Self-Brand Attraction: an Interpersonal Attraction Approach to Brand Relationships

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What is a brand relationship? In this paper, we build from previous research on brand relationships (Fournier 1998) and personalities (Aaker 1997) to further specify the interpersonal workings of consumer relationships with brands. By applying interpersonal attraction theory (Byrne 1971), we find that two things are required for a close brand relationship. First, consumers must perceive that the brand “person” has similar attitudes on a wide variety of topics (e.g., politics, music). Second, the brand’s attitude toward the consumer must also be considered in that the positive relationship between self-brand similarity and brand relationship closeness holds only when consumers feel the brand does not like them more than they like the brand.

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References

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Are brand-consumer relationships the same as interpersonal relationships? For almost a decade, brands have been theorized as parasocial entities with which consumers can form personal attachments (Aaker 1997; Fournier 1998). But what is the nature of this relationship? Further, can the interpersonal metaphor truly be extended to the person-brand context? If brands do have personalities, is it enough to simply like the “person”? Or, might a feeling of reciprocated affection from the brand itself also play a role, as human interpersonal attraction theory might predict?

In this research, we build from previous research in marketing that has accounted for brand-consumer connections as relationships (Fournier 1998) and theorized that brands have personalities (Aaker 1997). Specifically, we take both of these ideas seriously by using the interpersonal attraction paradigm from relationship research (Byrne 1961) to better understand brand relationships and to predict self-brand attraction better than competing theorizations (e.g., Keller 1993). Our findings show that felt similarity toward the brand and its associations is necessary, but does not sufficiently account for consumers’ opinions toward, connections with, and felt closeness to brands (i.e., the brand relationship). We further specify Fournier’s insight by showing that relationships aren’t simply about felt kinship with brands; they’re dyadic in the sense that we must also consider the reciprocal liking of the brand for the person.

Thus, in accordance with Byrne’s theory of interpersonal attraction (Byrne 1971), we predicted participants would convey a closer relationship to the brand the more similar they felt they were to the brand. Also in accordance with Byrne’s findings, we predicted the brand’s attitude toward the participant would play a role. Specifically, we predicted that the positive relationship between self-brand similarity and brand relationship closeness would only hold when participants felt that the brand did not like them more than they liked the brand. This prediction stems from research in the reciprocity literature, which suggests that excessive liking can convey unselectivity and even desperation (Eastwick, Finkel, Mochon, and Ariely 2007). To test these predictions, we adapted Byrne’s interpersonal attraction paradigm to a consumer-brand setting. Whereas Byrne manipulated self-other similarity by varying the extent to which the parties expressed like attitudes toward a variety of topics, we assessed self-brand similarity by measuring these attitudes. Furthermore, whereas Byrne manipulated others’ attitudes toward the self by supplying contrived responses to an interpersonal judgment scale, we measured both participants’ liking for the target brand and the felt reciprocal liking of the brand for the participant. The details of our survey methodology are described below.

In the first part of the survey, participants were asked to indicate their attitudes toward several topics (e.g., musical tastes; Byrne 1971). After several unrelated filler tasks, participants then took part in the second part of the survey which assessed their relationship with Chevrolet, an automotive brand we anticipated would elicit varied similarity and feeling reciprocation assessments. First, we asked participants to imagine Chevrolet as a person (Aaker 1997) and to write a brief description of that person. Next, they were asked to project the brand’s attitudes toward the same topics assessed earlier. Self-brand attitude discrepancies that fell within one standard deviation were considered similar attitudes, the sum of which comprised our self-brand similarity index. We then elicited participants’ liking for the brand as a person and the felt reciprocal liking of the brand for the participant (Byrne 1961, 1971). The difference between these ratings was used as our measure of self-brand reciprocation, with higher scores representing over-reciprocation by the participant and lower scores representing over-reciprocation by the brand. Finally, we assessed participants’ connection with the brand (Moore and Homer 2008), self-brand overlap (Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992), and their overall opinion of the brand (four 7-point semantic differentials)—dependent measures selected to capture brand relationship closeness.

Regression analyses were conducted in which each of the dependent measures was regressed on self-brand similarity, self-brand reciprocation, and the product of the two. Results revealed the predicted main effect of similarity. For all three measures of brand relationship closeness, participants expressed a stronger connection to, a greater overlap with, and a more favorable opinion of Chevrolet when they felt they shared attitudes with the brand. Results also revealed the predicted interaction between self-brand similarity and feeling.
reciprocation for two of the three dependent variables—self-brand overlap and brand attitude. To explore the nature of this interaction, we conducted a 2 x 2 between-participants ANOVA, separating those above and below the median for both independent variables. As predicted, there was a positive relationship between self-brand similarity and brand relationship closeness that held only when the brand is perceived to equally- or under-reciprocate affection.

These findings have several implications for consumer research. First, they prompt a reappraisal of our understanding of brands from a purely cognitive perspective, where brand equity is a product of brand association and valance (Keller 1993). Our findings suggest that brand liking is the product of a complex parasocial interplay that requires both projection of attitudes and reciprocated liking, at least for high-involvement products such as automobiles. Secondly, our work further specifies the nature of the consumer-brand relationship explored in previous research. We find that similarity of attitudes between the consumer and the brand is one important component of the brand relationship. However, we also find that consumers consider the extent to which their feelings toward the brand are reciprocated. In particular, our findings suggest that self-brand similarity exerts a positive influence on brand relationship closeness, but only when consumers feel that the brand does not like them more than they like the brand. In other words, when consumers feel that the brand over-reciprocates their affections, it seems they are “turned off,” thereby nullifying the effect of self-brand similarity on relationship closeness. In contrast, when consumers feel that the brand equally or even under-reciprocates their affections, our results suggest they are “turned on,” in which case self-brand similarity comes into play. Therefore, when it comes to brand relationships, it is not necessarily the case that consumers and brands of a feather flock together. Consumers must also feel that the brand is a catch, and that a relationship with that brand is not easy to come by.

References

Unconscious Brand Reactions Influence Financial Decision-Making
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Abstract
Recent neuroimaging insights indicate that the reward value associated with brands may impact on affective processes underlying choice. In this research, we explore the possibility that brands with affective value can impact on behaviour by influencing affective systems underlying decision-making. Our results indicate that brand images with affective value can shift decision-making towards affectively-driven choices. Furthermore, these effects occur without conscious awareness of the identity of the brand stimuli. These findings provide initial evidence that brands may impact on behaviour outside of the consumer context by modulating affective systems underlying decision-making.

Introduction
Recent research indicates that exposure to goal-relevant brands automatically primes goal-directed behaviour, even without conscious awareness of the stimulus (Fitzsimons, Chartrand, & Fitzsimons, 2008; Chartrand, Huber, Shiv, and Tanner, 2008). An Apple logo may prime creative behaviour, or a Disney logo may prime honesty. These data indicate that brand exposure can moderate the salience of pre-existing behavioural goals, and may operate via mechanisms that are at least partially inaccessible to conscious introspection.

Increasingly, research drawing on neuroscientific techniques supports the idea that favoured brands may act as reward cues that moderate decision-making. Brand or product preference preferentially engages neural regions associated with reward processing (Plassmann, Kenning, Deppe, Kugel, & Schwindt, 2008; Schaefer & Rotte, 2007); and neural regions that mediate the influence of affect in decision-making (e.g. Deppe et al., 2005; Erk, Spitzer, Wunderlich, Galley, & Walter, 2002; Plassmann et al., 2008; Schaefer, Berens, Heinze, & Rotte, 2006). Further, the reward value associated with stimuli may bias decision-making in the absence of conscious processing (Pessiglioni, Petrovic, Daunizeau et al., 2008). These findings may have important consequences for brand theory. Affective brand responses may impact on behaviour via the modulation of affective processes in parallel with activation of brand-related schema in the absence of conscious processing. In this research we sought to examine these processes. We posed the question: Would unconscious presentation of a brand with affective value impact on decision-making behaviour that is susceptible to the influence of affective motivational states?