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Exploring Dimensions of Consumer-Human Brand Attachment

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Abstract

Evidence suggests that many consumers form strong attachments to the brands they use. Recently, celebrities have been recognised as human brands and research suggests that consumers are influenced by their attachment towards such human brands. This study explores the attachment that consumers form towards celebrities by identifying specific dimensions of attachment. A principal components factor analysis revealed four distinct factors of consumer-human brand attachment: 1) separation distress, 2) trust, 3) relatedness and 4) satisfaction. Further analyses showed that each of the four factors was able to be used to differentiate between strong versus weak consumer-human brand attachment.

Keywords: consumer, source, satisfaction, perception
Exploring Dimensions of Consumer-Human Brand Attachment

Introduction

The relationship between individuals and celebrities has been investigated since the 1950’s (Horton and Wohl 1956; Caughey 1978; Rubin and McHugh 1987; Alperstein 1991). The illusion of intimacy, or intimacy at a distance, has been identified as a form of parasocial interaction – a one-sided relationship controlled by the performer and incapable of reciprocity (Horton and Wohl 1956). Within that relationship, recent marketing research has focused on the attachment that consumers feel for the human brand (Thomson 2006). Celebrities are considered human brands because they can be “professionally managed and because they have additional associations and features of a brand” (Thomson 2006: 105). The aim of this paper is to further examine the specific dimensions of consumer-human brand attachment and to determine whether significant differences exist on attachment dimensions when consumers have strong versus weak attachments to celebrities.

Parasocial relationships

It has long been argued that mass media are able to give the illusion of a face-to-face relationship between a spectator and a performer (Caughey 1978; Horton and Wohl 1956; Rubin and McHugh 1987). Horton and Wohl (1956: 216) suggest that viewers “know the persona in somewhat the same way they know their friends: through direct observation and interpretation of [their] appearance, [their] gestures and voice, [their] conversation and conduct in a variety of situations”. Furthermore, research shows that when an individual perceives a celebrity as reliable and predictable, they are more likely to develop a form of loyalty to the celebrity and, in turn, a parasocial relationship (Horton and Wohl 1956).

Although relationships with celebrities are seen as less interactive than those we have with our friends and family (Rubin and McHugh 1987), the meaning and degree of interactivity can be disputed, since celebrities are able to “construct reality” (Alperstein 1991: 55). For example, consumers are able to interact with rock/pop stars through listening to their music on iPods, stereo systems, computers and television screens. Consumers are also able to interact with celebrities at concerts, during autograph signing, by reading internet blogs and by following them on Twitter. Caughey (1978: 72) describes interactivity in terms of an artificial social world were the individual enters the vivid artificial experience through dreaming and fantasising, what he calls the individual’s “subjective world of imagination”. Recent marketing research has examined such parasocial relationships between consumers and celebrities in terms of the degree of attachment that consumers feel towards celebrities (Thomson 2006) and the effect that this relationship has on consumers’ attitudes and purchase intentions (Illicic, Fry and Webster 2008).

Consumer-human brand attachment

Research has identified various factors that influence consumers’ opinions of celebrities as endorsers for brands. Features of the celebrity such as their attractiveness (Ohanian 1990) and credibility, trustworthiness and expertise all can impact on the perceived appropriateness and
effectiveness of the celebrity as an endorser (Hovland, Janis and Kelley 1953; Hovland and Weiss 1951). Another stream of research has highlighted the importance of the match-up between the celebrity’s image and the brand’s image (Kamins 1990; Kamins and Gupta 1994; Till and Busler 1998). Attractive celebrities, whose image is consistent with the brands they endorse, make for much more effective endorsers. Nicole Kidman as the face for Chanel, for example, is a great deal more convincing than Nicole Kidman for Nintendo DS. These factors such as attractiveness and congruence, while significant, nonetheless fail to explain the much deeper emotional feelings or attachment bonds that consumers experience towards celebrities as human brands.

Attachment (Bowlby 1979, 1980) and Self-Determination (LaGuardia, Ryan, Couchman and Deci 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000) theories have provided the basis for understanding the depth and importance of consumer-celebrity relationships. Attachment has been defined as an emotion-laden, target-specific bond between a person and a specific object (Bowlby 1979, 1980). Emotional attachment to brands has been found to differ in terms of strength, with strong attachments being associated with heightened feelings of connection, affection, love and passion (Thomson, MacInnis and Park 2005). Attachment theory developed out of experimental psychological research examining relationships between mothers and their very young children. The premise of Attachment theory is the notion of “separation distress”, which is the degree to which individuals express strong emotional reactions when threatened with real or imagined separation from an object of affection. Separation distress has been shown to be a useful indicator of the strength or intensity of an attachment bond (Berman and Sperling 1994).

More positive qualities associated with attachment bonds also have been investigated. These typically are measured in terms of the degree to which a relationship is satisfying, trusting and committed (Fletcher, Simpson and Thomas 2000). Recent marketing research by Thomson (2006) has looked to Self-determination theory (LaGuardia et al. 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000) to identify the core elements of human brand attachment. Self-determination theory proposes that people seek to satisfy three basic needs: autonomy (freedom to make choices), relatedness (closeness to others) and competence (achievement). Thomson’s (2006) study found that participants had stronger attachment towards celebrities who made them feel they are cared for but also free to do as they wish. The need for achievements to be recognised was not a factor in participants’ attachment to celebrities, which is not surprising given the parasocial nature of the relationship. As such, Thomson’s (2006) results confirmed the importance of autonomy and relatedness, but not competency, for the development of human brand attachment.

Research to date has provided some support for the attachment that consumers feel for human brands and has focused on the impact that consumers’ self-determination (autonomy, relatedness and competence) and satisfaction, trust and commitment has on the degree to which consumers are attached to the celebrity (Thomson, 2006). However, research has yet to explore the specific dimensions of consumer-human brand attachment, and how these dimensions relate to strong versus weak attachment ties to a celebrity. It is probable that individuals who have a strong attachment to a celebrity also will display heightened levels on all attachment dimensions. Our purpose is to identify the core factors that make up consumer-human brand attachment, not the overall assessment of attachment. Each of the factors is further examined using customary scale validation procedures, including: criterion validation and reliability measures.
Method

Previous research on celebrity endorsement has shown that personal characteristics of a celebrity significantly influence consumers’ evaluations (Ohanian 1990). As such, it was vital to control for potential confounding factors, specifically the attractiveness and familiarity of the celebrity, to ensure that these factors did not influence consumers’ attachment to the celebrity. In a pre-test, 25 undergraduate university students were asked to rank order eight female and eight male Australian TV celebrities on a number of different characteristics, such as attractiveness, credibility, familiarity and attachment. Based on the results of the pre-test, two popular male TV celebrities were chosen, Rove McManus and Eddie McGuire. Two celebrities of the same sex were specifically chosen, as the attractiveness of a female celebrity was not comparable to that of a male celebrity. These two also were matched in terms of celebrity type (TV personality) and genre (game show hosts), at the time of the study both were hosts of popular evening game shows. In addition, both had high mean rank scores for familiarity (5.6 and 5.5, respectively), yet differed on attachment with Rove having a significantly higher mean rank score compared to Eddie (4.99 and 2.55 respectively). It was crucial that the celebrities selected matched on external criteria yet differed significantly on attachment to the target segment.

Main study: materials, measures and procedures

A new sample of 237 undergraduate students enrolled at an Australian university participated in the main study. Participants were asked to look at a photograph of one celebrity, either Rove or Eddie, and then to evaluate their attachment to the human brand. To make sure the two celebrities were as similar as possible, both were shown wearing black suits featured from the mid chest upwards, with a grey studio background. Following Thomson (2006) our different measures of attachment were used. Separation distress was measured with four items taken from Hazan and Shaver (1994). Two items for Autonomy and two for Relatedness were adapted from La Guardia et al. (2000). Trust (three items), Satisfaction (two items) and Commitment (two items) were sourced from Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas’ (2000) Perceived Relationship Quality Scale.

Results

Principal components factor analysis with orthogonal axes and varimax rotation was performed on the 15 attachment items. Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was greater than 0.6 (at 0.861), therefore, it was suitable to proceed. An examination of the factor solution revealed four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 accounting for 73.28 percent of the variance explained which was consistent with the scree plot output. Table 1 presents the factor loadings above 0.4 for the rotated component matrix. Factor 1 consists of three of the items that measure Separation Distress. This clearly is an emotional factor that identifies individuals’ assessments of their feelings with regards to a real, imagined or threatened separation to the human brand. The three Trust items all load highly on Factor 2, which indicates more of an appraisal of the celebrity’s character. Factor 3 consists of two items measuring Relatedness and one of the Autonomy items, suggesting that individuals feel free to be close to human brands and to care about celebrities. Factor 4 is made up of the two Satisfaction items, an evaluation of whether
the relationship is fulfilling. Interestingly, the two items measuring Commitment do not load highly on any of the dimensions. Apparently, in this case, human brand attachment does have its limits.

**Table 1** Rotated Component Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Component 1</th>
<th>Component 2</th>
<th>Component 3</th>
<th>Component 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upset if permanently gone from life</td>
<td>.870</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distressing if lost forever</td>
<td>.860</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss when not around</td>
<td>.800</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel better when not away from the celebrity</td>
<td>.574</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependable</td>
<td></td>
<td>.845</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust the celebrity</td>
<td></td>
<td>.822</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count on celebrity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.731</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cared about</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel free to be who I am</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy with relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content with relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.922</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The internal validity of the four dimensions of attachment was assessed by calculating a Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for each dimension on the reduced number of items. As shown in Table 2, all values were acceptable, indicating internal consistency (Nunnally 1978). To check the criterion validity of each of the four dimensions, the mean value for each attachment dimension was calculated for two different human brands: Rove McManus (identified in the pre-test as strong attachment) and Eddie McGuire (identified as weak attachment). Results in Table 2 show the ratings were consistently higher for Rove than for Eddie. T-tests were conducted to determine whether significant differences existed between the human brands for each of the attachment dimensions. All four dimensions were able to significantly differentiate between the strong attachment and weak attachment human brand, providing clear criterion validity support.
Table 2 Univariate Statistics and Reliability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cronbach’s α</th>
<th>Overall Mean</th>
<th>Strong Attachment Mean (Rove)</th>
<th>Weak Attachment Mean (Eddie)</th>
<th>T-test statistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Separation Distress</td>
<td>0.916</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>-3.941*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>0.878</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>-2.881*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatedness</td>
<td>0.877</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>-3.792*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>0.888</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>-4.219**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant at p<.01 level. ** Significant at p<.05 level.

Discussion

Some inconsistencies with Thomson’s (2006) previous research on human brand attachment were found within the current study. Results showed Attachment as having four distinct dimensions, consisting of: Separation Distress, Trust, Relatedness, and Satisfaction. An individual’s emotional state with regards to the celebrity, their cognitive assessment of the celebrity’s character, the closeness they feel with the celebrity, and the happiness they sense regarding the relationship they have with the celebrity, were all factors in a consumer’s attachment towards a celebrity. Autonomy and Commitment did not appear to be dimensions of Attachment bonds with human brands. In other words, the degree to which consumers feel controlled and the extent to which they are devoted to a relationship with celebrities did not clearly contribute to consumer-human brand attachment.

As this study is the first to examine the dimensionality of attachment within a human brand context, further research is needed to investigate the importance of each of the components in predicting consumer behaviour. Future research should explore the effect that consumer-human brand attachment has on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. Additional research also should be conducted using a number of different human brands under various conditions such as single versus multiple endorsement situations and with congruent versus incongruent product brands. A comparison between male and female celebrities should be also explored, in addition to the possible differences that may exist between genres, such as movie stars, sports stars, TV personalities and music stars. The investigation of the existence of gender effects with regards to consumers could also be explored to identify whether there is a difference in attachment dimensions between males and females.

Human brand managers would benefit from the current study by understanding and having the power to manipulate the components that influence the creation of an attachment bond between their client and consumers. Human brand managers are now able to assess consumers’ degree of attachment to their client in order to determine whether a relationship between consumers and the celebrity has been formed. With further research, the possibility that consumer attachment towards a human brand can be built by tapping into the emotions of consumers and altering their perceptions of the celebrity’s character can be explored.
References


