Executive Summary

What Consumer Responses Make a Brand Experience Create Brand Attachment?

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Consumer brand attachment is a relevant driver of brand profitability because it increases, for example, purchase intention, positive word-of-mouth, and the willingness to pay a price premium for the brand. Hence, understanding the factors determining consumers’ brand attachment has generated great interest within the marketing discipline. In the process of attachment formation, marketers consider consumers’ experiences with a brand relevant. However, the literature has not provided marketers with an integrated representation of what to consider when creating brand experiences that are supposed to create brand attachment.

A consumer’s brand experience is a subjective internal response to contact with a brand-related stimulus, such as a brand’s product, service, advertisement, social media activity, store, or event. For example, test driving a brand’s car, contacting a brand’s service desk, and dancing at a brand event are brand moments that elicit subjective brand experiences. Although the literature presents several characteristics of brand experiences that may positively affect brand attachment, it does not specify the fundamental underlying factors by which a brand experience produces the feeling of brand attachment. This article extends the literature by identifying the internal responses to a brand moment that are relevant for its attachment creation.

First, this paper describes how humans create attachment. We explain that consumers do not permanently feel attached to their attachment objects, such as brands, but construct and feel the feeling of attachment at times of a related need. To construct the feeling of brand attachment at a time of need, consumers use activated thoughts and feelings, that is, retrieved episodic memories related to the brand, memories of feelings related to the brand, and/or semantic memories about the brand’s characteristics.
Then, this research focuses on consumers’ individual episodes with a brand and the question of what inner responses to such brand moments cause or support the creation of brand attachment. We infer that the extents to which a brand experience includes pleasure, perceived distinctiveness, and arousal determine its attachment creation. Hence, pleasure, perceived distinctiveness, and arousal are the internal responses to a brand moment that create attachment. We present two empirical studies.

Our research seeks to provide value to marketing practice because the creation of brand attachment is highly relevant to marketers. We recommend that marketers use the three experience responses identified in this research (pleasure, perceived distinctiveness, and arousal) as a guide when creating marketing activities intended to strengthen brand attachment. The more pleasure, perceived distinctiveness, and arousal the target group experiences, the more the brand moment creates brand attachment. Marketers may use the items that we propose to assess (or pre-test) the extent to which an activity evokes the responses relevant for attachment formation. Since pleasure/displeasure and arousal constitute core affect, they can represent any prototypical feeling that a brand moment elicits without measuring such specific feelings (Russell and Barrett 1999). For example, high pleasure (displeasure) and high arousal can form delight (anger), whereas high pleasure (displeasure) and a moderate level of arousal can form satisfaction (dissatisfaction) (Oliver et al. 1997).

Finally, we point out that marketers may misinterpret studies that have suggested that, for example, sensory experiences and intellectual experiences create brand attachment or related constructs (e.g., Chen and Qasim 2021; Iglesias et al. 2019). Since most experiences that marketers create are, on average, pleasurable, positive relationships between such experiences and attachment make sense (empirically). However, this paper argues and demonstrates that brand experiences do not create brand attachment because consumers had, for example, a strong sensory experience but because (and only if) the experience contained pleasure.