Impact of Fear on Brand Attachment

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The current research examines how fear can facilitate brand emotional attachment through desire for affiliation. We find that when consumers undergo a fearful experience with a brand, they feel more emotionally attached to the brand, which has positive implications for brand loyalty.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Brand attachment has been defined as the strength of the bond connecting the consumer to the brand (Thomson, MacInnis and Park 2005). Consumers who feel strong attachment to a brand will be more loyal and less price sensitive. Because of its relevance to marketers, factors that increase brand attachment have become an important focus of research (Lastovicka and Sirianni 2011; Park et al. 2010; Thomson et al. 2005). Most of the research to date has demonstrated that the attachment process develops over time as consumers have numerous experiences with the brand. However, day-to-day life is filled with affective experiences that may not be directly associated with a particular brand but still involve them to some degree (e.g., fear caused by the horror movie and the brand of potato chips). Although not the cause of the experienced emotion, it stands to reason that the brand attachment process could potentially be influenced by these experiences. Prior research in affect transfer (MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986) has demonstrated that the experience of negative affect can transfer to unrelated objects such as a brand. This transfer can lower brand attitudes and evaluations (Goldberg and Gorn 1987). This concern has led marketers to avoid associated their brand with negative content (e.g., timing of advertisements within T.V. shows or placement of products within movies).

However, literature on social psychology suggests that some negative experiences, specifically fear, are unifying; causing people to seek out affiliation with others. (Schachter 1959; Sarnoff and Zimbardo 1961). In some situations, these “others” could be brands. Consumers have been known to treat brands as if they were people and form relationships with and expectations of them (Fournier 1998). Therefore, it is possible that fearful experiences may have a positive impact on brand attachment.

First, we show that incidental fear experienced in the presence of a brand can facilitate initial emotional brand attachment. Second, we provide evidence that this attachment occurs due to a perception that the brand and the consumer shared the emotional experience (affiliation). As such our work provides some of the first empirical evidence that brand relationships are not merely metaphorical, but that people can make psychological, personal connections to brands. Third, we advance understanding of the construct of brand attachment. We demonstrate that while initial emotional brand attachment (Thomson et al. 2005) can be facilitated by fear, broader, more cognitive brand attachment (Park et al. 2010) is not immediately enhanced. However, we also show that the initial feeling of emotional brand attachment can, over time, leads to the development of broader brand attachment.

In Study 1, we experimentally tested whether fear increased brand attachment. In addition, study 1 tested perceived affiliation with the brand as the underlying mechanism for the studied relationship. Using movies to prime an emotional experience (Andrade and Cohen 2007), participants were told that they would be completing two unrelated studies: a movie experience and a brand experience study. For the movie experience study, participants watched clips from one of four movie genres (action, comedy, horror, and drama). Prior to beginning, participants were given the unknown brand to try out prior to the brand study. Participants answered questions about emotional brand attachment (Thomson et al. 2005) and perceived shared experience (affiliation). Analysis revealed that participants in the fear condition felt more attached to the brand than those in any of the other conditions. In addition, fear participants reported a higher perceived shared experience with the brand during the experience. This perceived shared experience significantly mediated the impact of emotion type on brand attachment.

In Study 2, we further tested perceived affiliation as the underlying mechanism by showing that when affiliation is satiated, fear did not significantly increase emotional brand attachment. In this study, we primed participants through a word search to either feel affiliated or not (Jiang et al. 2010). Once primed, participants completed the movie and brand experience study as outlined in study 2 with the exception of only using horror and action clips. This study finds that only when participants did not feel affiliated did fear lead to significantly higher emotional brand attachment.

Finally, Study 3 examined the potential long-term impact of fear on behavioral outcomes such as broader, more cognitive brand attachment. We predicted that while emotional brand attachment (Thomson et al. 2005) could occur immediately (Time 1), broader brand attachment (Park et al. 2010) would only emerge at a later time (Time 2). Using a longitudinal design, participants went through the procedure from study 1 at Time 1, with the exception of measuring both emotional and broader brand attachment. After completing the initial study, participants were given samples of a brand of chips to take home to try and answered a questionnaire about brand attachment and loyalty three days later (Time 2). Results revealed that those participants who underwent the initial fearful experience not only felt higher emotional brand attachment at both Time 1 and Time 2, but only showed higher broader brand attachment at Time 2.

REFERENCES


