Partners and Servants: Adopting Traits of Anthromorphized Brands

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Three experiments demonstrate behavioral priming effects for anthropomorphized brands. Consistent with the theory that anthropomorphizing brands triggers goals for successful social interaction with the brand, consumers behave consistently or inconsistently with the brand trait depending on liking and type of relationship – servant or partner – consumers expect of the brand.

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we test our proposed framework in three studies. In study 1, we consider two partner brands, Kellogg’s and Krispy Kreme, near opposites on the healthy-unhealthy spectrum. Using an unrelated dependent variable that taps into people’s healthy (taking the stairs) or unhealthy (waiting for the elevator) behavior, we find consumers to be more likely to adopt the trait when they like the anthropomorphized brand, and reject the trait when they dislike it. In study 2, we consider two servant brands: Volvo (associated with safety) and Discovery Channel (associated with knowledge). We find consumers to be less likely to adopt the trait when they liked the anthropomorphized brand, and more likely to adopt the associated trait when they disliked it as evidenced by differences in unrelated tasks such as certainty equivalence for a risky gamble (Volvo) and responses to a set of SAT questions (Discovery Channel). In study 3, we manipulated perceived role of the brand, Volvo, under the pretext of testing two alternative advertising slogans that portrayed it either as a partner (works with you) or a servant (works for you). Results replicate the main effect in a more controlled environment.

This research is significant in its examination of an important yet an under-studied phenomenon in marketing—brand anthropomorphism. To our knowledge this is the first research that looks at the moderating effect of brand role on consumer’s goals and subsequent behavior. Thus, this research contributes to an emerging literature that highlights the value of understanding how inanimate objects may extend into our social realm.

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Comparing the selling prices for the in-group object, we find that those in the relationship anxiety condition had significantly greater selling prices than those in the control condition. In the out-group condition, a different pattern emerges. In the no-relationship anxiety condition, the standard endowment effect occurs with participants reporting greater selling prices than buying. In the high anxiety condition, for the out-group good, sellers and buyers did not report different prices from one another. It appears that relationship anxiety decreased selling prices for an out-group object. For the neutral good condition, we observed the classic endowment effect in both the control condition and the relationship anxiety condition. Relationship anxiety had no effect on either selling prices or buying prices of the neutral good.

In study 2, participants (N=261) in a nationally representative panel completed the same anxiety manipulation and then responded to a variety of questions regarding attitudes toward one of two given brands: DKNY (feminine) or Levi’s (masculine). In this study, therefore, in-group/out-group was manipulated using the gender of respondents and the personality (masculinity/femininity dimension) of the brands. We first tested an ANOVA using social self-concept connection to the brands as our dependent variable. The interaction of anxiety and in-group was significant (F(1, 253)=11.94, p<.001). In the in-group brand condition, high anxiety lead to greater social self-concept connection compared to low anxiety. In the out-group brand condition, however, high anxiety lead to lower self-concept connection compared to low anxiety. We ran a similar ANOVA using willingness to pay for the brands as the dependent variable. Once again, only the interaction of in-group brand and anxiety was significant (F(1, 250)=8.61, p<.01). High anxiety led to greater willingness-to-pay for the in-group brand compared to low anxiety, and a lower willingness-to-pay for an out-group brand compared to low anxiety. Further analysis revealed that social self-concept connection mediated the effect of the interaction of in-group brand and anxiety on willingness-to-pay (Sobel’s Z-score=1.97, p<.05).

Implications of the findings for brand relationship theory will be discussed.

“Brand Flings and the Transitional Self”
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This study advances the brand relationship agenda by providing a phenomenological illumination of one unexplored relationship: brand flings (cf. Fournier 1998). As an analytic device, the research also contributes to brand relationship theory validation efforts by exploring the differences and similarities between brand and person-to-person flings.

Sixteen phenomenological interviews provide data for this investigation. Informants in half of the interviews discussed flings with brands; eight discussed flings with other people. Informants were men and women between the ages of 18-35. Gender was equally distributed to capture potential differences in how men and women experience flings. Informants were pre-recruited via telephone to ascertain their resonance with, and ability to discuss, the subject of human (brand) flings. A homework assignment instructed informants to select and bring to the interview “5-6 images that express your thoughts and feelings about having a fling with a (person/brand).” These images provided a structure around which the interviews unfolded. Interviews lasted from 2-3 hours, and were conducted by a mixed gender, 3-person team.

Our analysis suggests four emerging themes qualifying brand flings. Most characteristic is the emotionality of the fling experience. A deep sense of satisfaction and tremendous amount of excitement, passion, and enjoyment characterizes the playful brand encounters that launch and sustain the fling. Secondly, some degree of obsession is embedded in the fling relationship, with significant investments of time, energy and attention dedicated to the brand. A third theme concerns a lack of rationality and sense of being out-of-control. Finally, a brand fling is temporary and time-bounded (though brand flings can recur). People experiencing brand flings are excited and obsessed but only for a while, after which time feelings and meanings taper almost unnoticeably as the person simply moves on. Our analysis highlights significant contrasts between brand flings and person-to-person flings. Person-to-person flings are most characteristically associated with freedom from commitment, and are surrounded by an aura of secrecy that derives from a sense of cultural taboo.

Collectively, thematic results support a role for brand flings that is analogous to the role played by transitional objects in psychoanalytic theories of child and adult development ( Winnicott 1971). Brand flings open up a creative space in consumers’ daily lives where people establish object relations that allow them to experiment playfully with different senses of self. Important, flings allow engagement with the concept of “not me,” a pivotal idea in object attachment theory. Consumers have flings with brands they typically don’t buy; brands not recognized as reflecting a known self. This separation from “the me” emerges as a fundamental goal of having a brand fling: to be taken out of ordinary life and away from the established self, if only for a brief moment or phase. Brand flings deliver squarely against Winnicott’s (1971) idea of the “potential space” existing between the “me” and the “not-me” that forms as an individual develops and grows.

The transitional self activated via transitional brand flings is fundamentally different from other self conceptualizations explored in brand relationship research: ideal selves (Sirgy 1982), feared selves (Fournier 1998), and possible selves (Schouten 1991). Flings are simply not that consequential: the motivation to engage in flings comes less from one particular self image that is desired/fearied/speculated than from the opportunity to leave the current self behind. “I am looking for a new excitement in something”, as one informant explains. To a certain extent, what this “something” is doesn’t matter much as long as it is new and different. Flings serve as transitional object relations that help consumers create and play with transitional selves.

This study supports brand flings as a relevant mechanism for consumer-brand engagement and provides a solid conceptual foundation for future research. The “potential space” filled by brand flings is a vital area in the mental life of the developing person. This finding is significant as prior research supports brands as replacements for under-realized interpersonal relationships, not valued relational objects in and of themselves. Research can explore the value of flings over partnerships in delivering brand attraction, willingness to pay, emotional commitment, and favorable brand experiences. The qualities of addiction and dependence evoked by transitional objects (Winnicott 1971) also suggest relationship maintenance in the face of stresses and strains. Transitional objects also serve as a defense against anxiety, and operate as soothing, comfort mechanisms in times of loneliness, deprivation or depressive moods, thus suggesting a role for brand flings as coping mechanisms when the anxious self is primed. Since transitional object relations occur at predictable developmental moments (e.g., the child becoming a separate individual, the teen becoming a young adult, the young adult becoming a parent), research can also investigate whether there exist productive, targetable periods for brand fling experiences along similar developmental lines.
“Brand Are Like Friends: Goals and Interpersonal Motives Influence Attitudes Toward Preferred Brands”
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Philip A. Gable, Texas A&M University, USA
Christina Albee, Ouachita Baptist University, USA
Courtney Boerstler, University of Oregon, USA

The present series of studies suggest similarities between consumers’ interpersonal relationships and brand relationships. Specifically, these studies demonstrate ways in which consumers draw closer to brands that facilitate specific goal pursuits, in the same way that consumers draw closer to acquaintances who facilitate such pursuits. Previous research has shown that when particular goals are activated, people feel closer to acquaintances who help them meet those goals (but not to other acquaintances; Fitzsimons and Shah 2008). In addition, research suggests that people tend to anthropomorphize products when those products symbolically address particular social deficit states (e.g., human-like products seem more human when people feel lonely; Epley et al. 2008). Building on this work, the present studies indicate how consumers evaluate preferred brands more positively when brand-relevant goals are activated and how this tendency is accentuated among consumers who have particular relational orientations (e.g., heightened belongingness needs or avoidant interpersonal attachment styles).

We performed three studies with college student participants. In Study 1, participants (N=101) completed the Need to Belong (NTB) scale, for which higher scores indicate increased investment in social acceptance (sample item: “I do not like being alone”). In addition, participants completed attitude measures targeting several popular shoe brands, including the brands they self-nominated in an earlier task as most helpful toward their goal of being healthy.

In Study 2, participants (N=31) completed an initial version of a subtle goal-priming task adapted from Fitzsimons and Shah (2008). This task required participants to unscramble sentences containing words related to healthiness (e.g., “active,” “well”) or, for control purposes, neutral words. Participants then completed attitude measures targeting several shoe brands, including the one that most facilitated their goal of being healthy. Shoe brands were self-nominated in an ostensibly unrelated earlier task.

In Study 3, participants (N=49) nominated a website which helped them achieve the goal of social connectedness and completed the Experiences in Close Relationships scale, comprising two subscales on which higher scores indicate greater attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, respectively. Sample items include “I worry about being abandoned” (anxiety) and “I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close” (avoidance). One week later, in an ostensibly unrelated session, participants completed a goal priming task (similar to the task in Study 2) in which they were assigned to exposure to words implicating social connectedness (e.g., “associate,” “community”) or healthiness. Then, participants completed attitude measures targeting several brands and websites, including the websites they nominated one week earlier.

In Study 1, we found that NTB was positively related to feeling close to one’s most helpful shoe brand (r = .33, p=.02) and negatively related to liking one’s least helpful shoe brand, r(24) = -.38, p=.05. In Study 2, we found that participants primed with health-related words subsequently rated their self-nominated goal-relevant shoe brands as a better value than did participants who were primed with neutral words, means = 6.75 vs. 5.94 on a 7-pt scale; r(27) = .254, p=.02. In Study 3, we found that participants in the social connectedness prime condition felt closer to websites that helped them achieve social connectedness than did participants in the healthiness condition, means = 5.84 vs. 4.58 on a 7-pt scale; F(1, 47) = 5.54, p=.01. Likewise, attachment avoidance (b* = -.29, p=.04) was predicted feelings of closeness, even while controlling for the priming effect (b* = .28, p=.05).

Studies 2 and 3 suggest similarities between processes governing consumers’ relationships with goal-relevant people and with goal-relevant brands. In addition, Studies 1 and 3 indicate that individual differences in consumers’ relational orientations can predict differences in consumers’ brand attitudes. Our findings highlight the essential social character of consumers’ brand representations in ways not documented by previous research. For researchers and practitioners, we see value in identifying similarities between motivational and dispositional forces regulating interpersonal relationships and those regulating brand relationships.

REFERENCES

