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### **published in**

Journal of Consumer Research  
2017

### **DOI (link to publisher)**

[10.1093/jcr/ucx065](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucx065)

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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### **citation for published version (APA)**

Van Horen, F., & Pieters, R. (2017). Out-of-Category Brand Imitation: Product Categorization Determines Copycat Evaluation. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44(4), 816-832. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucx065>

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# Out-of-Category Brand Imitation: Product Categorization Determines Copycat Evaluation

FEMKE van HOREN  
RIK PIETERS

Copycat brands imitate the trade dress of other brands, such as their brand name, logo, and packaging design. Copycats typically operate in the core product category of the imitated brand under the assumption that such “in-category imitation” is most effective. In contrast, four experiments demonstrate the benefits of “out-of-category imitation” for copycats, and the harmful effect on the imitated brand. Copycats are evaluated more positively in a related category, because consumers appraise the similarity between copycat and imitated brand more positively than in the core category, *independent* of the perceived similarity itself. This is due to a reduced salience of norms regarding imitation in the related category. Moreover, the results show a damaging backlash effect of out-of-category imitation on the general evaluation of the imitated brand and on its key perceived product attributes. The findings replicate across student, MTurk, and representative consumer samples; multiple product categories; and forms of brand imitation. This research demonstrates that out-of-category brand imitation helps copycat brands and hurts national leading brands much more than has so far been considered, which has managerial and public policy implications.

*Keywords:* product imitation, copycats, categorization, similarity

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## INTRODUCTION

Copycat brands imitate the trade dress of other brands, such as their brand name, logo, and packaging design, to take advantage of the positive associations of the imitated brands. Whereas counterfeit brands try to look identical to the imitated brand (e.g., a fake Rolex watch), copycat brands try to look similar but are not identical to

the imitated brand (Zaichkowsky 2006). When successful, copycatting increases consumers’ liking, willingness to pay, and choice rate of the copycat brand (Loken, Ross, and Hinkle 1986; Van Horen and Pieters 2012b, 2013; Warlop and Alba 2004). Copycatting is a common strategy among retail and upcoming brands: over 50% of the store brands in supermarkets appear to be some form of copycatting (Steenkamp and Geyskens 2013). For these reasons, it is important to understand the determinants of consumers’ evaluation of copycat brands, the conditions upon which brand imitation is successful for the copycat brand, and the potential negative implications for the imitated brand.

A growing research stream has gained insight into the influence that the similarity between the copycat and imitated brand has on the effectiveness of copycatting (Aribarg et al. 2014; Howard, Kerin, and Gengler 2000; Loken et al. 1986; Satomura, Wedel, and Pieters 2014; Van Horen and Pieters 2012a, 2012b; Warlop and Alba 2004). Such research has capitalized on “in-category brand imitation.” This particular research has systematically

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*Darren Dahl served as editor and Page Moreau served as associate editor for this article.*

*Advance Access publication April 27, 2017*

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varied the degree of similarity between the imitated and imitating brand, but has kept the product category in which copycatting takes place constant, namely the category in which the imitated brand is positioned. It rests on the common belief in marketing and trademark law that copycats potentially benefit most from such in-category brand imitation (Zaichkowsky 2006). As a case in point, the owner of the Red Bull energy drink accused the owner of Vicks Red Energy candy of parasitizing on its brand's equity, because Vicks used the words "Red" and "Energy" combined with a picture of a bull on its package. The court ruled against the claim of Red Bull, as Vicks Red Energy was not sold in the core category of the imitated brand (energy drinks) but rather in a related yet different category (candy), and thus supposedly would not benefit from the copycatting (Red Bull GmbH v. Procter and Gamble 2006).

But is it indeed the case that copycat brands do not unduly gain from such "out-of-category brand imitation"? To our knowledge, our research is the first to address this question. Counter to common beliefs, we propose that out-of-category brand imitation may actually benefit the copycat brand more than in-category brand imitation does and, in addition, that such a strategy poses serious threats to the equity of the imitated brands. We reason that such effects are due to the activation of category norms that consumers have about imitation. We predict that copycats are evaluated more positively when positioned in a related yet different category as compared to the core category of the imitated brand. Furthermore, we predict that this is due to how similarity is appraised across categories: The same copycat is judged to be bad and inappropriate when categorized in the core category of the imitated brand, but as good and appropriate in a related yet different product category—even when the copycat and imitated brand are perceived to be equally similar in both product categories.

Four experiments provide support for our predictions. They are the first evidence that out-of-category brand imitation can be more beneficial for copycat brands, which is counter to the prevailing beliefs in marketing practice and trademark law. In addition, the experiments identify a fundamentally different process than emphasized in previous copycatting research (Loken et al. 1986; Van Horen and Pieters 2012a, 2012b; Warlop and Alba 2004). Instead of differences in *perception* of similarity (low vs. high) underlying copycat evaluation, our experiments show that differences in *appraisal* of similarity (bad vs. good) crucially account for copycat evaluations. Our research is thus the first to demonstrate the pivotal role of category norms in copycatting research. Finally, it provides evidence that instead of in-category imitation, it is out-of-category imitation that hurts the imitated brand most. The potential harmful effects of out-of-category imitation on the equity of the established brand have hitherto been neglected or underestimated, which our research hopes to correct.

## PRODUCT CATEGORIZATION AND COPYCAT EVALUATION

Most brand imitation in the marketplace occurs "in-category," and this is what trademark law has focused on (Mitchell and Kearney 2002; Satomura et al. 2014). Such copycatting is based on the idea that the transfer of positive associations from the imitated to the copycat brand is stronger when those associations are easily activated, which is most likely to occur when imitation occurs in-category.

However, out-of-category brand imitation is prominent as well and such cases have been brought to court, with varying rulings. The earlier example of Red Bull is but one case. In a similar vein, Haribo, manufacturer of "Golden bears" bear-shaped gummy candy, claimed that the maker of Lindt chocolate could profit from the brand equity built up by Haribo by selling gold-wrapped bear-shaped chocolates (Haribo GmbH and Co. KG v. Lindt and Sprungli Group, 2011). The court ruled against the Haribo claim, reasoning that gummy candy and chocolate are different categories, and thus hard to confuse. These are not isolated cases. Other prominent examples of such out-of-category imitation include the court cases of Arc International v. Yiwu Lan Zhi Yun Glass Handcraft (2012), Bacardi and Company Limited v. Bat Beverage GmbH (2007), Church and Dwight Co., Inc. v. Helene Curtis Industries, Inc. (1977), G-Star International v. Pepsico (2011), and Visa International Service Association v. Visa Motel Corp. (1985). Although in-category brand imitation is the prevailing strategy, intellectual property lawyers are cognizant of out-of-category imitation. Yet the final court rulings are generally based on the presumed low likelihood of confusion in case of out-of-category imitation, and research has shown that such confusion may not be the largest threat (Aribarg et al. 2014; Van Horen and Pieters 2012a, 2012b). Based on categorization theory, we posit that other, more subtle mechanisms are at play, and that these might actually make out-of-category imitation more helpful for copycat brands than in-category imitation, but more harmful for the imitated brands.

## OUT-OF-CATEGORY IMITATION

Similarity and familiarity are two aspects of comparative judgment that can contribute to copycat evaluation. Whereas similarity involves a direct comparison between the copycat and imitated brand, familiarity is more indirect and transient, requiring no direct comparison between copycat and imitated brand. Familiar stimuli are more fluently processed, and this is generally liked (Fang, Singh, and Ahluwalia 2007; Winkielman et al. 2003). Similarity is generally liked as well. When participants were made to believe that photographed faces of others looked similar to

their own, they rated these others as more likeable and more familiar (Moreland and Zajonc 1982).

This would suggest that higher degrees of familiarity and similarity are generally appraised positively. Recent studies, however, indicate that familiarity and similarity appraisal is malleable and crucially depends on consumers' naive theories and beliefs (Briñol, Petty, and Tormala 2006; Unkelbach 2006). For example, when people believed that fluently processed stimuli were new instead of old, the appraisal of fluency was reversed (Unkelbach 2006). Likewise, a standard positive effect of fluency emerged for the evaluation of common products, but fluency was appraised negatively for special-occasion products because it made these appear more common (Pocheptsova, Labroo, and Dhar 2010).

Building on this, we speculate that a copycat's similarity and familiarity with the imitated brand are appraised differently depending on the product category it is positioned in. Consumers have knowledge and expectations about the existing brands in product categories, and spontaneously form category norms (Loken, Barsalou, and Joiner 2008). For example, consumers may hold norms pertaining to the typical performance of brands in a category, or they may hold norms related to the marketing strategies or the tactics that are frequently used by brands in that category. These norms dictate what is typical, appropriate, and acceptable in a particular product category (Anderson and Salisbury 2003; Barone and Jewell 2012) and serve as internal standards to which new products in the category are compared and judged. Strategies that correspond to category norms should be viewed as appropriate, while those that violate such norms should be perceived as relatively inappropriate for brands to use. When brands use strategies that violate the norm, they are likely to be penalized in the form of impaired brand attitudes or lower purchase intentions (Barone and Jewell 2012).

Copycats imitate the trade dress of existing brands to piggyback on the latter's positive associations (Collins-Dodd and Zaichkowsky 1999). For motives of fair competition, brands are expected to differentiate themselves from other brands in the market with unique package designs, especially when they are direct competitors (Aaker 1991; Keller 1993). High-similarity copycats that enter the market in the same category as the imitated brand violate these consumer expectations. Thus, such a strategy is likely to be considered as inappropriate and bad, prompting a negative reaction (Barone and Jewell 2012; Friestad and Wright 1994; Warlop and Alba 2004). Conversely, copycats are less likely to be perceived as a direct competitor of the imitated brand when entering a related yet different category. As the copycat's domain is not the domain of the imitated brand, category norms are not violated and brand imitation is more likely to be considered appropriate and good. This should contribute to positive copycat evaluation. Thus, the same high-similarity copycat will be *appraised* differently

depending on the category it enters, due to the salience of category norms. Furthermore, we expect that such out-of-category imitation has a much more perilous effect on the imitated brand than so far acknowledged. Even though the copycat and imitated brand are not direct competitors when out-of-category imitation takes place, the copycat may still harm the imitated brand through dilution of its associations, decreasing the specific attribute beliefs that consumers have about the imitated brand.

## THE CURRENT RESEARCH

Four experiments test the idea that copycat evaluation critically depends on product category membership, and thus that the same high-similarity copycat can be evaluated positively or negatively depending on the product category in which it is positioned. Counter to the idea that transfer of positive associations is highest when a copycat brand is positioned in the same product category as the imitated brand, we hypothesize that copycats are evaluated more positively when positioned in a related yet different category than in the core category of the imitated brand (hypothesis 1). Further, instead of differences in perceptions of similarity (low vs. high), we predict that the appraisal of similarity (inappropriate vs. appropriate) predicts copycat success in the related versus core category because of the activation of category norms (hypothesis 2). Finally, we predict that out-of-category imitation is more harmful to the imitated brand than in-category imitation (hypothesis 3). Support for these hypotheses would extend prior consumer behavior and trademark research that has solely focused on the influence of varying levels of similarity between imitated brands and copycats in a single category. It has, however, not yet considered the evaluation of the same high-similarity copycat in different categories, the appraisal processes driving these evaluations, the effects of in- and out-of-category imitation on the imitated brand, or the role of category norm activation.

Experiment 1 demonstrates the benefit of out-of-category imitation for copycats (hypothesis 1), using brand names as stimuli. Experiment 2 tests the generalizability of the pattern of results using a large, representative sample of regular consumers. The heterogeneous sample in experiment 2 also enables us to address an additional question, namely whether familiarity with the imitated brand moderates the effects. When familiarity with the imitated brand is high and imitation takes place in the core category, the norm that products should differentiate and not imitate is even more likely to be activated, which should decrease the evaluation of copycats. In the related category, this norm will be less salient, and because highly familiar participants are likely to recognize the copycat as something they know, positive associations are expected to transfer to the copycat, which should increase copycat evaluation.

Experiment 3 examines in further detail the mechanisms that account for the benefits of out-of-category imitation for copycats. It finds that even when similarity between copycat and imitated brand is perceived to be equally high in both product categories, copycats are judged to be good and appropriate in the related category, but bad and inappropriate in the core category, which mediates the differences in copycat evaluation (hypothesis 2). It uses brand packages instead of brand names to generalize the findings across relevant marketing stimuli in copycatting cases and includes an unrelated category to demonstrate that at least some overlap is required to make the imitated brand relevant for the evaluation of the copycat. Experiment 4 demonstrates the backlash effect of out-of-category imitation on the imitated brand (hypothesis 3). It shows that harm is reflected not only in the general evaluation of the imitated brand, but also in its key perceived product attributes, which form the basis for its brand equity. Furthermore, in contrast to the general idea that in-category imitation is highly threatening for the imitated brand, it demonstrates that in-category imitation actually results in an increased evaluation of the imitated brand.

## EXPERIMENT 1: CATEGORIZATION

Experiment 1 tests the idea that product category membership determines copycat evaluation. We predict that the same high-similarity copycat is evaluated negatively in the core category of the imitated brand, but positively in a related yet different category. Experiment 1 uses brand name imitation as one recurring class of trademark infringement (see [www.darts-ip.com](http://www.darts-ip.com)).

### Method

*Participants, Design, and Stimuli.* One hundred seventy-one undergraduate students (125 males,  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.83$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ) were randomly assigned to a condition of a 2 (copycat name: Vabello, Livea)  $\times$  2 (category: lip balm, hand cream) between-subjects design. Lip balm and hand cream were selected as product categories. The products in these two categories are related (both are personal care), but are also different in their attributes (shape, consistency, packaging) and located in different sections in the store. Labello (lip balm) and Nivea (hand cream) were chosen as the imitated national brands. These national brands have the highest market share in the local market, have a distinctive and unique brand name, and are not represented as a brand extension in the other category. Because brand name similarity in court cases is typically assessed as the number of identical letters and their placement in the name (Mitchell and Kearney 2002; [www.darts-ip.com](http://www.darts-ip.com)), the brand names “Vabello” and “Livea” were selected for the copycats. Only the first letter of the imitated brand name was replaced to create high similarity.

*Procedure and Measures.* Data collection took place on personal computers in the behavioral lab. Participants were informed that a new brand was about to be launched in the lip balm (hand cream) product category in addition to the existing brands in the local market, Blistex, Purol, and Labello (Unicura, Atrix, and Nivea). Next, they read that the new brand in the product category lip balm (hand cream) would be Vabello (Livea). The new brand name (either Vabello or Livea) was evaluated on four semantic differential items with seven-point response alternatives (negative–positive, bad–good, uninteresting–interesting, unattractive–attractive), which were averaged to create the evaluation scale ( $\alpha > .87$ ). In addition, participants were asked to indicate their willingness to buy (“Would you consider buying this brand?”), on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much), and their willingness to pay for a hand cream (price range: € 2.00 and € 5.50) or a lip balm (price range: € 1.50 and € 3.50) with this brand name. As control variables, participants indicated their familiarity with the imitated brand Labello (Nivea), from 1 (not familiar at all) to 7 (highly familiar); evaluation of the imitated brand, from 1 (negative) to 7 (positive); and purchase frequency of the imitated brand, from 1 (never) to 7 (very often).

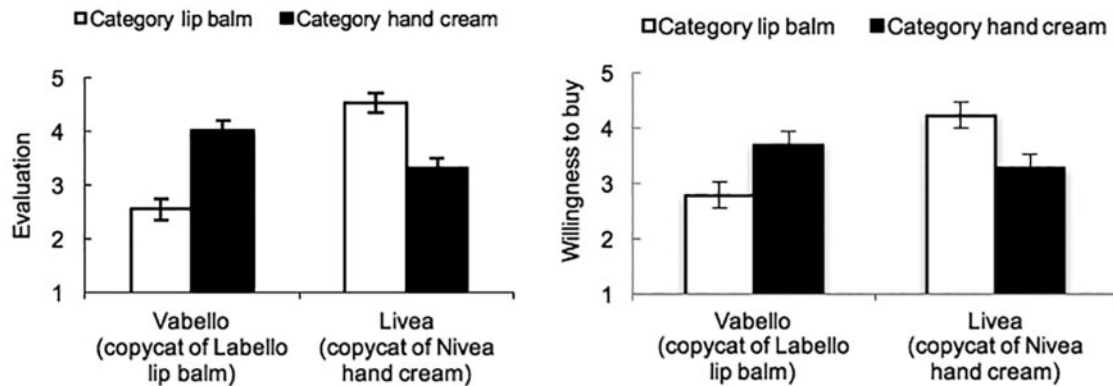
### Results

*Evaluation.* The results revealed the hypothesized significant interaction effect between brand name and product category ( $F(1, 167) = 50.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .23$ ). The main effect of brand name was also significant ( $F(1, 167) = 11.51$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .06$ ), whereas the main effect of product category was not ( $F(1, 167) = 0.49$ ,  $p = .49$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .003$ ; see figure 1, left panel). Simple-effect tests showed, as predicted, that the copycat name Vabello was evaluated more negatively in the core category lip balm ( $M = 2.55$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) than in the related category hand cream ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ;  $F(1, 167) = 30.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .15$ ), whereas the copycat name Livea was evaluated more negatively in the core category hand cream ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) than in the related category lip balm ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ;  $F(1, 167) = 20.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .11$ ).

*Willingness to Buy.* Consistent with the results on evaluation, the results on the willingness-to-buy measure revealed a significant interaction effect between brand name and product category ( $F(1, 167) = 15.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .08$ ). The main effect of brand name was also significant ( $F(1, 167) = 4.71$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ ), whereas the main effect of product category was not ( $F(1, 167) = 0.01$ ,  $p = .91$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .00$ ; see figure 1, right panel). As predicted, simple-effect tests showed that the purchase intention of the copycat with the brand name Vabello was lower in the core category lip balm ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) than in the related category hand cream ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ;

FIGURE 1

COPYCAT EVALUATION AND WILLINGNESS TO BUY DEPEND ON PRODUCT CATEGORIZATION: EXPERIMENT 1



NOTE.—Evaluation and willingness to buy range from 1 to 7. Error bars indicate  $\pm 1$  SE of the mean.

$F(1, 167) = 7.14, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .04$ ), whereas purchase intention of the copycat with the brand name Livea was lower in the core category hand cream ( $M = 3.28, SD = 1.75$ ) than in the related category lip balm ( $M = 4.23, SD = 1.31; F(1, 167) = 8.11, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .05$ ). None of the control variables affected the evaluation and willingness-to-buy measures when entered as covariates (all  $ps > .10$ ).

**Willingness to Pay.** Because the response scales for the willingness-to-pay measure differed across the two categories, they were z-transformed before being averaged. Again, as hypothesized, the results revealed a significant interaction effect between brand name and product category ( $F(1, 167) = 5.19, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .03$ ). The main effects of brand name and product category were not significant ( $F(1, 167) = 2.01, p = .16, \eta_p^2 = .01$  and  $F(1, 167) = 0.00, p = .996, \eta_p^2 = .00$ , respectively). Simple-effect analyses showed further that consumers were willing to pay less for a product with the name Vabello in the core category lip balm ( $M = -0.28, SD = 0.95$ ) than in the related category hand cream ( $M = 0.06, SD = 0.98$ ), but this difference did not reach significance ( $F(1, 167) = 2.59, p = .11, \eta_p^2 = .02$ ). For the product with the brand name Livea the opposite pattern emerged: consumers were willing to pay less for a product with the name Livea in the core category hand cream ( $M = -0.06, SD = 1.03$ ) than in the related category lip balm ( $M = 0.27, SD = 0.98$ ), but again this difference did not reach significance ( $F(1, 167) = 2.60, p = .11, \eta_p^2 = .02$ ).

As hypothesized, copycat evaluation, purchase intention, and willingness to pay were indeed contingent on product categorization. Evaluation was more positive, and purchase intention and willingness to pay were higher, when a highly similar copycat brand was positioned in a related

yet different product category than in the core category of the imitated brand.

## EXPERIMENT 2: GENERALIZATION

Experiment 1 was conducted with a sample of students, and these are homogenous in age, educational level, and brand familiarity with the imitated brands. Experiment 2 ( $N = 578$ ) was designed to examine the generalizability of the results to the general population and to other product categories. It allowed us in addition to explore the influence of naturally occurring differences in familiarity with the imitated brand. There were no notable effects of the covariates on copycat evaluation in experiment 1, such as for familiarity with the imitated brand. This might have been due to range restrictions in combination with the relatively small sample size.

Relying on a larger sample size and more, naturally occurring, heterogeneity in brand familiarity, we explored the idea that consumers' familiarity with the imitated brand is positively related to copycat evaluation in the related category, but negatively related to copycat evaluation in the core category. That is, when the imitated brand is highly familiar and thus accessible, it is more likely to be used as a comparison standard in direct similarity judgments (Polk et al. 2002). The more accessible the imitated brand, the more likely a high-similarity copycat in the core category violates consumer expectations to differentiate (and not imitate), which should prompt a negative response. However, when positioned in a related category, category norms are less strongly activated, and positive associations due to high brand familiarity are more likely to transfer to the copycat brand. The opposite effects are expected for low familiarity. This would imply a crossover interaction effect of brand familiarity on copycat evaluation

(negative in the core category and positive in an unrelated category). Finding support for this reasoning would imply that the more familiar the imitated brand in the core category is, the better off copycat brands are to position themselves in a category other than the imitated brand's core category.

## Method

A random sample of 578 paid members (281 males, age range 18–65,  $M_{\text{age}} = 46.37$ ,  $SD = 10.86$ ) of a nationally representative online consumer panel was randomly assigned to a condition of a 2 (copycat name: Silka, Lutella)  $\times$  2 (category: chocolate bar, chocolate spread) between-subjects design.

Milk chocolate and chocolate spread were selected as product categories. Again, the products in these two categories are related (both products are sweet and contain chocolate), but are also different (one is a snack, whereas the other is a sandwich spread, and they are located in different sections of the supermarket). Within these categories, Milka and Nutella were selected as the imitated national brands, as these brands are the clear market leaders in the local market, have a distinctive and unique brand name, and are not represented as a brand extension in the other category. The brand names “Silka” and “Lutella” were selected as copycat names, representing high similarity with the leader brands.

Instructions were similar to experiment 1: participants were informed that a new brand was about to be launched in the chocolate bar (chocolate spread) product category in addition to the existing brands, Cote d'Or, Swiss chocolate, Milka, and Lindt (Duo Penotti, Chocoreale, Nutella, and Kwatta). Because of the consumer panel's restrictions on the length of the questionnaire, the evaluation measure consisted of three (negative–positive, unattractive–attractive, bad–good,  $\alpha = .94$ ), instead of four, semantic differential items, and a willingness-to-buy item was included. As in experiment 1, purchase frequency of, familiarity with, and evaluation of the imitated brand were included as covariates. For all measures, seven-point response scales were used. Because of the significant, large correlation between the items tapping familiarity with and evaluation of the imitated brand ( $r = .50$ ,  $p < .001$ ), we constructed an overall imitated brand familiarity measure by averaging across these two items. Analyses on the individual items gave similar results. Finally, information on participant's age, income, work/daily activity, education level, and household size and composition was collected.

## Results

*Evaluation.* Consistent with the findings from experiment 1, a significant interaction effect between brand name and category on copycat evaluation emerged ( $F(1, 574) = 20.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ ). The main effect of brand name was not significant ( $F(1, 574) = 1.93$ ,  $p = .17$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .003$ )

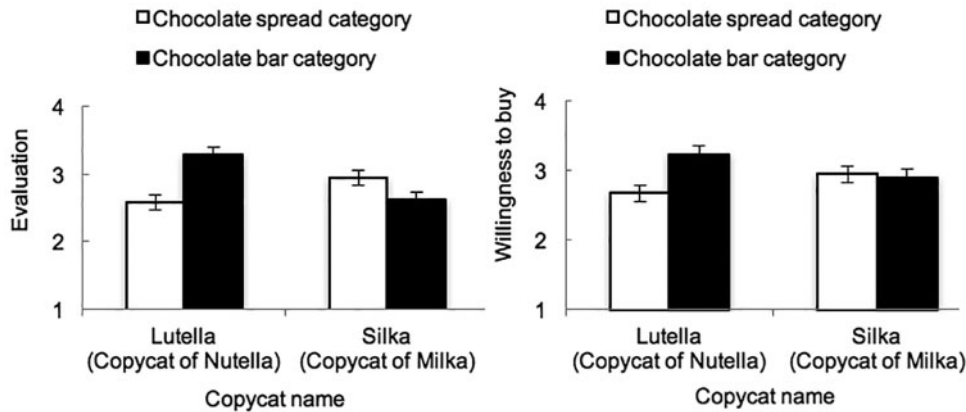
and the main effect of product category was marginally significant ( $F(1, 574) = 2.81$ ,  $p = .09$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ ). Simple effect tests showed, as predicted, that the copycat brand Lutella was evaluated more negatively in the core category chocolate spread ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) than in the related category chocolate bars ( $M = 3.29$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ;  $F(1, 574) = 20.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ ). Conversely, the copycat brand Silka was evaluated more negatively in the core category chocolate bar ( $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) than in the related category chocolate spread ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ;  $F(1, 574) = 3.98$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ , see figure 2, left panel).

*Willingness to Buy.* The interaction effect of brand name and category was marginally significant at  $p = .06$  ( $F(1, 574) = 3.57$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ ). The main effect of brand name was not significant ( $F(1, 574) = 0.02$ ,  $p = .97$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .00$ ) and the effect of product category was ( $F(1, 574) = 7.85$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ ) (see figure 2, right panel). Simple-effect analyses showed, as predicted, that participants were less willing to buy the copycat brand Lutella in the core category chocolate spread ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) than in the related category chocolate bar ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ), ( $F(1, 574) = 11.40$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ ). Purchase intention of the copycat brand Silka did not differ between conditions ( $p = .53$ ).

*Familiarity with the Imitated Brand.* When familiarity with the imitated brand was included in the analysis, the two-way interaction between brand name and category was significant ( $F(1, 570) = 11.62$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ ), but also, and importantly, the three-way interaction with familiarity with the imitated brand ( $F(1, 570) = 9.89$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ ) was significant. We then tested whether familiarity with the imitated brand indeed moderates categorization effects on copycat evaluation. To facilitate interpretation, we first created a new category variable with two conditions, where positioning of the copycat in the core versus a related category was collapsed over brand name. Then copycat evaluation was regressed on the variables familiarity with the imitated brand (mean-centered) and category (contrast coded;  $-1 = \text{core}$ ,  $1 = \text{related}$ ). The analysis revealed a significant interaction effect between category and brand familiarity ( $b = 0.20$ ,  $t = 3.32$ ,  $p = .001$ ). We examined the slopes of brand familiarity in separate regressions across the category variable levels. As hypothesized, the slope of brand familiarity was significant and negative in the core category ( $b = -0.27$ ,  $t = -2.67$ ,  $p = .01$ ) and significant and positive in the related category ( $b = 0.18$ ,  $t = 2.04$ ,  $p = .04$ ). Figure 3 plots the interaction. In support of our theorizing, the more familiar and positive consumers are about the imitated brand, the more negative they are about the copycat when it is in the core category of this brand. Yet familiarity has a positive effect on copycat evaluation when imitation takes place in a related category. Then, the more familiar and positive consumers are

FIGURE 2

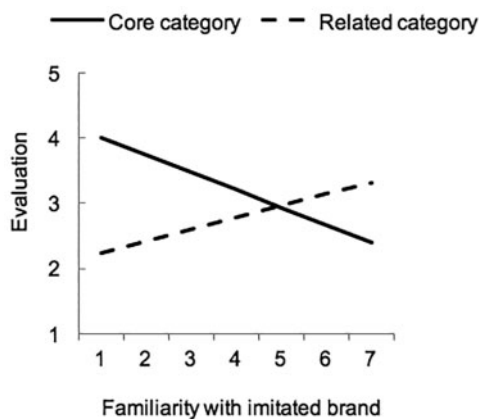
COPYCAT EVALUATION AND WILLINGNESS TO BUY DEPEND ON PRODUCT CATEGORIZATION: EXPERIMENT 2



NOTE.—Evaluation and willingness to buy scales range from 1 to 7. Error bars indicate  $\pm 1$  SE of the mean.

FIGURE 3

BRAND FAMILIARITY MODERATES COPYCAT EVALUATION: EXPERIMENT 2



NOTE.—Evaluation scale ranges from 1 to 7.

about the imitated brand, the more positive they are about the copycat.

**Control Variables.** Purchase frequency, gender, age, education, work/daily activity, family status, household size, and income had no significant effects on copycat evaluation (all  $p$ s > .10). An unexpected significant three-way interaction emerged when “having a partner” (yes, no) was included in the model ( $F(1, 570) = 5.53, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .01$ ). Further exploration demonstrated that the predicted two-way interaction between category and brand name was significant for participants who did or did not live with a partner, but was much more pronounced for those who did

not live with a partner ( $F(1, 130) = 20.05, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .13$ ) than for those who did ( $F(1, 440) = 7.86, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .02$ ). The reasons for this effect are less clear, but we report it for full disclosure. It did not influence the main findings.

Experiment 2 supports the generalizability of the findings across samples and types of marketing stimuli. It reveals that consumers who are familiar with and positive about the imitated brand are even more inclined to positively evaluate copycats when these are positioned in a related category, but to evaluate these more negatively when positioned in the core category.

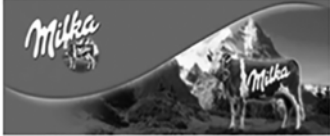



### EXPERIMENT 3: NORMS

Experiment 3 makes three contributions. First, it adds a control condition to establish whether imitation in the core category hurts copycat evaluation, whether imitation in a related category helps copycat evaluation, or both. We predict that a high-similarity copycat will be evaluated more positively when positioned in a related yet different category than when positioned in, respectively, the core category or a completely unrelated category. Second, it explores the mediating process, examining whether valence of familiarity and appropriateness of similarity account for the effect of categorization on copycat evaluation. It tests the idea that differences in levels of familiarity and similarity between copycat and imitated brand *by themselves* do not have a positive or negative impact on copycat evaluation, but instead that the extent to which the familiarity is deemed *good* and the extent to which the similarity is deemed *appropriate* jointly determine copycat evaluation. Empirical support for this hypothesized process would imply that instead of mere



FIGURE 4

STIMULI IN EXPERIMENT 3

<b>A</b> Imitated national brand	<b>B</b> Copycat in core category: Chocolate bar
	
<b>C</b> Copycat in related category: Chocolate spread	<b>D</b> Copycat in unrelated category: Spreadable butter
	

similarity and familiarity, the normative appraisals of similarity and familiarity drive copycat evaluation, and that these appraisals are specific to the product category. Finally, experiment 3 uses visual packaging designs rather than brand names (used in experiments 1 and 2) to establish the generalizability of the findings across relevant marketing stimuli in copycatting cases.

## Method

*Participants, Design, and Stimuli.* Two hundred eighteen paid undergraduate students (106 males,  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.49$ ,  $SD = 2.68$ ; two participants did not report their age) were randomly assigned to a condition of a three-group design (category: spreadable butter (unrelated/control condition), chocolate spread (related), chocolate bar (core)). A professional graphic designer developed the copycat package to be highly similar to the imitated brand Milka in the chocolate bar product category (pretest  $N = 18$ ;  $M = 7.50$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ;  $t(17) = 8.19$ ,  $p < .001$ , tested against the midpoint of the scale [5]). The spreadable butter product category was selected as the control condition because it is unrelated to the core category of the imitated brand (chocolate bar), but is a dairy product and thus the copycat package could realistically be introduced in this category. All participants saw the same package design, the only difference being that the category name was adapted according to the condition. Figure 4 shows the target stimuli.

*Procedure and Measures.* General setup was as in experiments 1 and 2. Participants were informed that a new brand would be introduced in the chocolate bar (chocolate

spread, spreadable butter) product category. Participants were asked to imagine themselves in front of the shelf of the respective category in the supermarket and were shown a picture of the available brands in that category. The copycat package was evaluated on the same evaluation and willingness-to-buy measures as used in experiment 1. These measures were highly correlated ( $r = .76$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and averaged into a single evaluation measure. Participants then indicated to what extent the package of Lecha looked familiar to them, from 1 (very unfamiliar) to 7 (very familiar), and how they evaluated this feeling of familiarity, from 1 (bad feeling) to 7 (good feeling). Participants also indicated to what extent they judged the new (copycat) brand to be similar to the Milka package, from 1 (very low similarity) to 7 (very high similarity), and how appropriate they considered this similarity to be, from 1 (very inappropriate) to 7 (very appropriate). The same control variables as in experiments 1 and 2 were included.

## Results

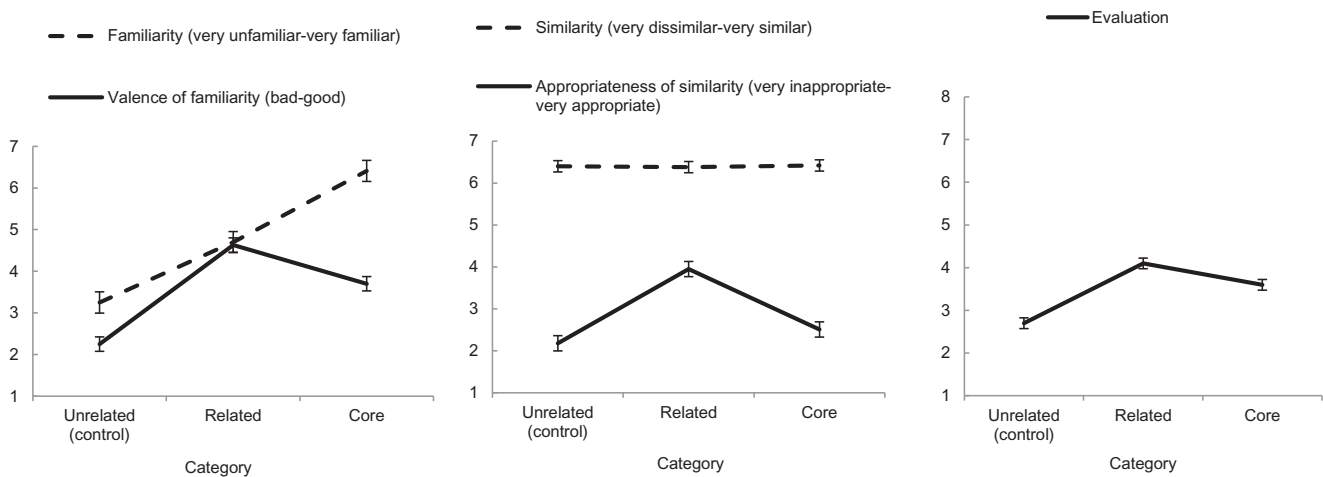
*Evaluation.* The results of a MANOVA revealed a significant effect of condition on evaluation of the copycat ( $F(2, 215) = 31.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .23$ ). As hypothesized, the copycat was evaluated more positively in the related category chocolate spread than in the control category spreadable butter ( $F(1, 215) = 62.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .23$ ), and more positively than in the core category chocolate bars ( $F(1, 215) = 8.02$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ ). Table 1 presents the descriptives. None of the control variables affected copycat evaluation ( $ps > .10$ ).

TABLE 1  
DESCRIPTIVES: EXPERIMENT 3

	Imitation in unrelated category: Spreadable butter ( $N = 72$ )	Imitation in related category: Chocolate spread ( $N = 73$ )	Imitation in core category: Chocolate bar ( $N = 73$ )
Copycat evaluation	2.70 (0.93) <sup>a</sup>	4.10 (1.21) <sup>c</sup>	3.60 (1.05) <sup>b</sup>
Familiarity	3.25 (2.65) <sup>a</sup>	4.70 (2.42) <sup>b</sup>	6.41 (1.10) <sup>c</sup>
Valence of familiarity	2.25 (1.14) <sup>a</sup>	4.63 (1.51) <sup>c</sup>	3.70 (1.71) <sup>b</sup>
Similarity	6.40 (1.33) <sup>a</sup>	6.38 (1.30) <sup>a</sup>	6.42 (0.71) <sup>a</sup>
Appropriateness of similarity	2.18 (1.50) <sup>a</sup>	3.95 (1.71) <sup>b</sup>	2.51 (1.41) <sup>a</sup>

NOTE.—All measures are on seven-point response scales (1 to 7). Means in rows with different subscripts differ significantly at  $p < .001$ . Order of superscript-letters is in ascending order of the size of mean.

FIGURE 5  
PRODUCT CATEGORIZATION AND COPYCAT EVALUATION: EXPERIMENT 3



NOTE.—Familiarity, valence of familiarity, similarity, appropriateness of similarity, and evaluation scales range from 1 to 7. Error bars indicate  $\pm 1$  SE of the mean.

*Familiarity, Similarity, and Their Normative Appraisals.* We predicted that differences in copycat evaluation are not due to the sheer level of familiarity of the copycat, or of the level of similarity between copycat and imitated brand, but rather due to how the familiarity and similarity are appraised—that is, to what extent the familiarity feels good or bad, and whether the similarity is considered appropriate or inappropriate. The three conditions differed significantly in familiarity of the copycat ( $F(2, 215) = 38.71, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .27$ ) and in the appraisal of familiarity ( $F(2, 215) = 48.09, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .31$ ). Specifically, the copycat looked more familiar in the core than in the related category ( $F(1, 215) = 22.82, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .10$ ) and more familiar in the related than in the unrelated category ( $F(1, 215) = 16.22, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$ ). Importantly and as hypothesized, familiarity was, however, appraised more positively in the related category than in the core category ( $F(1, 215) = 14.62, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$ ) and the unrelated category ( $F(1, 215) = 94.77, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .31$ ).

In addition, the three categories did not differ significantly in similarity between copycat brand and imitated brand ( $F(2, 215) = 0.02, p = .98, \eta_p^2 = .00$ ): perceived similarity was very high in all three categories (table 1). However, and as predicted, the categories did differ in the appropriateness of the similarity ( $F(2, 215) = 26.89, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .20$ ). As hypothesized, the same level of similarity was deemed more appropriate in the related category than in the core category ( $F(1, 215) = 31.67, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .13$ ) and the unrelated category ( $F(1, 215) = 47.34, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .18$ ). Figure 5 summarizes these results. Indeed, and as hypothesized, copycats are most positively evaluated and appraised in a related but different category, and least positively in either the core category or an unrelated category.

*Mediation Analysis.* The mediation analysis provides additional support for the idea that normative appraisals of familiarity (bad-good) and similarity (inappropriate-appropriate),

**TABLE 2**  
MEDIATION ANALYSIS: EXPERIMENT 3

Relationships		Path	Estimate	<i>p</i>	95% CI		
<i>Predictor:</i>		<i>Mediator:</i>					
Unrelated vs. related	to	Familiarity	a1	-.58	<.001	-.87	-.29
Core vs. related	to	Familiarity	a2	.68	<.001	.40	.98
Unrelated vs. related	to	Valence	a3	-1.35	<.001	-1.63	-1.08
Core vs. related	to	Valence	a4	-.53	<.001	-.81	-.25
Unrelated vs. related	to	Similarity	a5	.02	.47	-.32	.35
Core vs. related	to	Similarity	a6	.04	.42	-.30	.37
Unrelated vs. related	to	Appropriateness	a7	-1.03	<.001	-1.33	-.73
Core vs. related	to	Appropriateness	a8	-.84	<.001	-1.14	-.54
		<i>Outcome:</i>					
Familiarity	to	Copycat evaluation	b1	.04	.26	-.08	.16
Valence	to	Copycat evaluation	b2	.46	<.001	.33	.59
Similarity	to	Copycat evaluation	b3	.06	.13	-.05	.16
Appropriateness	to	Copycat evaluation	b4	.16	.005	.04	.28
Unrelated vs. related	to	Copycat evaluation	c'1	-.36	.01	-.67	-.04
Core vs. related	to	Copycat evaluation	c'2	-.07	.32	-.35	.22
<i>Indirect effects:</i>							
Unrelated vs. related	via	Familiarity	a1 × b1	-.02	.26	-.10	.05
Core vs. related	via	Familiarity	a2 × b1	.03	.26	-.06	.12
Unrelated vs. related	via	Valence	a3 × b2	-.62	<.001	-.85	-.41
Core vs. related	via	Valence	a4 × b2	-.24	<.001	-.40	-.11
Unrelated vs. related	via	Similarity	a5 × b3	.001	.48	-.03	.03
Core vs. related	via	Similarity	a6 × b3	.002	.44	-.03	.03
Unrelated vs. related	via	Appropriateness	a7 × b4	-.16	.005	-.31	-.04
Core vs. related	via	Appropriateness	a8 × b4	-.13	.005	-.26	-.03

NOTE.—*N* = 218. Unrelated (1) versus related (0), and core (1) versus related (0) are dummy variables. Measures of mediators and outcome were standardized prior to the analysis. Estimates are unstandardized path weights. Intercepts are not shown. One-tailed Bayesian significance levels (*p*-value) reported. 95% CI is 95 % Credible Interval. Total variance accounted for (VAF) is respectively .26 in familiarity, .30 in valence, .01 in similarity, .20 in appropriateness, and .44 in copycat evaluation.

rather than the sheer degrees of familiarity and similarity (low–high) themselves, account for copycat evaluation in the core, related, and unrelated category. Prior to the mediation analysis, two dummy variables were constructed to distinguish, respectively, copycatting in the unrelated (1) versus the related (0) category, and copycatting in the core (1) versus the related (0) category. In this way, copycatting in the core and unrelated category, which were evaluated negatively, are compared to copycatting in the related category, which was evaluated positively. In this parallel mediation model, the four mediating variables (similarity, familiarity, and their normative appraisals) were simultaneously regressed on the two dummy variables for the category conditions, and copycat evaluation was regressed on all preceding variables. The residuals of the four mediating variables were allowed to correlate. To ensure precise estimates in small samples and to provide 95% Credible Intervals of the estimated indirect effects, Bayesian estimation was used (Zhang, Wedel, and Pieters 2009, with 25,000 iterations, using the Mplus 7.4 program (Muthén and Muthén 2015). Table 2 summarizes the findings. Summary statistics data and additional analyses are in the appendix.

The mediation analysis results support the hypotheses. The valence of familiarity (path b2 = .46, *p* < .001) and

the appropriateness of similarity (b4 = .16, *p* = .005) accounted for copycat evaluation, but the mere familiarity of the copycat (b1 = .04, *p* = .26) and the mere similarity between copycat and imitated brand (b3 = .06, *p* = .13) did not (table 2). The indirect effects indicate that the negative impact of imitation on copycat evaluation in the core category as compared to the related category was mediated by negative valence of familiarity (a4 × b2 = -.24, *p* < .001, 95% CI [-.40, -.11]), and by lower appropriateness of similarity (a8 × b4 = -.13, *p* = .005, 95% CI [-.26, -.03]), and not by familiarity (a2 × b1 = .03, *p* = .26, 95% CI [-.06, .12]) and similarity (a6 × b3 = .002, *p* = .44, 95% CI [-.03, .03]) themselves. Likewise, the positive impact of imitation on copycat evaluation in the related category as compared to the unrelated category was mediated by positive valence of familiarity (a3 × b2 = -.62,<sup>1</sup> *p* < .001, 95% CI [-.85, -.41]) and by higher appropriateness of the similarity (a7 × b4 = -.16, *p* = .005, 95% CI [-.31, -.04]), and not by familiarity (a1 × b1 = -.02, *p* = .26, 95% CI [-.10, .05]) and similarity (a2 × b1 = .001, *p* = .48, 95% CI [-.03, .03]) themselves.

The correlations in the mediation model between familiarity and similarity (*r* = .17, *p* = .003), and between the

1 Negative sign due to coding.

valence of familiarity and the appropriateness of similarity ( $r = .27, p < .001$ ), are significant but modest. This indicates that the normative appraisals of familiarity and similarity capture related but distinct processes that contribute to copycat evaluation. As expected, the correlations between familiarity and its appraisal ( $r = .06, p = .13$ ), and similarity and its appraisal ( $r = -.08, p = .10$ ) were not significantly different from zero, further underlining the prevalence of normative appraisals in the process. To explore the possibility that omitted variables account for the mediation effects, we also estimated a follow-up parallel mediation model in which we added information about participants' gender and age, and about their familiarity with, and evaluation and purchase frequency of, the imitated brand as covariates of the mediators and copycat evaluation. The results were essentially the same, which is reassuring.

*Follow-up Experiment.* The results of experiment 3 indicate, as hypothesized, that when a copycat is positioned in the unrelated category it is evaluated less positively than when it is positioned in the related category. This is due to negative valence of familiarity in the unrelated category as compared to the related category and lower judged appropriateness of similarity. Our theory predicts that in both the related and unrelated categories, the norm not to imitate should be less salient than in the core category and appropriateness of similarity higher. Appropriateness of similarity may, however, pick up on both how normatively *acceptable* similarity is and on how utilitarian *relevant* similarity is, and that the interpretation of the item depends on the category in which the copycat is positioned.

A follow-up experiment, with the same packages as in the main experiment 3, explored this issue. Participants ( $N = 53$ , single-group-within-subjects, all new) were presented with the copycat in the chocolate spread category (related category) and in the spreadable butter category (unrelated category). They then indicated (1) the relevance of package similarity for both product categories ("I think the degree of similarity with Milka chocolate is relevant for the new product in the category chocolate spread (spreadable butter)" from 1 (certainly not) to 7 (certainly yes)) and (2) the acceptability of package similarity ("I think the extent in which the package of the brand Lecha looks similar to the package of Milka in the category chocolate spread (spreadable butter)" is 1 (very unacceptable, very insincere, very inappropriate) to 7 (very acceptable, very sincere, very appropriate), averaged,  $\alpha_s > .81$ ).

As predicted, similarity between packages was judged to be marginally more acceptable in the unrelated category ( $M = 3.48, SD = 1.14$ ) than in the related category ( $M = 3.16, SD = 1.12; F(1, 52) = 2.96, p = .09, \eta_p^2 = .05$ ) but less relevant in the unrelated category ( $M = 2.83, SD = 1.74$ ) than in the related category ( $M = 5.70, SD = 1.10; F(1, 52) = 110.00, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .68$ ). This

supports a normative appraisal explanation: in line with our reasoning, similarity was judged to be more appropriate (acceptable) but at the same time less relevant (useful) in the unrelated than in the related condition. This demonstrates, in addition, that using similarity in an unrelated category is not effective, supporting the notion that activated knowledge of the imitated brand can transfer to the copycat only when similarity is deemed to be relevant (Fazio 1986).

## Discussion

Taken together, the findings of experiment 3 support the idea that copycat evaluation, valence of familiarity, and judged appropriateness of similarity are most positive when imitation takes place in a related yet different category. The findings of experiment 3 and its follow-up also provide evidence for the underlying process, indicating that normative appraisals that familiarity is good and similarity is appropriate account for the positive evaluation of copycats in the related category as compared to the core category of the imitated brand. Furthermore, they show that for the copycat brand, imitation in the related category is more effective than in a totally unrelated category, indicating that indeed some overlap is needed for similarity to become relevant.

The results identify very different effects of copycatting on evaluation contingent on the product category, even though participants were fully aware of the high similarity between copycat and imitated brand in the product categories. Despite people being fully aware of the high degree of similarity, they still evaluated the copycat in the related category as more positive, because of its higher normative appropriateness, than in the core category.

## EXPERIMENT 4: BACKLASH

Experiments 1 to 3 demonstrated that out-of-category imitation is more effective than in-category imitation for the copycat brand. But does this positive effect of out-of-category imitation on the copycat brand leave the imitated brand unharmed? Experiment 4 tests the extent in which out-of-category imitation has a damaging "backlash" effect on the imitated brand itself. It examines to what extent established brands should be concerned about out-of-category imitation, or whether they can simply dismiss such copycatting activity as irrelevant because out-of-category copycats are not in direct competition with the imitated brand. Specifically, this experiment tests the idea that copycatting may hurt the overall evaluation of the imitated brand, and its key perceived product attributes, in which its brand equity is rooted.

## Method

One hundred ninety-seven MTurk workers (104 males,  $M_{\text{age}} = 37.27$ ,  $SD = 11.48$ ) participated for a small fee (\$ 0.35). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions of a 2 (category: orange juice, soft drinks)  $\times$  2 (evaluation: copycat, imitated brand) mixed design, with the first as a between-subjects factor and the second as a within-subject factor. Tropicana was selected as the imitated national brand and the brand name Tropicala as the highly similar copycat. General setup of the experiment was as before. Participants first evaluated on a slider scale from 0 (very negative) to 100 (very positive) the copycat brand name either in the core category orange juice or in the related category soft drinks. After evaluation of the copycat, participants were asked to rate the imitated brand Tropicana on three of the attributes consumers have learned to associate with Tropicana: healthiness (very unhealthy–very healthy), amount of pure oranges (contains only a few pure oranges–contains a lot of pure oranges), and natural taste (artificial taste–natural taste), all on slider scales ranging from 0 to 100. Then, participants rated the imitated brand Tropicana on the same scale as the copycat brand Tropicala. Finally, to explore whether out-of-category imitation influences only the imitated brand negatively, and not just any other existing brands in the orange juice category, participants rated the national brand Simply Orange on the same three attribute and evaluation scales as above.

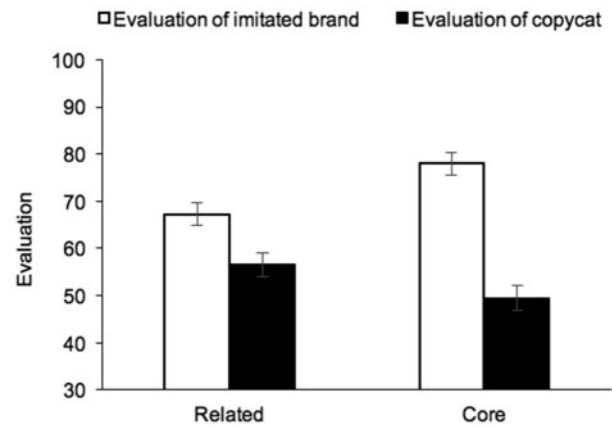
## Results

**Rating of Tropicana's Attributes.** The results of a MANOVA revealed a significant main effect of category,  $F(3, 193) = 3.75$ ,  $p = .012$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .06$ . Participants perceived the imitated brand Tropicana to be less healthy ( $M = 62.99$ ,  $SD = 26.44$ ), to contain a lower amount of pure oranges ( $M = 63.88$ ,  $SD = 26.67$ ), and to have a lower natural taste ( $M = 62.60$ ,  $SD = 26.50$ ) after having seen the copycat in the related category than after having seen the copycat in the core category ( $M_{\text{Healthy}} = 73.66$ ,  $SD = 23.50$ ;  $M_{\text{Oranges}} = 75.00$ ,  $SD = 22.83$ ,  $M_{\text{Taste}} = 73.89$ ,  $SD = 25.28$ ;  $F(1, 195) = 8.99$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ ,  $F(1, 195) = 9.36$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ ,  $F(1, 195) = 9.93$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ , respectively).

**Evaluation.** An ANOVA with repeated measures revealed the hypothesized significant interaction effect between category and brand evaluation ( $F(1, 195) = 15.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .07$ ), a significant main effect of brand evaluation ( $F(1, 195) = 76.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .28$ ), and an insignificant main effect of category ( $F(1, 195) = 0.46$ ,  $p = .50$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .002$ ). Figure 6 illustrates the results. After having seen the copycat in the core category, participants evaluated the imitated brand Tropicana more positively ( $M = 77.95$ ,  $SD = 20.88$ ) than after having seen the

FIGURE 6

EFFECT OF IN- AND OUT-OF-CATEGORY IMITATION ON EVALUATION OF THE IMITATED BRAND: EXPERIMENT 4



NOTE.—Evaluation scale ranges from 0 to 100. Error bars indicate  $\pm 1$  SE of the mean.

copycat in the related category ( $M = 67.28$ ,  $SD = 25.18$ ;  $F(1, 197) = 10.52$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ ). The copycat, on the other hand, was evaluated marginally more positively when positioned in the related category ( $M = 56.54$ ,  $SD = 19.87$ ) than when positioned in the core category of the imitated brand ( $M = 49.48$ ,  $SD = 30.10$ ;  $F(1, 197) = 3.74$ ,  $p = .055$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ ), replicating the results of experiments 1–3. Importantly, the results also demonstrate that the positive difference between the evaluations of the imitated brand Tropicana and the copycat was much larger in the core category ( $F(1, 197) = 83.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .30$ ) than in the related category ( $F(1, 197) = 11.22$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ ). Perceiving the copycat in the related category did not affect the rating (attributes and evaluation) of the national brand Simply Orange in the category orange juice,  $F(4, 192) = 1.41$ ,  $p = .23$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ . This indicates that out-of-category copycatting has a negative backlash effect only on the brand being imitated and not on the brands in the category as a whole.

## Discussion

These results demonstrate two important points. First, out-of-category imitation indeed has a damaging effect on the imitated brand. After having seen the copycat in the related category, participants evaluated the imitated brand less positively than after having seen the copycat in the core category. This was not only the case for the general evaluation of the imitated brand, but also for its specific attributes. The copycat backlash effect thus also occurs on the product attributes that form the basis for its brand equity. Second, in contrast to the general idea that in-category imitation is highly threatening for the imitated

brand, the results suggest that in-category imitation actually results in an *increased* evaluation of the imitated brand through a contrast effect away from the copycat, at least when similarity is high. The difference in evaluation between copycat and imitated brand is much smaller after out-of-category imitation, which suggests fiercer competition in the related category and a higher threat for the imitated brand after imitation takes place in the related category instead of in the core category.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Copycat brands that operate in a related but different category than the imitated brand gain equity from their imitation practice, and the imitated brands lose equity. This finding is new and has important implications for consumer behavior theory and marketing practice.

Consumers are surrounded by copycat brands in the marketplace. Most of these copycats operate in the same, core category as the imitated brand whose features they imitate. This is based on the idea that the easier the imitated brand comes to mind, the more the copycat gains from transfer of positive associations from the imitated brand. Contrary to this idea, our experiments are the first to demonstrate a very different effect and process. First, high-similarity copycats in related but different categories gain more brand equity from the imitated brand as compared to copycat brands in the core category of the imitated brand. Second, such out-of-category imitation by copycat brands damages the equity of the imitated brands more than in-category imitation does. More specifically, our experiments provide new evidence concerning (1) the critical influence of product categorization on copycat evaluation, (2) the mediating role of the valence of familiarity and the appropriateness of similarity in copycat evaluation, independent of the sheer levels of familiarity and similarity, (3) the threat that out-of-category imitation strategies poses on the equity of the imitated brands, (4) the influence of category norms and their ability to alter copycat evaluation by impacting the judged appropriateness of the used imitation tactic, and (5) the differential effect of product categorization on copycat evaluation based on consumers' familiarity with the imitated brand.

Experiment 1 established the core effect and demonstrated that evaluation of a copycat depends on category membership: consumers evaluated copycats more positively when they were positioned in a related yet different product category than when they were positioned in the same category as the imitated brand. Experiment 2 demonstrated that the positive effects of out-of-category copycatting emerged in the general population as well, and that stronger familiarity with the imitated brand amplifies the profitability of positioning copycats in related categories and the perils of positioning copycats in the core category.

Experiment 3 provided evidence for the underlying mechanism with a parallel mediation model, and revealed that out-of-category imitation is more beneficial for copycats than in-category imitation is, because high-similarity copycats were judged to be good and appropriate in the related category, but bad and inappropriate in the core category. This occurred even when there was no difference in the perceived similarity across categories. This shows that participants were fully and equally aware of the copycatting practices but appraised them very differently depending on the product category, due to reduced salience of category norms. Experiment 4 demonstrated the backlash effect of out-of-category imitation on the imitated brand. First, it revealed that the equity of the imitated brand is damaged on both the attributes it advertises with and the general attitude toward the brand after out-of-category imitation. Second, against the general belief, experiment 4 showed that in-category imitation helps the evaluation of the imitated brand, whereas out-of-category imitation actually hurts it. These findings were obtained across samples of students, MTurk workers, and nationally representative consumers; across textual (brand names) and visual (package designs) brand trademarks; and across a range of product categories (personal care, bread spreads, juices), which supports the robustness of the results.

## Implications

Our findings contribute to the copycat and trademark literatures and have implications for theory and practice. First, the copycatting literature has investigated various factors influencing copycat effectiveness, such as individual characteristics (Foxman, Berger, and Cote 1992), environment characteristics (D'Astous and Gargouri 2001; Van Horen and Pieters 2013), and package characteristics (Satomura et al. 2014; Van Horen and Pieters 2012a, 2012b). The current findings are pioneering in that they are the first to demonstrate that the product category in which the same copycat is positioned critically determines copycat evaluation.

Second, the present research is, to our knowledge, the first to distinguish and examine the effects of perceptions of similarity and appraisals of similarity in copycat evaluation: a copycat is judged to be more appropriate when it is positioned in a related category than in the core category, even though the similarity between copycat and imitated brand was perceived to be equally high across conditions. Thus, over and above the possibility that the same copycat in the related category is perceived to be of lower similarity (Van Horen and Pieters 2012a), the current results demonstrate that—even when explicitly being made aware of the high similarity between the copycat and imitated brand—consumers *still* consider copycats in a related category to be more appropriate. This identifies a fundamentally different mechanism underlying copycat evaluation

than identified earlier in the literature (Aribarg 2014; Van Horen and Pieters 2012a, 2012b). Also, earlier work has examined the effect of different degrees of similarity (package characteristics) on copycat evaluation, whereas our work highlights the critical role of product categorization (shopping characteristics) on the same copycat (i.e., while holding all brand content constant). In addition, the present research directly tested the normative mechanisms underlying copycat evaluation that prior work has speculated upon (Warlop and Alba 2004).

Third, the present research advances the current copycat literature by demonstrating that the judged appropriateness of similarity and associated copycat evaluation are contingent upon the norms being contextually activated. Categories not only activate exemplar information from memory, but also play a crucial role in inductive judgments. Consistent with Yamauchi and Markman (2000), who observed that category membership governed inferences about a new product more strongly than similarity matching did, our experiments indicate that ideas about high-similarity copycats are driven by prevailing norms about brand differentiation and imitation. These processes explain why a copycat can be disciplined for imitation that deviates from market convention in one context, but can unduly gain from the same amount of imitation in another product category. The norm to differentiate (and not imitate) may not only be derived from product categories, but also from other contexts. For instance, beliefs about the use of imitation may differ across store type. In discount stores, as compared to high-end stores, different norms may prevail that in turn affect the perceived appropriateness of imitation. In such cases, in-category imitation might in fact be evaluated positively.

These findings provide new insights into the role of categorization and normative appraisal processes in similarity judgment and evaluation, which we expect to generalize to domains outside of copycatting and trademark law. Research on identity theft (Reysen, Branscome, and Landau 2012) and group imposters (Hornsey and Jetten 2003) has, for instance, demonstrated that people feel threatened when another person intentionally copies a person's or group's distinctive characteristics (e.g., clothing, hairstyle, eating behavior). As people want to maintain a unique public identity, it is the norm that others distinguish themselves from us. This norm, however, becomes less salient when people identify less strongly with the group or when behaviors are carried out privately, resulting in lower feelings of threat or negative affect toward the imitator. Furthermore, in the scientific domain, it is imaginable that imitation of research ideas is judged to be completely unacceptable when imitation is taking place within the same discipline (say, marketing), but less unacceptable when the same ideas are copied in a related domain (say, psychology). Follow-up work may examine this.

Fourth, the findings not only demonstrate that out-of-category imitation is more beneficial for the copycat brand,

but also that it is more *harmful* to the imitated brand. Interestingly, the evaluation of the imitated brand was higher when a high-similarity copycat was positioned in the core category, presumably because the latter was considered less acceptable due to the norm to differentiate under direct competition. However, the evaluation of the imitated brand was lower when the copycat was positioned in a related yet different category. After consumers saw the copycat in the related category, their specific attribute beliefs about the imitated brand decreased. Therefore, an out-of-category imitation strategy could lead to a dilution of associations that consumers have with the brand name (Loken and Roedder John 1993; Morrin and Jacoby 2000; Morrin, Lee, and Allenby 2006). This has potentially devastating consequences, not only for the consumers' general disposition toward the brand, but also in terms of its positioning and differential advantage in the marketplace. In addition to losing their unique associations and distinctive character due to imitation strategies in related categories, imitated brands can be harmed by copycats in other ways. For instance, negative transfer of affect between the copycat and the imitated brand can take place when the copycat has low quality, is positioned in a category the imitated brand does not want to be associated with, or after bad product experiences. Furthermore, the competitive advantage of the imitated brand may be threatened even more in the related category, as the evaluation of both brands in the related category was much closer. This can create a lost opportunity for the imitated brand to extend to the related category when the copycat is also active in this category, which would be an ironic benefit of copycats and perhaps even an intentional strategy in competitive markets. Future research might explore such dynamics.

An important implication of the current findings is that marketers can physically manipulate the effect of categorization on copycat evaluation by positioning the copycat in a related category, which is under managerial control. If it is at their disposal, owners of copycat brands may benefit by positioning blatant imitations in related yet different product categories, instead of in the core category of the imitated brand. On the other hand, blatant imitations in the core category may actually boost the equity of the imitated leader brands.

Based on the current experiments, trademark law might consider focusing more on the effects of out-of-category imitation. Traditionally, jurisdictional attention has centered on core category imitation, because the likelihood of brand confusion is higher there. However, free riding on a brand's positive associations may occur without such brand confusion taking place, as the present experiments demonstrate. Counterintuitively, out-of-category imitation seems to come at a higher cost for the imitated brand than in-category imitation, which has important ramifications for trademark law. Even when the copycat and the imitated brand are not direct competitors, imitation can still

significantly harm the imitated brand. Thus, Red Energy candies might profit much more from its similarity with Red Bull than the court was aware of when ruling against Red Bull's claim. That is, out-of-category does not reduce but might instead increase the threat of such copycatting to Red Bull.

## Discussion and Directions for Future Research

There are several remaining questions, some of which call for future research. First, could it be that the positive evaluation of copycats in the related category arose because participants thought the copycat was actually a brand extension of the imitated brand? This seems unlikely. The copycat brand names and packages were similar to the imitated brand, but clearly different as well. Moreover, in both the core and the related categories, participants indicated that they were well aware that the copycat used an imitation strategy and thus was not the same as the imitated brand (experiment 3). To further rule out this "brand extension" explanation, we conducted a follow-up experiment. Participants ( $N = 189$ , between-subjects, student sample) evaluated (on a seven-point scale) the imitated national brand (Nutella) or the copycat (Lutella) in its own/core category (chocolate spread) or in a related category (chocolate bar). The results revealed a significant interaction effect between brand and category ( $F(1, 185) = 35.34, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .16$ ). Simple effect tests demonstrated, consistent with earlier findings, that the copycat was evaluated more positively in the related category ( $M = 3.60, SD = 1.68$ ) than in the core category ( $M = 2.62, SD = 1.06, F(1, 185) = 14.68, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$ ). The national brand Nutella, however, was evaluated more negatively in the related category ( $M = 4.89, SD = 1.22$ ) than in its own category ( $M = 6.08, SD = 0.92, F(1, 185) = 20.92, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .10$ ). Furthermore, and importantly, in the related category the national brand Nutella, being the brand extension, was evaluated more positively than the copycat Lutella ( $M = 3.60, SD = 1.68; F(1, 185) = 25.06, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .12$ ), indicating that the copycat was differently perceived and evaluated than the real brand extension. In addition, participants in the related category conditions were asked to what extent they thought the brand name (either Lutella or Nutella) was a brand extension. Results indicated that participants thought more often that Nutella was a brand extension in the related category than Lutella ( $t(93^2) = 1.89, p = .06$ ). These results indicate that people differentiate the copycat from the real brand extension in the related

category, making a "brand extension" explanation of the obtained copycat effects unlikely.

A second question is whether the obtained evaluation effects also hold for more subtle forms of similarity, given that the copycats in the current experiments all were very similar to the imitated brand. Possibly, in the core category, high levels of similarity activate the norm that imitation is inappropriate, but lower levels of similarity may do less so and lead to a more positive evaluation of the copycat. In the related category, on the other hand, lower levels of similarity may not remind consumers enough of the imitated brand for positive transfer of associations to take place. Therefore, more subtle forms of similarity in different categories would contribute little to positive evaluation of copycats. Such findings would be consistent with the results from experiment 2, indicating that stronger familiarity with the imitated brand amplified the effects. Future research might explore these issues.

In sum, this research reveals that copycats are surprisingly better off being positioned out-of-category rather than in-category, shows that the imitated brands are worse off with such out-of-category copycatting, and identifies normative appraisal processes that account for such imitation effects across the boundary.

## DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The data for the first experiment were collected by research assistants under the supervision of the first author at the behavioral lab of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in the winter of 2016. The data of the second experiment were collected via Liss panel of CentER data, an independent institute for data collection and research at Tilburg University, in spring 2015. The second author supervised data collection of the third experiment at the same university in summer 2015. The data for the follow-up study for experiment 3 were collected by research assistants under supervision of the first author in the autumn of 2016 at the behavioral lab of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The data of the fourth experiment were collected through Amazon Mechanical Turk in the winter of 2017. The data for the experiment reported in the General Discussion were collected by research assistants under the supervision of the first author at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in the summer of 2016. The first author did the main analyses of all the experiments, and discussed them with the second author. The second author conducted the mediation and follow-up analyses for experiment 3, and discussed these with the first author.

2 Fewer degrees of freedom because only half of the sample evaluated the imitated brand and copycat in the related category.



APPENDIX

EXPERIMENT 3 SUMMARY STATISTICS AND ADDITIONAL ANALYSES

TABLE A1  
SUMMARY STATISTICS DATA EXPERIMENT 3

Label	Variables	Mean	SD	Correlations							
				X1	X2	M1	M2	M3	M4	Y	
X1	Unrelated vs. related	.33	.47								
X2	Related vs. core	.34	.47	-.50							
M1	Familiarity	4.79	2.51	-.43	.46						
M2	Valence of familiarity	3.53	1.76	-.51	.07	.22					
M3	Similarity	6.40	1.14	-.001	.01	.16	.003				
M4	Appropriateness of sim.	2.88	1.72	-.29	-.16	.01	.48	-.08			
Y	Evaluation	3.47	1.21	-.45	.08	.21	.62	.05	.43		(.92)

NOTE.—N = 218. Category (X1) coded as 1 = unrelated versus 0 = related and category (X2) coded as 1 = core versus 0 = related. Familiarity (M1), valence of familiarity (M2), similarity (M3), and appropriateness of similarity (M4) are all seven-point items. Evaluation (Y) is average of four seven-point evaluation items and one seven-point willingness-to-buy item. Cronbach's alpha of evaluation measure is on the diagonal.

To assess discriminant validity of copycat evaluation, valence of familiarity, and appropriateness of similarity vis-à-vis each other, confirmatory factor analyses were performed (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Because valence of familiarity and appropriateness of similarity are each assessed with a single item, two sets of three one-factor CFAs were estimated. Model 1 was a single-factor model with all five indicators of copycat evaluation and valence of familiarity (set 1) and appropriateness of similarity (set 2) as free loading indicators. Model 2 was as model 1, but it restricted the five indicators of copycat evaluation to be tau-equivalent (same loading) and freely estimated the loading of valence of familiarity (set 1) and appropriateness of similarity (set 2). Model 3 was as model 2, but it restricted all six indicators to be tau-equivalent (same loading). There is evidence for discriminant validity when model 2 fits as well as model 1 does (all indicators of evaluation reflect a similar construct), but when model 3 fits worse than model 2 (valence of familiarity (set 1) and appropriateness of similarity (set 2) differ from the other indicators).

This is indeed what was found. For valence of familiarity the  $\chi^2$ -difference between M2 and M1 was not significant (2.17 (4),  $p = .70$ ), but the  $\chi^2$ -difference between M3 and M2 was (5.86, (1),  $p = .02$ ). For appropriateness of similarity the  $\chi^2$ -difference between M2 and M1 was not significant (2.00 (4),  $p = .74$ ), but the  $\chi^2$ -difference between M3 and M2 was (26.75, (1),  $p < .001$ ). The correlation between valence of familiarity and appropriateness of similarity was .48,  $p < .001$  (95% CI [.34, .62]).

Finally, a mediation model that corrected for measurement error in copycat evaluation (CR = .90, AVE = .64) by structural equation modeling (SEM) gave similar results as the path analysis reported. All significant effects

remained significant, and all insignificant effects remained insignificant.

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