



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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## **Spicing Things Up With a (Brand) Secret**

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The present research problematizes the conventional wisdom that transparency is paramount in relationships by establishing the positive value of discovering a secret in consumer-brand relationships. Two longitudinal studies show that secrets increase interest, excitement, and interaction with brands to which individuals describe themselves as “committed.”

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# Spicing Things Up with a (Brand) Secret

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Both popular culture and academic research propagate the idea that secrets are harmful to relationships (Lane and Wegner 1995, Critcher and Ferguson 2014, Slepian, Masicampo, and Ambady 2014). Nevertheless, marketing practitioners seem to have intuited pleasure where the academic literature has neither forecast nor found it: restaurants like Starbucks have developed “secret menus” (Haq 2017); brands such as Nike have created secret websites (Nike 2018); Sofar Sound offers secret concerts in 429 cities worldwide. The extensive work on consumer-brand relationships (e.g., Fournier 1998; Escalas and Bettman 2005; Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli 2007; MacInnis and Folkes 2017; Park and MacInnis 2018) has yet to examine the impact of a secret. Our research explores possible effects a brand secret can have on the consumer-brand relationship. Specifically, in the vein of research on consumer delight (Olivier, Rust, and Varki 1997; Kumar and Pansari 2016), what might increase consumers’ interest in and engagement with a brand after commitment is established? Just as normative human relationship narratives typically end with commitment, marketers have traditionally focused on consumer loyalty or habit as the brand relationship end game (Ahluwalia, Burnkrand, and Unnava 2000; Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrand 2001; Wood and Neal 2009, Wood and Runger 2016). Contrary to this trajectory, we predict that a secret will stimulate a brand relationship by leading not merely to new kinds of cognitive and affective engagement but also to behaviors of increased interaction with the brand relationship partner.

Unlike other researchers, we argue that the unique structure of a brand secret lies not in its status as *nondisclosure* (Slepian, Chun, and Mason 2017) but as *selective sharing*. Most secrets are told to at least one other person and last a period of two years (Vrij et al. 2002). Brand secrets are likewise a form of sharing and so comprise a type of communication, not its absence (Lane and Wegner 1995; Perlow and Williams 2003). While people are encouraged to share surprises widely when the time is right (Kelly and McKillop 1996; Rust and Olivier 2000), they are not to share secrets beyond the curated network. Both secrets and loyalty/VIP programs are predicated on information exclusivity; however, the latter are typically affixed to consumer behaviors like spending or the frequency of consumption rather than to special knowledge about the brand as in the case of a secret (Yi and Jeon 2003). Treating secrets as selective sharing thus allows us to see them as conferring exclusivity, defined as insider status, in ways that consumers enjoy (Berger and Ward 2010; Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014).

### *Relationship status? “It’s Complicated”*

Popular culture has long held that when commitment makes a relationship feel stale, it is possible to “spice things up” with one’s partner. In this context, a committed relationship presents a physiological dilemma in which a stimulation threshold, which demands new options and experiences, can no longer be reached by habit-driven consumption partners (Mogilner, Kamvar, and Aaker 2011). While spicing things up in human relationships is typically talked about as types of activities consumed together (Etkin 2016), we suggest that the primary option for spicing things up in a brand relationship will connote “making things interesting” in the literal, cognitive, sense (Yoon et al. 2006). Secrets are interesting in precisely this way (Davies 2014). Of the four main attributes of interest in compel-

lingness foundations theory, secrets possess three: they are centered around human drama, play upon the fear of missing out, and diverge from an anticipated pattern (Pocheptsova, Labroo, and Dhar 2010). Recent studies have shown, furthermore, that difficulty confers interest (Labroo and Pocheptsova 2016) and that complexity spurs engagement (Lovett, Peres, and Shachar 2013). We suggest that the colloquial relationship status “it’s complicated” means that the relationship has been rendered more interesting and deep in ways that are not captured by conventional descriptions of a relationship and coin a new term, “relationship complication,” to describe its assumption through a secret of depth and complexity and consequently the feeling of being more exciting/fun (Schmitt 1999; Mourey, Olson, and Yoon 2017; Ruan, Hsee, and Lu 2018; Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994). The positive hedonic sensations associated with complication lead to more excitement about the brand relationship and more positive attitudes toward the relationship partner. These, in turn, cause consumers to interact with the brand partner more, including by making more purchases, following exposure to a secret.

## STUDY 1

### Procedure and Measures

Two hundred fourteen undergraduates from an eastern university (average age = 21, 59% male) participated in an experiment with a 2-cell between-subjects design (no secret vs. secret). In the no secret condition participants saw the regular Starbucks menu before ordering, and in the secret condition they saw an actual Starbucks secret menu that is currently circulating in the marketplace before ordering. They selected an option, completed a beverage-ordering simulation, and then answered questions designed to capture a mediating variable, brand relationship complication ( $\alpha = .86$ ): When I think about my relationship with Starbucks now (after my beverage order)... My relationship with Starbucks is more complex than it was before I ordered this beverage (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree); My relationship with Starbucks is...simple, with few layers (1) to deep, with many layers (7); I feel like my relationship is now more interesting (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). We included three manipulation checks (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree): 1) The menu was familiar to me ( $M_{\text{secret}} = 2.51$  vs.  $M_{\text{no secret}} = 3.82$ ,  $F(1,211) = 30.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ); The menu made me feel like an insider with special knowledge ( $M_{\text{secret}} = 4.97$  vs.  $M_{\text{no secret}} = 3.63$ ,  $F(1,211) = 35.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ); The menu made me feel more in the know about the brand ( $M_{\text{secret}} = 5.17$  vs.  $M_{\text{no secret}} = 4.46$ ,  $F(1,211) = 12.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Two months later, 187 of the original participants returned to the lab, recalled the study, and were asked to “Think about your experiences at Starbucks since completing the study. First, please describe the thoughts and feelings you’ve had about Starbucks as you’ve gone there. Second, please describe in detail the beverages you’ve ordered at Starbucks since completing the study.” Open-ended responses to the first question (brand attitude) were coded by two independent coders blind to the condition for degree of positive or negative thoughts and feelings about the brand, where -3 = very negative, 0 = neutral, 3 = very positive ( $M = .68$ ; kappa = .98). We then counted the number of beverages ordered since completing the main study ( $M = 1.31$ ; brand interaction).

## Results

We analyzed our results first with one-way ANOVA then with an appropriate multiple mediation test (Mehta, Zhu, and Cheema 2012).

*Brand relationship complication.* Participants who ordered from the secret menu (vs. those who ordered from the official menu) found the brand relationship significantly more complicated ( $M_{\text{secret}} = 4.02$  vs.  $M_{\text{no secret}} = 2.94$ ,  $F(1, 212) = 28.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

### Brand attitude

Participants who ordered from the secret (vs. official) menu described having significantly more positive brand attitudes in the past two months ( $M_{\text{secret}} = 1.34$  vs.  $M_{\text{no secret}} = 0.08$ ,  $F(1, 186) = 33.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Brand interaction

Finally, those who ordered from the secret (vs. official) menu reported significantly more beverage orders in the past two months ( $M_{\text{secret}} = 1.67$  vs.  $M_{\text{no secret}} = .98$ ,  $F(1, 186) = 5.82$ ,  $p < .02$ ).

### Indirect effects

We sought evidence of the underlying processes through a test of the indirect effects (Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010). In our conceptual model, we predicted that a brand secret (vs. no secret) would positively affect brand interaction through increased brand relationship complication and then a more positive brand attitude. Thus, we next conducted a test of mediation using the serial multiple mediator model (Hayes' PROCESS model 6, 5000 bootstrap samples; Hayes 2013) with secret condition, brand relationship complication, brand attitude, and brand interaction. We find support for our conceptual model.

## STUDY 2

The objectives of study 2 were to 1) replicate the effect observed in study 1; 2) test whether complication leads to excitement about the brand partner; 3) find out whether the effect on brand attitude emerged immediately and remained positive; and 4) explore the moderator of brand commitment. Thus, study 2 uses a similar longitudinal approach to study 1.

## Procedure and Measures

Three hundred undergraduates from an eastern university (average age = 21, 56% male) participated in an experiment with a 2-cell between subjects (no secret vs. secret) x continuous (brand commitment) design. Participants completed commitment measures (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree;  $r = .89$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $M = 3.54$ ): I have an established, long-term relationship with Starbucks; I am committed to Starbucks). Brand commitment did not affect the secret condition ( $p = .28$ ). Then they saw the standard menu; and in the secret condition only, they saw a secret menu about which they overheard a conversation. Next, they answered questions capturing the mediating and dependent variables at time 1. Brand relationship complication was as in study 1 ( $M = 3.28$ ). We measured brand relationship excitement using the following two items ( $M = 4.08$ ;  $r = .64$ ,  $p < .01$ ): Considering the secret/standard menu makes me more excited about my relationship with Starbucks (1 = not at all, 7 = very much); The menu gave me a sense that Starbucks is fun (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Next, we coded responses to the following brand attitude question using the same coding scheme as in study 1, "How does the menu make you think differently about Starbucks (if at all)?" (standardized,  $M = .34$ ,  $\kappa = .99$ ). Finally, we measured brand interaction intentions using two items ( $M = 3.30$ ;  $r = .41$ ,  $p < .01$ ): The menu gave me a sense that Starbucks is a brand I could spend more time with (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly

agree); How likely are you to visit Starbucks in the next 24 hours? (1 = not at all, 7 = very likely).

As in study 1, multivariate ANOVA results on manipulation check items indicate that participants found the standard menu more familiar ( $M_{\text{secret}} = 3.40$  vs.  $M_{\text{no secret}} = 3.98$ ,  $F(1, 296) = 6.81$ ,  $p = .01$ ), while the secret menu made them feel like an insider with special knowledge ( $M_{\text{secret}} = 4.34$  vs.  $M_{\text{no secret}} = 3.13$ ,  $F(1, 296) = 39.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and more in the know about the brand ( $M_{\text{secret}} = 4.77$  vs.  $M_{\text{no secret}} = 4.14$ ,  $F(1, 296) = 11.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

One month later, at time 2, 259 of the original participants returned to the lab and completed a survey capturing a mediator, brand attitude (standardized,  $M = .46$ ;  $\kappa = .97$ ) and dependent variable, self-reported actual brand interaction ( $M = 1.03$ ), as in study 1.

## Results

### Brand relationship complication

One-way ANOVA revealed that participants who ordered from the secret (vs. official) menu found the brand relationship significantly more complicated ( $M_{\text{secret}} = 3.90$  vs.  $M_{\text{no secret}} = 2.67$ ,  $F(1, 298) = 59.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Time 1 and 2 brand attitude measures

A mixed ANOVA analysis to determine whether any change in brand attitude is the result of the interaction between secret vs. official menu and time, and we observe a main effect of condition ( $F(1, 275) = 42.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ), a non-significant effect of time ( $F(1, 275) = .16$ , NS), and a significant interaction ( $F(1, 275) = 4.56$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Examining the simple main effects using one-way ANOVA reveals that those participants who ordered from the secret (vs. official) menu had a significantly more positive brand attitude immediately ( $M_{\text{secret}} = .29$  vs.  $M_{\text{no secret}} = -.28$ ,  $F(1, 275) = 36.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and in the month following the main study ( $M_{\text{secret}} = .25$  vs.  $M_{\text{no secret}} = -.26$ ,  $F(1, 257) = 17.95$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Time 1 and 2 brand interaction measures

One-way ANOVA reveals that those who ordered from the secret (vs. official) menu reported significantly greater intentions to interact with the brand ( $M_{\text{secret}} = 3.52$  vs.  $M_{\text{no secret}} = 3.08$ ,  $F(1, 298) = 6.00$ ,  $p < .02$ ) immediately and reported significantly more beverage orders one month later ( $M_{\text{secret}} = 1.45$  vs.  $M_{\text{no secret}} = 1.00$ ,  $F(1, 257) = 4.97$ ,  $p < .03$ ).

## Mediation Analyses

*Time 1. Indirect effect on brand interaction intentions through brand relationship complication and brand attitude (excitement).* Using Hayes PROCESS model 6 as in study 1, the serial indirect effect is significantly positive, because the 95% bootstrap confidence interval is above zero (.059 to .205 with attitude, .296 to .634 with excitement).

*Time 2. Indirect effect on brand interaction through brand relationship complication, time 1 brand attitude (excitement), and time 2 brand attitude.* We used the same PROCESS model and find a significantly positive serial indirect effect with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval entirely above zero (.007 to .059 with time 1 brand attitude, and .023 to .150 with excitement).

## Moderation Analysis

### Brand commitment

The interaction effect of attitude and brand commitment is significant ( $\beta_{\text{interaction}} = .10$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $t(256) = 2.40$ ,  $p < .02$ ), and the conditional indirect effect of secret condition on brand interaction is positively significant at values of 5.00 and above for brand com-

mitment (75<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> percentiles; 95% bootstrap confidence interval .03 to .44 and .06 to .61, respectively). The index of moderated mediation is significantly positive, with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval between .02 and .18.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Two studies found that exposure to a brand secret makes consumers more interested, excited and engaged with brands in which they are in a committed relationship. The contributions of these findings are twofold. First, we approach secrets as a form of exclusive communication rather than a synonym for silence and are therefore prompted to consider secrecy as a relational form. We thus empirically demonstrate that secrets, largely treated as damaging in their outcomes by researchers who primarily consider these phenomena from individual moral and psychological perspectives, can have a positive valence when considered in a relational context. Second, we contribute to research on brand relationships (e.g., Fournier 1998; MacInnis and Folkes 2017) by advancing a theory of secrets that can have a positive impact on the way consumers view a brand partner, finding that the marketplace seems to offer a safe space in which to explore alternative forms of relationship experience with which humans are otherwise uncomfortable but which have the benefit of increasing partners' ability to experience hedonic pleasure in a committed relationship beyond its early stages (Kelly and McKillop 1996; Fitzsimons, Finkel, and Vandellen 2015). A secret is thus shown to be a powerful tool in marketing managers' arsenal of tactics to bring back the butterflies in consumers' relationships with their brands—and so, perhaps, to offer a fledgling pathway for exploring longevity in other human relational forms.

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