Can Beloved Brands Reduce Pain?

Martin Reimann, The University of Arizona, Eller College of Management, USA
Sandra Nuñez, Tecnológico de Monterrey, EGADE Business School, Mexico
Raquel Castaño, Tecnológico de Monterrey, EGADE Business School, Mexico

We explored whether consumer-brand relationships can reduce one’s pain experience, similarly to prior research on interpersonal relationships. Four experiments show that consumers who were confronted with their loved brands tolerate physical and psychological pain more compared to participants viewing brands they hate, unbranded positive, negative, or distracting stimuli, or control.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1019314/volumes/v43/NA-43

copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Can Beloved Brands Reduce Pain?
Martin Reimann, University of Arizona, Eller College of Management, USA
Sandra Núñez, Tecnológico de Monterrey, EGADE Business School, Mexico
Raquel Castañó, Tecnológico de Monterrey, EGADE Business School, Mexico

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The notion that interpersonal relationships help reduce pain has received increasing support (e.g., Eisenberger et al. 2011; Master et al. 2009; Younger et al. 2010). However, who can individuals turn to during times of pain if soothing support from another human being is out of reach? In the United States alone, the proportion of single-person households increased from 17 to 27 percent between 1970 and 2012 (Vespa, Lewis, and Kreider 2013), and the proportion of individuals reporting that there is no one they can turn to almost tripled between 1985 and 2004 (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006).

There is rising evidence that consumers view brands as relationship partners (Fournier 1998) and attach to brands similarly than they attach to other humans (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). Building on this work, the present research explored whether and how consumer-brand relationships can reduce one’s pain experience. Thus, the present study fuses research on the role of social support in pain management (e.g., Eisenberger et al. 2011; Master et al. 2009) with research on close consumer-brand relationships (e.g., Fournier 1998) to hypothesize that a beloved brand can reduce pain.

Experiment 1 explored the effect of brand relationships on the experience of pain. We used an established methodology for inducing physical pain, the cold pressor test (e.g., von Baeyer et al. 2005). Experiment 1 employed a one-way experimental design with condition (brand relationship, control) as between-subjects independent variable and physical pain ratio as dependent variable. Brands with which participants had previously formed a relationship were more effective in reducing pain compared to control.

Experiment 2 attempted to replicate the effect of brand relationships on the experience of pain in a different context. We used a previously established methodology for inducing psychological pain in which participants were asked to imagine the loss of a loved one (Twenge et al. 2001). Experiment 2 employed a one-way experimental design with condition (loved brands, distraction, control) as between-subjects independent variable and psychological pain difference as dependent variable. Loved brands were again more effective in reducing pain compared to control.

Experiment 3 provided evidence that pain reduction is greater in the case of loved brands than in situations in which consumers simply experiences positive affect. Experiment 3 employed a one-way experimental design with condition (loved brands, positive affect, hated brands, negative affect, control) as between-subjects independent variable and psychological pain difference as dependent variable. Loved brands were again more effective in reducing pain compared to the other conditions in this study. This experiment also revealed that, counter to intuition, neither hated brands nor a negative consumption-related stimulus further increased pain but instead reduced it.

Experiment 4 provided support for why beloved brand relationships reduce pain so effectively. We hypothesized and showed that beloved brands trigger feelings of social inclusion, which help consumers cope better with pain. Experiment 4 employed a one-way experimental design with brand relationship (loving, neutral) as between-subjects independent variable, feelings of social inclusion as independent variable, and psychological pain difference as dependent variable. Loved brands signaled social inclusion and made individuals feel less lonely, and thus were more effective in reducing pain compared to a neutral product.

Four experiments provided convergent empirical support for the notion that consumers who are confronted with their loved brands tolerate both physical and psychological pain more compared to participants viewing (a) unbranded but consumption-related positive affective stimuli, (b) unbranded distracting stimuli, (c) hated brands, (d) unbranded but consumption-related negative affective stimuli, or (e) control. This research contributes and extends extant work on the role of social support in pain management and on the roles of brands in human relationships by showing that loved brands carry pain-soothing strengths akin to those of loved human partners.

REFERENCES


