

# The Effect of Brand Rituals on Brand Attachment

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**Abstract:** *With consumption upgrading, consumers are placing higher demands on the consumption process. A brand ritual is a ritualized interactive behaviour between consumers and a brand. The brand communication attributes of ritual and consumers' enthusiasm for the ritual have prompted companies to use ritual elements to form emotional ties with consumers. Brand attachment is the cognitive and emotional bond that connects the brand to the consumer's ego. The brand ritual has a positive influence on brand attachment. The psychological contract reveals how brand rituals act on brand attachment. Consumers establish a transactional psychological contract with the brand based on the functional value of the product acquired and establish a relational psychological contract with the brand during the interaction of the brand ritual. Establishing a psychological contract further strengthens the emotional relationship between the consumer and the brand.*

**Keywords:** *Brand Ritual, Psychological Contract, Brand Attachment*

## 1. Introduction

Experience, as a subjective, emotional, and personalized response from consumers, plays a pivotal role in maintaining consumer relationships and brand building. In the process of brand building, it becomes crucial for the brand to bring a long-lasting experience to consumers and deliver brand value and cultural significance. As an interesting interaction process, rituals have been deeply embedded in marketing. On the one hand, some brands have introduced ritual elements into their service processes to enhance the consumer experience and form a unique brand image. For example, the "twist, lick, soak" advertising slogan and the eating behaviour of Oreo cookies have been well received. And the birthday ceremony at Haidilao Hotpot attracts many consumers because of the entertaining atmosphere of the birthday ritual process. On the other hand, consumers demand more from the consumption process, such as joy, happiness, and a sense of ritual. These drive them to participate in the brand's ritual activities.

Brands increasingly seek to build strong emotional connections with consumers, as such emotional connections lead to more supportive behaviours for the brand. As the connection strengthens, consumer behaviour deepens. Brand attachment is an emotional and unique bond between individuals and brands. And a stable and relational dependency is formed during the interaction between consumers and brands. Since the introduction of attachment theory into consumer behaviour research in the late 1980s, scholars have successively found that consumers develop emotional attachments not only to their possessions but also to places, products, brands, and other specific types of preferred objects. More studies have concluded that consumers' alignment manifests consumers' emotional attachment status with the brand or consumers' identification with the brand, which can motivate consumers to visit the same store repeatedly. The brand ritual reinforces the emotional connection between the brand and the consumer through a brand-specific interactive experience that delivers the values of functionality, enjoyment, and sociality, aligning consumer self-concept with brand values. In the interaction process, consumers are prompted to conclude a psychological contract with the brand so that the brand ritual becomes an interaction that consumers are willing to devote a lot of time to participate in, and eventually form consumers' attachment to the brand and their willingness to be loyal.

## 2. The Brand Ritual and Brand Attachment

Rituals are a series of activities with repeatable patterns, regularities, and expressions of values and meanings, which are ancient and universal cultural phenomena in human society and an important field of social science research. In recent years, organizational behaviour and marketing research has begun to focus on the issue of rituals in work and consumption situations.

Ritual is an important concept in understanding consumer behaviour. Brand ritual is defined based on

ritual as a ritualized interactive behaviour between a consumer and a brand, a set of repeated, meaning-expressing, non-functional behaviours<sup>[9]</sup>. Step-by-step actions, behavioural conventions, symbolic performances, and unity of intention and action characterize a successful branding ritual. Brand rituals build consumer-brand contact points, facilitate the opportunity and process of establishing interaction between consumers and brands, and stimulate the psychological process of consumer awareness of brand attributes and brand knowledge, which in turn helps consumers form brand identity and brand association. Through a literature review, Wang summarized the two dimensions of brand rituals. One is execution and experience, and the other is consumer identification. She designed a brand ritual scale with two dimensions and proved through empirical research that brand rituals positively impact brand loyalty<sup>[13]</sup>. Brand rituals build an emotional connection between consumers and the brand. In continuously performing brand ritual behaviours, consumers strengthen their identity and emotional connection, enhancing their loyalty to the brand.

The impact of rituals on consumers' emotions, perceptions, experiences, and selves, as the role of ritual behaviour in the production, transmission, and acquisition of symbolic values or symbolic meanings of products and brands, are important research themes. In 1984, Rook first suggested that rituals as a social psychological concept are important in explaining consumers' symbolic behaviour<sup>[10]</sup>. And that research on consumers' participation in rituals can help to understand their brand attachment. Okleshen explored the relationship between rituals, empathy, and market performance and found that through rituals, consumers share consumption experiences, values, and lifestyles and develop "empathy"<sup>[8]</sup>. Empathy is an extraordinarily emotional experience that consumers have for other consumers, and it positively affects their sense of belonging, identity, common sense, and attachment. Xue suggests that during the ritual, consumers experience not only the product but more the feelings evoked by the ritual action of the brand infused into the product<sup>[15]</sup>. A ritualistic interaction between consumers and brands can bring a special emotional experience to consumers, thus enhancing the emotional connection between consumers and brands. In addition, rituals have the property of symbolic symbols and the deep connotation of the brand, which can be used to play a role in brand symbolic values. Brand rituals play a strong symbolic role in the consumption process and are important for establishing brand attachment with consumers.

### ***2.1 Execution and experience dimension of brand ritual***

Consumers should first perceive brand rituals, and this perception comes from consumers' corresponding behaviours according to the brand rituals. For example, the advertising slogan of a juice brand, "Shake before you drink", became a brand ritual only after the consumer made the corresponding behaviour. In the brand ritual interaction context, the fixed steps and manipulable behavioural patterns of the rituals provide "complete" and "manipulable" task cues for consumers to complete the purchase or experience the product and brand, which results in positive emotions such as pleasure, specialness, and meaning<sup>[14]</sup>. This long-term emotional experience is key in promoting emotional attachment to consumers. Consumers perform the same ritual behaviours together when they participate in brand rituals. And they inevitably engage in interactive behaviours with the brand, other consumers, and brand associates. Individuals develop a sense of group cohesion as they engage in synchronous behaviours, and behavioural congruence promotes stronger feelings of cooperation, social attachment, and attachment to the participating group in subsequent tasks, with consumers even going so far as to sacrifice personal gain to obtain such feelings<sup>[3]</sup>. Rituals enhance consumers' perception of external and internal cues to become more fully aware of their emotional state, physical condition, and surroundings, resulting in a positive emotional and cognitive state.

Brand rituals in interactive situations prompt consumers to develop attachment emotions to the external environment, and positive internal user experiences lead to sustained attachment to specific objects. Experience is a subjective and internal individualized feeling of consumers, which is due to the impact of stimuli associated with the brand on consumers, and these stimuli have a certain impact on consumers in four aspects: sensory experience, emotional experience, behavioural experience, and intellectual experience, respectively<sup>[7]</sup>. Experience is the accumulation of consumers' attitudes and emotions toward a brand. Through experience throughout all stages of consumer behaviour, consumers will develop extensive brand awareness, and enhance their ability to recognize brand efficacy and brand image, thus linking self-emotion, satisfaction, and behaviour, making positive or negative subjective judgments, and thus promoting the formation of emotional attachment.

## **2.2 The consumer identity dimension of the brand ceremony**

The identity dimension of brand rituals includes group identity and individual identity. When a consumer performs or participates in a brand ritual, it can be interpreted as his identification with that brand. When consumers perform a brand ritual together, intergroup communication and interaction promote the identification of the individuals who are in the group. Consumers' consumption of products is not only the satisfaction of functional needs but also the inner needs of identity construction and self-expression. And whether the consumption process can help consumers express themselves or obtain identity has become an important factor to consider when they choose brands or products. Consumers will choose brands with symbolic role meaning. The symbolic brand and the connotation build consumers' group identity to reflect their relationship with society, and self-perception builds consumers' identity to express individual characteristics. Brand ritual is a way to obtain role symbols.

Consumers are required to complete a series of brand-designed actions or behaviours during brand rituals, and Hobson shows those ritual behaviours that include physical actions can lead to emotional changes.<sup>[5]</sup> In the ritual process, with the physical activity and sensory stimulation, consumers will feel the special emotional experience brought by the ritualized action and gradually form an understanding of the brand values and connotation in the repeating behaviour process. Ultimately, it generates recognition of brand values, further enhancing consumers' goodwill toward the brand and strengthening their emotional connection with it. Thus, an active ritual process creates a sense of identification with the brand and thus promotes a relational connection between the consumer and the brand.

## **3. Brand Ritual and Psychological Contract**

Argyris first introduced the concept of the psychological contract. He sees psychological contracts as "expectations that are not expressed in writing."<sup>[1]</sup> Rousseau defines a psychological contract as "a person's trust in terms of a reciprocal transaction with a person or an organization."<sup>[1]</sup> That is, one party believes a promise made by the other party, and the other party will offer remuneration for it in exchange for that promise, which imposes on both parties the responsibility of fulfilling certain reciprocal obligations. Rousseau divides psychological contracts into transactional psychological contracts and relational psychological contracts. Transactional psychological contract is based on short-term rewards and benefits. It's a concrete, short-term economic interaction. And relational psychological contract involves a higher degree of emotional involvement. And it's a broad, long-term, socio-emotional interaction.

The formation of a psychological contract is conducive to the establishment of a customer-brand relationship. A strong psychological contract can increase customers' attention and emotional investment in the brand, thus shortening the brand's cognitive process and acceptance process. In addition, the psychological contract constraint makes the relationship between consumers and brands remain stable in the turbulent market environment and will form a deep psychological accumulation. Consumers will have a lasting dependence on the brand and its products for the brand to maintain a long-term stable relationship with consumers.

Psychologists have recognized the importance of the emotional states generated between participants through interaction for relational exchange. However, the initial interactive behaviour of the related parties may be based on certain economic needs. The repetitive inter-individual interactive behaviour allows the parties to build affection and dependence. Individual preferences and psychological affiliations between the interacting consumer and the brand or other consumers, generated during repeated interactive behaviours, may be an important motivation for sustaining the current exchange relationship. The stronger the psychological bond, the more likely the consumer will continue the relationship with the brand.

### **3.1 Transactional psychological contract**

Generally, a transactional psychological contract is based on short-term rewards and benefits. And it focuses on specific, short-term, and economic interactions, which refer to a specific, monetizable exchange for a limited period. According to social exchange theory, through interaction, consumers and brands can gain value in their favour, both functionally and emotionally, which can drive the relationship in a good direction.

A comparative set of experiments was conducted, which found that consumers who engage in ritual behaviour before eating make higher positive evaluations of food and can better perceive the quality of

food. During the brand ritual, consumers learn more about the product or service through the experience. Consumers gain functional value. In addition, consumers take lots of time and effort to participate. And the higher cost of participation leads to higher perceived product and brand value. For brands, it is easier to collect real consumer feedback about their products or services during the interaction process, which can help them gain inspiration for product innovation. The brand and the consumer achieve a mutually beneficial effect. The consumer and the brand will form a transactional psychological contract based on functional value.

The customer psychological contract based on reciprocity theory assumes that customers' perceptions of their obligations and the brand's obligations are reciprocal. When brands provide satisfactory service, consumers feel rewarded for the intellectual, physical, emotional, and monetary effort they put into involvement in the service. The customer's perception of their responsibility will increase during the service interaction. Conversely, if their expectations are not met, customers will be disappointed and believe they have not been rewarded for their efforts. The consumers' brand identification will reduce, damaging the currently established trading relationship. The consumer identification dimension of brand rituals will positively influence consumers' transactional psychological contract with the brand, and the stronger the consumer identification, the more it will help consumers sustain the current transactional relationship.

### **3.2 Relational psychological contract**

A relational psychological contract focuses more on long-term, extensive, socio-emotional interactions. In addition to financial material rewards, it has emotional input from a higher level of involvement and generates a stronger sense of involvement and belonging. A relational psychological contract involves more emotional commitment and identification with the exchange partner. As a combination of behavioural actions and symbolic meanings, brand rituals can bring brands closer to consumers by conveying brand spirit, culture, and values. At the same time, The "hard to imitate" signals of brand rituals are time- and energy-consuming. And participation in rituals demonstrates participants' commitment to the group, generating identification with ritual values, which leads to greater solidarity among group members and increased cooperative behaviour.

In addition, compared to random actions, brand rituals have unique symbolic resources, fixed patterns, and repeatability over time. These characteristics serve as situational cues to better inform consumer decisions. It proves that brands provide significant and positive emotional resources to consumers now and in the future through a specific pattern and on an ongoing basis, which increases consumers' confidence in future benefits and their willingness to maintain a long-term relationship with the brand in the future. The interaction during the ritual strengthens the emotional connection between consumers and the brand and creates a good communication atmosphere.

Consumers will also form a closer relationship with each other. During the ritual, certain consumers with a strong desire for expression, a wealth of information about the brand or the product, and a sense of identification with brand values can gain the attention of others. They will obtain social benefits by gaining social recognition and a heightened sense of self-esteem, and they will satisfy their needs for self-expression and a sense of belonging. Consumers' higher-level needs and their intrinsic need for self-actualization are easily satisfied. Consumers gain mutual recognition and perceive the brand's emotional commitment through emotional communication during interpersonal interactions, and Gao found that the level of interpersonal interaction positively affects people's psychological contract level<sup>[4]</sup>. At the same time, the closer the interpersonal interaction, the deeper the emotional communication between each other, the higher the expectation of gaining recognition, and the corresponding increase in the level of the psychological contract.

## **4. Brand Attachment and Psychological Contract**

The brand attachment was developed from the concept of attachment in psychology, where psychologists found in the study of mother-infant relationships that attachment is a relationship between a specific individual and a specific object filled with emotional bonds. This interpersonal bond extends through an individual's upbringing and influences subsequent friendships and intimate and romantic relationships. When marketing scholars analyze the phenomenon of consumer attachment, they extend the attachment relationship from "person-person" to "person-object". It is believed that consumers become attached to the objects they own. Therefore, brand attachment is generally defined as a unique emotional connection and bond between consumers and the intended brand<sup>[6]</sup>. Consumers who have a

strong attachment to a brand reinforce this identity through their purchasing behaviour. And they build and expand their social networks in this regard.

Brand attachment indicates consumers' love, passion, and connection to a brand. Bidmon believes that consumers become attached to a brand because the brand is highly associated with and emotionally connected to them. The brand occupies an important place in their psyche, and consumers perceive it as irreplaceable to a certain extent <sup>[12]</sup>. Knapp points out that this association and psychological location perception of the brand is accumulated through consumers' in-depth understanding and perception of the brand through years of product usage experience, word-of-mouth accumulation, information understanding, etc. <sup>[2]</sup> Therefore, consumers' deep perception of the brand will make consumers have a deep emotional attachment to the brand. Zhou et al. argue that consumers' perception of a brand can effectively enhance their trust and dependence, which leads to emotional attachment and attachment to the brand.

This long-term emotional experience is key in promoting emotional attachment to consumers. Consumers fully perceive the goodwill and sincerity of the brand and other consumers during the long-term interaction. So they provide supportive attitudes, positive buying behaviour, or brand premiums as reciprocity. In the long run, a relationship of mutual help, trust, and dependence will be formed between brands and consumers. This perception and feeling generated from the interaction increase consumers' inner expectations and raises the level of their psychological contract. The brand needs to maintain a good relationship with consumers in the brand-building process. An interesting ritual activity stimulates consumers' further willingness to cooperate and take the initiative to interact. But the emotional bonds maintain a long and stable relationship between consumers and brands.

## 5. Conclusion

Brand rituals have a positive effect on consumers' brand attachment. The special brand experience brought by the brand ritual can bring consumers an unforgettable memory. And the repetition of this unique experience during the brand ritual reinforces the emotional connection between consumers and the brand. This paper demonstrates that psychological contracts will bind brands and consumers. It also can form and maintain good brand relationships.

Brand rituals deepen consumers' recognition of brand culture or brand values. Brand rituals also close the psychological distance between consumers, making consumers feel a sense of belonging and becoming fans of the brand. During the ritual interaction, consumers have an initial perception of the functional value of the product or the service, based on which consumers establish a transactional psychological contract with the brand. The more consumers engage, the more involved they become. And they are likely to interact with brands or other participants in the same ritual. In this case, it is easier for a brand to establish a relational psychological contract with consumers. These two contracts will tightly bind the consumers to the brand. Then the brand attachment is formed, and consumers will remain loyal to the brand due to brand attachment and will engage in positive behaviours such as maintaining brand reputation.

## 6. Suggestions

This study provides management insights for brands to establish and maintain consumer relationships. Firstly, brands could develop ritual activities that are appropriate for their brands based on their characteristics. The path of brand ritualization could take consumers' daily consumption habits, their actual needs, and the brand's core values into consideration. The more unique and fittable brand rituals are, the more the brand's rituals are accepted and loved by the target audience. Secondly, brands should offer high-quality products and services to consumers to create a base psychological contract. At the same time, brands should meet consumers' social and emotional needs during the interaction process. These are essential factors that could enhance consumers' recognition and trust. And it's possible to maintain a long-term stable consumer-brand relationship.

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