

**SHARED BRAND AND INTERPERSONAL EXPERIENCES:
HOW CONSUMERS FORM RELATIONAL CONNECTIONS WITH BRANDS**

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This research examines how married consumers form relational brand connections. Findings contribute to extant work on brand connections by showcasing how shared brand consumption and marital satisfaction influence the nature of the consumer's connection to the brand and the perceived importance of the brand to the marital relationship. The research herein has important theoretical contributions and managerial implications. From a theoretical perspective, we examine the effect of how consumers incorporate brands into their personal relationships (experiential vs. mundane), and resulting shared brand consumption, on consumers' brand evaluations. From a managerial perspective, our findings address important implications especially in the advertising domain.

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Marketing campaigns often encourage consumers to share their consumption with close others. For example, Coca-Cola's recent "share a Coke" campaign encourages consumers to share their Coca-Cola consumption experience with friends, and Nutella's "rise and shine" campaign inspires families to have breakfast together, and enjoy Nutella as part of that familial breakfast experience. The idea that brands may benefit from shared consumption is intuitively appealing. Indeed, brands are part of our identity narratives (Escalas 2004; Fournier 1998; Sprott et al. 2009) and our identities are shaped by the relationships we forge with others (Anderson and Chen 2002; Aron et al. 1992; Brewer and Gardner 1996). Thus, it seems likely that consumers may form particularly strong relationships with brands that they consume together with people they love and care for.

This research examines how married individuals form connections with brands that they consume together with their spouses. When an individual establishes a romantic relationship, he or she expands the self-concept to include the relational partner (Aron and Aron 1986; Aron et al. 1992) and marriage, in particular, involves the construction of a relational identity (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Fincham et al. 1997). Importantly, engaging in shared experiences, such as recreational activities, improves marital satisfaction (Orthner and Mancini 1990, 1991), in part because when couples engage in such activities, they are "reinforcing a sense of interdependence and closeness" (Aron et al. 2000, 274). We expand on this premise by exploring how shared brand consumption influences brand connections. Specifically, in line with extant research on marriage and self-expansion, we propose that a married individual who consumes a brand with his or her spouse forms a brand connection that is anchored in the relational (marriage) identity

(i.e., “this brand is part of who we are”), rather than the self-identity (“this brand is part of who I am”).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Previous research documents that consumers forge connections with brands to “construct the self or communicate the self-concept to others” (Escalas and Bettman 2003, p. 339). Most extant work has focused on self-identity and social-identity motives underlying brand consumption (Escalas and Bettman 2005; Sprott et al. 2009), often highlighting the importance of brands to identity signaling (Berger and Ward 2010; Chan et al. 2012). The social context is central to the development of self-brand connections because the nature and prevalence of reference groups influence consumers’ reliance on brands to communicate association or dissociation with others (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2003). However, as a consequence of the self-identity signaling focus of previous research, brand consumption has mostly been considered in relation to a given social context, without consideration of how brands become part of a social entity. Anderson and Chen (2002, p. 619) argue that the “self is relational-or even entangled-with significant others.” Thus, relational partners are important to identity construction because individuals may expand their self-concept to include important others, such as romantic relationship partners (Aron and Aron 1986; Aron et al. 1992). In particular, individuals who are in a close relationship with each other form a relational identity (Brewer and Gardner 1996) that may have profound influences on the relationship partners, even resulting in convergence of preferences, personality, and emotional responses (Anderson, et al. 2003; Guttman and Zohar 1987). Thus, a consumer who has established a close relationship with another consumer may, as a consequence, form connections with brands by incorporating them into this relational identity.

In this research, we focus on a particular type of relational identity, marriage, and its impact on the formation of brand connections. Marriage is a particularly familial and uniting relationship that involves sharing of resources and life experiences (Girgis et al. 2010). Specifically, marriage involves a myriad of social exchanges in which the spouses adjust according to their relationship (Davidson 1984). Importantly, because marriage is a formal relational institution, it is regulated by laws, norms, and informal expectations (Yodanis and Lauer 2014) and has patterns and regularities that are manifested in spouses' actions and behaviors (Lauaer and Yodanis 2010; Nee 2005). Moreover, because marriage is a form of relationship that requires explicit attachment and commitment to another individual, it is also characterized by shared economic and emotional resources (Ross 1995) that provide support mechanisms benefiting spouses' physiological and psychological well-being (Ross et al 1990). Importantly, given the purpose of this research, married individuals also engage in shared experiences as part of their marital relationship. Shared experiences are particularly important to marital bonding (Herridge et al. 2003); and shared leisure activities have been shown to facilitate relational identity construction (Fincham et al. 1997) and improve marital satisfaction (Hill 1988; Orthner and Mancini 1990, 1991). Hence, shared leisure activities increase "relationship satisfaction because they are intrinsically enjoyable and by being shared become associated with the partner and the relationship" (Aron et al. 2000, 274).

Given this importance of marriage to life experience and identity construction, we propose that married consumers may form a specific relational brand connection with brands that they consider to be part of their relational "marital" identity. Specifically, because shared experiences foster feelings of interconnectedness and interdependence (Aron et al. 2000) by

bonding the spouses to one another (Herridge et al. 2003), we propose that the inclusion of a brand into the marital relational identity is facilitated through shared consumption of the brand.

Are All Shared Consumption Experiences Created Equal?

Extant research suggests that the marital “utility” derived from shared experiences may differ depending on the nature of shared experiences that spouses engage in (Johnson et al. 2006; Freeman and Zabriskie 2003). For example, Aron et al. (2000) document that experiences perceived as more “exciting” (e.g., skiing, hiking, dancing) were related to stronger relationship quality. Research on consumption of experiences also suggests that although “memories of mundane experiences help individuals navigate through daily life, memories of extraordinary and meaningful life events have important consequences for self-definition, well-being, and life satisfaction” (Zauberman, et al. 2009, p. 715). Thus, we argue that the experiential nature of shared brand consumption should have an impact on formation of a relational brand connection. Further, although mundane shared consumption (i.e., routine/everyday brand use) is more frequent/common, shared brand consumption defined as “special” (i.e., out of the ordinary) should be more important for formation of relational brand connections than shared “mundane” brand consumption.

H1: Shared “special”, compared to “mundane”, brand consumption leads to stronger relational brand connection

Moreover, because marital satisfaction reflects how marriage lives up to expectations regarding experiences and interactions as a married couple (Ward et al. 2009), we suggest that such marital satisfaction will influence relational brand connection. Thus, after statistically controlling for the effect of shared brand consumption, we expect a positive effect of marital satisfaction on formation of relational brand connections.

H2: Marital satisfaction leads to increased relational brand connection (after controlling for shared brand experiences).

Perceived brand importance has been established as a salient dimension of brand relationships (Ashworth et al. 2009). We propose that the formation of a relational brand connection should increase the perceived importance of the brand to the marital relationship.

H3: Relational brand connection leads to increased perceived importance of the brand to the marital relationship.

Further, because marriage is so central to self-identity construction, we expect relational brand connection to influence how the married consumer feels about the brand. Previous research suggests that spouses' interactions facilitate a sense of interconnectedness and codependence (Aron et al. 2000) that is reflected in individual spouses' thoughts and behaviors (Anderson, et al. 2003; Guttman and Zohar 1987). Thus, brands that are perceived as being more important to the marital relationships should also be more preferred by the individual, as reflected in attitudes, purchase intentions, affect towards the brand and separation distress if the brand is discontinued:

H4: Perceived importance of the brand to the marital relationship leads to increases in (a) favorable attitudes towards the brand, (b) purchase intentions for the brand, (c) affection for the brand and (d) anticipated separation distress experienced if the brand is discontinued.

STUDY

We conducted a 2 condition (type of shared brand consumption: special vs. mundane) between-subjects experiment to understand how the nature of shared brand consumption within a marriage influences relational brand connection. Data were collected from MTurk workers (n =

580 ; 51% females, 53% married less than 5 years; 95% married to opposite-sex spouse). Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the two conditions, and asked to write the name of a brand that was reflective of either special or mundane shared consumption (each had a different description for shared use). In the shared special brand consumption condition participants read the following text describing how to select a brand:

This brand should be part of the special experiences you share as a couple. For example, this brand can be a brand that you use together as a part of your special occasions/memories; such as anniversary celebrations or date-nights out, or in your shared special experiences; such as enjoying special hobbies/activities together as a couple.

In contrast, for the mundane shared consumption condition, the description of the brand use was as follows:

This brand should be part of the everyday life you share as a couple. For example, this brand can be a brand that both you and your spouse use frequently as part of your daily life or a brand that is convenient and/or beneficial to your daily routine as a couple.

Participants reported 304 different brands from a variety of product categories, including technology (22%), food/beverages (18%), restaurants (11%), personal hygiene/cosmetics (9%), cars (8%), hobbies/sports (7%), and sexual (3%). Throughout the survey, participants answered questions related to this “focal” brand. We measured marital satisfaction using the 16-item version of the Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI; Frunk and Rogge 2007), deemed appropriate because it measures an individual’s (rather than the couple’s) satisfaction with a relationship. Relational brand connection was measured by adapting Escalas and Bettman’s (2003) self-brand connection scale, replacing all first person singular pronouns (i.e., I, me) in the items with first person plural pronouns (i.e., we, us). We adapted measures of brand use and importance from Ashworth et al. (2009). We measured attitudes and purchase intentions using 3-item 7-point

bipolar scales for each. Finally, we used established measures of brand affection (Thomson et al. 2005) and brand separation distress (Park et al. 2010).

Data Analysis and Results

To ascertain that the manipulation of “special” and “mundane” brand experience was successful, we ran a t-test on three manipulation check items (e.g., Participants were asked to indicate how they use the brand on 8-point bipolar scales such as *1 = Everyday experiences, 2 = Special experiences*). The three items loaded on a single factor with factor loadings higher than .90 (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .95$) and thus were averaged for the manipulation check. In support of our special versus mundane shared brand consumption manipulation, the results indicate that participants use the brand for “special” purposes more in the special condition ($M = 4.22$) than in the mundane condition ($M = 1.98$, $t(578) = 12.78$, $p < .01$). Although we treat marital satisfaction (CSI) as an individual difference variable, we tested the interaction effect of marital satisfaction across the special versus mundane conditions on the relational brand connection. We median split the CSI scale, and ran a 2 (CSI: high vs. low) x 2 (use: special vs. mundane) ANOVA. In support of our expectation, the results document that although CSI ($F(1, 576) = 22.74$, $p < .01$) and Use ($F(1, 576) = 13.42$, $p < .01$) were factors that significantly affect relational brand connections, their interaction was not significant ($F(1, 576) = .02$, $p > .8$). Specifically, participants in the “special” condition ($M = 5.06$) reported significantly stronger relational brand connection than participants in the “mundane” condition ($M = 4.64$, $F(1, 576) = 13.42$, $p < .01$). Similarly, participants who have greater marital satisfaction ($M = 5.12$) reported significantly stronger relational brand connection than participants who have low marital satisfaction ($M = 4.58$, $F(1, 576) = 22.74$, $p < .01$).

Prior to hypothesis testing, confirmatory factor analysis was utilized to estimate the measurement model in AMOS; the measurement model had an acceptable fit with the following Goodness-of-fit indices: $\chi^2(607) = 1265.78.5$, $p < .01$; CMIN/d.f. = 2.1; NFI = .95; RFI = .94; IFI = .97; TLI = .97 and CFI = .97 (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). The RMSEA was .043 with a 90% confidence interval ranging from .04 to .047 (PCLOSE = 1.00). All factor loadings were positive and significant ($p < .01$), and construct reliabilities were sufficient and between .80 and .98; the AVE of each construct was higher than the squared correlations between any pair of constructs. To test the structural model, as suggested by Edwards et al. (2012), we used dummy codes (mundane = 0; special = 1) in order to interpret the differential effect of “special”, compared to “mundane, shared brand use. We included CSI in the model to examine the effect of “special” use after controlling for the effect of marital satisfaction (CSI) on relational brand connection. This structural model had an acceptable fit with Goodness-of-fit indices: $\chi^2(657) = 1398.3$, $p < .01$; CMIN/d.f. = 2.12; NFI = .95; RFI = .94; IFI = .97; TLI = .97 and CFI = .97. The RMSEA was .044 with a 90% confidence interval ranging from .041 to .047 (PCLOSE = .99). All paths were significant (See table 1 and figure 1).

Insert Table 1 and Figure 1 about here

In support of H1, after controlling for the effect of marital satisfaction (CSI), the differential effect of experiential versus mundane consumption on relational brand connection was significant ($\beta = .19$). Specifically, shared special, compared to mundane, brand consumption, led to stronger relational brand connection, after controlling for marital satisfaction. Similarly, accounting for the effect of special versus mundane shared brand consumption, marital satisfaction (CSI) significantly increased relational brand connection ($\beta = .29$) (H2), which resulted in an increase in perceived importance of the brand to the marital

relationship ($\beta = .94$) (H3). Moreover, greater importance of the brand to the marital relationship was associated with more favorable attitude towards the brand ($\beta = .41$) (H4a), stronger purchase intention for the brand ($\beta = .12$) (H4b), more affection toward the brand ($\beta = .77$) (H4c), and more separation distress if the brand is discontinued ($\beta = .71$) (H4d). Thus, in support of our hypotheses, we documented the effect of marital satisfaction and special versus mundane shared brand use on formation of relational brand connection, which led to importance of the brand to the marital relationship, which positively influenced individual branding outcomes.

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our research makes several important contributions to the literature on brand connections and interpersonal consumption. First, although previous research has examined social aspects of brand connections, the primary focus of this work has been on the importance of reference groups to the construction of self-brand connections (Escalas and Bettman 2003). From this perspective, consumers forge stronger connections with brands that align with their social identity motives (Escalas and Bettman 2005). However, a consumer's "self" is not only constructed in relation to other people, but also includes important others, such as romantic relationship partners (Anderson and Chen 2002; Aron and Aron 1986). In this research, we showcase how such codependent aspects of the consumers' identity influence the formation of brand connections. Second, in contrast to previous research, we move beyond identity signaling motives to shed light on how experiential aspects of brand consumption influence brand connections. Although "brand experience" has received increased attention by consumer behavior scholars (Brakus et al. 2009), this extant research has primarily focused on the experiential attributes of brands, rather than the experiential aspects of brand consumption. In contrast, our research considers different ways in which consumers experience brands as a part

of their relationships, and how the nature of the consumption context (i.e., mundane vs. special shared brand consumption) influences to what extent consumers feel connected to the brand. Finally, our research makes important contributions to work on interpersonal consumption. Specifically, we examine the moderating role of marriage satisfaction on the formation of brand connections, thus showcasing how and when interpersonal relationships influence brand relationships.

This study offers new insights into shared brand consumption and interpersonal relationships, and opportunities for future research. For example, for shared experiential versus mundane brand consumption, we did not control for product category. On one hand, this enabled us to increase the robustness and generalizability of our findings, by showing that shared experience versus mundane consumption is related to how consumers incorporate the brand into their marital relationship, and how they experience the shared consumption. On the other hand, not controlling for the product category such as, mundane versus experiential or special, or hedonic versus utilitarian, can be deemed to be a limitation. Thus, we believe controlling for the product category and its potential effect can be a future research avenue.

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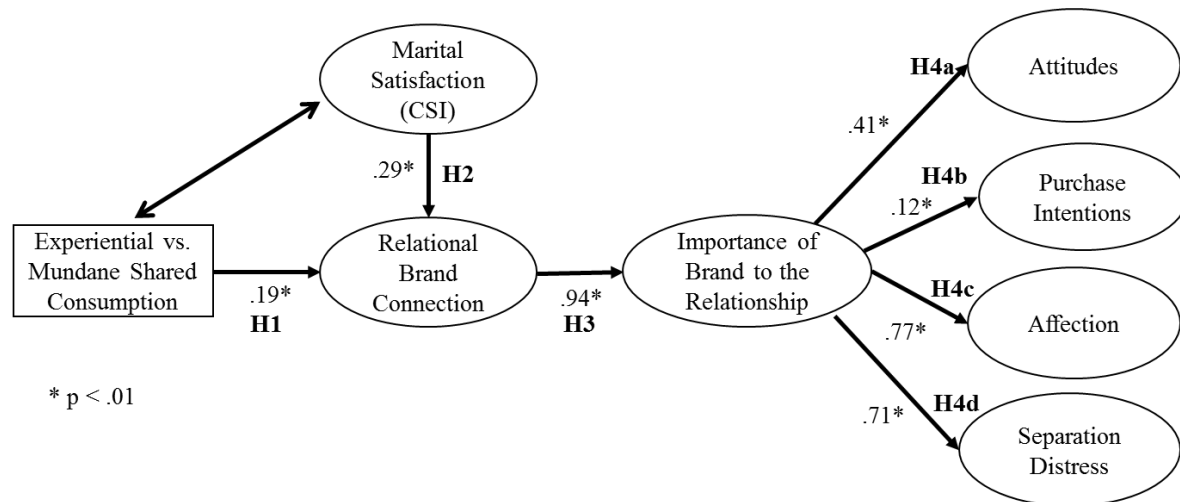
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Table 1: Overview of Results

	Standardized Estimate	Hypothesis Results
H1: Special vs. Mundane Shared Consumption → Relational Brand Connection	0.19*	Supported
H2: Marital Satisfaction (CSI) → Relational Brand Connection	0.29*	Supported
H3: Relational Brand Connection → Perceived Importance of Brand	0.94*	Supported
H4: Perceived importance → Brand Outcomes:		(All Supported)
(a) Attitudes	0.41*	Supported
(b) Purchase Intentions	0.12*	Supported
(c) Affect	0.77*	Supported
(d) Separation Distress	0.71*	Supported

* $p < .01$ **Figure 1: The Structural Model****Structural Model**

N = 580
 $\chi^2 = 1398.3$, $df = 657$
 CMIN/DF = 2.12
 CFI = .97 NFI = .95
 IFI = .97 RFI = .94
 TLI = .97
 RMSEA = .044 (.041 - .047, $pclose = .99$)

Measurement Model

N = 580
 $\chi^2 = 1265.8$ $df = 607$
 CMIN/DF = 2.1
 CFI = .97 NFI = .95
 IFI = .97 RFI = .94
 TLI = .97
 RMSEA = .043 (.040 - .047, $pclose = 1.00$)

All authors confirm that the work is original, and if accepted, the author Selcan Kara agrees to attend the full workshop and present the work.