All You Need Is Love: Focusing on Brand Attachment Self-Affirms Against Social Loss
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Social loss is painful, and consumers draw on accessible relationships to reduce this pain. By testing two predictions about the role of brand relationships in the context of loss, authors find brand attachment is self-affirming (buffering) but not socially fulfilling (remedying). Furthermore, when attachment reduces pain, consumers reward attached brands.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017886/volumes/v42/NA-42

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All You Need is Love: Focusing on Brand Attachment Self-Affirms against Social Loss

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers routinely experience the psychological pain of losing others. Neighbors move, loved ones pass, and friends exclude; the pain from severed social ties mirrors physical pain (Eisenberger et al. 2003; Panksepp 2003), and the resulting distress encourages consumers to rely on existing relationships for support (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Cohen and Wills 1985). Given similarities between interpersonal and brand relationships (Batra et al. 2012; Fournier 1998; Park et al. 2010; Sirianni and Lastovicka 2011), it is likely that brand attachment serves a palliative function in instances of social loss. Thus the primary goal of this research is to understand the role of brand attachment in the context of social loss.

Specifically, authors examine two possible functions of brand attachment, whether it is self-affirming (buffering) and socially fulfilling (remedying) in the context of social loss. Cohen and Wills (1985) classify socially supportive strategies as preemptive (i.e., buffering) or reactive (i.e., remedying). Interpersonal relationships can preempt the pain of social loss by affirming the self, thus increasing one’s ability to tolerate pain; likewise, interpersonal relationships can react to the pain of social loss by fulfilling comfort and companionship needs. Because consumer researchers find a positive correlation between brand relationships and interpersonal deficits (Sirianni and Lastovicka 2011, p. 334), and since brand relationships are posited to be more than ‘merely metaphorical’ (Dunn and Hoegg 2014), authors consider the potential buffering and remedying functions of focusing on brand attachment, which is “the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self” (Park et al. 2010, p. 2).

Results of this research offer three primary contributions. First, though previous research suggests brand relationships can “compensate for interpersonal deficits” (Lastovicka and Sirianni 2011, p. 325), authors find brand relationships differ from interpersonal relationships in at least one meaningful way: they are self-affirming but not socially fulfilling in the context of social loss. Supporting this, authors find in study 1 that brand attachment only reduces pain when consumers focus on attachment before loss. This order effect was not observed for interpersonal attachment. As a second contribution, authors find that focusing on brand attachment (vs. brand quality) in conditions of social loss enhances brand performance (i.e., purchase intention, word-of-mouth). However, absent social loss, brand performance does not differ whether consumers focus on brand attachment or brand quality. Furthermore, authors find these moderated effects are mediated by pain reduction in conditions of social loss. Accordingly, authors identify an important moderator—social loss—that influences the effect of brand attachment on performance. As a third contribution, authors find that mobility across the United States enhances the effect of brand attachment on loyalty, thus replicating our findings from studies 1 using a national sample. Aside from tethering effects observed in a controlled experiment to variables freely available to brand managers (i.e., mobility data), authors also demonstrate an important role of mobility—a heretofore underexplored phenomenon—in consumer research. Overall, authors add to the literature by explicating the role of brand relationships in the context of social loss across two studies.

In study 1, authors conduct an experiment with a 2 (brand attachment: high vs. low) x 2 (social loss: high vs. low) x 2 (task order: brand attachment first vs. second) design. After completing the pretested tasks in random but recorded order, participants completed measures of psychological pain, purchase intention, and word of mouth. Analyses revealed a significant three-way interaction on purchase intention ($p<.01$) and a marginally significant three-way interaction ($p<.07$) on word of mouth. Decomposing these interactions, we found two significant ($p<.01$) interactions within the social loss condition but no significant interactions in the control condition. The significant order x attachment interaction indicated that respondents were more likely to purchase and recommend attached brands when they focused on brand attachment prior to social loss, but not after. Furthermore, the indirect effects of brand attachment on purchase intention and word of mouth through pain reduction were significant ($p<.05$) only when focusing on brand attachment occurred prior to social loss, suggesting brand attachment is self-affirming but not socially fulfilling in the context of social loss, and consumers reward attached brands with increased purchase intentions and recommendation when they offer self-affirming value. Then, in study 2, authors extend results observed in study 1 by testing whether social loss at a county-level enhances the effect of brand attachment on brand loyalty. They do this by drawing on four national datasets that include consumer brand ratings and county-to-county migration data. A hierarchical model reveals that social loss (outflow migration) from consumer i’s county enhances the effect of consumer i’s brand attachment on brand loyalty, thus conceptually replicating results from study 1 showing that brands offer self-affirming value in the context of social loss, and that consumers reward brands for this value with higher loyalty.

In conclusion, the current research examines the role of brand attachment in the context of social loss from a social support perspective. Fifteen years ago, Susan Fournier (1998, p. 359) found that the relationships consumers build with brands can “provide perceived self-efficacy and self-esteem” that allow consumers to resolve “feelings of marginality” and maintain an “expression of autonomy.” Authors’ findings suggest the way brand relationships achieve this is through self-affirmation, which authors demonstrate is especially valuable to consumers in conditions of social loss who then reward attached brands. Additionally, authors find brand relationships are imperfect substitutes for interpersonal relationships, since brand relationships are not socially fulfilling in the context of social loss. Furthermore, authors find mobility across the U.S. influences the effect of brand attachment on brand loyalty, consistent with our experimental results.

REFERENCES


