

How we relate to brands: Psychological and neurophysiological insights into consumer–brand relationships

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Abstract

In three experiments, this research provides new insights into branding by studying the psychological and neurophysiological mechanisms of how consumers relate to their beloved brands. The authors propose that emotional arousal decreases over the brand relationship span, while inclusion of the brand into the self increases over time. Results of experiment 1 indicate greater self-reported emotional arousal for recently formed brand relationships, as well as decreased emotional arousal and increased inclusion of close brands over time. Additionally, the moderating role of usage frequency of the brand brings out an interesting nuance of the way these effects operate. Experiment 2 measures skin conductance responses and reveals increased emotional arousal for recently formed close relationships but not for established close brand relationships, corroborating the results based on self-reported data. In experiment 3, a functional magnetic resonance imaging study reveals an association between established close relationships and activation of the insula, a brain area previously found to be a crucial mechanism in diverse but related psychological phenomena such as urging, addiction, loss aversion, and interpersonal love.

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Introduction

“A man's self is the sum total of all that he can call his.”

~ William James (1890)

The consumer–brand relationship literature contains myriad consumer–brand relationship constructs, including brand attachment (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005), brand commitment (Wang, 2002), brand devotion (Pichler & Hemetsberger, 2007), and brand love (Ahuvia, 2005; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Fournier, 1998). Research on these concepts has improved our

understanding of the consequences of close consumer–brand relationships for various consumer behaviors, such as loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. However, studies have not fully explored the motivational–emotional aspects associated with close brand relationships. What is the general emotional significance of such close relationships? This question is at the heart of the social–psychological self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1986), which has been applied extensively to human relationships (e.g., Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995) but not yet to brand relationships.

Self-expansion theory suggests that, in early stages, close relationships are motivated by rapid self-expansion—i.e., the

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acquisition of resources, perspectives, and identities that enhance one's ability to accomplish goals—whereas in later stages, close relationships are associated with the inclusion of others into the self, i.e., people tend to consider the close other as part of themselves. Taken together, while one central feature of close personal relationships pertains to the motivation to expand oneself, the other central feature is the overlap between two people. This overlap of “selves” is a consequence of falling in love (Aron & Aron, 1986). Hence, according to this theory, love emanates from this desire to rapidly expand (Aron & Aron, 1996). Love motivates the formation and maintenance of close relationships, with love being the mechanism and motivational force of close relationships. Following this notion, we use love and close relationships synonymously for our purposes.

Recently, Reimann and Aron (2009) suggested that these ideas of relationships may be relevant to consumers' close relationships with brands as people also form a similar type of relationship with objects (Belk, 1988). More often than not, these objects are specific brands, which consumers relate to and use to identify their “selves” (Ahuvia, 2005). Similar to loved others, brands can create a “warm feeling” among consumers, generate a pleasurable experience of being cared for, and ultimately bond consumers in a close connection (Fournier, 1998). Brands can give consumers “ideal selves” to aspire to, as the presentation of self through possessions allows consumers to differ from what may be their “real selves” (Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011). Given this resemblance of loved brands to loved others, applying theories of close interpersonal relationships to consumer–brand relationship seems feasible.

The specific appeal of self-expansion theory for brand research lies in its motivational–emotional account. Additionally, the theory emphasizes the dynamic character of close relationships and allows for predictions of changes in motivations and emotions as the relationship matures. Thus, self-expansion theory promises a richer understanding of brand relationships at various points of the brand lifecycle.

The present research draws from a variety of psychological and neurophysiological methodologies, including self-report, skin conductance, and brain activation, to empirically test self-expansion theory in the context of consumer–brand relationships. Specifically, consumers' skin conductance responses (SCR), which measure the arousal dimension of emotion (Boucsein, 1992), have the potential to shed new light on how consumers expand their “selves.” A process-tracing methodology, the recording of SCR helps provide novel insights on otherwise hidden processes in consumer judgments (Figner & Murphy, 2010). Additionally, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) makes feasible the analysis of neurophysiological mechanisms in the brain at the time they take place (Reimann, Schilke, Weber, Neuhaus, & Zaichkowsky, 2011; Shiv, 2007; Shiv et al., 2005), because fMRI is not subject to cognitive processes overlapping actual emotional processes (Reimann, Zaichkowsky, Neuhaus, Bender, & Weber, 2010). Participants do not have to recall how they relate to a brand as they do when they provide self-reports, so the fMRI process helps clarify how consumers include brands in their “selves.”

Prior research has used fMRI to improve the understanding of cognitive processes associated with brands, including the neural correlates of brand perception and processing (Cheung, Chan, & Sze, 2010), brands' impact on product perception (McClure et al., 2004; Reimann et al., 2010), brand categorization (Schaefer & Rotte, 2007b), brand judgments (Yoon, Gutchess, Feinberg, & Polk, 2006), and brand preference (Paulus & Frank, 2003; Santos, Seixas, Brandao, & Moutinho, 2011; Schaefer & Rotte, 2007a). However, knowledge of the neural underpinnings of brand relationships—especially their underlying motivational–emotional processes—does not appear in the literature.

In testing self-expansion theory in the context of brand relationships, this paper contributes to the extant literature by determining (1) whether rapid self-expansion and inclusion into the self are greater for recently formed close brand relationships compared to established close brand relationships, (2) whether levels of self-expansion and inclusion change over time, and (3) whether usage frequency of the brand influences the effects of time on self-expansion and inclusion. Using a multi-method approach, the present research adds to knowledge of psychological and neurophysiological responses to brands as well as to knowledge of brain areas associated with close brand relationships. Overall, the use of psychophysiological data complements fMRI findings by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the physiological and neural mechanisms of decision-making and, therefore, yields more valuable information by examining the interplay among emotions and behavior (Wong, Xue, & Bechara, 2011).

Conceptual background

Rapid expansion of the self through close brand relationships

Self-expansion theory emphasizes that a central human motive is the desire to rapidly expand one's self, to acquire resources, perspectives, and identities from loved others that enhance one's ability to accomplish goals (Aron, Norman, & Aron, 1998). For example, Aron et al. (1995) tested participants several times over a ten-week period. At each testing, participants answered a number of questions, including items intended to indicate whether they had fallen in love since the last testing and an open-ended listing of self-descriptions (e.g., “Who are you today?”). As self-expansion theory proposes, participants' self-contented domains in their self-descriptions between before falling in love and after falling in love increased more than they did when participants started out in love or when participants did not fall in love.

More specifically, self-expansion theory predicts that the process of rapid expansion is inherently positive and emotionally arousing (Strong & Aron, 2006). Forming a new relationship results in high levels of excited positive arousal, consistent with prior findings on the impact of rapid movement toward a goal on the affective state (Carver & Scheier, 1990). When two people first enter a relationship, they usually experience an initial period of exhilaration. From the perspective of self-expansion theory, this period is the one in which the partners, because of the intense exchange, are expanding their “selves” at a rapid rate. Once they

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