masters/bachelor) have no significant effect on copycat package design evaluation; however, means scores of both groups showed higher evaluation for featural package design strategy (M=4.62 to 4.81). Table 5 depicts how consumers view the design types.

**Table 5**  
**Consumer Evaluation of the Design Types**

S#	Package Design Types	Mean	One Sample t-test
1	Featural	4.740	ns
2	Thematic	3.681	**
3	No Imitation	2.580	**

*Copycat Strategy in General*

As per the research question, how do consumers evaluate copycat strategy generally? Participants evaluated thematic copycat strategy as low (M=3.83) below the midpoint (4.00, i.e., test value) and featural copycat strategy as higher (M=4.35). Group comparisons indicate that consumer marketing subject knowledge (with/without ) and educational level (masters/bachelor) have no significant effect on copycat as a general marketing strategy; this means scores of both groups showed higher evaluation for featural strategy (M=4.27 to 4.40). Table 5 depicts how consumers view the strategy types.

**Table 6**

S#	strategy types	Mean	One Sample t-test
1	Featural Copycat	4.348	ns
2	Thematic Copycat	3.833	**

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The current study is undertaken to empirically investigate the impact of copycat strategy on an explanatory variable copycat evaluation. The study indicates how copycat marketing strategy, types, brand names, and package design influence consumer copycat evaluation in a comparative mode. Previous research in marketing and similarity literature emphasized the threats copycats bring by imitating the features and themes of the existing leader brands. Fictitious copycats are developed for each leader brand varies in features, themes and meaning. The results are generated by primary data. The statistical techniques applied to the useable data of 174 participants allow us better to analyze the data in the discipline of marketing. There are six main results of this study. The discussion of these findings is explained as follows:

The first result of the study is the empirical evidence and a confirmation that consumers hold negative opinions about the Copycat as a Marketing Strategy. This may be due to the fact that consumers are exposed to different imitations in the marketplace and consult their naive and knowledge accessibility theories in making a brand choice, thus evaluating the copycat against the leader brand. In the current study, participants evaluated the copycats in the comparative mode in which they can compare the leader brand with the copycat type.

The second result demonstrates empirically that most consumers are confronted with two main types of imitations (featural and thematic). Depending upon the condition given by the previous researcher, consumers evaluated Feature Copycats as positive, negating the proposed

hypothesis. However, previous studies explained that thematic copycats are positively evaluated in leader brand presence as it has a meaningful theme attached to them rather than a meaningless string. The findings of prior research show dissimilarity to current results. Overall, consumers found thematic brand names diffusing but still evaluated the thematic brand names' uniqueness with the leader brand. Consumers find literal words more effective than imitating the semantic meaning.

The third result of the study provides empirical substantiation and support for the type of imitation strategy, i.e., brand name. Natural and Feature with Meaning Brand Names evaluated higher than thematic and no imitation copycat.

The fourth result replicates the findings of study 2, brand names, but with the package design. Featural Package Design receives comparatively higher evaluation than thematic and no imitation design. The perceived attractiveness is greater than the thematic and no imitation package design. Consumers find imitating the distinctive attributes more effective in associating copycat design with leader brand design. It may be noticed that consumers have a great inclination towards featural package design because of the use of attractive packaging, trade dress, logo and color scheme, etc.

The last results demonstrate that consumer personal characteristics, i.e., marketing subject knowledge (with or without) and educational level (bachelor's or master's), play no role in copycat evaluation. The consumer has individual differences in cognitive processing and mindset, thus affecting their copycat evaluation. Stimuli that are more blatant and direct are picked spontaneously by the consumers at first glance. It requires deep product involvement to determine that the copycat has imitated the underlying meaning; otherwise, what is attractive and appealing is sold and liked in the marketplace.

### *Research Implications*

The current study has important implications for theory and requires reconsidering similarity and copycatting concepts in light of consumer attitudes. Brand strategists and theorists require careful analysis of the copycatting tactics and marketing strategies eating up the leader brand market share. Current findings explain that high-similarity copycats are evaluated more positively in the non-comparative mode and negatively in the comparative mode (Howard et al., 2000; Ross et al., 1986; Warlop et al., 2004). Further investigation is required to analyze reasons for high similarity copycat liking, regardless of their “featural imitation.”

The research findings revealed unexpected results as consumers evaluated formidable copycats in leader brand presence. This allows for the required qualification and more comprehensive knowledge to cater to consumer cognitive feelings, as the consumer mind encodes both elementary and thematic information under evaluation mode. The empirical demonstration of the impact copycat strategy has on consumer attitude and evaluation. This issue had inadequately tapped into previous literature and required more elaboration from the consumer perspective, not the copycatters' perspective.

The managerial implications implies managers to develop the attributive elements so competitively so that copycats could not steal the featural essence of leader brand. Theme-based copycats receive less attention in marketing literature and remain undetected by consumers; this has resulted in consumers having less knowledge about thematic copycats, which are dangerous and are available in the market largely. It requires creative designers to create abstract themes competitively to save their brand from unlawful imitation practices. Furthermore, this study enables leading brand manufacturers to collaborate with brand stores or retailers to modify the physical arrangements of products on shelves. Consumers may adopt a different comparative mode by positioning copycats further away from leader brands. There is a possibility that consumers may evaluate high-similarity copycats negatively in the absence of leader brands. This insight can assist marketing strategists, and managers craft suitable

strategies for products of varying natures. For copycat producers, it is advisable to position products in an uncertain environment where consumers are unfamiliar with local products. When it comes to copying the medications, it is advisable for copycatters to formulate package designs with more halo resemblance to the leader brand. This would help consumers to evaluate the similarity of copycats with the well-known brand similarity.

### *Limitations and Directions*

Like other studies, the present research also has certain limitations. Firstly, the study respondents are exclusively female and are enrolled at the university level. Moreover, only students from business administration departments were chosen, with most possessing relevant academic backgrounds. Additionally, participants may not be familiar with international leader brands. Lastly, copycat evaluation was solely analyzed under a comparative mode.

The findings of the current study are unexpected and challenging; however, they elevate future research issues. First, if copycats are evaluated positively, how positively or negatively leader brand market sales are affected reverse is the case observed of copycats are negatively evaluated. Additionally, less recognized copycats with inferior quality sometimes fail to hurt leader brand success because of the quality assurance, brand image, status concern, consumer satisfaction, and price it provides. Second, driving the manager's attention toward trademark dilution. The study will meet the future directions of Morrin et al., 2000.

However, even if the Leader brand's success is not affected by copycatting practices, it can still hurt the leader brand through trademark dilution by increasing its reasonable level, which corrodes the leader brand's goodwill and equity. This creates brand confusion suggested by Balabanis and Craven (1997). Third, examining other contextual primes, cues, social conditions, and other factors may activate consumers in a shopping environment. Fifth, to advance the marketing science and trademark law, developing methodologies and theories would be a decisive tool for managers and strategists to institute strong similarity between the brand names and package design. Doing so would enlarge our findings to turn down the moderate and blatant copycats and help consumers differentiate between copycatters and leader brands. Sixth, the important factor not considered in past research is price. The last suggestion would be an addition of the composite variable amalgamating five modes of measuring variables as a single unit, namely a copycat strategy mix.

### *Conclusion*

The study has yielded unexpected yet intriguing findings. It confirms that consumers generally hold a negative opinion regarding copycatting strategies. Further exploration is needed to understand consumer responses to different types of copycats. Interestingly, consumers tend to associate featural copycats more positively with the leader brand, particularly in a comparative mode. The research also illustrates that consumers evaluate featural copycats positively due to their strong resemblance and association with the leader brand. Despite being aware of copycat tactics, consumers still purchase copycats, especially those with featural characteristics. Consequently, consumers generally prefer visually differentiated brands with appealing package designs and brand names. Past literature suggests that blatant imitations serve as strong cues of similarity and association. The study paves the way for future research, indicating that when participants are informed about imitation types before evaluation, high similarity copycats are evaluated negatively, whereas moderate similarity copycats are evaluated positively. To mitigate bias, this research aims to analyze consumer perceptions by informing them about the existence of copycats and the aspects in which they imitate leader brands. The study also reveals that consumers evaluate brand names and package designs

more positively when closely imitating attributive qualities with greater literal similarity. In general, consumers tend to evaluate featural strategies more favorably than thematic ones, especially in a comparative mode. Overall, the study offers new insights into consumer evaluation of copycats across various variables of interest and provides several implications for establishing and maintaining relationships with consumers that encourage them to evaluate copycats compared to the original brand.

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