

Hyman Brands: Investigating Antecedents to Consumers' Strong Attachment to Celebrities

Zeenat Ismail

Department of Social Sciences & Liberal Arts
Institute of Business Administration – Karachi

Email: zismail@iba.edu.pk

Tel #:+92(333) 3775545

Fax #:+92(21) 38103008

— *Review of* —
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Saba Ali

Institute Of Business Administration- Karachi

ABSTRACT

This research seeks mainly to identify the factors that make consumers strongly attached to the human brands/celebrities. It basically explores the latest improvements in self-determination theory as to why consumers develop strong attachments to human brands. Human brand refers to any well known personality who is the subject of marketing communication efforts. Survey has been done through questionnaires and autonomy as well as relatedness needs of the consumers have been identified. Results suggest that when a human brand enhances and fulfills the autonomy and relatedness needs of the consumers, consumers develop a strong attachment to the human brand. The results also imply that organizations will also be benefitted such as entertainment firms and political parties that establish direct interaction between human brands and consumers. Also, much of the success of the media and entertainment industry depends upon the strong relationships between the consumers and human brands.

KEY WORDS: Antecedents, attachment, human brand.

INTRODUCTION

Although consumers interact with thousands of products, people and brands in their lives, they develop an intense emotional attachment to only few. The possibility that consumers can develop strong emotional attachments to brands is interesting as attachment theory in psychology (Bowlby, 1979) suggests that the degree of emotional attachment to an object predicts the nature

of an individual's interaction with the object. For example, individuals who are strongly attached to a person are more likely to be committed to, invest in, and make sacrifices for that person (Bowlby, 1980; Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Analogously, consumers' emotional attachments to a brand might predict their commitment to the brand (e.g., brand loyalty) and their willingness to make financial sacrifices in order to obtain it (e.g., to pay a price premium).

People can form attachments to a variety of objects including pets (Hirschman, 1994; Sable, 1995), places (Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992) and celebrities (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Alperstein, 1991). These attachments vary in strength and stronger attachments are associated with stronger feelings of love, affection, connection and passion; (Bowlby, 1979; Brennan, Sternberg, 1987).

ANTECEDENT

An antecedent refers to a prior event or an occurrence that lead to a particular happening. In this case, antecedents are basically the factors that lead to a strong attachment between human brands and consumers.

ATTACHMENT

According to Bowlby, attachment is an emotional laden target specific bond between a person and a specific object. Attachments vary in strength and stronger attachments imply higher level of connection, love and passion.

HUMAN BRAND

A human brand is a well known personality who is a subject of marketing communications efforts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

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. The most important work on attachment was conducted by Bowlby (1979, 1980) in the field of parent- infant relationships. According to Bowlby, an attachment is an emotional-laden target- specific bond between a person and a specific object. Attachments vary in strength and stronger attachments are associated with stronger feelings of affection, connection, love and passion (cf. Aron & Westbay, 1996; Bowlby, 1979; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Collins & Read, 1990, 1994; Feeney & Noller, 1996;

Fehr & Russell, 1991; Sternberg 1987). Attachments are a type of strong relationship that people usually experience as children with their parents; later in life, these attachments routinely develop with other targets such as human brands (Leets, De Becker, and Giles 1995). Although the relationship with celebrities is perceived to be less interactive as compared to family and friends, (Rubin and McHugh 1987), the extent of interactivity can be argued since human brands have the capability to construct reality (Alperstein 1991:55). For instance, consumers are able to interact with their favorite celebrities in concerts, different television programs and following them on different social networking sites. 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 (Ilicic, Fry and Webster 2008).

In the latest marketing researches, more positive attributes regarding the attachment bond between consumers and human brands have been investigated. These include the extent to which the relation is satisfying, trusting and committed (Fletcher, Simpson and Thomas 2000). Also, recent marketing research by Thomson (2006) has identified the aspects regarding Self Determination theory (LaGuardia et al. 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000) related to the relationship between consumers and human brands and to identify the basic components of human brand attachment. Self determination theory proposes that people basically seek to satisfy three basic needs i.e. autonomy, relatedness and competence needs. Autonomy refers to self governance or a feeling of having the authority to make the decisions by one's own choice and not under anyone's pressure. Relatedness refers to a feeling of being cared about, while competence means a sense of achievement in oneself and a feeling of not being a mediocre person but to be a high grade achiever. Thomson's (2006) study revealed the fact that the consumers experienced strong attachment towards the celebrities who made them feel cared about but also free to do as they wish. Attachment research has also focused on separation distress as a crucial indicator of the degree to which individuals feel attachment bonds (Berman and Sperling 1994). The basic underlying premise of Attachment theory is "Separation Distress", which refers to the extent to which consumers show their emotions when exposed with real or imagined separation from an object of strong attachment. Separation distress has proved to be one of the most essential indicators to identify the attachment strength between the consumers and human brands (Berman and Sperling 1994).

Research also implies that attachments between consumers and human brands may be vital to understanding customer-based brand equity, in which certain brands resonate with consumers and indicate financial value for the firm.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

H1: The more a person observes a human brand satisfying his/her autonomy needs, the more strongly he/she will be attached to the human brand.

H2: The more a person observes a human brand satisfying his/her relatedness needs, the more strongly he/she will be attached to the human brand.

METHOD

Seventy undergraduate students were asked to fill up a questionnaire taken from the work of La Guardia and colleagues (2000). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement on a 7 point likert scale with 1= “strongly disagree” and 7= “strongly agree”. Three human brands were mentioned and the same set of 7 questions was asked for each human brand. Questions were based on the facts that whether individuals develop feelings like autonomy and relatedness when they see that particular human brand on television. Questions regarding relatedness included statements like “ABC makes me feel cared about” and “ABC brings a feeling of closeness to me”. Questions on autonomy included statements like “ABC makes me feel free to be who I am” and “ABC makes me feel pressured and controlled in some ways”.

RESULTS

Through the survey conducted, we come to know from the data that consumers, who perceive those human brands who fulfill their autonomy needs, they tend to be strongly attached to the human brand. Similarly, an individual who observes a human brand satisfying their relatedness needs, tend to be strongly attached to the human brand. In my questionnaire, three celebrities were mentioned and the same set of 7 questions was asked about each celebrity. The celebrities included David Beckham, one of the most famous football players, Imran Khan, who is a well know political personality of Pakistan, and Roger Federer, the most popular tennis player of the world.

Going through the results, it was found that all these three personalities tend to satisfy the autonomy and relatedness needs of the individuals as it is evident from the data collected. Individually, Imran Khan was found satisfying the autonomy needs of most of the people, while the other two celebrities tend to satisfy both the basic need satisfaction needs.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Due to time constraints, the sample size was reduced to seventy. Also, it was a convenient sample not a random one, meaning it was not a perfectly representative sample. Furthermore, this research focuses only on the celebrities seen on television, not on any other media.

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