Research Article

Common Ground and Cultural Prominence

How Conversation Reinforces Culture

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ABSTRACT—*Why do well-known ideas, practices, and people maintain their cultural prominence in the presence of equally good or better alternatives? This article suggests that a social-psychological process whereby people seek to establish common ground with their conversation partners causes familiar elements of culture to increase in prominence, independently of performance or quality. Two studies tested this hypothesis in the context of professional baseball, showing that common ground predicted the cultural prominence of baseball players better than their performance, even though clear performance metrics are available in this domain. Regardless of performance, familiar players, who represented common ground, were discussed more often than lesser-known players, both in a dyadic experiment (Study 1) and in natural discussions on the Internet (Study 2). Moreover, these conversations mediated the positive link between familiarity and a more institutionalized measure of prominence: All-Star votes (Study 2). Implications for research on the psychological foundations of culture are discussed.*

If cultural prominence is defined as the quality of being discussed and esteemed in a given culture, then the most well-known elements of society seem to have an advantage in maintaining and increasing their prominence. The economics literature offers an explanation for this phenomenon: People, ideas, and practices become and stay prominent because of their superior quality or performance (see, e.g., Hamlen, 1991; MacDonald, 1988). Sometimes economists concede that at the very top of a field, small differences in quality can be disproportionately magnified—why settle for a CD of the world's sec-ond-best singer when one can just as cheaply buy the best?—but even these economic arguments emphasize quality as the dimension underlying selection of cultural elements (Rosen, 1981).

But this *quality hypothesis* does not account for inertia in cultural prominence. Cultural observers have long noted that some celebrities are famous simply for being famous—consider Zsa Zsa Gabor, Charles Nelson Reilly, or today's Paris Hilton. And in the domain of science, it has been argued that well-known scientists receive more than their fair share of credit for joint discoveries made with lesser-known scientists, a phenomenon labeled the Matthew effect in the sociology of science (Merton, 1968). These and similar examples have led sociologists to criticize the quality hypothesis, arguing that quality is not an objective, easy-to-observe property of social objects and is instead socially constructed (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1979/1984; DiMaggio, 1987; Gans, 1974).

Their criticism is valid; quality is difficult to measure among celebrities and perhaps even in science. However, sociologists do not typically offer detailed accounts of what social construction is or how it happens. In this article, we attempt to provide such an account: We posit a theory about why cultural prominence might not follow the quality hypothesis and then report results of two studies testing this theory. Drawing on past research, we argue that people are most likely to talk about aspects of culture they think they share in common with others, and, furthermore, that this tendency serves to reinforce, or institutionalize, the cultural prominence of familiar cultural elements, independently of their quality.

We provide a rigorous test of the quality hypothesis by exploring the domain of professional baseball. We selected this domain because the extensive amount of data that has been collected about professional baseball allows quality to be assessed. Though we tested our ideas about common ground in the domain of professional baseball, our proposed mechanism sheds light on other examples of cultural prominence. For example, the

most familiar corporations tend to be the most prominently represented in contemporary corporate legends, even when the original stories featured different corporations (Fine, 1985). Similarly, familiar stereotypes tend to be discussed and reinforced, even when surprising, counterstereotypical information is readily available (A.E. Clark & Kashima, 2007; Kashima, 2000; Lyons & Kashima, 2001, 2003).

COMMON GROUND AND CULTURAL PROMINENCE

Cognitive anthropologist Dan Sperber (1990) has noted that "culture is the precipitate of cognition and communication in a human population" (p. 42). Consistent with this idea, a small but growing literature has explained cultural phenomena using psychology (Rubin, 1995; Schaller & Crandall, 2004; Sperber, 1996). Most researchers have used principles of cognition to explore how ideas become prominent (Miller & Taylor, 1995; Norenzayan & Atran, 2004; Rubin, 1995). Here, however, we emphasize communication (see also Schaller, Conway, & Tanchuk, 2002), focusing particularly on the pursuit of common ground in conversations.

Gravitation toward common ground is a well-documented phenomenon in psycholinguistics and social psychology. People generally favor talking about information they share in common with other people (H.H. Clark, 1996; Stalnaker, 1978). The tendency to emphasize common information is often the result of a sampling bias: Shared information is more likely to be sampled simply because there are more people who can bring it up (e.g., Stasser, Taylor, & Hanna, 1989; Stasser & Titus, 1985, 1987). However, group members also tend to mention shared information that has already been discussed at higher rates than they mention unshared information, whether or not it has been discussed (Larson, Christensen, Franz, & Abbott, 1998; Stasser et al., 1989). This finding indicates a strong preference for common ground. People prefer common ground because it makes them feel more socially connected (A.E. Clark & Kashima, 2007) and better about themselves (Wittenbaum & Park, 2001). Discussing familiar information also increases people's confidence that the information is valid and accurate (Brauer, Judd, & Gliner, 1995; Wittenbaum, Hubbell, & Zuckerman, 1999; Wittenbaum & Park, 2001). Building on these findings, we posit the *common-ground hypothesis* of cultural prominence: People's desire to establish common ground should lead them to favor familiar conversation topics, and this social rehearsal should make those topics even more prominent in society at large.

OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENT RESEARCH

We conducted two studies (an experiment and a field study) pitting the common-ground hypothesis against the quality hypothesis in one of the most statistics-laden domains of cultural life—professional baseball. Because well-known players serve as good common ground, we hypothesized that they would be more likely than lesser-known players to be discussed during conversations, independently of the players' current athletic performance. We also hypothesized that familiarity at one point in time (indexed by media mentions) would lead to increased future prominence in All-Star voting, a highly institutionalized measure of good performance. A player who is more familiar serves better as common ground and is mentioned more in conversations, which in turn leads people to be more likely to vote for him. Although it is highly likely that familiarity, conversational mentions, and All-Star votes are interrelated, we posited and tested one direction in which the relationship might flow. Specifically, common ground should lead to increased cultural prominence in conversations, which, in turn, should reinforce and increase institutionalized cultural prominence in the form of accolades and honors, such as All-Star votes.

STUDY 1

We first explored cultural prominence by investigating which baseball players become prominent in a controlled laboratory culture. We designed a particularly stark test of the quality hypothesis by giving participants a choice between discussing either familiar baseball players who had mediocre seasons or less familiar players who had fantastic, All-Star-worthy seasons. According to the quality hypothesis, the players with outstanding recent performance would become most prominent. In contrast, the common-ground hypothesis predicted that familiar players—even if they had mediocre seasons—would become most prominent because those players were more suited to provide common ground during conversation.

Of course, familiarity could make a player prominent in conversations for reasons other than common ground. An *availability hypothesis* would suggest that certain players might become prominent in conversations because of an availability bias in memory; players who are more familiar may be more likely to come to mind as worthy topics (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). We attempted to reduce the role of availability in two ways. First, we gave participants the names of familiar and less-familiar players, along with detailed information about their season performance (e.g., home runs and batting average); this information should have freed participants from having to rely on whatever information was available in their own memories. Second, we used an e-mail format that allowed participants ample time to compose their messages and required only one conversational interchange. Both features reduced the demands of availability, but presumably did not affect the desire to seek common ground.

To further separate the effects of common ground from those of availability and quality, we manipulated participants' perceptions of the conversation partner's baseball knowledge. People generally seek to establish social connections with others (A.E. Clark & Kashima, 2007), and they do so by

highlighting the information that others are most likely to consider common and valuable (A.E. Clark & Kashima, 2007; Fussell & Krauss, 1992). Thus, we either informed participants that they would have a brief on-line exchange with a knowledgeable baseball fan (i.e., conversation with an expert) or made no specifications about the partner (i.e., general conversation). We predicted that participants would generally favor familiarity over skill when selecting a player to discuss. But to provide the most stringent test of common ground, we looked at the responses of those participants who were baseball experts (i.e., self-identified fans). If the quality hypothesis is correct, the experts should have discussed the players with the best performance. Similarly, if the availability hypothesis is correct, the experts should also have discussed the best-performing players, because they were likely to be familiar with all the players and therefore should have discussed the ones who were most interesting. But if the common-ground hypothesis is correct, the experts should have talked about the topics they were most confident they shared in common with their partner, favoring the less-familiar (but high-performing) players when talking with another fan and favoring the familiar (but underperforming) players when talking with an unspecified partner (see A.E. Clark & Kashima, 2007).

Method

Participants

Eighty-nine adults (33 men, 56 women; mean age = 31.90 years) participated in an on-line survey in exchange for a $5 on-line gift certificate. The sample included both self-identified baseball fans ($n = 36$) and nonfans ($n = 53$).

Procedure and Design

We created a list of eight baseball players. Pretesting confirmed that the four players on the list who had just finished fair-to-mediocre seasons were familiar to the general public (e.g., Ken Griffey, Jr.) and that the four who had just finished spectacular seasons were less familiar (e.g., Miguel Cabrera). By providing information about performance, and by using familiar players who performed worse than the less-familiar players, we set up a conservative test of the merits of the common-ground hypothesis relative to the quality hypothesis.

Participants were provided the list of eight players and were asked to initiate an on-line conversation with another person. They were informed that the other person would read their message and write a response, and that this would be the extent of the conversation. In reality, the conversation never took place. We randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions: talking with a fan ($n = 46$) or talking with an unspecified partner ($n = 43$). After participants wrote their conversation starter, they rated the skill and familiarity of each player using 7-point Likert scales.

Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants decided to converse about well-known players (66%) more often than lesser-known, higher-performing players (34%), $\chi^2(1, N = 89) = 5.94, p = .02, p_{rep} = .93$. One possible interpretation of this result is that participants selected the familiar players to express surprise at their poor performance, but only a single participant commented on the subpar performance of a familiar player.

Another possibility is that participants did not distinguish clearly between skill and familiarity. To directly assess the driving force behind people's selections, we performed a logistic regression predicting the likelihood that each player would be selected from participants' own standardized ratings of that player's familiarity and skill. By including both performance and familiarity in the regression, we were able to observe the effects of one while controlling for the other. The results were consistent with a common-ground explanation. Participants emphasized familiarity over skill when their conversation partner was unknown, but preferred skill over familiarity when their partner was an expert (see Table 1). This analysis revealed significant interactions between conversation partner and skill ($z = 2.35, p = .02, p_{rep} = .93$) and between conversation partner and familiarity ($z = 2.39, p = .02, p_{rep} = .93$). This pattern is inconsistent with the quality hypothesis, which predicts that people should always favor quality, and is also inconsistent with the availability hypothesis, which predicts that people should always favor familiarity. Most important, these effects were driven primarily by the experts, who were familiar with all the players and therefore able to talk freely about whomever they liked. As predicted by the common-ground account, experts who were engaged in a general conversation selected players to talk about on the basis of familiarity, $b = 1.39, \chi^2(1, N = 36) = 5.47, p = .02, p_{rep} = .93$, but not on the basis of skill, $b = 0.70, \chi^2(1, N = 36) = 0.67, p = .41, p_{rep} = .56$; in contrast, experts who were talking with another expert selected players on the basis of skill, $b = 2.71, \chi^2(1, N = 36) = 4.13, p = .04, p_{rep} = .89$, but not on the basis of familiarity, $b = 0.69, \chi^2(1, N = 36) = 0.48, p = .49, p_{rep} = .51$ (see Fig. 1).

TABLE 1

Results From Study 1: Familiarity and Performance as Predictors of Which Players Participants Chose to Discuss

Conversation type	Player's familiarity			Player's performance		
	b	SE	Wald	b	SE	Wald
General conversation	1.80	0.41	19.72**	0.46	0.75	0.38
Conversation with expert	0.43	0.41	1.12	2.23	0.78	8.14*

Note. Familiarity and performance were measured by participants' standardized ratings of each player. A separate logistic regression was conducted for each conversation type.
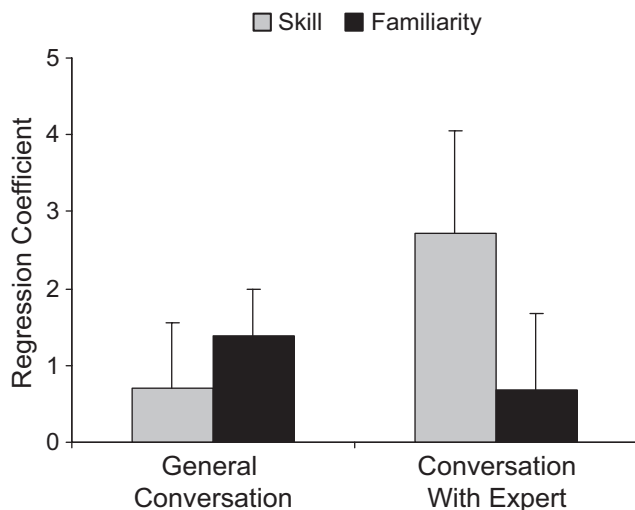*$p < .01$. **$p < .001$.

Fig. 1. Results from Study 1: regression coefficients from a logistic regression in which players' skill and participants' familiarity with players were used to predict which players fans discussed in general conversation and in conversation with an expert. Error bars represent standard errors.

These results suggest that a purely quality-based explanation for prominence is insufficient: Participants selected which players to talk about on the basis of the players' familiarity even though familiarity was inversely correlated with performance. Furthermore, the results demonstrate the strength of the common-ground goal above and beyond other conversational goals: Participants revealed a strong preference for pursuing common ground even though they had access to information informing them of the superior quality of lesser-known players and therefore could have talked about these players with ease. Even fans showed this preference when their partner was not labeled as a fan. This suggests that the very experts who were in the best position to educate other people about lesser-known players instead pursued conversations that reinforced the prominence of already-familiar players. In Study 2, we examined the implications of these findings for culture.

STUDY 2

Study 1 provided a fairly precise test of the common-ground hypothesis, but the lab culture we created necessarily involved a limited number of players. In Study 2, we examined conversations in a larger slice of culture (actual conversations taking place on the Internet) and for a broader set of players (all players who were All-Star contenders in two different baseball seasons). We predicted that, even after controlling for performance, familiar players would achieve more prominence in conversations than less-familiar players. We also tested the idea that conversational prominence became institutionalized in a concrete indicator of cultural prominence: All-Star voting.

Method

We tested our predictions at two different points in time, the years leading up to the 1996 and the 2001 Major League Baseball All-Star games. In each case, we included the top 10 vote recipients at each position in each league. We obtained our most complete set of All-Star voting data, which listed all players on the ballot in 1996, from Hanssen and Anderson (1999). This is a rare data set that is difficult to replicate, but we sought to do so for the seasons 5 and 10 years later. We were able to get data for the top 10 vote recipients for each position in each league in 2001, but could not locate similar data for 2006 even after an extensive database search of the top 50 U.S. newspapers. We initially ran all of our analyses separately for 1996 and 2001; the findings were essentially the same, so we combined the data for simplicity. Thus, the analyses reported here included a total of 360 players.

Familiarity

We used Factiva, an on-line database, to measure the number of times each player's name appeared in the top 50 U.S. newspapers during the 3 years before the focal All-Star voting year. By using the top 50 newspapers, we strove to create a broad-based measure of common ground in the U.S. population. We used a 3-year window because we wanted a measure that was reasonably recent, yet fairly independent of performance during the voting season. (This scale was strongly correlated with playing time but only weakly correlated with performance, which supports the idea that it measured familiarity better than performance.)

Conversational Mentions

We used the "Google Groups" Advanced Search function to measure how many times players were mentioned in discussion groups (sports related and otherwise) on the Internet during the playing year prior to All-Star voting. We also subdivided these data into a baseball-insider measure (mentions in conversations in the rec.sport.baseball discussion group, the Google discussion group frequented by avid baseball fans) and a measure of conversations among the general public (mentions in conversations outside rec.sport.baseball).

All-Star Votes

For a strongly institutionalized measure of cultural prominence, we recorded the number of votes each player received for the corresponding All-Star game. The All-Star game takes place approximately midway through the baseball season and is intended to feature the highest-performing players for that season (Hanssen & Anderson, 1999). Fans elect the starters for the nonpitching positions by voting at games or on-line. Receiving votes and being selected for the All-Star game increase players' status, publicity, and even financial rewards. Thus, All-Star selection is a highly reinforced position of prominence.

Quality of Performance

For a measure of performance during the All-Star voting season, we used offensive average (OA), the preferred performance index in economic studies and among baseball statisticians (Bennett & Flueck, 1983; Hanssen & Anderson, 1999). OA is calculated as follows: [singles + (2 × doubles) + (3 × triples) + (4 × home runs) + walks + stolen bases]/(at bats + walks). We also calculated each player's lifetime OA.

Control Variables

We controlled for year (i.e., 1996 vs. 2001), team, league (i.e., American League vs. National League), the player's position, the number of career and midyear at bats, and the number of previous All-Star game appearances.

Results and Discussion

A regression analysis (see Table 2) showed what drove Internet conversations about baseball players. Results were consistent with the quality hypothesis in that players were discussed more in on-line discussion-group conversations if they had strong lifetime performance ($\beta = .15$, $p = .01$, $p_{rep} = .95$) and strong current performance ($\beta = .15$, $p < .01$, $p_{rep} = .96$). More critically, there was evidence for common ground: Players were mentioned more often if they were more familiar (as measured by media coverage), and this effect was independent of players' actual performance. Indeed, the effects of familiarity ($\beta = .44$, $p < .001$, $p_{rep} = .99$) were larger in magnitude than the effects of lifetime performance or current-season performance. An increase of 1 standard deviation in media attention increased the frequency of conversational mentions by 66, whereas an increase of 1 standard deviation in performance increased the frequency of conversational mentions by 17 (lifetime performance) or 18 (current performance).

A regression analysis of the All-Star votes (see Table 3) showed that familiarity predicted this measure of institutionalized cultural prominence even when we controlled for the performance-based quality measures. At first glance, this pattern of results seems to support the availability hypothesis. That is, prominence

TABLE 2

Results From Study 2: Performance and Familiarity as Predictors of How Often Players Were Mentioned in On-Line Conversations

Predictor	b	SE	β
Lifetime performance (offensive average)	0.65	0.21	.15*
Current performance (offensive average)	0.87	0.33	.15*
Familiarity (past media attention)	0.36	0.05	.44**

Note. Control variables were year, team, league, position, number of career at bats, number of midyear at bats, and number of past All-Star games. The predictors and dependent variable were normalized.
*$p < .01$. **$p < .001$.

TABLE 3

Results From Study 2: Performance and Familiarity as Predictors of How Many All-Star Votes Players Received

Predictor	b	SE	β
Lifetime performance (offensive average)	0.22	0.22	.04
Current performance (offensive average)	0.79	0.14	.21**
Familiarity (past media attention)	0.10	0.03	.15*

Note. Control variables were year, team, league, position, number of career at bats, number of midyear at bats, and number of past All-Star games. The predictors and dependent variable were normalized.
*$p < .01$. **$p < .001$.

could have been driven not by what people talked about, but by their familiarity with players who had received media attention. A mediational analysis, however, showed that the effect of familiarity was fully mediated by conversational mentions (Sobel $z = 3.74$, $p < .001$, $p_{rep} = .99$). In particular, it was mediated by the types of conversations that Study 1 suggested were the least informed by concerns about quality—those among nonexperts (see Fig. 2). When we combined data from conversations among experts and nonexperts, we obtained a similar result, but conversations among experts alone did not mediate the effect of familiarity on All-Star votes. Note that the results of the mediation analysis are doubly ironic from the standpoint of the quality hypothesis: Not only did familiarity predict All-Star votes independently of performance, but familiar players got more votes when their familiarity translated into conversation among the least-informed members of the baseball community (i.e., nonexperts). Similarly, we found that when mentions in outsider and insider conversations were included in a regression predicting All-Star votes, mentions in outsider conversations predicted the number of votes ($\beta = .17$, $p < .001$, $p_{rep} = .99$), but mentions in insider conversations had only a marginal effect on the number of votes ($\beta = .09$, $p = .06$, $p_{rep} = .86$).

To further explore the magnitude of the common-ground effect, we assessed how many extra votes players would receive for an increase of 1 standard deviation in the predictor variables. An increase of 1 standard deviation in current performance would yield an additional 64,065 All-Star votes, and an increase of 1 standard deviation in mentions in nonexpert conversations would produce a nearly equivalent addition of 59,696 votes. (An increase of 1 standard deviation in mentions in expert conversations would add only 31,530 votes.)

Finally, we wanted to rule out the possibility that the results were due to the superstar effect, whereby the best performer garners the lion's share of the reward (Rosen, 1981). We repeated all of our analyses with dummy variables that assessed whether or not each player was the best performing player (we ran separate analyses for lifetime performance and midyear performance) and the most familiar player (media mentions) at his position. The same pattern of results was obtained as in the original analyses.
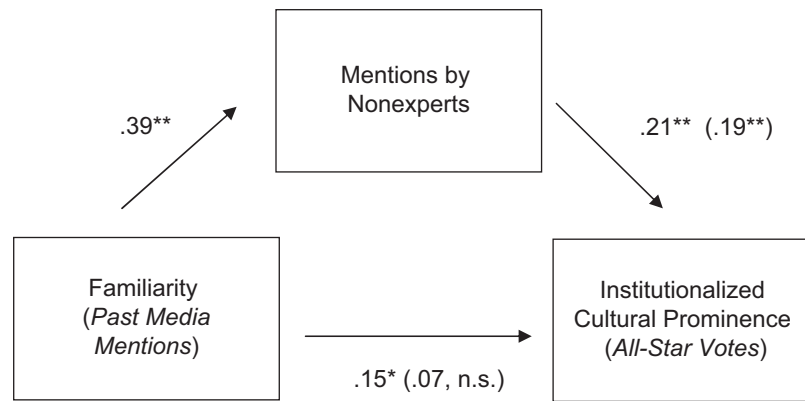
Fig. 2. Conversational mentions as a mediator of the relation between players' familiarity and the number of All-Star votes they received. The numbers alongside the arrows are standardized regression coefficients; coefficients in parentheses are the values obtained when both familiarity and mentions by nonexperts were included as controls. Asterisks indicate coefficients significantly different from zero, $*p < .01$, $**p < .001$.

These results extend the findings from Study 1. As specified by economic theory, quality does matter for cultural prominence: Players generated more conversation and attracted more votes when they performed better. However, as predicted by the common-ground hypothesis, players generated more conversation and collected more votes when they could serve as a familiar source of common ground, and these effects were above and beyond those of performance. And perhaps most striking of all, the influence of media-based familiarity on All-Star voting was completely mediated by mentions in conversations, a finding that clearly demonstrates one directional relationship among these interrelated variables: Familiar players generated conversational buzz—especially in casual, nonexpert conversations—and buzz translated into additional votes.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

These two studies indicate that the tendency to pursue common ground during conversations plays a key role in reinforcing culture. Even in baseball, a domain in which quality is easy to assess, familiar players maintain attention that makes them more culturally prominent than their less-familiar counterparts who are equally or more deserving of recognition. In Study 1, participants were more likely to discuss familiar baseball players with a conversation partner even though the familiar players performed worse than the less-familiar players and information about these differences in performance was readily available. Even fans—who favored discussing higher-performing players when talking with fellow experts—discussed familiar players when engaging in general conversations. In Study 2, we replicated and extended these findings in the field, showing that common ground (in the form of familiar players) led to conversational buzz, and that conversational buzz led to a highly institutionalized form of prominence (i.e., All-Star votes).

These studies offer several contributions. First, they provide a social-psychological account for what sociologists have argued is a process of social construction, showing that conversations affect cultural prominence by bolstering the popularity and relevance of elements of culture that are already familiar to the most people. Second, these studies indicate that gravitation toward common ground, a phenomenon that has been well documented at the level of dyads and small groups, is also useful for understanding the distribution of information in culture at large. Finally, by providing evidence that common ground can explain cultural phenomena that cannot be explained by other accounts (e.g., quality, availability, and pure media attention cannot fully explain how prominence arises), these studies show, in Sperber's (1990) words, that culture is the precipitate of communication, as well as of cognition.

We have not explored why particular players initially become culturally prominent, but merely have shown that cultural prominence is self-reinforcing. To understand why aspects of culture become prominent, it would be interesting to examine the full trajectory of prominence. Baseball players may initially become familiar because of superior athletic performance, but in other domains of cultural life, such as celebrity, the initial role of quality may be less important than luck or surprise. In either case, the common-ground hypothesis suggests that individuals are likely to retain their prominence, however it is established, even when lesser-known counterparts perform equally well or better.

For the present research, we selected a domain in which quality could be easily measured, in order to create a conservative test for the common-ground hypothesis. But we speculate that common-ground dynamics may play an even bigger role in domains where quality is harder to assess. For example, it has been noted that urban legends about corporate brands are at first about obscure brands, but then migrate to feature familiar

brands. In the late 1970s, Wendy's hamburgers were the original target of an urban legend about worms being added to hamburger meat, but this legend quickly changed to being about McDonald's (Fine, 1985). Given that McDonald's had 10 times the market share of Wendy's, a common-ground analysis can explain why a legend about McDonald's outcompeted a legend about the more obscure Wendy's.

Our findings suggest that prominent ideas (e.g., stereotypes), practices (e.g., social norms), and people (e.g., celebrities) remain prominent because they help people connect and create social bonds during conversations. Study 1 shows that the very experts with the knowledge required to change this cultural dynamic actually avoid introducing their knowledge when it would violate common ground. Similarly, Kashima and his colleagues showed that familiar stereotypes tend to be passed along from person to person, even when surprising counterstereotypical information is available (A.E. Clark & Kashima, 2007; Kashima, 2000; Lyons & Kashima, 2001, 2003). If common ground can affect cultural prominence even in a quality-focused domain such as All-Star voting, then its effect on other elements of cultural prominence, ranging from celebrity to social stereotypes, is worth understanding.

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