

# Emotional Brand Attachment and Brand Personality: The Relative Importance of the Actual and the Ideal Self



Creating emotional brand attachment is a key branding issue in today's marketing world. One way to accomplish this is to match the brand's personality with the consumer's self. A key question, however, is whether the brand's personality should match the consumer's actual self or the consumer's ideal self. On the basis of two empirical studies of 167 brands (evaluated by 1329 and 980 consumers), the authors show that the implications of self-congruence for consumers' emotional brand attachment are complex and differ by consumers' product involvement, consumers' individual difference variables, and the type of self-congruence (fit of the brand's personality with the consumer's actual self versus with the consumer's ideal self). On a general level, actual self-congruence has the greatest impact on emotional brand attachment. Product involvement, self-esteem, and public self-consciousness increase the positive impact of actual self-congruence but decrease the impact of ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment. The authors discuss important managerial and academic implications of these findings.

**Keywords:** emotional brand attachment, brand personality, self-congruence, actual self, ideal self, product involvement, self-esteem, public self-consciousness

Increasingly, companies are searching for ways to create strong emotional brand connections with consumers. This is motivated by the finding that such connections lead to higher levels of consumer loyalty, which increases company financial performance (Park et al. 2010). For example, cosmetics companies have communicated for years to consumers that using their products will make them more attractive and beautiful and bring them closer to realizing an ideal vision of themselves (an "ideal self"). More recently, however, Unilever's Dove line has used models who are more average in appearance, presumably corresponding more closely to how the majority of consumers actually see themselves (an "actual self"). This approach hit a nerve with many consumers, causing them to form a strong emotional connection with the brand. Thus, the "actual self" seems to be growing in importance to consumers looking for reality and authenticity in marketing

messages (Gilmore and Pine 2007), and many marketing managers seem to increasingly favor an authentic approach to branding. Nevertheless, other companies still create emotional connections with campaigns that focus on ideal beauty. In other words, the "ideal self" seems to remain important because many consumers like brands that do not fit with their actual reality but, rather, represent an aspiration (as a means of self-improvement; Sirgy 1982). Thus, both strategies could be effective, depending on the situation. In light of this, a key question is which strategy to use and when to use it to strengthen emotional brand attachment.

A key concept for investigating this question is the concept of "self-congruence" (i.e., a fit between the consumer's self and the brand's personality or image; Aaker 1999; Sirgy 1982). It has been suggested that self-congruence can enhance affective, attitudinal, and behavioral consumer responses to the brand (e.g., Aaker 1999; Grohmann 2009). In particular, because the consumer's self-concept must be involved for an emotional brand attachment to occur (Chaplin and John 2005; Park et al. 2010), self-congruence should play an especially prominent role in creating emotional brand attachment.

To the best of our knowledge, however, no study has investigated which consumer's self is best to target in particular situations to increase emotional brand attachment. When should marketers emphasize a brand personality related to aspirations (i.e., tailored to the consumers' ideal self), and when should they pertain to the real (actual) self of consumers? Thus, our study has two research objectives:

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