Brands increasingly introduce products with attributes that fail to provide consumers with meaningful benefits (i.e., trivial attributes). The authors present two experiments that examine the effect of brand equity on consumer valuation of such trivial attributes and the reciprocal effect that such a strategy may have on brand equity. The results show that both high and low equity brands benefit from offering an attractive trivial attribute in the absence of a disclosure of its true value. However, prechoice disclosure of an attribute's triviality heightens the role of the brand and context cues. Competing low equity brands benefit by sharing the trivial attribute with a higher equity brand, whereas competing high equity brands benefit from uniquely offering a trivial attribute. Postchoice revelation that an attribute is trivial hurts the subsequent ability of a low but not a high equity brand to differentiate in a new product category, particularly among subjects who had previously chosen the target brand. For insights on brand dilution, the authors also examine consumer attributions regarding marketer intent for offering a trivial attribute.

The Reciprocal Effects of Brand Equity and Trivial Attributes

Trivial differentiation occurs when a brand differentiates on an attribute that "appears valuable but, on closer examination, is irrelevant to creating the implied benefit" (Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto 1994, p. 339). For example, Pantene Pro-V shampoo differentiates from other shampoos on the basis of its provitamin ingredients. Consumers may believe that because the ingestion of vitamins improves overall health, vitamins have a similar positive effect when applied externally to hair. Yet according to Consumer Reports (2000, p. 19), vitamins in shampoo have no beneficial effect on hair (which is dead cells) and “really only enliven one thing: the label copy.” Similarly, the Epson GT-1200 scanner offers interpolated resolution that estimates data points between those that are measured, seemingly to enhance image equity. But “impressive-sounding specifications like ‘interpolated resolution’ … [are] hype, overkill, plain and simple. In truth, there’s only one kind of resolution that really matters—optical resolution, which is derived from the number of sensing elements” (Consumer Reports 2001, p. 26).

Evidence suggests that even when consumers are pre-informed of a trivial attribute’s lack of performance value, the attribute continues to have a positive impact on consumer choice (Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto 1994). We propose that the ability of a brand manager to capitalize on the use of a trivial attribute strategy to create a competitive advantage is dependent on a brand’s equity. Specifically, our results show that when the value of a trivial attribute is called into question, low equity brands benefit over close competitors if they share the attribute with a higher equity alternative, whereas high equity brands benefit if they uniquely offer the attribute.

Although brand equity can be leveraged through a trivial attribute strategy, doing so may carry a sizable downside. The use of trivial attributes risks undermining the credibility of the brand, which serves as the foundation of its equity (Erdem and Swait 1998). Detrimental effects may be exacerbated if consumers purchase a brand in good faith only to discover that the differential was trivial. Ramifications may include consumers reacting negatively to the brand’s other products and its future differentiation. For example, if after purchasing an Epson scanner, consumers learn from Consumer Reports that interpolated resolution provides no advantage, Epson may be penalized when it offers other new scanner attributes, as well as when it offers new attributes in other categories such as printers. Our results show that such brand dilution is more likely for low than for high equity brands.

In this article, we first review the trivial attribute literature and then hypothesize about the role of brand equity on con-
sumer valuation of trivial attributes, as well as about the consequences of a trivial attribute strategy in future evaluations of a brand. We present two experiments that examine the relative competitive advantage that a low versus high equity brand can gain in its equity tier (i.e., intra-equity tier competition) from using a trivial attribute strategy. Studies 1 and 1A examine the effect of prechoice disclosure of the attribute’s true value on consumer valuation of the trivial attribute. We show that positive valuation of the trivial attribute is dependent on brand equity and the uniqueness of the attribute relative to the context set. Study 2 varies the timing of the disclosure in an initial category as either pre- or postchoice and then examines its effect on subsequent consumer reaction to a brand’s new differentiated offering in a related product category. When disclosure of the trivial attribute occurs after an initial product choice, valuation of a brand’s subsequent differentiation depends on the subjects’ initial choice and the brand tier.

TRIVIAL ATTRIBUTES

Brown and Carpenter (2000, p. 372) define trivial attributes as “those attributes with a trivial and/or subjective relationship to perceived quality as well as objectively irrelevant attributes.” Trivial attributes include those that provide no performance benefit but that consumers may perceive as “ambiguously positive” (e.g., “alpine class” versus “regular” down fill) (Brown and Carpenter 2000, p. 374) or for which consumers may have existing preferences (e.g., silk as an ingredient in shampoo) (Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto 1994). In addition, trivial attributes include fictional attributes that may provide novel associations without adding any objective benefit to the product (e.g., “Fahrvergnuegen” to describe Volkswagen) (Brown and Carpenter 2000; Mukherjee and Hoyer 2001). Trivial attributes may also include those attributes that have known value to consumers but are assumed to be irrelevant to both the brand performance and the consumer choosing the product (e.g., undesired promotional premiums) (Brown and Carpenter 2000; Simonson, Carmon, and O’Curry 1994; Simonson, Nowlis, and Simonson 1993). We limit our study of trivial attributes to those situations in which a brand offers an attribute level that is distinct from its competitor, for which consumers may have a prior preference, but provides no meaningful performance benefit.

Although consumers may value attractive trivial attributes, in practice the long-term viability of a trivial attribute strategy seems less than tenable. Market forces such as competitive advertising or consumer advocate groups might provide consumers with explicit objective information about the attribute’s irrelevance, reducing the ambiguity of its value. However, research suggests that such disclosure may not attenuate the trivial attribute’s advantage. In a strong test of trivial differentiation, Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto (1994) show that disclosure of the irrelevance of a trivial attribute before product exposure does not by itself eliminate the effect of its differentiating value in consumers’ product judgments. Subsequent research has shown that the elements of the decision context affect valuation of a trivial attribute.

In decision contexts in which there is no other diagnostic information, consumers have been shown to temporarily treat trivial attributes as though they have value to strategically resolve the dilemma of choosing between otherwise comparable alternatives. Brown and Carpenter (2000) show that valuation of the trivial attribute is dependent on its ability to expedite a final choice and not necessarily on an underlying belief that it improves product performance. Specifically, in choice sets of more than two comparable alternatives, positive valuation of a trivial attribute is more likely because it allows for a simple resolution to the choice problem, whereas a negative valuation would leave a difficult choice from the remaining alternatives.

In decision contexts in which other diagnostic product information is available, motivated consumers are likely to use it to infer a value to the trivial attribute (Feldman and Lynch 1988). For example, consumers have been shown to rely on the labels of trivial attributes to make inferences about the value of the attribute (Broniarczyk and Gershoff 1997). Of particular interest, in Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto’s (1994) second study, consumers were shown to use price information to form inferences about the trivial attribute. In the absence of a disclosure regarding the trivial attribute’s null value, a positive linear relationship existed by which consumers inferred that higher (lower) prices were associated with a higher (lower) value for the trivial attribute. However, on disclosure of the trivial attribute’s irrelevance, the consumer decision-making process became more complex. At the moderate price level, the positive benefit from trivial differentiation continued, whereas no effect was observed at the low price level. However, the disclosure attenuated consumer valuation of the trivial attribute at a premium price.

Because price level and brand equity are often positively related (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001), Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto’s (1994) results might imply that trivial differentiation is an ineffective strategy for high equity brands in the presence of a disclosure and for low equity brands in general. However, key differences between brand and price cues suggest that a trivial attribute strategy may be effective for both high and low equity brands. First, brand cues are an enriched set of associations, whereas price cues are reference dependent (Nowlis and Simonson 1997). Second, consumers may infer that companies are motivated to maintain their brand reputations in the long run for future transactions (Shapiro 1982). Third, although a price cue may signal increased value, it also has negative consequences associated with higher costs to the consumer. A premium-priced alternative that achieves increasing profits without providing a similar increase in value may be less preferred by consumers if they ascribe a negative motive to the alternative (Campbell 1999; Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1986). Campbell (1999) provides evidence that consumers react differently to brand cues by showing that high brand equity can attenuate the likelihood of such negative inferences following a price increase.

1Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto’s (1994) study consists of three price points described as low, high, and premium. We use a nine-point scale to evaluate brands, and our three levels of brand equity were described as low (x = 3.5), mid (x = 5.0), and high (x = 7.5). Thus, we match our high–brand equity result to Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto’s (1994) premium-price level result. It may have been possible to find brands rated higher than our high tier.
BRAND EQUITY AND DISCLOSURE OF TRIVIAL ATTRIBUTES

Keller (1993) defines brand equity as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the brand’s marketing activities. Brand knowledge is the set of associations that consumers hold in memory regarding the brand’s features, benefits, users, perceived equity, and overall attitude as a result of prior brand marketing activities and investments in advertising and promotion. Brand knowledge has been shown to differentially affect consumers’ responses to blind taste tests (Allison and Uhl 1964), subjective perceptions of attribute values (Park and Srinivasan 1994), and inferences about the attributes of brand extensions (Park, Milberg, and Lawson 1991).

Our primary interest is how consumers use brand knowledge as a cue to infer the value of a trivial attribute and how the use of trivial attribute strategies affects subsequent brand equity. We consider situations in which brands employ trivial attribute strategies to gain advantage over their close competitors that have comparable levels of equity and otherwise offer similar attributes. We limit our focus to such intra-equity tier competition for two reasons. First, the presence of meaningful differentiation has been shown to dominate a trivial attribute in product evaluation when consumers are informed of its true value (Broniarczyk and Gershoff 1997). We expect that a trivial attribute strategy will not dominate the relevant attribute of brand equity and therefore will not result in a low equity brand being preferable to a high equity brand. Second, with such intratier competition, we are able to isolate how brand equity affects the valuation of the trivial attribute.

Although we examine the subjective evaluation of trivial attributes, we focus on the situation in which the trivial attribute’s null value is explicitly disclosed. Marketers will strategically label a trivial attribute so that it gives the appearance of being valuable, which leads to positive subjective consumer inferences. These inferences from the attribute label are likely to be generated spontaneously, according to subjects’ prior beliefs (Broniarczyk and Alba 1994), and only if subjects engage in further processing will otherwise offer similar attributes. We limit our focus to such intra-equity tier competition for two reasons. First, the presence of meaningful differentiation has been shown to dominate a trivial attribute in product evaluation when consumers are informed of its true value (Broniarczyk and Gershoff 1997). We expect that a trivial attribute strategy will not dominate the relevant attribute of brand equity and therefore will not result in a low equity brand being preferable to a high equity brand. Second, with such intratier competition, we are able to isolate how brand equity affects the valuation of the trivial attribute.

However, when the triviality of the attribute is disclosed, consumers must reconcile why the brands in the choice set differentiate the attribute at all (Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto 1994). Given this uncertainty, we expect consumers to go beyond the trivial attribute’s label and engage in more constructive information processing (Houston, Childers, and Heckler 1987). Such constructive processing should make them more sensitive to brand equity and con-
Unique context. The choice context in which the trivial attribute is uniquely offered reinforces the brand cue’s valuation of the trivial attribute. Specifically, consumers expect high equity brands to offer unique advantages over mid- and low equity brands. However, consumers do not expect a low equity brand to offer a unique advantage over the higher equity of a midtier brand. Thus, we predict that a high equity brand will be more likely than a low equity brand to gain an advantage over its intratier competitor from a unique trivial attribute in the face of a prechoice disclosure. This prediction is counter to Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto’s (1994) price result, which shows that a prechoice disclosure results in significant attenuation for a trivial attribute at the premium price level.

Shared context. The preceding argument suggests a limited ability for a low tier brand to initiate a trivial attribute strategy in the event of prechoice disclosure. However, a low tier brand may be able to benefit within its competitive set from sharing a trivial attribute with a higher tier brand. Sharing a trivial attribute with a midequity brand is predicted to produce opposite results from unique trivial differentiation for low versus high equity brands. We expect that high equity brands offering a trivial attribute will suffer from sharing the attribute with a lower equity brand. Sharing a common attribute with a midequity brand simultaneously reduces its perceived differentiation from a lower equity tier and increases its high equity competitors’ perceived differentiation from the midequity tier. Conversely, we expect that a low equity brand sharing a trivial attribute with a higher equity brand will be viewed favorably. For a low equity brand, the midtier brand represents a higher equity standard, and consumers are expected to believe that it offers superior features. Thus, in the face of a disclosure, we expect consumers’ choices to be positively influenced in the low tier when a target brand shares a trivial attribute with a midtier brand. This prediction also runs counter to Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto’s (1994) price result, which shows that a low-priced alternative did not benefit from a trivial attribute strategy.

Therefore, we predict that consumer valuation of the trivial attribute is dependent on the interaction between the brand equity tier and the decision context.

H1: A brand’s ability to gain a choice share benefit over a close competitor when the triviality of the attribute is disclosed prior to choice depends on its equity and the context, such that

(a) a low equity brand will be more likely to gain a choice share benefit if the trivial attribute is shared with a mid-equity brand than if it is uniquely offered and

(b) a high equity brand will be more likely to gain a choice share benefit if the trivial attribute is uniquely offered than if it is shared with a midequity brand.

STUDY 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine the effects of a trivial attribute strategy and the moderating roles of brand tier, disclosure of irrelevance, and decision context on choice between intratier competitors. The choice set included three brands. Two of the brands were competitors from the same equity tier, and the third was a midtier brand.

In all conditions but the control, a positive level of a trivial attribute was present for one of the two intratier brands (i.e., the target brand), and a negative level was present for the other. The experiment examined two levels of brand tier (low and high), two levels of disclosure (subjective and pre-revelation), and two levels of decision context (unique and shared) for a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects experimental design. The brand tier factor varied on whether the two competitive brands were from a low or a high equity tier. The disclosure factor varied on whether subjects were provided with a prechoice disclosure that revealed that the trivial attribute was meaningless. In the condition in which the prechoice disclosure was not provided, subjects determined the valuation of the trivial attribute subjectively. The decision context factor varied on whether the positive trivial attribute level was unique to one of the intratier brands (unique context) or was also possessed by the midtier brand (shared context). In addition, there was a control condition for each brand tier in which subjects chose between branded alternatives without a trivial attribute.

The stimuli were based on those of Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto (1994) to increase comparability. The product category was down jackets, which were described by the relevant attributes of fill rating, cover material, and stitching and the trivial attribute of type of down fill. To maximize the correspondence between the disclosure and the trivial attribute (Broniarczyk and Gershoff 1997), the types of down fill were described as either “goose” or “duck” down. A pretest of 50 undergraduate students using a nine-point rating scale ($1 = \text{“like”} \text{to} 9 = \text{“dislike”}) revealed that goose was more preferred than duck ($x = 3.88$ versus $x = 5.40$, $t(49) = 3.83$, $p < .001$), so goose and duck down were used as the positive and negative levels of the trivial attribute, respectively.

Brands for the intratier pairs were selected through a pretest in which 28 undergraduate students reported brand name evaluations on a nine-point scale ($1 = \text{“poor”} \text{to} 9 = \text{“excellent”})). Store brands were used for this manipulation because our southwestern U.S. subjects were unfamiliar with brands in the down jacket category. On the basis of the ratings, we designated Kmart ($x = 3.11$) and Wal-Mart ($x = 3.89$) as low tier brands, Mervyns ($x = 5.00$) as the midtier context brand, and L.L. Bean ($x = 7.11$) and Eddie Bauer ($x = 7.96$) as high tier brands. All brands were highly familiar to subjects and received ratings greater than 8 on a nine-point scale. To avoid ceiling effects, the target brand paired the positive trivial attribute of goose down fill with the lower rated brand in each tier (high: L.L. Bean and low: Kmart). The stimuli are presented in Appendix A.

Procedure

Three hundred forty-four undergraduate subjects enrolled in an introductory marketing class were given course extra credit for participating in Study 1. The cover story was that they needed to purchase a down jacket for an upcoming ski vacation. Subjects received booklets containing a Consumer Reports description of down jackets on four attributes and, if appropriate, a disclosure manipulation embedded in the description of down fill type. Consistent with Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto’s (1994) study, the disclosure manipulation informed subjects that the down fill attribute was irrelevant with the phrase, “the age of the bird determines
the softness of the down fill, the type of bird it comes from does not make a difference.” Subjects in the subjective condition were told only that two types of down fill were duck down and goose down. To ensure that the prechoice disclosure manipulation was successful, subjects completed a comprehension test to indicate their knowledge of the attribute descriptions before proceeding to the choice task.4

The choice task involved selecting the most preferred brand from the set of three and then providing a ranking of the three brands. The measure of intratier choice was taken from subjects’ ranking of the two intratier alternatives in both the low and high brand tier choice.5 Subjects then rated brand preference, familiarity, trust, and manufacturing expertise. The last section assessed subjects’ beliefs about marketer intent for offering the trivial attribute (Campbell 1995). Specifically, the likelihood that the trivial attribute was used to attract attention, improve product performance, or take advantage of the consumer was assessed on a five-point scale (1 = “very unlikely” to 5 = “very likely”) for the unique context.

Results

In examining the effects of trivial attribute strategies between brand tiers, it is important to consider not only the differences in the brands’ choice shares between conditions but also the gain or loss in choice share relative to the control condition in which there is no trivial attribute. Therefore, we performed a logit analysis, with preference for the target versus nontarget intratier brand as the dependent variable. We included independent variables in the model such that the effects of the manipulation of brand tier, disclosure, and context could be examined in terms of the change in the target brand choice share compared with its control. In Table 1, we report absolute choice shares for each condition, and the statistical analyses examine the difference (Δ) between the experimental and control conditions. Unless otherwise noted, all χ² have 1 degree of freedom.

Manipulation checks. The data were screened to ensure that subjects correctly understood the Consumer Reports attribute information and the disclosure regarding the trivial attribute. Analyses included only the 76% of subjects (n = 260/344) who passed the prechoice disclosure comprehension test. Consistent with the pretest, subjects reported higher means for the high than low tier brands on preference

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4In the comprehension test, subjects answered questions about each of the four attributes of fill rating, stitching, down fill type, and cover material. For each attribute, the question began with the phrase, “According to the Consumer Reports information....” This was followed by four possible responses about the superiority of each attribute level: one or the other attribute levels was superior, neither was superior, or there was not enough information provided to answer the question. Subjects needed to answer all four questions correctly to pass the comprehension test.

5Ninety percent of subjects in the low tier condition chose the midtier context brand, whereas none of the subjects in the high tier chose the midtier brand. None of the subjects' rankings in either the high or the low tier were inconsistent with their choice from the set of three brands.

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Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDY 1 and 1A CHOICE RESULTS</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Low Equity Tier</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nontarget Brand:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wal-Mart</td>
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<tr>
<td>Down Fill</td>
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<tr>
<td>Target Brand:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kmart</td>
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<tr>
<td>Down Fill</td>
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<td>Midtier Brand*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Choice of Target Brand</td>
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<td>Control</td>
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<td>Subjective</td>
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<td>Study 1 unique context</td>
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<td>Study 1 shared context</td>
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<td>Study 1A shared context</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prerevealed</td>
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<td>Study 1 unique context</td>
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<td>Study 1 shared context</td>
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<td>Study 1A shared context</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>High Equity Tier</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nontarget Brand:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eddie Bauer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Down Fill</td>
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<tr>
<td>Target Brand:</td>
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<tr>
<td>L.L. Bean</td>
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<td>Down Fill</td>
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<td>Midtier Brand*</td>
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<td>Choice of Target Brand</td>
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<td>Study 1 shared context</td>
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<td>Study 1A shared context</td>
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*The midtier brand in Study 1 was Mervyns. Study 1A provided a set of four midtier brands: Sears, J.C. Penney, Mervyns, and Bealls.
(M_{high} = 7.25 versus M_{low} = 4.84, t(258) = 13.331, p < .001),
trust (M_{high} = 7.20 versus M_{low} = 5.30, t(258) = 10.55, p < .001),
and manufacturing expertise (M_{high} = 7.19 versus M_{low} = 4.76, t(258) = 14.18, p < .001).

**Overall model.** The choice results revealed no main effect
for share gain compared with the control by brand tier
(Δ_{high} = +24.1% versus Δ_{low} = +37.2%, χ^2 = 1.90, p > .16)
(see Table 1). There was a marginal effect of decision con-
text; the target brand achieved slightly more share gain in
the shared (Δ = +36.8%) than in the unique (Δ = +24.4%)
context (χ^2 = 2.80, p = .09). As we expected, there was a sig-
nificant main effect for disclosure; there was more share
gain for the target brand in the subjective (Δ = +37.9%) than
in the prerevelation (Δ = +23.4%) condition (χ^2 = 3.57, p =
.058). However, consistent with Carpenter, Glazer, and
Nakamoto (1994), even when prerevealed, the presence of a
trivial attribute still resulted in a significant gain in choice
share relative to the control (Δ = +44.8% versus +21.4%,
χ^2 = 9.87, p < .01).

**Choice results.** The results show a significant three-way
brand tier × context × disclosure interaction (χ^2 = 3.71, p =
.054). As we expected, in the subjective condition, there was
no significant brand tier × context interaction (χ^2 < 1). In the
absence of a disclosure, there was a significant main effect
for adding a trivial attribute compared with the control (Δ =
+37.9%, χ^2 = 21.31, p < .001) but no effect for context
(Δ_{shared} = +45.3% versus Δ_{unique} = +28.6, χ^2 = 2.25, p = .13)
or brand tier (Δ_{high} = +31.6% versus Δ_{low} = +47.4%, χ^2 =
1.52, p = .22). Without a disclosure, both high (χ^2 = 7.73,
p < .005) and low (χ^2 = 15.04, p < .001) equity brands
gained choice share relative to the control. Subjects
appeared to rely on their prior preference for goose over
duck down fill in valuing the trivial attribute and did not use
the context or brand tier to infer relative value to the
attribute.

H1 predicts that when a prechoice disclosure reveals that
the trivial attribute is meaningless, consumer valuation of
the trivial attribute is dependent on the interaction between
the brand tier and the context. Specifically, we predicted that
a low tier brand would gain choice share from its closest
competitor through a trivial attribute strategy when it shared
the attribute with a midtier context brand. Conversely, we
predicted that a high tier brand would gain choice share in a
unique context.

In support of H1, in the prerevelation condition, the pre-
dicted brand tier × context interaction occurred (χ^2 = 5.81,
p < .02). As predicted by H1a, the low tier gained greater
choice share when it shared (Δ_{shared} = +48%) the trivial
attribute with a midtier context compared with when it
uniquely offered the trivial attribute (Δ_{unique} = +15%, χ^2 =
4.88, p < .03). Furthermore, this share gain was significant
relative to the control in the shared (χ^2 = 11.91, p < .001) but
not the unique (χ^2 = 2.16, p = .14) context.

Consistent with H1b, when the irrelevance of the trivial
attribute was disclosed, the high tier brand directionally
gained more choice share from its competitor when it
uniquely offered the trivial attribute than when the attribute
was shared with a midtier context brand, though this
difference did not reach significance (Δ_{unique} = +25% versus
Δ_{shared} = +8%, χ^2 < 1). As we predicted, the high tier brand’s
share gain was significant relative to the control in the
unique (χ^2 = 3.89, p < .05) but not the shared (χ^2 = .46, p =
.49) condition (see Figure 1). Thus, when the disclosure was
prerevealed, subjects appeared to pay careful attention to the
context brand and used its relative value to resolve the
uncertainty that the disclosure created regarding the trivial
attribute. After receiving a prechoice disclosure, subjects
preferred the high tier brand to be different from the midtier
brand but preferred the low tier brand to be similar to the
midtier brand.

**Consumer attributions.** We assessed subjects’ beliefs
about the target brand’s motives for offering the trivial
attribute (relative to scale midpoint) in the unique context
to provide insight into the consumer thought process and neg-
ative reciprocal feedback to the brand. Subjects in the sub-
jective conditions were neutral about whether the unique
attribute improved performance (M_{low} = 3.0 and M_{high} = 3.1,
p > .20) and believed that it was unlikely that the brand was
trying to take advantage of them (M_{low} = 2.3 versus M_{high} =
2.3, ps > .05). They believed that the reason the unique
attribute was offered was to attract their attention (M_{low} =
3.6 and M_{high} = 3.7, ps < .05).

**Figure 1**

**STUDY 1 CHOICE SHARE FOR TARGET BRAND DIFFERENCES FROM CONTROL**
As we expected, when the trivial attribute was revealed to be meaningless, consumers were significantly less likely to believe that the trivial attribute improved product performance (with decline from the scale midpoint) in the low (M_{low} = 2.4, p < .01) and high (M_{high} = 2.6, p < .10) tiers with no difference between tiers (t < 1, p > .20). Subjects in the high tier were more likely to believe that the trivial attribute strategy was used as an attention-getting device (M_{high} = 4.4) compared with those in the low tier (M_{low} = 3.3, t(51) = 3.45, p < .001). There was little indication of manipulative intent by either high or low tier brands, in that neither was greater than the midpoint of the scale (M_{high} = 3.1, M_{low} = 2.3, p < .2), though the high tier was found to be greater than the low tier brand (t(51) = 2.58, p < .02).

Summary. For a trivial attribute of subjective value, both low and high equity brands benefited from offering a trivial attribute that appeared favorable and was offered by other brands in the choice set, irrespective of their brand equity. This finding refutes a uniqueness explanation for the effects of trivial attributes.

The presence of a disclosure appeared to make brand equity and context information more influential in the consumer evaluation process of the trivial attribute. In the prechoice disclosure condition, prior beliefs about the trivial attribute were challenged by the disclosure. In this case, subjects were more likely to use other cues, such as brand equity and context brand offerings, to resolve the ambiguity. A high tier brand was more likely than a low tier brand to continue benefiting from a unique trivial attribute in the face of a prechoice disclosure; subjects attributed it to an attention-getting device but did not ascribe manipulative intent. However, when the trivial attribute was shared with a midtier brand, a low tier brand was more likely than a high tier brand to continue benefiting.

STUDY 1A

Prior research has focused on the benefits of uniquely offering a trivial attribute. Of particular interest in Study 1 was the finding that when a trivial attribute is revealed to be meaningless, a low but not high tier brand benefits from a shared context. Study 1A was designed to examine the robustness of a shared context for trivial attribute valuation.

In addition, we wanted to examine the effect of consumer knowledge on the valuation of the trivial attribute. Trivial attributes have included both attributes for which consumers have had prior preferences and knowledge and those for which they have not (Brown and Carpenter 2000). We might expect that consumers with low knowledge would be most prone to value a trivial attribute positively. Yet even the beliefs of high knowledge consumers regarding the trivial attribute might not be veridical (Alba and Hutchinson 2000). Therefore, we measure prior experience with the trivial attribute in Study 1A to examine its effect on valuation on disclosure.

Finally, we instituted stimuli and procedural changes to address some deficiencies in the prior study. First, the trivial attribute continued to be down fill type, but the levels were now described as “alpine” and “regular” rather than “goose” and “duck.” This served to duplicate the attribute labels used by Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto (1994), allowing for a more direct comparison with previous research. It also served to examine a situation in which embellished labels are used in place of actual product attribute descriptions, which may provide more latitude for inference making.

Second, Study 1A moved from a simultaneous choice set to a learning and test phase that equated the procedure and stimuli for the low- and high-equity condition. In Study 1, subjects chose their most preferred option from a set of three alternatives (two intratier brands and a midtier brand) and then rank-ordered their preferences for the three alternatives. Consequently, in the low tier, most subjects chose the midtier brand, and preference between the two low tier brands was measured by the rankings of three alternatives. Another potential problem was that the manipulation of brand tier confounded brand name and the performance level of the relevant attributes for the intratier brands.

Study 1A’s learning phase established the common level of alpine fill material for midtier brands in the product category. Subjects read a Consumer Reports discussion of down jacket attribute information in which alpine down was described as made from goose feathers and regular down was described as made from duck feathers. A pretest of 50 undergraduate students using a nine-point rating scale (1 = “like” to 9 = “dislike”) confirmed that alpine was more preferred than regular down fill (x̄ = 3.68 versus x̄ = 4.92, t(49) = 3.42, p < .001). In the prerelevation condition, Consumer Reports also disclosed the irrelevance of the type of bird feather in determining down fill softness. Subjects completed a rating task of four midtier brands that all possessed the shared positive level of the trivial attribute, alpine down fill.

Subjects were then asked to choose between two intratier competitors that were comparable except for brand name and the trivial attribute. The target brand is the brand offering the positive shared trivial attribute of alpine down fill. To prevent ceiling effects, the shared, more preferred alpine down fill level was paired with the lower rated of the competitor brands (high: L.L. Bean and low: Kmart), and the unique, less preferred regular down fill level was paired with the higher rated brand (high: Eddie Bauer and low: Wal-Mart). The attribute descriptions for the test brands were identical for the low and high tier conditions (see Appendix A).

Subjects were asked to describe the basis for their choice, followed by ratings of brand preference, familiarity, trust, and manufacturing expertise, as well as previous ownership of a product containing down fill. All subjects were then asked an open-ended question about the intent of the non-target brand offering the unique negative trivial attribute of regular down fill.

One hundred thirteen subjects participated in exchange for extra credit in an introductory marketing class. The experiment examined two levels of revelation (subjective and prerevealed) and two levels of brand tier (high and low) for a 2 × 2 between-subjects design. Only the shared context was examined. The control condition of Study 1 was used as the baseline estimate for choice preference within a brand tier.

Results

Choice results. The results appear in Table 1. H₁ predicts that the ability of a brand using a trivial attribute to benefit
over a close competitor when the triviality of the attribute is disclosed depends on brand equity and context. Specifically, for the shared context, a low but not high tier brand is expected to benefit from a trivial attribute strategy. Consistent with this hypothesis and corroborating the results of Study 1, there was a revelation × brand tier interaction relative to the control ($\chi^2 = 4.23, p < .05$). Consistent with $H_{1a}$, in the low tier when the target brand possessed alpine down fill, it gained significant share compared with the control in both the subjective ($\Delta = +65\%$, $\chi^2 = 20.72, p < .001$) and the revealed ($\Delta = +51\%$, $\chi^2 = 13.83, p < .001$) conditions with no difference as a function of revelation ($\chi^2 = 1.22, p = .27$). That is, a low tier brand benefits from sharing the trivial attribute with a midtier brand, even when it is revealed that the attribute is meaningless. Consistent with $H_{1b}$, in the high tier, there was a significant difference as a function of revelation ($\chi^2 = 6.16, p < .02$). The target brand possessing alpine down fill gained share when the trivial attribute was subjective ($\Delta = +48\%$, $\chi^2 = 15.87, p < .01$), but there was no significant share gain when the attribute was revealed to be meaningless ($\Delta = +17\%$, $\chi^2 = 1.89, p = .17$). Therefore, a high tier brand may benefit from sharing a trivial attribute with a midtier alternative only when consumers are unaware of the trivial attribute’s true value. However, when the consumer is aware of the true value of the trivial attribute, a high tier brand does not benefit.

Consumer attributions. To shed light on consumer reaction to a brand that does not share a trivial attribute, we assessed subjects’ cognitive responses in the prerevelation condition regarding the intent of the sole brand to offer the negative level of regular down fill. Subjects who received a disclosure were more likely to report a negative reaction to that brand for failing to offer the shared level of the positive trivial attribute of alpine for low than for high tier brands ($Z = 3.57, p < .001$). Specifically, 75% (18/24) of low brand tier subjects made negative inferences that the brand offering regular instead of alpine down fill did so to take advantage of cost savings or ease of availability compared with only 24% (6/25) of the high brand tier subjects. Thus, consistent with the choice results, subjects who were unimpressed by the irrelevance of the trivial attribute believed that a low tier brand should not be different from other category members in offering the trivial attribute.

Next, we examined the generalizability of this result across different levels of prior experience with the trivial attribute. In Study 1A, 58% of subjects indicated that they owned a product containing down fill, and these subjects were evenly distributed across all cells such that no cell differed significantly from the mean ($p > .1$). A separate model was run to examine whether ownership affected choice of the target brand. In support of $H_3$, the brand tier × revelation interaction was marginally significant ($\chi^2 = 2.84, p = .092$). The results also show a significant ownership × revelation interaction ($\chi^2 = 3.71, p = .054$), such that the effect of revelation was greater for nonowners than for owners of down fill products. However, no other significant main effects or interactions were detected ($p > .15$). Thus, the finding that high tier brands can uniquely offer trivial differentiation, whereas low tier brands benefit only when the trivial attribute is shared with a higher equity brand, appears to generalize across prior experience with the trivial attribute.

Summary. We note that in both Study 1 and Study 1A, when subjects were unaware of the meaninglessness of the trivial attribute, both low and high tier brands were able to gain share from close competitors. Apparently, subjects relied on their prior beliefs to infer value from the attractive level of the trivial attribute. Thus, it would appear that brands have very little to lose and much to gain by using a trivial attribute strategy if consumers are unlikely to be aware of the true value of the trivial attribute at the time of choice. However, consumers may become aware of the meaninglessness of the trivial attribute after they have made a purchase decision. When this happens, consumers may alter their view of the brands and perceive them as having been manipulative by taking advantage of their equity without offering any additional value.

A critical test of brand dilution is how a brand’s prior marketing actions affect the success of its future marketing actions (Keller 1993). Specifically, we are interested in whether postchoice revelation of the meaninglessness of the trivial attribute will hurt the brand’s subsequent ability to introduce a new differentiated attribute.

BRAND DILUTION: POSTCHOICE DISCLOSURE OF TRIVIAL DIFFERENTIATION

Prior research in which consumers received negative information about a brand extension has generally shown only limited dilution to overall brand attitude (Keller and Aaker 1992) and brand beliefs (Loken and John 1993; Romeo 1991). This brand dilution research has been grounded in categorization theory, whereby the feedback to the core brand is a function of the similarity between the extension and original category and the degree to which the extension attributes are consistent with brand associations.

The likelihood of dilution has been found to increase for negative extensions to high similarity categories, such as line extensions (John, Loken, and Joiner 1998; Milberg, Park, and McCarthy 1997), that are the domain of trivial differentiation.

Brand dilution can be measured not only by examining changes to core brand beliefs and attitudes but also by whether there is a change in consumer reaction to subsequent brand actions. Keller and Aaker (1992) find that an unsuccessful intervening brand extension can negatively affect consumer reaction to a future brand extension.7 The success of intervening extensions affected the brand’s credibility in introducing future extensions.

6Because we did not collect ownership measures in the control condition in Study 1, only the data from Study 1A could be used. Comparisons are based on actual differences of choice share without controlling for the difference in share between the tiers.

7Specifically, Keller and Aaker (1992) find that the feedback from the success of an intervening extension leads to more favorable consumer reactions to a proposed extension for an average quality core brand, whereas an unsuccessful intervening extension leads to less favorable consumer reactions for a high quality brand. They used hypothetical brands and provided subjects with explicit information about the marketplace success of the extension. Although this research highlights the effect of prior marketing actions on future marketing actions, its brand results may have limited generalizability to the situation examined here, in which real brands are expected to influence the subjective valuation of the ambiguous trivial attribute.
In our research, both high and low equity brands might be regarded as falsely implying that the trivial attribute is credible through its mere existence (i.e., pragmatic inferences). Study 1 shows that subjects who received a prechoice disclosure perceived low performance benefits from the trivial attribute. Yet these preinformed subjects made limited attributions of manipulative intent to the brand offering the trivial attribute. Instead, they appeared to rely on context brand information to resolve their uncertainty, preferring the trivially differentiated brand in the high tier when it was uniquely offered and in the low tier when the trivial attribute was shared with a higher equity brand.

However, the extent of negative feedback may depend on the timing of the disclosure. Prechoice disclosure provides information to the consumer that enables evaluation of expected outcomes. In many cases though, consumers may learn of the irrelevance of the trivial attribute from sources such as Consumer Reports, word of mouth, or competitor advertising only after they have purchased the product. Consumers who were persuaded to choose on the basis of the trivial attribute, only to discover later that it was meaningless, may perceive the firm as having benefited without providing similar benefit to the consumer. According to equity exchange theory, such a consumer comparison of the outcomes/inputs ratio relative to the brand’s outcomes/inputs ratio would lead to a perception of unfairness (Campbell 1995; Oliver and Swan 1989).

Equity exchange theory assumes an unbiased assessment of the outcomes and inputs. But substantial research finds that as a defense mechanism, consumers process information about a chosen alternative in a biased fashion (Eagly and Chaiken 1993) by favorably interpreting ambiguous information (Muthukrishnan 1995) and generating counterarguments to negative information (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2000). Such biased processing has been found to be a function of brand equity. Brands for which consumers have higher commitment and stronger expectations are more resistant to negative publicity (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2000) and product harm crises (Dawar and Pillutla 2000).

Because higher equity brands also possess higher levels of brand trust (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001) and greater certainty about new attribute performance (Nowlis and Simonson 1996), we may similarly expect choosers of high compared with low tier brands to be less affected by postchoice disclosure regarding the trivial attribute. As do Keller and Aaker (1992), we measure brand dilution by examining how introducing a trivial attribute affects a brand’s subsequent ability to introduce a new differentiated attribute.

On the basis of the preceding reasoning, we predict that postchoice disclosure will have a greater negative effect on subsequent differentiation than will prechoice disclosure and that the postchoice disclosure will be more likely to affect the consumers who originally chose the trivially differentiated brand. Furthermore, we predict that the effect of the postchoice disclosure on future differentiation is dependent on brand equity, in that high tier brands will receive less negative feedback from a trivial attribute strategy than will low tier brands. We also examine consumer attributions as to marketer motives for offering the new attribute to gain insight into the potential negative feedback to brand equity (Campbell 1999). Because negative attributions are more likely for a brand that uniquely introduces rather than shares a trivial attribute with context alternatives, we focus on the context in which the brand uniquely offers the trivial attribute.

H2: After postchoice disclosure of the irrelevance of a trivial attribute, original choosers of the brand differentiated by a unique trivial attribute will be less likely to choose the brand’s subsequent new differentiated alternative in a related product category for low than for high equity brands.

**STUDY 2**

Study 2 was a 2 (brand tier) × 2 (disclosure) between-subjects design with two sequential choices. The first factor of brand tier varied on whether the test brands were from a low or a high equity tier. The second factor of disclosure varied on whether the disclosure was provided to subjects before the first choice (prerevelation) or after the first choice but before the second choice (postrevelation). Only the unique context was examined; the target brand possessed the unique positive attribute of goose, and other brands possessed duck down fill. In addition, there was a control condition for each brand tier in which subjects chose between branded alternatives without a trivial attribute.

**Procedure**

Two hundred thirty-three subjects were given course extra credit for participating in Study 2. The cover story was that they needed to purchase a down jacket for an upcoming ski vacation. The procedure was similar to Study 1A. In the learning phase, subjects read a Consumer Reports discussion of down jacket attribute information. In the prerevelation condition only, Consumer Reports also disclosed the irrelevance of the type of bird feather in determining down fill softness, and subjects completed a comprehension test. The postrevelation condition was similar to the subjective condition in Study 1 through the first choice. Subjects then completed a rating task of four midtier brands that all possessed the shared negative level of the trivial attribute, duck down fill.

Subjects were then asked to choose between two intratier competitors that were comparable except for brand name and the trivial attribute. The target brand paired the unique positive level of goose down fill with the lower rated of the competitor brands (high: L.L. Bean and low: Kmart). The shared level of duck down fill was paired with the more preferred brand (high: Eddie Bauer and low: Wal-Mart). The stimuli appear in Appendix B.

Subjects were asked an open-ended question regarding the basis for their choice, followed by ratings of brand preference, familiarity, trust, and manufacturing expertise. Then, in the postrevelation condition only, subjects received an update from Consumer Reports with the trivial attribute disclosure.

The next section contained the second choice scenario. Subjects were told that their vacation plans had been postponed until later in the spring, so instead of a heavy down jacket, they would need only a lighter fleece jacket for the ski trip. Information was provided about three fleece jacket attributes of fleece fiber, weight, and water repellant. The second choice task asked subjects to select between the
same two intratier brands as were provided in the first choice. The alternatives were comparable on the attributes of fleece fiber, weight, pockets, zipper, and color options. The differentiation existed on ambiguous types of the water repellent attribute. The target brand (low: Kmart and high: L.L. Bean) that had offered the unique trivial attribute in the down jacket choice now offered a “NEW!” PKX water repellent in the fleece jacket category, whereas the nontarget brand offered BXZ water repellent. The highlighting of “NEW!” for the target brand was designed to test subject reaction to the brand’s latest differentiation that was neutral in value.

After making a choice, subjects were asked to describe the basis for their choice, preference for water repellent type, and beliefs about marketer intent for offering the new type of water repellent. Specifically, we assessed the likelihood that the “NEW!” PKX water repellent was used to improve product performance, attract attention, or take advantage of the consumer on a five-point scale (1 = “very unlikely” to 5 = “very likely”).

Results

The data were screened to ensure that subjects correctly understood the Consumer Reports attribute information and the disclosure regarding the trivial attribute. Analyzes included only the 81% of subjects (n = 188/233) who passed the prechoice comprehension test. As confirmation of the pretest, subjects reported higher means for the high than for the low tier brands on preference (x̄low = 5.08, t(185) = 5.74, p < .001), and manufacturing expertise (x̄low = 5.08, t(185) = 5.74, p < .001).

Choice 1 results: down jackets. We used a logit model with choice of the target brand as the dependent variable and brand tier and disclosure as independent variables to test for differences in choice share compared with the control. The postrevelation disclosure condition was identical to the subject's prechoice comprehension test. As confirmation of the pretest, subjects reported higher means for the high than for the low tier brands on preference (x̄low = 5.28 versus x̄low = 5.47, t(186) = 2.15, p < .033), trust (x̄low = 6.53 versus x̄low = 5.96, t(186) = 2.86, p < .005), and manufacturing expertise (x̄low = 6.25 versus x̄low = 5.08, t(185) = 5.74, p < .001).

Choice 2 results: fleece jackets. The purpose of the postrevelation condition was to examine how a target brand’s customers might react to learning of the irrelevance of the trivial attribute after they had made their choice. H2 predicts that postchoice disclosure will make original choosers of the trivial differentiation less likely to choose the new differentiation in the low than in the high brand tier. We used a logistic regression model to examine subjects’ second choices (fleece jacket choice) as a function of the disclosure condition, the brand tier, and subjects’ prior choices (down jacket choice).

Not surprisingly, there was a main effect from subjects’ first brand choice (x̄2 = 29.95, p < .001). Subjects who chose the target brand with the trivial attribute in the first choice were more likely to choose the target brand in the second choice (83.9%) than were those who had not chosen the target in the first choice (32.3%). However, the tendency to choose the target brand in the second choice also depended on the brand tier and the disclosure conditions.

In support of H2, in the postrevelation condition compared with the control, the percentage of subjects who selected the target brand in the second choice differed depending on the brand tier and whether subjects had chosen the target brand in the previous choice (first choice × brand tier: x̄2 = 3.63, p = .057). In the control condition, 100% of subjects who selected the target brand in the first choice selected it again when it offered a new attribute in both the low and the high tier. In the postrevelation condition, subjects in the low tier (53.8%) were less likely than...
those in the high tier (94.1%) to choose the target brand in the second choice if they had chosen it in the first choice ($\chi^2 = 7.043, p < .01$) (see Figure 2). Thus, when disclosure regarding the trivial attribute occurred postchoice, a high tier brand retained its share of choosers for the brand’s new differentiation, but the low tier lost a significant portion of its original choosers.

There was no significant difference by tier for postrevelation subjects who had not chosen the target brand in the first choice ($\chi^2_{low} = 38.5\%, \chi^2_{high} = 28.6\%, \chi^2 = .297, p = .585$). In the prerevelation condition when disclosure was revealed before the first choice, there was no significant tier by first choice interaction ($\chi^2 = .711, p = .399$).

When subjects were aware of the meaningfulness of a trivial attribute before a first choice, brand tier did not appear to affect the choice of an extension product by those who either had or had not chosen the target brand in their first choice. However, subjects who chose a brand with a trivial attribute and subsequently learned that the differentiation was meaningless were less likely to choose an extension of that brand in the low compared with the high brand tier.

**Consumer attributions.** Cognitive responses describing the basis for the second choice revealed that the likelihood of postrevelation subjects spontaneously reporting negative inferences regarding the target brand’s new attribute (e.g., “New doesn’t always mean better,” “I am wary of the new water repellent”) was significantly higher for low than for high tier brands. Among target brand choosers in the first choice, half of the low tier subjects (50.0%) made negative comments about its offering a new attribute in the second choice product category, whereas few high tier subjects (5.9%) made negative comments about the new attribute ($\chi^2 = 7.48, p < .01$). However, there was no difference in the likelihood of negative inferences for those who had not chosen the target brand in the first choice by brand tier ($\chi^2_{low} = 21.4\%$, $\chi^2_{high} = 28.6\%, \chi^2 < 1$). This first choice $\times$ brand tier interaction for negative inferences was significant ($\chi^2 = 4.59, p < .05$). Thus, consistent with their second choices, subjects in the low tier were more likely to ascribe a negative value to the new attribute in a subsequent choice when disclosure came after making a first choice, particularly those who had originally chosen the target brand.

Postrevelation subjects’ beliefs about the marketer’s motive for offering the new attribute in the second choice provide further insight (see Table 3). Consistent with cognitive responses, postrevelation caused subjects who chose the target brand in the first choice to be less likely (relative to control subjects) to believe that the new attribute improved performance in the low tier ($\chi^2_{control} = 3.72$ versus $\chi^2_{postrevelation} = 2.69, F(1, 18) = 3.54, p < .08$) but not in the high tier ($\chi^2_{control} = 3.25$ versus $\chi^2_{postrevelation} = 3.24, F(1, 23) = 0, p > .98$) condition. All subjects strongly believed that the brand offered the new attribute to attract attention ($M = 4.65$), which created a ceiling effect with no differences from the control as a function of brand tier or first choice ($ps > .20$).

As we expected, attributions of taking advantage of the consumer were directionally stronger for postrevelation subjects than for their counterparts in the prerevelation condition ($\chi^2_{postrevelation} = 4.14$ versus $\chi^2_{prerevelation} = 3.73$, $t(111) = 1.79, p = .077$). Although first choice target brand choosers in the prerevelation condition were directionally more likely than control subjects to attribute manipulative intent to a brand attempting new differentiation in the low ($\chi^2_{control} = 3.29$ versus $\chi^2_{postrevelation} = 3.85, F(1, 18) = .732, p > .40$) and high ($\chi^2_{control} = 4.00$ versus $\chi^2_{postrevelation} = 4.18, F(1, 23) = .16, p > .69$) brand tiers, neither result was significant, perhaps because of small sample size. The highest

### Table 3
**STUDY 2 SECOND CHOICE (FLEECE JACKETS) BELIEF MEASURES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Improve Performance</th>
<th>Attract Attention</th>
<th>Take Advantage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td>First Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Target Choosers</td>
<td>Non-target Choosers</td>
<td>Target Choosers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low Tier</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>3.71 (.42)</td>
<td>2.76 (.22)</td>
<td>4.71 (.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postrevelation</td>
<td>2.69 (.33)</td>
<td>2.46 (.35)</td>
<td>4.77 (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prerevelation</td>
<td>3.14 (.46)</td>
<td>2.57 (.23)</td>
<td>4.43 (.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High Tier</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>3.25 (.67)</td>
<td>3.57 (.17)</td>
<td>4.75 (.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postrevelation</td>
<td>3.24 (.33)</td>
<td>2.79 (.24)</td>
<td>4.65 (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prerevelation</td>
<td>3.40 (.50)</td>
<td>3.44 (.24)</td>
<td>5.00 (.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Beliefs assessed the likelihood of the reason a brand offered a unique attribute on a five-point scale, where 1 = “very unlikely” and 5 = “very likely.” Standard errors are in parentheses.
ratings of manipulative intent for new differentiation were for non-target brand choosers in the high tier post-revelation condition (x̄control = 3.93 versus x̄postrevelation = 4.50, F(1, 41) = 3.54, p = .067), in which the postchoice disclosure confirmed their decision to ignore the trivial attribute.

Summary. To summarize, the first choice in Study 2 revealed a pattern similar to Study 1; prerevelation significantly attenuated the share gain from offering a unique trivial attribute for low but not high tier brands, though the high tier gain was limited. When disclosure occurred after subjects had made a choice between brands distinguished by a trivial attribute, the brands' subsequent ability to introduce a differentiated attribute was affected. Subjects in the low tier condition who had selected the target brand in their first choice were far less likely to select the brand again (Choice 2) than were those in the high tier. High tier brands displayed almost no adverse effects on subsequent choice from post-revelation of the trivial attribute's value. After a postchoice disclosure, original choosers in the low but not the high tier made negative inferences about the brand's new attribute in a subsequent choice. Postchoice revelation made all subjects believe that the target brand offered the new attribute as an attention-getting device and to take advantage of them, but this did not necessarily negatively influence their likelihood of choosing the target brand.

DISCUSSION

In summary, although brands commonly use trivial attribute strategies as a means to lure consumers away from competitors, only recently have marketing researchers begun to understand the mechanisms and limitations of such strategies. Previous research has attributed the effectiveness of trivial attribute strategies in the face of the disclosure of meaningfulness to consumer attraction to the uniqueness of the differentiated attribute (Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto 1994) and consumers’ use of the trivial attribute for decision resolution (Brown and Carpenter 2000). We suggest that brand equity, the choice context, and the timing of the disclosure of meaningfulness also influence the effectiveness of trivial attribute strategies.

We found that brand equity and the offering of the trivial attribute by a context brand influenced the ability of a brand to gain choice share when the triviality of the differentiation was disclosed before subjects’ choices. A low equity brand was able to gain choice share when it differentiated itself from its closest competitor by sharing the trivial attribute with a higher equity context brand. Our results for high equity brands were less conclusive but generally showed that a high equity brand was able to gain choice share when it differentiated itself from both its closest competitor and a lower equity context brand by uniquely offering a trivial attribute.

Without a disclosure, both high and low equity brands increased their choice share over their closest competitor through a trivial attribute strategy with limited context effects. When the meaninglessness of the trivial attribute was disclosed after subjects’ choices, choices of a subsequent differentiation by the same brand were dependent on brand equity. Low equity brands lost a substantial portion of their customer base, which made negative inferences about the performance value of the subsequent new differentiation. Conversely, high equity brands retained their customer base, which continued to select the brand's new differentiated offering despite the postchoice revelation that the brand’s prior differentiation was meaningless.

This research adds to the literature on product entry by suggesting that the success of an innovation strategy by a late mover (Shankar, Carpenter, and Krishnamurthi 1998) is dependent on brand equity. A strategic implication of our results is that brand equity affects a brand’s ability to maintain its choice share in the face of trivial differentiation by other members of its product category. Low tier brands may be penalized if they fail to offer the trivial differentiation of higher equity brands. In contrast, high tier brands that seek to offer only meaningful differentiation to maintain their credibility might not be penalized if they refuse to follow trivial differentiation by other category members.

Our studies do not explicitly manipulate the temporal sequence of information presentation. Additional research should examine the dynamic valuation of a trivial attribute as its adoption diffuses over a product category. For example, the lower equity Walgreens’ store brand imitated the higher equity Pantene Pro-V vitamin shampoo with its own V vitamin shampoo. Our results suggest that as long as consumers are unaware of the meaninglessness of vitamins in shampoo, Pantene’s market share with respect to other higher equity brands will not suffer from this imitation. Walgreens will also benefit by taking share from other lower tier brands. However, as consumers become informed that vitamins are a trivial attribute for shampoo (Consumer Reports 2000), our results suggest that Pantene is less likely to continue to benefit from the trivial attribute strategy but may still be able to benefit from subsequent trivial differentiation. Walgreens may find that its customers are likely to be more skeptical about future trivial differentiation. However, repeated experience with the trivial attribute may lead consumers to develop a preference for the meaningless attribute (Muthukrishnan and Kardes 2001) and possibly positive feedback to the brand.

Study 1A does not show a moderating effect of prior ownership of a down fill product on consumer valuation of trivial attributes. However, our measure of product familiarity was a single-item question of prior ownership. Because product knowledge is a multifaceted construct, research should further examine the moderating effect of multiple types of knowledge, such as category, trivial attribute, and brand knowledge. Our results show that those with prior ownership of a down product are more resistant to the disclosure that the attribute of down fill type was trivial. Because consumers with high category knowledge are also likely to possess well-defined brand preferences, they may similarly exhibit high resistance to a disclosure if their favorite brand is explicitly promoting the trivial attribute (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2000).

Further research might also examine other cumulative effects of trivial attributes on the potential brand dilution of high equity brands. Consumer experience with a trivial attribute may inadvertently block the learning of future brand attributes that offer meaningful differentiation (van Osselaer and Alba 2000). In addition, revelation of the true value of the trivial attribute was shown to increase subjects’ beliefs about the brand’s manipulative intent in both the low and the high tier. Our results show that consumers ascribe manipulative intent to high tier brands after a postchoice dis-
closure that its differentiation was trivial but continue to choose the brand’s future differentiations. It appears that a one-time negative encounter may not be enough to undermine the sum total of positive brand experiences that a high tier may have accumulated in its equity. Although consumers’ persuasion knowledge may lead them to expect marketers to engage in some manipulative tactics (Friestad and Wright 1994), continued use of a trivial differentiation strategy may produce noticeable brand dilution, especially if it is coupled with a price increase (Campbell 1999). Although our focus was on brand dilution among prior brand choosers, the belief results of Study 2 also suggest that dilution occurs for nonchoosers of a brand. Disclosure of the meaninglessness of the trivial differentiation made nonchoosers highly likely to ascribe manipulative intent to the differentiated brand, which potentially solidifies their preference for a competitor.

It is also important to examine other components of brand equity. Our measure of brand equity was the overall evaluative rating assigned to the brand. Furthermore, all the brands examined were familiar to subjects. Recent research suggests that brand commitment (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2000), credibility (Erdem and Swait 1998), and trust (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001) are important brand equity components to consider in addition to brand affect. High equity brands may possess stronger consumer commitment than low equity brands, and this perhaps limited share gain from a trivial attribute strategy in the high tier following prechoice disclosure. The signaling perspective of brand equity posits that the sunk costs invested in prior periods create a brand’s reputation that its claims are credible (Erdem and Swait 1998). Even our low equity brands had established reputations. Additional research should examine the possible interactions between brand affect and brand credibility on the long-term success of a trivial differentiation strategy. Although manipulation checks showed that our brand affect and brand trust measures were correlated ($r = .642, p < .001$), it would be interesting to disentangle these effects. For familiar brands, there may be brand-specific associations that can be leveraged as a basis for trivial differentiation (Kraus and Carpenter 1999). Prior research is equivocal regarding whether negative extension information about general equity or brand-specific association is more likely to dilute the core brand (John, Loken, and Joiner 1998).

This research extends understanding of the effects of trivial differentiation strategies by demonstrating the moderating effect of brand equity and context. When triviality is disclosed, low equity brands can benefit, but only if they share the differentiation with a higher equity brand, whereas high equity brands benefit, but only if they uniquely offer the differentiation. Finally, the effects of brand equity and trivial differentiation are reciprocal. Disclosure of trivial differentiation after a consumer makes a choice can affect a brand’s equity, such that subsequent trivial differentiation strategies may be less effective.

### Appendix A

#### STIMULI FOR STUDY 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NonTarget</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High Quality Tier</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie Bauer</td>
<td>L.L. Bean</td>
<td>Mervyns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>550 fill rating</td>
<td>550 fill rating</td>
<td>500 fill rating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthetic cover</td>
<td>Synthetic cover</td>
<td>Synthetic cover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra tight stitching</td>
<td>Extra tight stitching</td>
<td>Regular stitching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duck down fill</td>
<td>Goose down fill</td>
<td>Goose/duck down fill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low Quality Tier</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wal-Mart</td>
<td>Kmart</td>
<td>Mervyns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>450 fill rating</td>
<td>450 fill rating</td>
<td>500 fill rating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthetic cover</td>
<td>Synthetic cover</td>
<td>Synthetic cover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-regular stitching</td>
<td>Sub-regular stitching</td>
<td>Regular stitching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duck down fill</td>
<td>Goose down fill</td>
<td>Goose/duck down fill</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### STIMULI FOR STUDY 1A

**Part I: Learning Phase—Down Jacket**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Fill Rating</th>
<th>Down Fill</th>
<th>Cover Material</th>
<th>Stitches per Inch</th>
<th>Rating (1–7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sears</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>Alpine</td>
<td>Synthetic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.C. Penney</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>Alpine</td>
<td>Cotton</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mervyns</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>Alpine</td>
<td>Cotton</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bealls</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>Alpine</td>
<td>Synthetic</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part II: Test Phase—Down Jacket (High Tier/Low Tier)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Fill Rating</th>
<th>Down Fill</th>
<th>Cover Material</th>
<th>Stitches per Inch</th>
<th>Rating (1–7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eddie Bauer/Wal-Mart</td>
<td>525 fill rating</td>
<td>525 fill rating</td>
<td>Synthetic cover</td>
<td>12 stitches per inch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthetic cover</td>
<td>12 stitches per inch</td>
<td>Detachable hood</td>
<td>Dry clean only</td>
<td>Regular down fill</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| L.L. Bean/Kmart | 525 fill rating | Synthetic cover | 12 stitches per inch | Detachable hood | Dry clean only | Alpine down fill |
### Part I: Learning Phase—Down Jacket

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Fill Rating</th>
<th>Down Fill</th>
<th>Cover Material</th>
<th>Stitches per Inch</th>
<th>Rating (1–7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sears</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>Duck</td>
<td>Synthetic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.C. Penney</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>Duck</td>
<td>Cotton</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mervyns</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>Duck</td>
<td>Cotton</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bealls</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>Duck</td>
<td>Synthetic</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Part II: Choice 1—Down Jacket (High Tier/Low Tier)
- **Eddie Bauer/Wal-Mart**
  - 525 fill rating
  - Synthetic cover
  - 12 stitches per inch
  - Detachable hood
  - Dry clean only
  - Duck down fill
- **L.L. Bean/Kmart**
  - 525 fill rating
  - Synthetic cover
  - 12 stitches per inch
  - Detachable hood
  - Dry clean only
  - Goose down fill

### Part III: Choice 2—Fleece Jacket (High Tier/Low Tier)
- **Eddie Bauer/Wal-Mart**
  - Polartec fleece
  - 200 weight
  - Lined pockets
  - Full zipper
  - Multiple colors
  - BXZ water repellant
- **L.L. Bean/Kmart**
  - Polartec fleece
  - 200 weight
  - Lined pockets
  - Full zipper
  - Multiple colors
  - NEW! PKX water repellant

### REFERENCES


