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How Far Do Feelings Go? How Attachments Influence Brand Extensions
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Today, most new product introductions are brand extensions (Aaker, 1990). Hence, this area is of paramount importance for both marketing practitioners and academics. Academic research in marketing has looked at a number of important factors determining the success (or failure) of extensions (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994). Research has suggested that the perceived fit or conceptual similarity between a parent and extended brand is a major factor driving the evaluation of brand extensions (Park, Milberg & Lawson, 1991).

Research also indicates that when consumers have favorable attitudes toward parent brands, they tend to evaluate extensions positively as well (Boush & Loken, 1991). That is, while brand extension researchers have previously studied the role of affect, the focus has been on affect either as a component of attitude (Boush & Loken, 1991; Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994) or as mood (Barone, Miniard, & Romeo, 2000). In these cases, affect as attitude is understood as a relatively less potent or “cold” (Cohen & Areni, 1991) form of affect, while mood is also a relatively mild affective state that is often not directly traceable to a specific reason or stimulus.

In the current paper, we introduce the attachment construct into the brand extension literature and suggest that it acts as a powerful determinant of consumers’ reactions to brand extensions that could help marketers overcome a lack of fit. Unlike previous research on the effects of attitude in brand extension research, attachment is a “hot” stimulus-induced affect that describes certain emotionally-laden relationships between consumers and brands (Ball & Tasaki, 1992). We argue that attachment to the parent brand goes beyond both fit/similarity and attitude in determining brand extension success.

Attachment is a relationship-based construct that reflects the emotional bond connecting an individual with a specific target object (Bowlby, 1979). High attachment to a particular target (i.e., object, person) induces a state of emotion-laden mental readiness that influences one’s allocation of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral resources towards the object of attachment (Holmes, 2000). It is evidenced, among other things, by such psychological and behavioral outcomes as proximity-seeking behaviors, separation distress, a sense that the attachment object offers a safe haven, and mourning of its loss (Bowlby, 1979).

The first study examined the attachment construct using a fictitious brand through manipulations of both the fit between a parent and extended brand (low, medium, or high) and the attachment (low or high) to the parent brand. Attachment was manipulated by invoking separation distress that accompanies high levels of attachment. As hypothesized, participants in the high attachment condition showed higher purchase intentions towards (M=4.41) and willingness to pay (M=54) for the extensions as opposed to those in the low attachment condition (3.52 and 84 respectively). The effect was pronounced at the high (sneakers and shorts) and medium (sneakers and sunglasses) levels of fit (for high fit, PI: 5.35 vs. 4.10, willingness to pay: 114 vs. 98; for medium fit, PI: 4.50 vs. 3.61, and willingness to pay: 98 vs. 78). When the fit was low, as in the case of sneakers and grills, even the strong emotional bond implied by high attachment did not help.

The second study replicated the above results in the context of real brands to which participants were strongly or weakly attached. Different product categories were used for both the parent brand and the extension (jeans vs. casual shirts, sandals, or desk lamps). We also measured attitude strength and included it as a covariate, to make sure the attachment construct had an effect above and beyond attitude. Furthermore, the effect of attachment on evaluations of the extended brand was partially mediated by brand commitment.

In summary, this paper introduces an important variable of consumer attachment to the brand extension literature, and adds to the emotional richness of this important area of consumer research. Drawing from two studies employing real and fictitious brands, this paper shows that emotional attachment has a positive effect on consumer reactions to brand extensions, even when controlling for the effect of attitude favorability and strength.

REFERENCES