

Do Brands Like Us? The Perceived Liking of the Brand for the Self and Brand Attraction

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We provide evidence of reciprocity in consumer-brand relationships by showing that brand attraction depends not only on the extent to which the consumer likes the brand, but also on perceptions of the extent to which the brand likes the consumer—a concept we refer to as perceived brand liking. In particular, we find that consumers are more attracted to brands that exhibit cues of liking for them, either through friendly actions (i.e., from the brand, brand employees or brand users) or self-brand similarity (i.e., to the brand or brand users), and that the effect of these cues is mediated by the perceived liking of the brand for the self.

Do Brands Like Us? The Perceived Liking of the Brand for the Self and Brand Attraction

A fundamental challenge facing companies is understanding why consumers are attracted to some brands more than others. Key to this understanding is the notion that consumers form parasocial relationships with brands (Blackston 1993; Fournier 1998) and that the nature and strength of those relationships depends on several factors. For instance, consumers are more attracted to brands that signal social group membership (Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2003) or aspects of their own personalities (Swaminathan, Stilley, and Ahluwalia 2009). Further, the trajectory of consumers' relationships with brands over time depends on whether these relationships are best characterized as close friendships or short-lived flings (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). However, the potential for a dyadic component to brand relationships has been largely overlooked (for exceptions, see Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Aggarwal 2004; Blackston 1993). The present research addresses this gap by exploring the notion that if brands truly serve as active relationship partners, brand attraction should depend not only on the extent to which the consumer likes the brand, but also on perceptions of the extent to which the brand likes the consumer—a concept we refer to as *perceived brand liking*.

Drawing from research on interpersonal attraction which shows that when people perceive that others like them, they are likely to be attracted to those people in return (Eastwick and Finkel 2009), we propose that consumers will be more attracted to brands that exhibit cues of liking, either through friendly brand actions (e.g., interactions with brand employees or users) or self-brand similarity (Condon and Crano 1988). Importantly, we also propose that the positive effect of each of these cues on brand attraction will be mediated by perceived brand liking. Finally, we propose a boundary condition for this effect—namely, that brand liking cues will increase brand attraction only when they are considered diagnostic of the brand's true liking (Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2006), such as when they are selectively directed to a few consumers rather than to all consumers (Eastwick and Finkel 2009).

In the following sections, we first review the relevant research on brand relationships, interpersonal attraction, and cue diagnosticity to provide empirical bases for the hypotheses that consumers are generally more attracted to brands that exhibit cues of liking for them, that the effect of these cues is mediated perceived brand liking, and that the diagnosticity of these cues depends on their selectivity. We then present one survey and four experiments in which we test these hypotheses. Finally, we discuss the contributions of this research to brand relationship theory.

Conceptual Background and Hypotheses

The idea that a brand may exhibit liking for the consumer has roots in the brand relationship literature. In her seminal paper on the topic, Fournier (1998; Hinde 1995) identified reciprocation, or active participation by the relationship partner, as the sine qua non of relationships, and assumed that brands fulfill this requirement on the basis of such factors as their “observable behaviors” (e.g., advertising communications) and consumers’ personalistic associations with brands (e.g., that brands have personalities; Aaker 1997). However, to our knowledge, this qualifying condition of brand relationships has not been empirically validated. The objective of this research is to explore the potential for such a dyadic component by examining the role of perceived brand liking in consumer-brand relationships. In particular, our objective is to explore the effect of brand liking cues on consumers’ attraction to brands. Insight into this issue is found in the interpersonal relationship literature, particularly research which examines the role of reciprocal liking in interpersonal attraction.

A primary finding to emerge from research on interpersonal attraction is that people like others who like them in return (Eastwick and Finkel 2009). In fact, reciprocal liking is considered one of the primary determinants of interpersonal attraction, along with similarity, familiarity, proximity, and physical attractiveness. Similarity itself is believed to increase interpersonal attraction, at least in part, by means of the perceived liking of the relationship partner for the self (Aronson and Worchel 1966).

Building on previous research by Byrne and colleagues which showed a positive linear relationship between attitude similarity and interpersonal attraction (Byrne 1971; Byrne and Rhamey 1965), Condon and Crano (1988) found that people who share similar attitudes assume there will be mutual liking, and that this attribution mediates the positive relationship between self-other similarity and attraction.

Drawing on this literature, we examine two ways brands may signal liking for the consumer. First, because partner actions are a primary source of perceived liking in interpersonal relationships (Backman and Secord 1959; Byrne and Rhamey 1965), the friendly behaviors of brand employees or users may serve as one cue of the brand's liking for the self. Second, because people expect that similar others will like them and these expectations of liking lead to interpersonal attraction (Condon and Crano 1988), we propose that perceived similarity to the brand or other brand users may serve as a more subtle cue of brand liking. Thus, we predict that consumers will be more attracted to brands that exhibit cues of liking (vs. a neutral control), either through friendly brand actions or self-brand similarity (H1).

Further, if it is truly consumers' perceptions of brand liking that lead to brand attraction and not simply the positive valence of brand liking cues (De Houwer, Thomas, and Baeyens 2001; Stuart, Shimp, and Engle 1987), factors that raise doubts about the truth value of brand liking cues should affect their diagnosticity (Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2006). One instance in which consumers may doubt the truth value of brand liking cues is when they perceive that friendly brand actions are directed to all consumers rather than to a more select set. Support for the prediction that unselective brand actions will not be diagnostic of the brand's true liking is found in the interpersonal attraction literature. As previously discussed, the perceived liking of a relationship partner for the self generally increases interpersonal attraction; however, the strength of this relationship depends on whether A likes B uniquely (i.e., dyadic liking) or A likes everyone on average (i.e., generalized liking) (Eastwick and Finkel 2009). Specifically, a strong positive correlation between perceived partner liking and attraction emerges when people believe that they are uniquely liked, whereas only a weak positive correlation

emerges when people believe that the relationship partner likes everyone in general (Kenny 1994). Thus, we predict that the diagnosticity of different brand liking cues for brand attraction will depend on their perceived selectivity (H2). Specifically, selective (i.e., dyadic) brand actions will be more diagnostic (H2a), whereas unselective (i.e., generalized) brand actions will be less diagnostic (H2b).

We test these hypotheses in one survey and four experiments. In an exploratory survey, we provide initial evidence that perceptions of brand liking exist as well as support for our theorizing regarding the sources of perceived brand liking. In experiment 1, we manipulate brand action and self-brand similarity cues for a fictitious brand and show that when cues of brand liking are present, they causally increase brand attraction (H1). In experiments 2 and 3, we show that the perceived liking of the brand for the self separately mediates the effects of self-brand similarity and friendly brand actions on brand attraction, thereby confirming their roles as indicators of brand liking. And in experiment 4, we manipulate the selectivity of known brands' actions and find that brand liking cues are diagnostic only when they are directed to consumers uniquely. When they are directed to all consumers, in contrast, they have no impact on perceived brand liking and, thus, brand attraction (H2).

Exploratory Survey: Existence and Sources of Perceived Brand Liking

The purpose of the exploratory survey was to provide initial evidence for H1 by assessing consumer experience with the concept of perceived brand liking as well as the sources of such experiences (N = 75). Two open-ended questions were focal in our analysis: (1) "Have you ever felt that a particular brand did (or probably would) like you? If so, why? What made you feel that way?" and (2) "Have you ever felt that a particular brand did not (or probably would not) like you? If so, why? What made you feel that way?" Responses were coded by two independent coders, inter-rater reliability met acceptable levels, and disagreements were resolved through discussion. The results revealed that most participants were able to readily recall instances of feeling that brands liked or disliked them (83% and

77%, respectively). Experiences with employees and other company representatives as well as perceptions of similar (or dissimilar) values and traits were the most commonly cited sources of these feelings. These findings provide preliminary support for our theorizing regarding the sources of perceived brand liking and, more generally, for the premise that consumers indeed have perceptions that brands do or don't like them. However, they do not allow for causal inferences about the relationship between cues of brand liking and brand attraction. Experiment 1 addresses this issue.

Experiment 1: Cues of Brand Liking and Brand Attraction

The objective of this experiment was to test whether cues of brand liking causally increase brand attraction (H1); thus, the friendliness of the brand's actions toward the participant (i.e., the brand action cue) and the similarity of the brand to the participant (i.e., the self-brand similarity cue) were manipulated. One hundred twenty-six students from a Midwestern university participated in a lab experiment for which they either received \$15 or course credit. A 2 (brand actions: friendly vs. neutral) \times 2 (self-brand similarity: high vs. low) between-subjects design was used. First, participants read a brief description of a fictitious personal fragrance brand, Element Fragrance. They were then presented with focus group results for the brand. Those in the high (low) self-brand similarity condition were told that young professionals (middle-aged blue-collar workers) embraced the brand more than any other group. Next, participants read one of two brand action scenarios in which brand employees served as the vehicle representing the brand's actions. In the friendly brand actions scenario, the Element representatives at a sampling display were extremely affable and eager to get to know the participant, whereas in the neutral brand actions scenario, the Element representatives were polite but somewhat aloof. Finally, participants were asked how seriously they would consider purchasing and how likely they would be to purchase an Element fragrance (1 = not at all seriously, not at all likely; 9 = very seriously, extremely likely).

To determine whether cues of brand liking causally increase brand attraction, participants' purchase interest ($r = .90$) was submitted to a 2 (brand actions) \times 2 (self-brand similarity) between-subjects ANOVA. The results revealed a main effect of self-brand similarity, such that participants had greater purchase interest when they perceived themselves to similar (vs. dissimilar) to other brand users ($M = 5.12$ vs. 4.20 ; $F(1, 122) = 5.41, p < .05$). This effect was qualified by a two-way interaction ($F(1, 122) = 5.38, p < .05$). As predicted, planned contrasts revealed that when Element Fragrances was perceived to display any cue of brand liking, either through friendly brand actions or self-brand similarity, participants expressed greater purchase interest than when the brand did not display such cues (i.e., the neutral brand actions, dissimilar condition) ($M = 5.08$ vs. 3.61 ; $t(122) = 3.75, p < .001$; see figure 1) (H1). Finally, although main effect of brand actions was not significant, the means were in the predicted direction ($M_{Friendly} = 4.98$ vs. $M_{Neutral} = 4.44$; $F(1, 122) = 2.54, p = .11$).

Insert figure 1 about here

The results of experiment 1 provide initial evidence that consumers are more attracted to brands that exhibit cues of liking (vs. a neutral control), either through friendly brand actions or self-brand similarity. However, the proposed mechanism by which this occurs—the perceived liking of the brand for the self—was not tested. To rectify this, two follow-up experiments were conducted to assess whether perceived brand liking separately mediates the effects of self-brand similarity (Experiment 2) and friendly brand actions (Experiment 3) on brand attraction.

Experiment 2: Mediator(s) of the Relationship between Self-Brand Similarity and Brand Attraction

The objective of this experiment was to examine the mechanism(s) by which self-brand similarity influences brand attraction. In accordance with Condon and Crano (1988), we hypothesized

that self-brand similarity (vs. dissimilarity) would increase perceptions of brand liking, which would in turn increase brand attraction. However, we also anticipated that self-brand similarity (vs. dissimilarity) would increase the perceived fit between brand users' and one's own social identities (i.e., the identity-signaling function of the brand; Berger and Heath 2007), which would also increase brand attraction. Most importantly, we predicted that holding the identity-signaling function of the brand constant, self-brand similarity (vs. dissimilarity) would increase brand attraction by increasing perceptions of brand liking. Evidence supporting these predictions would not only show that self-brand similarity operates through multiple mechanisms, but more importantly, that the perceived liking of the brand for the self exerts an influence on brand attraction even when other factors are held constant.

Forty-two students from a Midwestern university participated in an online survey and were entered into a lottery with a 1/50 chance of winning a \$25 gift card. The procedure was similar to that used in experiment 1, with two key differences. First, brand actions were not manipulated, which allowed for an unencumbered examination of the relationship between self-brand similarity and brand attraction. Second, participants were asked whether they thought Element Fragrances was designed with people like them in mind and whether they thought they would be a good fit with Element Fragrances' consumer base (1 = not at all; 9 = definitely). These two items were designed to measure the perceived identity-signaling function of the brand.

Results

First, participants' perceived similarity to each of the featured user groups was examined using a 2 (self-brand similarity: high vs. low) \times 2 (user group: young professionals vs. middle-aged blue collar workers) repeated measures ANOVA, with user group as a within-subject factor. As expected, the results revealed a within-subject effect of user group, such that participants considered themselves to be more similar to young professionals than middle-aged blue-collar workers ($M = 5.90$ vs. 2.36 ; $F(1, 40) =$

77.32, $p < .001$; no other effects were significant, $ps > .60$). Thus, the self-brand similarity manipulation was successful.

Next, to determine whether participants were more interested in purchasing an Element fragrance when it was preferred by similar (vs. dissimilar) others, participants' purchase interest ($r = .92$) was submitted to a one-way between-subjects ANOVA. As expected, the results revealed a main effect of self-brand similarity, such that participants were more interested in purchasing the brand when they perceived themselves to be similar (vs. dissimilar) to other brand users ($M = 5.19$ vs. 3.90 ; $F(1, 40) = 5.00$, $p < .05$).

Third, participants' perceptions of brand liking ($r = .87$) were assessed using the same one-way ANOVA, which also revealed a main effect of self-brand similarity. As expected, participants who felt similar (vs. dissimilar) to other brand users indicated that they thought that the brand liked them more ($M = 5.77$ vs. 4.63 ; $F(1, 40) = 8.25$, $p = .01$). To determine whether perceptions of brand liking mediated the relationship between self-brand similarity and purchase interest, we used Hayes' PROCESS macro (2012; Model 4; see also Preacher and Hayes 2004, 2008), which employs bootstrapping methods (5,000 bootstrap resamples) to estimate the confidence interval for the indirect effect of self-brand similarity (1 = similar; -1 = dissimilar) on purchase interest through perceived brand liking (centered) (indirect effects with confidence intervals that do not contain zero are interpreted as significant). The analysis revealed that self-brand similarity positively predicted perceived brand liking ($\beta = .41$, $t = 2.87$, $p = .01$). In turn, perceived brand liking positively predicted purchase interest ($\beta = .67$, $t = 5.27$, $p < .001$). Moreover, the indirect effect of self-brand similarity on purchase interest through perceived brand liking was significant (indirect effect = $.53$, 95% CI = $.18$ to 1.00), whereas the direct effect of self-brand similarity on purchase interest was nonsignificant ($\beta = .06$, $t = .45$, $p > .60$). These results indicate that perceived brand liking mediated the effect of self-brand similarity on purchase interest.

Finally, the identity-signaling function of Element Fragrances was assessed by examining the perceived fit between brand users' and participants' own social identities ($r = .90$). As expected, the results of a one-way ANOVA revealed that participants perceived Element Fragrances to be a better fit with their own identities when they felt similar (vs. dissimilar) to other brand users ($M = 5.94$ vs. 3.22 ; $F(1, 40) = 19.97, p < .001$). This was followed by a determination of whether the perceived identity-signaling function of the brand mediated the relationship between self-brand similarity and purchase interest. Using the same procedure outlined previously, we found that self-brand similarity positively predicted identity signaling ($\beta = .57, t = 4.46, p < .001$). In turn, identity signaling (centered) positively predicted purchase interest ($\beta = .92, t = 8.38, p < .001$). Moreover, the indirect effect of self-brand similarity on purchase interest through identity signaling was significant (indirect effect = $.99$, 95% CI = $.59$ to 1.56), whereas the direct effect of self-brand similarity on purchase interest was nonsignificant ($\beta = -.19, t = -1.70, p = .10$). These results indicate that the perceived identity-signaling function of the brand also mediated the effect of self-brand similarity on purchase interest. Further, when both perceived brand liking and identity-signaling were included in the model as parallel mediators, the indirect effects of self-brand similarity on purchase interest through perceived brand liking (indirect effect = $.20$, 95% CI = $.03$ to $.50$) and identity-signaling (indirect effect = $.84$, 95% CI = $.50$ to 1.31) both remained significant, indicating that participants' perceptions that the brand likes them and the identity-signaling function of the brand both account for positive impact of self-brand similarity (vs. dissimilarity) on brand attraction (see figure 2).

Insert figure 2 about here

Discussion

The results of experiment 2 show that self-brand similarity influences perceptions of brand liking, which in turn influence brand attraction, even when other mechanisms such as the perceived

identity-signaling function of the brand are held constant. Not only do these findings validate self-brand similarity as a cue of the brand's liking for the self, extending Condon and Crano's (1988) research to a consumer-brand setting, they also address an alternative explanation for the effects of self-brand similarity. In particular, whereas the theoretical contention in this research is that self-brand similarity (vs. dissimilarity) increases perceptions of brand liking, which in turn increase brand attraction, one could argue that the previously reported relationship between self-brand similarity and brand attraction is driven instead by the identity-signaling function of brands with high self-brand similarity (Berger and Heath 2007). Indeed, experiment 2 offers evidence that identity signaling is one mechanism by which self-brand similarity influences brand attraction. However, it is also found that perceptions of brand liking exert a significant and independent influence on brand attraction—an influence which heretofore has not been considered in the brand relationship literature.

These findings support the central premise that self-brand similarity (vs. dissimilarity) is perceived as a cue of the brand's liking for the self—a cue which leads consumers to be more attracted to the brand. Experiment 3 investigates whether friendly (vs. neutral) brand actions are also perceived as a cue of brand liking and if it this association which underlies the relationship between friendly brand actions and brand attraction.

Experiment 3: Mediator of the Relationship between Brand Actions and Brand Attraction

The objective of this experiment was to examine the mechanism by which the actions of a brand representative influence brand attraction. In accordance with the interpersonal attraction literature, which shows that partner actions are a primary source of perceived partner liking (Backman and Secord 1959; Byrne and Rhamey 1965), as well as the brand equity literature, which shows that consumers conceptualize brands as a host of associations, including user imagery, employee imagery, etc. (Aaker

1991; Keller 1993), our hypothesis was that the friendly (vs. neutral) actions of a brand representative would increase perceptions of brand liking, which would in turn increase brand attraction.

Fifty-eight students from a Midwestern university participated a lab experiment for which they received \$8. The procedure was similar to that used in experiment 2, with two key differences. First, a bank rather than a personal fragrance served as the category of interest. Specifically, participants were asked to imagine that they had landed a new job with a substantial salary increase, and to learn more about their banking options they had decided to make an appointment with a personal banker they previously met at their bank, Grove Bank (adapted from Aggarwal 2004). The second change introduced in the procedure was to manipulate brand actions rather than self-brand similarity. As in experiment 1, participants read one of two brand action scenarios in which a brand employee served as the vehicle representing the brand's actions. In the friendly brand actions scenario, the personal banker at Grove Bank was affable and eager to help the participant, whereas in the neutral brand actions scenario, the personal banker was polite but somewhat aloof.

Next, mirroring the dependent measures used in experiment 2, participants were asked how seriously they would consider opening new accounts with Grove Bank and how likely they would be to open new accounts with Grove Bank in the future (1 = not at all seriously, not at all likely; 7 = very seriously, extremely likely). Finally, participants were asked to indicate what they thought Grove Bank's opinion was of them (1 = unfavorable, dislike; 7 = favorable, like)—two items designed to capture participants' perceptions of brand liking.

Results

To determine whether participants were more interested in opening new accounts with Grove Bank when the personal banker behaved in a friendly (vs. neutral) way toward them, participants' purchase interest ($r = .92$) was submitted to a one-way between-subjects ANOVA. Indeed, the results revealed a main effect of brand actions, such that participants in the friendly brand actions condition

were more interested in opening new accounts with Grove Bank than those in the neutral brand actions condition ($M = 5.72$ vs. 4.37 ; $F(1, 56) = 11.51, p = .001$). Next, participants' perceptions of brand liking ($\alpha = .89$) were assessed using the same one-way ANOVA. As expected, participants in the friendly brand actions condition thought that the brand liked them more than did those in the neutral brand actions condition ($M = 5.37$ vs. 4.27 ; $F(1, 56) = 14.13, p < .001$).

To determine whether perceptions of brand liking mediated the relationship between brand actions and purchase interest, we used the bootstrapping procedure outlined in experiment 2 (Hayes 2012; PROCESS macro, Model 4). The analysis revealed that the friendliness of the brand's actions (1 = friendly; -1 = neutral) positively predicted participants' perceptions of liking from the brand ($\beta = .45, t = 3.76, p < .001$). In turn, perceived brand liking (centered) positively predicted purchase interest ($\beta = .50, t = 4.22, p < .001$). Moreover, the indirect effect of brand actions on purchase interest through perceived brand liking was significant (indirect effect = $.37$, 95% CI = $.17$ to $.63$), whereas the direct effect of brand actions on purchase interest was nonsignificant ($\beta = .19, t = 1.56, p > .10$). These results indicate that perceived brand liking mediated the effect of brand actions on purchase interest (see figure 3).

Insert figure 3 about here

Discussion

These results show that the actions of brand representatives—in this case, a brand employee— influence perceptions of brand liking, and that it is this association which underlies the relationship between brand actions and brand attraction. Thus, the findings across four studies suggest friendly brand actions and self-brand similarity both serve as cues of the brand's liking for the self—cues which lead consumers to become more attracted to the brand. However, the possibility also exists that these findings are due to simple associative learning (De Houwer, Thomas, and Baeyens 2001), whereby the affect associated with an unconditioned stimulus (e.g., a brand liking cue) transfers to a conditioned stimulus

with which it is paired (e.g., a brand; Stuart, Shimp, and Engle 1987; Sweldens, Van Osselaer, and Janiszewski 2010). If this is the case, then it is the positivity (or neutrality) of brand liking cues rather than consumers' inferences about those cues (i.e., "the brand truly likes me") which account for the observed outcomes.

One way to test the validity of these competing explanations is to examine whether consumers disregard brand liking cues with questionable truth value when they have reason to doubt such cues. According to the associative-propositional evaluation model (Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2006), attitude change resulting from associative processes should occur independently of the truth value (i.e., diagnosticity) of brand liking cues, and thus is a product of pure affect transfer. In contrast, attitude change resulting from propositional processes should depend on the subjective truth or falsity consumers assign to these cues, and thus is a product of a more elaborated reflection on the meaning behind them. Thus, if cues of brand liking increase brand attraction through simple affect transfer, then factors that raise doubts about their truth value should have no effect (Sweldens et al. 2010). However, if cues of brand liking increase brand attraction because consumers believe the brand truly likes them, as proposed, then factors that raise doubts about their truth value should affect their diagnosticity (Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2006). As previously discussed, one instance in which consumers may doubt the truth value of brand liking cues is when they perceive that friendly brand actions are directed to all consumers rather than to a more select set (Eastwick and Finkel 2009).

Experiment 4: Brand Selectivity and Diagnosticity of Brand Action Cues

Experiment 4 was designed to test the moderating role of brand selectivity (H2) using a 2 (brand actions: friendly vs. neutral) \times 2 (brand selectivity: dyadic vs. generalized) between-subjects design. We also sought to bolster the ecological validity of the study by using known brands as the target and percentage discounts as the cue of brand liking. Ninety-four students from a Northeastern university

participated in a lab experiment for which they received \$15. First, participants were asked to indicate their favorite clothing brand. Next, they read a scenario in which they received an email from the brand offering them a 50% (friendly condition) or 10% (neutral condition) discount. Participants were then told either that all customers received this discount (generalized condition) or that a few customers received this discount whereas other customers received a 30% discount (dyadic condition). Finally, participants rated their opinion of the brand (1 = dislike, unfavorable; 9 = like, favorable; $r = .88$) as well as what they thought the brand's opinion was of them (1 = dislike, unfavorable; 9 = like, favorable; $r = .91$).

The results revealed a main effect of brand actions on both dependent variables, such that when participants received a 50% (vs. 10%) discount, they thought the brand liked them more (7.01 vs. 5.58; $F(1, 90) = 17.21, p < .001$) and were more attracted to the brand ($M = 7.93$ vs. 6.01; $F(1, 90) = 26.19, p < .001$). The results also revealed a main effect of brand selectivity on brand attitude ($p < .05$), such that participants in the generalized (vs. dyadic) condition evaluated the brand more favorably ($M = 7.38$ vs. 6.44; $F(1, 90) = 5.47, p < .05$). Importantly, these effects were qualified by a two-way interaction (perceived brand liking: $F(1, 90) = 4.61, p < .05$; brand attitude: $F(1, 90) = 12.84, p = .001$, see figure 4). As predicted, when the brand's actions were selectively directed to the participant (i.e., when they were dyadic), friendly brand actions increased perceived brand liking and brand attraction, whereas neutral brand actions (viewed negatively in contrast with the brand's friendly behaviors toward others) decreased them (perceived brand liking: $M_{Friendly} = 7.23$ vs. $M_{Neutral} = 5.00$; $t(90) = 4.36, p < .001$; brand attitude: $M_{Friendly} = 8.18$ vs. $M_{Neutral} = 4.78$; $t(90) = 6.03, p < .001$) (H2a). In contrast, when the brand's actions were directed to everyone in general (i.e., when they are generalized), they had no impact on perceived brand liking or brand attraction (perceived brand liking: $M_{Friendly} = 6.80$ vs. $M_{Neutral} = 6.10$; $t(90) = 1.45, p = .15$; brand attitude: $M_{Friendly} = 7.70$ vs. $M_{Neutral} = 7.10$; $t(90) = 1.11, p = .27$) (H2b).

Moderated mediation analyses using bootstrapping methods (Hayes 2012) again showed that perceived brand liking mediated the effect of brand liking cues on brand attraction.

Collectively, these results provide support for H2 and suggest that when consumers perceive that brands are not selective in their actions, this will arouse doubt about their truth value as brand liking cues, rendering them nondiagnostic. Further, the reported interaction and moderated mediation results demonstrate that it is not simply the positivity (or neutrality) of brand liking cues but rather consumers' inferences about those cues (i.e., "the brand truly likes me") which account for the observed outcomes.

Insert figure 4 about here

Conclusion

Across five studies, we show that the perceived liking of the brand for the self plays a critical role in consumer-brand relationships. Specifically, we find that without a veridical cue of liking from the brand, either through friendly brand actions or self-brand similarity, brand attraction falters and the strength of the brand relationship is diminished. This research contributes to the brand relationship literature in several important ways. First, it enriches our understanding of the types of associations that influence our valuation of brands (Keller 1993). Second, it further specifies the nature of the consumer-brand relationship explored in previous research. Namely, our findings are the first to empirically validate the existence and impact of perceived brand liking and, consequently, the reciprocal liking of the consumer for the brand—notable in that the presence of reciprocity is a necessary condition by which consumer-brand relations may accurately be characterized as true "relationships" (Fournier 1998, Hinde 1995). Most importantly, our findings provide support the view that consumer-brand relationships are a two-way street, with the thoughts and actions (real or imagined) of *both* partners influencing consumer behavior.

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Figures

FIGURE 1:

PURCHASE INTEREST AS A FUNCTION OF BRAND ACTIONS AND SELF-BRAND SIMILARITY (EXPERIMENT 1)

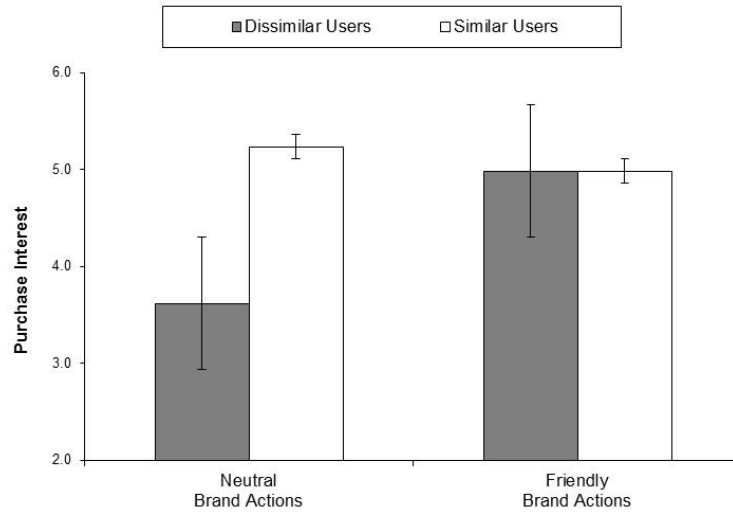
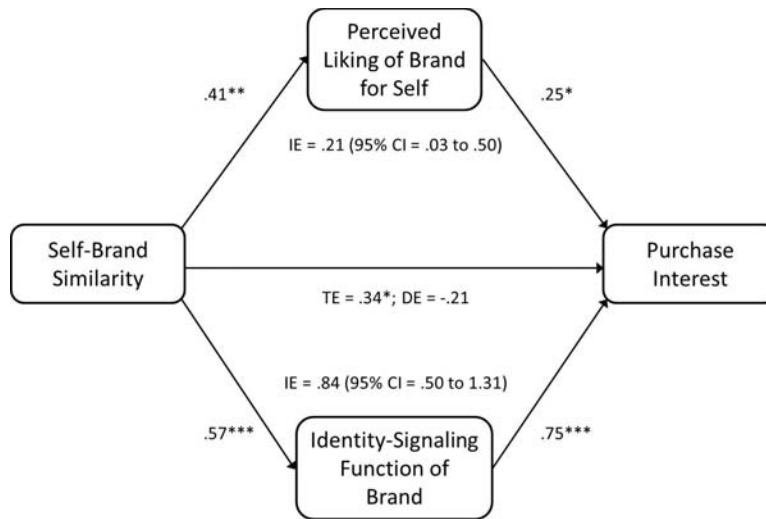


FIGURE 2:

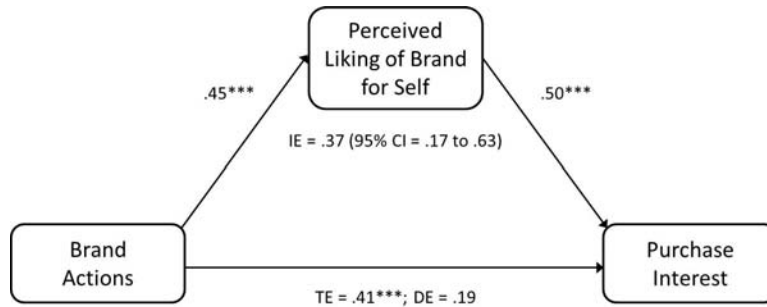
PERCEIVED BRAND LIKING MEDIATES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-BRAND SIMILARITY AND PURCHASE INTEREST (EXPERIMENT 2)



NOTE.—IE = indirect effect; CI = confidence interval; TE = total effect; DE = direct effect; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

FIGURE 3:

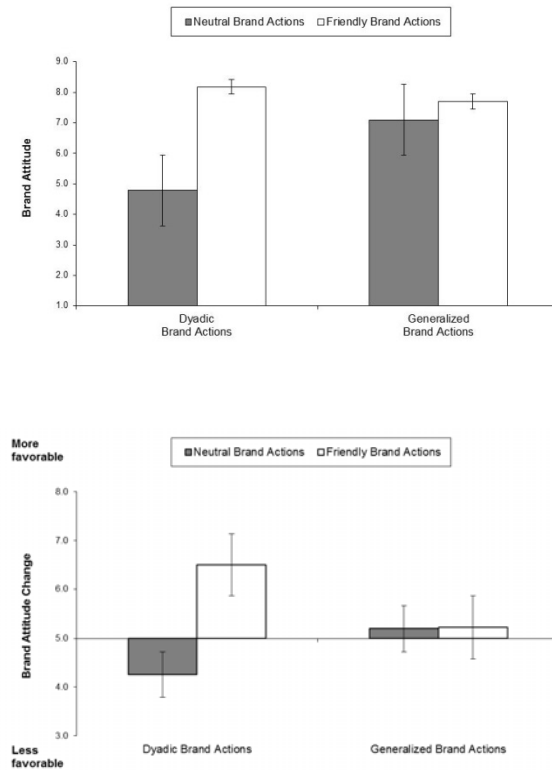
PERCEIVED BRAND LIKING MEDIATES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BRAND ACTIONS AND PURCHASE INTEREST (EXPERIMENT 3)



NOTE.—IE = indirect effect; CI = confidence interval; TE = total effect; DE = direct effect; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

FIGURE 4:

BRAND ATTITUDE AND BRAND ATTITUDE CHANGE AS A FUNCTION OF BRAND SELECTIVITY AND BRAND ACTIONS (EXPERIMENT 4)



Author Commitment

Both authors confirm that (1) the work is original and (2) if accepted, Lora Harding will attend the full workshop and present the work.