



**prof. dr. Femke van Horen**

Full Professor, School of Business and Economics, Marketing

**Title**

**THOU SHALL NOT IMITATE: WHEN DO COPYCATS TRIGGER MORAL CONCERN?**

**Abstract**

Copycats, which imitate the trade-dress of successful brands, are morally ambiguous; while often legal, they free-ride on the equity and investment of original brands. Thus, consumers sometimes accept and value copycats and sometimes they do not. We investigate how the circumstances impact the salience of moral concern towards the original brand. Results from social media data and seven experiments show that the extent to which a copycat is perceived to harm the original brand influences the perceived unfairness of and thus response to the copycat. We first identify ingroup (vs. outgroup) status of the original brand as a factor that increases the salience of moral concern, lowering copycat evaluations. Our subsequent studies demonstrate, using a variety of product categories and some incentive compatible choice designs, that consumers perceive copycats' business practice as more unfair and evaluate copycats more negatively when the original brand is perceived to suffer harm because it has made a high (vs. low) investment or is a small- (vs. large-) sized firm. The effect attenuates when imitations are illegal (counterfeits) and reverses when copycats are framed as promoting competition (vs. infringing upon intellectual property rights). These results have implications for how brands can effectively fight competition by a copycat.