

HOW BRAND POWER CREATES ATTACHMENT THROUGH CONSUMER STATUS

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Resumo

Brands continuously pursue the development of relationships with its customers to improve results, using its attributes to create connections with them. The purpose of this study is to assess the influence of brand power on the consumers brand attachment, one form of consumer-brand relationships. We argue that brands with high power will lead consumers to feel more attached to the brand and such influence is best explained by the brand status. Moreover, we show that brand power only influences brand attachment, through brand status, when the perception of risk is low. We performed two experiments to test our predictions. The findings highlight the brand power and add a new perspective on consumer-brand relationship literature.

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ABSTRACT

Brands continuously pursue the development of relationships with its customers to improve results, using its attributes to create connections with them. The purpose of this study is to assess the influence of brand power on the consumers brand attachment, one form of consumer-brand relationships. We argue that brands with high power will lead consumers to feel more attached to the brand and such influence is best explained by the brand status. Moreover, we show that brand power only influences brand attachment, through brand status, when the perception of risk is low. We performed two experiments to test our predictions. The findings highlight the brand power and add a new perspective on consumer-brand relationship literature.

Keywords: Brand Power, Brand Attachment, Brand Status, Risk Perception

INTRODUCTION

Consumers regularly rely on strong brands to express attitudes and personality to their peers in daily life. For instance, attorneys seeking an agreement in a legal hearing utilize strong brand pens to make a good impression on the other party of the agreement. In most cases, consumers appropriate the power from brand to guarantee a higher social status in a specific domain. However, what is the aftermath of brand power on consumer attachment to the brand?

Past research focusing the topic has demonstrated that power establishes how people relate and how decisions are made and can be found in any relationship (Dunbar, 2004). Crosno, Freling, and Skinner (2009) defined brand power as the ability of the brand to influence the behavior of consumers and to make them do something they would not do without the brand intervention. More specifically, research on brand power has explored factors related to the power of luxury brands (Cervellon & Coudriet, 2013), the relationship between power and compensatory consumption (Bian, Haque, & Smith, 2015), power in online interactions and recommendations (Zhang, 2015) and the relationship between brand power and the consumer personal power (Semperebon & Prado, 2016). The latter was one of few studies to explore power from the consumer-brand relationship's point of view.

Although scholars have proposed the brand power construct, the above-cited studies show little research has explored power in the context of brands and its impact on consumer-brand relationships. In this regard, the current research shows that brand power influences consumer attachment to the brand. We propose that brands with high perceived power can attract consumers generating a strong attachment to the brand. That effect is due to the status the brand provides to its customers in social domains. We also argue this effect is mitigated by the perceived risk. Situations that exert high risk to consumers can decrease the perceived status and prestige brands have over consumers which, in turn, reduces the influence of brand's power.

Knowing that one of the bases of power, the reference brand power, refers to the ability of the brand to influence people's behavior by increasing brand identification and attraction (Crosno, Freling, & Skinner, 2009) and that the connection between consumers and brands is a factor that influences attachment (Park, Eisingerich, & Park, 2013), it is expected that a brand's ability to create connection with the consumer will positively impact brand attachment. Since these relationships can evoke consumer behaviors such as loyalty, positive recommendations and participation in brand communities (MacInnis, Park, & Priester, 2009), it becomes relevant to understand how brand power can be used to intensify such relationships. Our research

suggests that the status generated by brand's power deals with how much consumers infer that the brand has a unique quality, prestige and can be used as a symbol of success and social differentiation (Fiske & Berdhal, 2007; O'Cass & Choy, 2008). To some extent, brands help consumers to solve social problems in everyday life, what in turn, creates dependence and identification between consumers and brands (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010; Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012). In circumstances where some social risk is eminent that connection can be broken whereas the brand loses its reference power and its ability to provide status.

To test our proposition, in the following paper, we first develop our conceptual framework altogether with the hypotheses, then we report two experiments that test our predictions and discuss the implications of the findings.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

It is intrinsic in the human nature the need for power, to control what happens to us and to others (Fiske & Berdhal, 2007). The social power is defined as the influence that an individual has over another person's performance, based on his or her ability to benefit or punish this person (Keltner, Van Kleef, Chen, & Kraus, 2008). Thus, to have power, the individual must have the ability to control the social, physical or economic performance of the other (Fiske & Berdhal, 2007). Power, therefore, is not a characteristic of a person, but rather an attribute of a relationship between an individual and another person (Dunbar, 2004).

It is known that social power stems from five bases – the sources of power between A and B – which are: (i) legitimate power, based on values of B that entitle A to influence him; (ii) coercive power, dependent on the capacity of A in punishing the behaviors of B; (iii) reward power, founded on the ability of A in rewarding the desired behaviors of B; (iv) expert power, defined as a belief of B that A has a more significant knowledge of a subject; and (v) referent power, based on the desire of B to identify itself with A (French & Raven, 1959).

In the brand domain, Crosno et al. (2009) proposed the brand power construct, defining it as the brand's ability to influence consumers' behavior and to drive them to do something they would not do without its intervention. These authors understood that power is attributed since it is perceived by consumers who interact with the brand. They also pointed out that brand power presents five bases of power, adapted from the French and Raven (1959) study. One of these bases is the referent brand power, based on the brand's ability to influence consumers' behavior by increasing brand identification and attraction (Crosno et al., 2009).

Brands with high referent power create the need for consumers to become closer to them (Crosno et al., 2009). As proposed by French and Raven (1959), individuals become attracted to an entity (a person, a group, or in this case, a brand) with high referent power to leverage its image and to enhance their identity. Further, the use of brands to fulfill consumer self-identity goals is linked to the development of strong relationships between consumers and brands (Park et al., 2013). Thus, the closer the consumer self is to the brand, higher is the brand attachment (Kaufmann, Petrovici, Filho, & Ayres, 2016). We expect that this ability of the brand to create a connection with the consumer will positively influence the attachment. Therefore, we propose that individuals will exhibit a greater attachment in a relationship with a brand that has high power, according to the first hypothesis:

H1 – Brand attachment will be higher (vs. lower) for brands with high (vs. low) power.

Crosno et al. (2009) pointed that the perceived similarity between consumers' actual self and the brand image is an essential element of the brand referent power influence since it is a

source of attractiveness. We not only agree with their view, but we also extend such proposition by exploring how the ideal social self of the consumer can play a significant role in this process.

The ideal social self refers to the image individuals desire to express to others (Sirgy, 1982). Consumers are known to seek status brands to position themselves socially, thereby improving their prestige in society (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004). Therefore, one can define brand status as "a consumer's perception of the brand's quality, prestige, and price, and its ability to act as a symbol of success and status" (O'Cass & Choy, 2008, p. 342).

As denoted by French and Raven (1959), the power a referent entity exert over others may be originated on the aspiration of others to be associated with a prestigious entity. This could be the case for the relationship between consumers and high-status brands. Past research has shown that brand status positively influences the consumer's identification with the brand (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Therefore, consumers may associate with brands they perceive as having high referent power to become more like it, to be more prestigious.

This perception of benefits in the construction of consumers' social identity tends to generate greater symbolic satisfaction, thus increasing the attachment between consumers and brands (Park et al., 2013). We expect that the brand status will be the reason which brings the consumer closer to the referent power brand, thus increasing the brand attachment. Thus, the second hypothesis is suggested:

H2 – Brand status positively mediates the influence of brand power on brand attachment.

Different products can be associated with different levels of risk by consumers. When a product exceeds the level of risk that the consumer tolerates, it will be withdrawn from the set of choice, thus reducing the risk in the consumer's decision (Dowling, 1986). In the social sphere, the perceived social risk is defined as "the potential loss of status in one's social group as a result of adopting a product or service, looking foolish or untrendy" (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003, p. 455). If a purchase is not approved by the group a person aspires to be associated with, the group may stigmatize and exclude such person (Wee, Ta, & Cheok, 1995).

Matzler, Grabner-Kräuter, and Bidmon (2008) pointed the negative influence of the perceived risk to consumer-brand relationships. Based on the cited argument and on the expectation that consumers would purchase brands with status to position themselves socially (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004), we expect that consumers who perceive some level of social risk would be less prone to feel attracted to the status brand. Following this logic, Rubio, Oubiña, and Villaseñor (2014) demonstrated that risk perception negatively influences both the perceived value of the brand and the level of consumer satisfaction. Therefore, we propose that consumers only will feel more brand attachment due to the brand referent power, through the brand status, when the perceived risk is low:

H3: Only under conditions of low perceived risk, the indirect positive effect (brand status) of brand power on brand attachment will occur.

STUDY 1

Our first study aimed to test the main effect of brand power on consumer attachment to the brand, thus verifying H1.

Participants and design. Fifty-eight university students (53.4% female, $M_{age} = 22.14$, $SD = 3.89$) participated in this experiment in exchange for course credit. They were randomly distributed between two conditions of brand power (high vs. low) in a between-subjects design. In the high power brand condition, 25 individuals were presented to a fictitious sneakers brand

with high power, and in the low power brand condition, 33 participants saw the characteristics of a fictitious sneakers brand with low power.

Procedure. Initially, participants were told that they bought a new pair of sneakers from the fictitious brand. Next, they were presented with the description of the sneakers brand. In the low power brand condition, participants saw the following description: "The brand of XYZ sneakers is not considered famous. Usually, people who use the brand of XYZ sneakers do not usually comment anything special about the brand. The XYZ brand does not issue any kind of value to its buyers. XYZ is a brand of quality sneakers."

In the high power brand scenario, respondents saw: "The brand of XYZ sneakers is famous among youngsters and adults all over the world. Many people claim that there is a great similarity between them and the XYZ brand. Values propagated by the brand are in line with those your friends also believe in, so they buy XYZ sneakers. XYZ is a quality brand and offers interesting benefits. Thus, many are attracted and identified with the XYZ brand. Many people associate with XYZ by searching for information about it and participating in events promoted by the brand. You've heard from a friend of yours that he likes the brand and that he feels similar to it."

The description of the fictitious brands followed the determinations of Crosno et al. (2009) on the properties of brands with high and low power. Further, the choice for a fictitious brand is based on the study of Fedorikhin, Park, and Thomson (2008), who also explored attachment using fictitious brands. The authors point out that the use of fictitious brands ensures that the effects are not due to the idiosyncratic characteristics of a particular brand.

Measures. After the brand power manipulation, participants responded the brand attachment scale (Park et al., 2010): "To what extent is the brand part of you and who you are?", "To what extent do you feel personally connected to the brand?", "To what extent do you feel emotionally bonded to the brand?", "To what extent is the brand part of you?", "To what extent does the brand say something to other people about who you are?" ($\alpha = 0.90$). To check if participants were influenced by the brand power manipulation we used the scale with six items from Crosno et al. (2009) that referred to reference power: "You would like to be associated with this brand", "I like this brand", "This brand is a favorable brand", "Being similar to this brand is good", "I can identify myself with this brand", "The personality of this brand is similar to mine", "The attitudes and values of this brand are similar to mine" ($\alpha = 0.90$). All items were measured on a 10-point agreement scale (1-Strongly disagree / 10-Strongly agree).

Results

Manipulation check. The brand power manipulation check indicated that individuals who were exposed to the low power fictitious brand perceived a lower brand power ($M_{low} = 4.75$; $SD = 1.59$) compared to the respondents in the high power condition ($M_{high} = 6.42$; $SD = 1.11$; $t = -4.48$; $p < 0.01$), thus evidencing the success of the manipulation, since the brand's perception of power was greater for the high power scenario.

Brand attachment. Next, to test our first research hypothesis, we compared the brand attachment means in each condition of the experiment. The results demonstrated that individuals in the low power brand condition indicated a lower brand attachment ($M_{low} = 3.64$; $SD = 1.74$) than in the high power brand condition ($M_{high} = 5.42$; $SD = 1.75$; $t = 3.86$; $d = 1.038$; $p < 0.01$). Therefore, this study provide support to H1.

Discussion. The study 1 provides support to the first hypothesis of this research, which states that the brand attachment will be higher (lower) in the relationship with high (low) power brands. Participants in the high power brand scenario indicated a higher brand attachment compared to the individuals in the low brand power scenario. These results reinforce theoretical arguments presented previously, which have shown that factors that approximate consumers and brands increase the amount of brand attachment (Kaufmann et al., 2016). One could

question our results based on our choice to use a fictitious brand since the attachment is a form of relationship that needs time and interactions between consumer and brand to be built (Park et al., 2010). In this case, a fictitious brand would mean no previous interactions. However, evidence in the marketing literature has already shown that some factors may facilitate consumer-brand attachment, even if the consumer may not know the brand. For example, the work from Dunn and Hoegg (2014) showed in four different experiments that consumers who undergo a fearful experience with a brand tend to demonstrate higher levels of brand attachment, with all experiments being done with brands not known by participants. In light of this possible concern, in the second study of this research, we manipulated the brand power using brands known by consumers, seeking to improve the validity of our results.

STUDY 2

The second experiment aimed to confirm our H1 and to test the other two hypotheses, regarding the brand status role as the underlying mechanism of the brand power effect on brand attachment (H2) and the conditioning effect of the risk perception in this relationship (H3). To this end, not only we evaluated the effect of brand power on attachment, but we also added to our model the mediating variable, brand status, and the moderating variable, risk perception. Further, in this study, we use real Brazilian sneakers brands known by consumers in the brand power manipulation, to improve the external validity of our research.

Participants and design. Seventy-two respondents (75% male, $M_{age} = 30.24$, $SD=8.55$) were recruited to participate in this experiment. Individuals were randomly distributed between the two conditions (brand power: high vs. low), 36 in each group, with a single factor between-subjects design. Respondents were approached in virtual communities of street joggers.

Procedure. At the beginning of the experiment, respondents were told to imagine that they would participate in a street race, and their primary goal was to achieve a good performance. Next, participants were randomly divided between two brand power conditions. In the high brand power condition, individuals were told that they would race using sneakers from the Asics brand. For the low brand power condition, respondents were told that they would race using sneakers from the Rainha brand. The choice of the brands was based on the study of Niada (2011), which showed the relevance of these brands for street runners. For both brands, the same sneakers description was showed: "The sneaker has the upper (woven) fabric in open weaves for greater internal ventilation. The midsole is made of EVA for foot and heel support. The sole is built on rubber for added grip". After reading this description, participants were asked to describe how they would feel using the brand sneakers in that situation.

Measures. After reading the proposed scenario, participants answered the same brand attachment scale from study 1 ($\alpha = 0.95$). Next, they rated a measure of brand status. The items of this measure were extracted from the literature due to the absence of a suitable scale for the present research. Until the moment of the studies' conduction of this article, most researchers that had studied the brand status did so using it as a manipulation variable and did not use a robust scale to perform the manipulation check. Thus, the items we used were: "this brand is exclusive," "this brand has prestige," "this brand is unique," "this brand is distinctive" and "this brand has high quality" ($\alpha = 0.94$). Further, risk perception was measured using items adapted from the work of Jiang, Zhan, and Rucker (2014): "I do not consider a risk to choose this brand," "I am sure when choosing this brand," "I feel safe when choosing this brand" ($\alpha = 0.91$). All items of the brand status and risk perception measures were rated on a 10-point agreement scale (1-Strongly disagree / 10-Strongly agree). Finally, the manipulation check was similar to the one used in study 1.

Results

Manipulation check. First, we checked if the brand power manipulation was successful. The results demonstrated that individuals who were exposed to the Asics brand (high power) perceived a higher brand power ($M_{high} = 7.33$; $SD = 1.98$) compared to the respondents who saw the Rainha brand (low power) ($M_{low} = 4.32$; $SD = 2.37$; $t = 5.84$; $p < 0.01$), showing that the brand power manipulation was effective.

Brand attachment. Regarding the test of our first hypothesis, the data indicated that the brand attachment was higher for individuals who were exposed to the Asics brand ($M_{high} = 5.64$; $SD = 2.35$) than for participants who saw the Rainha brand ($M_{low} = 3.73$; $SD = 2.36$; $t = 3.43$; $d = 0.822$; $p < 0.01$). Thus, the results show that brands who are perceived as having more power elicit higher brand attachment responses from consumers, supporting our H1.

Brand Status Mediation. Following the study, we tested H2, which argues that brand status positively mediates the influence of brand power on the brand attachment. The mediation test follows the procedures indicated by Prado, Korelo, and Mantovani (2014) based on model 4 of Hayes (2013). Table 1 demonstrates the results of the mediation test.

Table 1. Brand Power and Brand Attachment Mediated by Brand Status

	Effect	Error	p	Lower CI	Upper CI
Total effect	1.911	0.556	0.001	0.801	3.021
Direct effect	0.421	0.562	0.465	-0.701	1.543
Indirect effect (brand status)	0.558	0.110	0.000	0.337	0.777

$R^2 = 0.379$ ($p = 0.01$)

Bootstrap method (5.000)

The data presented in Table 1 show that the influence of brand power on brand attachment only occurs when mediated by brand status (Effect = 0.558; $p = 0.000$), in this case, a full mediation, once the direct effect of brand power on brand attachment is not significant (Effect = 0.421; $p = 0.465$). This positive effect demonstrates that there is an increase in the brand attachment when the perception of brand power is higher, and this relationship only is valid when mediated by brand status, thus supporting H2.

Risk perception. Finally, we present the results of the relationship between brand power and brand attachment mediated by brand status and moderated by risk perception. The test follows the proposal presented by Prado et al., (2014), based on model 14 of Hayes (2013). For the analysis, the scale was inverted to represent the level of risk perception. Table 2 demonstrates the results of the moderate mediation test.

Table 2. Brand Power and Attachment Mediated by Status and Moderated by Risk Perception

	Moderation Risk perception	Effect	Error	Lower CI	Upper CI
Direct effect		0.132	0.738	-1.364	1.629
	Low ($M = 1.215$)	1.511	0.832	0.253	3.472
Indirect effect (brand status)	Average ($M = 4.285$)	1.088	1.048	-0.427	3.657
	High ($M = 7.356$)	0.664	1.421	-1.615	4.017

$R^2 = 0.419$ ($p = 0.00$)

Interaction of brand status and risk perception ($p = 0.304$)

Bootstrap method (5.000)

The results confirm H3, which defends the moderating role of the risk perception in the brand status mediation between brand power and brand attachment. The direct effect was not significant (Effect = 0.132; 95%CI = -1.364 to 1.629), resulting in a complete moderated mediation. In this model, the mediation effect only occurs for low levels of risk perception (Effect = 1.511; 95%CI = 0.253 to 3.472). Thus, the brand power will increase the level of

brand attachment when mediated by the brand status, but only under conditions of low risk perception.

Discussion. This second study reinforces our proposition that the brand power positively influences consumers brand attachment (H1). Using real sneakers brands, we showed that brands perceived as having high power elicit higher brand attachment from consumers, compared to brands perceived as having low power. Further, we demonstrated that status acts as a mechanism for this relationship between brand power and brand attachment (H2). This finding reinforces the suggestion that a higher brand status will lead to a more significant consumer's identification (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), thus leading to higher brand attachment. Finally, our analysis indicated that this brand status mediation only occurs for low levels of risk perception. Only when consumers perceived low risk, regarding the brand, the brand power positively influences the brand attachment, through the brand status. Therefore, the risk perception acts as a boundary condition in this brand power-attachment relationship (H3). These findings reaffirm the proposition that different levels of risk perception can condition consumer-brand relationships (Matzler et al., 2008).

GENERAL DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The present research evidenced the relationship between brand power and brand attachment. Results from both studies of this work confirm that consumers will feel a greater brand attachment when relating to brands with high power. When a brand has high power, the consumer tends to increase its identification with the brand and feel more attached to it. Therefore, we contribute to the branding literature by demonstrating how the power attributed to a brand can engender a greater brand attachment. This proposition is in line with other results presented in the literature, which demonstrate that aspects that increase consumer identification with the brand impact the attachment between them. Previous studies show that a higher identification of brands and consumers generates a greater brand attachment (Kaufmann et al., 2016).

The second finding of the present research refers to the brand status mediation role, which acts as an underlying process in the positive effect of brand power on brand attachment. Brand status positively influences the identification of consumers with brands (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Such identification is an essential factor in the attachment relationship between consumers and brands (Kaufmann et al., 2016). Thus, a higher brand referent power perception will lead to higher brand status perception and, as a result, the consumers will demonstrate a stronger attachment to the brand.

Our last finding refers to the role of risk perception conditioning the relationship between brand power and brand attachment, through the brand status mediation. Our second study demonstrated that the mediation of brand status only occurs under conditions of low risk perception. Thus, we contribute to the consumer-brand relationship literature by further evidencing the importance of risk perception in relationships between consumers and brands. This result confirms previous findings in the literature regarding the impact of the risk perception in the consumer-brand relationship (Matzler et al., 2008).

We contribute to managerial practice by highlighting a brand characteristic, the brand power, which can be used to foster a more communal relationship between consumers and brands. To that end, managers should develop brand characteristics that provide identification and attraction between them and their target audience (Crosno et al., 2009), such as brand status, as demonstrated in this research. By increasing the referent power of the brand, the level of brand attachment increases. A higher level of attachment tends to increase positive behaviors from consumers towards the brand (MacInnis et al., 2009).

Also, we demonstrated that for brand power to influence brand attachment, the risk perceived by the consumer needs to be low. Thus, when trying to foster attachment through brand power, managers must invest in their communications and interactions with consumers, highlighting factors that decrease their perception of risk, such as the customization of the company's communications reputation (Bacile, Ye, & Swilley, 2014).

As a limitation of this work, we can point that we only explored a positive relationship between consumers and brands, not analyzing, for example, if consumers exposed to a brand with low brand power would have a higher level of brand aversion, compared to a brand with high power. Negative relationships may not follow the same processes of the theories that form the basis for positive relationships, so there is a need to explore negative relationships separately from the positive relationships (Fournier & Alvarez, 2013). It is suggested that future studies explore how brand power can impact negative relationships, such as brand aversion.

Other studies may also explore how other sources of brand power can impact the relationships between consumers and brands. Researchers may wonder whether the coercive power bases, which refers to the brand ability to punish consumer behaviors, would be able to raise the level of attachment between consumers and brands since the high coercive brand power is associated with the severity of punishments imposed by the brand (Crosno et al., 2009).

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