The Role of Brand Personality and Consumer Attachment Style in Strengthening Brand Relationships

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In a series of three studies, this research examines the impact of brand personality and attachment style differences on strength of brand attachment. Findings support our hypotheses regarding the manner in which brand personality and attachment style differences systematically influence brand attachment. Results show that anxiously attached individuals are more likely to be differentially influenced by brand personalities. Further, the results indicate that the level of avoidance predicts the types of brand personality that are most relevant to anxious individuals. Implications of these findings are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Background. That brands have personalities or human characteristics is now well established in the literature; as is the idea that brand personality is a vehicle of consumer self-expression and can be instrumental in helping consumers express different aspects of their self (Aaker 1997). Humanizing a brand empowers it to play a more central role in the consumer’s life: potentially enabling the consumer to project an aspect of their self which might be desirable for relationships they seek (Aaker 1997); or possibly even give them a sense of comfort at having found a brand that “fits” with their self-concept (Aaker 1999). In order to harness the potential of brand personality, it is important from both a managerial and a theoretical point, to understand the underlying mechanisms invoked under different circumstances, and identify moderators that provide more specific insights into which brand personality traits are going to matter to consumers. We adopt an attachment theory (Bowlby 1980) perspective to provide a richer understanding of the role of brand personality in influencing consequential branding outcomes such as brand attachment and purchase likelihood, especially under marketplace settings where consumers are not explicitly directed to pay attention to the brand’s personality.

Predictions. Attachment theory has identified two dimensions of attachment style based on the individuals’ view of self and view of others, i.e., anxiety and avoidance respectively, which are expected to influence the type of relationships they engage in and their potential for forming attachments in the interpersonal domain (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991; Bartz and Lydon 2004). We propose that a consumer’s attachment style (based on these two dimensions) will moderate the effect of brand personality on crucial outcomes such as brand attachment and purchase likelihood.

Method. Through a series of three experiments, our research demonstrates that consumers’ attachment styles are likely to moderate the impact of brand personality on marketplace outcomes. We examine these hypotheses across three studies. The first study examines the extent to which consumers’ attachment styles moderate the role of brand personality in predicting their existing brand attachments for favorite clothing brands. In Study 2 and 3, the key variables of attachment style and brand personality are manipulated (instead of measured), to provide a cleaner test of the hypotheses. Generalizability of the pattern of effects obtained with favorite brands in the first study is extended to the context of brand extensions (study 2) and new product introductions (study 3). The last two studies also attempt to provide process related insights (study 2) as well as identify boundary conditions for the effects obtained (study 3).

Results. Our research reveals that consumers who have an anxious attachment style are more likely to be influenced by a brand’s personality than those who are less anxious about relationships. For the anxious types, when the brand is associated with a personality trait which the consumer considers important or relevant for maintaining relationships with others, brand attachment and purchase likelihood are enhanced. In this regard, our research reveals that high anxiety types who tend to avoid relationships are likely to be influenced by exciting brands; whereas high anxiety individuals who are low on relationship avoidance are attracted to sincere brands. In contrast, consumers who do not have an anxious attachment style, tend not to be influenced to the same extent by the brand’s personality, demonstrating similar brand outcomes (attachment as well as purchase likelihood) for sincere and exciting brands. Importantly, this pattern of effects is replicated whether attachment style is measured or manipulated; across different product categories (clothing, shoes, and clocks); for well known favorite brands to new and unfamiliar brands; for outcomes varying from brand attachment to purchase likelihood. Further, these results appear to be more important in the context of publicly consumed goods rather than for privately consumed goods.

Conclusions. As such, our research points out to an interesting but counterintuitive finding: brand personality can be most useful for forging consumer-brand connections in a domain where past literature in the interpersonal relationship context suggests brand attachments are most unlikely (e.g., the high anxiety high avoidance consumers). Interestingly, brand personality might hold the key to forming relationships with and enhancing purchase likelihood of these consumers. Specifically, although high anxiety and high avoidance type of individuals (fearfuls) have been shown to demonstrate the lowest levels of attachment potential in past literature (e.g., Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991), the use of an exciting brand personality led them to exhibit brand attachment levels similar to low anxiety low avoidance (secure) individuals, associated with highest attachment potential in the interpersonal domain. Furthermore, it appears these relationships are formed with a view to projecting one’s image as more desirable. Hence, this relationship potential is most likely for products which tend to be consumed publicly.

Our research sheds light on the processes underlying these effects. We contrast the mediating role of self-brand relevance and self-brand similarity. We find that self-brand relevance offers a better account of the processes by which individuals use brand personality in an instrumental way to building brand attachments.

Implications. At this point, it is important to note that several potential roles of brand personality have been discussed in the literature, ranging from a match with the consumer’s self-concept to impression management via brand personality with the goal of developing positive relationships (Aaker 1999). Our research suggests that consumer attachment styles might be more likely to invoke the impression management type of mechanisms, serving as a tool to enhance one’s attractiveness as a relationship partner.

By illuminating the important role of attachment styles, this research may serve to encourage scholars to re-think some of the fundamental notions of the universality of brand personality traits and their meaningfulness across groups of consumers differentiated based on attachment styles. This research contributes to the literature by demonstrating the important role of consumers’ view of self and view of others, which, developed during infancy, influences how consumers seek brands with personality traits that are self-relevant or important. Brand personalities help consumers derive symbolic meaning from their relationships with brands. Sincere brand personality traits, for instance, are meaningful to consumers who seek relationships (less avoidant), but who have a highly anxious view of self. Exciting brands also symbolic meaning and are particularly meaningful to those anxious individuals who are focused on self-reliance.
REFERENCES


