

2016

# The role of brand attachment in brand-related bragging

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
QUESTROM SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

Dissertation

**THE ROLE OF BRAND ATTACHMENT IN BRAND-RELATED BRAGGING**

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

2016

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## **DEDICATION**

To Shweta and Sehej

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to express my gratitude to my dissertation committee members Dr. Barbara Bickart, Dr. Remi Trudel and Dr. Susan Fournier for their endless support and invaluable guidance. I would also like to thank rest of the Questrom faculty and PhD students who gave me valuable insights throughout the program. I would also like to acknowledge the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) for funding this research through a research grant.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Bragging about brands on social media is pervasive. When bragging about brands, communicators face a trade-off between enhancing perceptions of their competence versus lowering perceptions of their warmth or likeability. Likewise, for brands, bragging can increase the brand's visibility but can convey negative brand-user imagery that detracts from the equity of the brand. Across four experimental studies, this dissertation shows how signaling brand attachment moderates the effects of brand-related bragging on both the perceptions of communicators and brand-user imagery. Results from the first two studies show that mentioning a high status brand in social media communications leads to negative evaluations when the communicator is not seen as attached to the brand, and positive evaluations when brand attachment is signaled. Using brand attachment cues while bragging leads the audience to infer that the communicator talks about the brand because of intrinsic motives such as personal enjoyment, versus extrinsic motives such as status-signaling, resulting in favorable communicator impressions and brand-user imagery. The last two studies show that the beneficial effects of using brand attachment cues while bragging are mitigated if the cues are seen as non-credible or non-diagnostic of motives in a particular communication context. This research develops a theoretical framework for brand-related bragging and suggests

practical ways to manage the trade-offs involved for both communicators and brands.

Further, it opens new avenues for research by providing a social perception lens on consumer-brand relationships and showing that there are benefits of signaling one's brand attachment for both consumers and brands in terms of impressions formed by the audience.

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## INTRODUCTION

“In order to gain and hold the esteem of man it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence.”

-Veblen (1899, 36)

“Who knows himself a braggart, let him fear this, for it will come to pass that every braggart shall be found an ass.”- William Shakespeare in All's Well That Ends Well

Signaling status is considered a central motivation in consumer behavior (Bourdieu 1984; Eastman, Goldsmith, and Flynn 1999; Veblen 1899) and people make status inferences based on others' consumption choices (Belk, Bahn and Mayer 1982; Nelissen and Meijers 2011). In line with Veblen's (1899) conceptualization of conspicuous consumption, the consumption literature has mainly focused on status signaling via conspicuous 'display' of possessions to an *immediate* audience (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010). With the advent of online media, however, consumers have an opportunity to signal status to a *wider* audience via brand-related bragging in online communications (Schau and Gilly 2003). For example, 'name dropping' of premium and differentiated brands is much higher in online discussions compared to those offline (Lovett, Peres, and Shachar 2013). The use of social media for bragging has become so pervasive that it has been termed a “social epidemic” (Bernstein

2012) and bragging about consumption experiences is a big part of such online bragging (Briggs 2012). As suggested by Veblen, it makes sense to brag about one's prestigious possessions/experiences in order to win others' esteem. However, such bragging puts one at risk of looking like an "ass" in the words of the Bard.

While brand-related bragging can create desired status associations, it can also lead to less than favorable impressions both of the communicator (Godfrey, Jones, and Lord 1986) and potentially, of the brand itself (Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2013). For example, though bragging might increase one's perceived competence, it can also lead to lower likability and perceived warmth (Fragale and Grant 2015; Pfeffer et al. 2006). Similarly, brand users who engage in bragging about a brand can boost the brand's visibility but can also generate negative brand-user imagery that rubs off on the brand, resulting in dilution of brand perceptions and possible brand avoidance (Ferraro et al. 2013; Lee, Motion, and Conroy 2009). In a world where marketers are creating many opportunities for consumers to brag about brands on social media (Berger 2013), it is important to understand and mitigate the negative impact of such brand-related bragging on impressions of brand users to avoid brand dilution and avoidance. My research question originates from this tradeoff inherent in brand-related bragging and aims to identify content and context related factors that can help both consumers and brands to mitigate the costs associated with brand-related bragging while still enjoying its benefits.

Does brand-related bragging always lead to negative impressions? Literature on conspicuous consumption suggests that conspicuous brand-related behaviors, such as bragging, always lead to negative evaluations (Ferraro et al. 2013). However, this

dissertation proposes that the impressions formed based on brand-related bragging may not just be a matter of whether a particular brand is mentioned but how it is mentioned and show how the potential negative effects of brand-related bragging can be mitigated. It shows that mentioning a high status brand in social media communications does not lead to negative evaluations if the communicator is seen as attached to the brand. Conveying brand attachment leads the audience to infer that the communicator talks about the brand because of intrinsic motives such as personal enjoyment versus extrinsic motives such as status signaling, resulting in favorable evaluations of both the communicator and the brand. However, the beneficial effects of using brand attachment cues while bragging are mitigated if the communication context makes the cues non-credible or non-diagnostic of motives.

By showing that depending on the content and context of communication, brand-related bragging does not always lead to negative brand impressions; this research develops a theoretical framework of brand-related bragging and suggests practical ways to manage the tradeoffs involved for both communicators and brands. As marketers are strategically creating opportunities for consumers to brag about the purchase/use of brands on social media (Sekhon et al. 2015), this research can help them design campaigns that build (rather than dilute) brand equity. It can guide practitioners in encouraging brand mentioning in ways that convey brand attachment and thus mitigate the negative consequences associated with brand-related bragging. By encouraging marketers to pay attention to not only the frequency but also to the context of brand mentions, this research can be helpful in initiating social interactions that will enhance

brand value. It can also inform consumers who want to talk about their favorite brands without incurring social costs. Moreover, it is the first to use a social perception lens on consumer-brand relationships —examining the consequences of others decoding cues about a given consumer’s brand relationships rather than examining the focal consumer’s relationship with the brand—and showing that there are benefits of signaling one’s brand attachment for both consumers and brands in terms of audience’s impressions.

## **BRAND-RELATED BRAGGING**

### **Brand-related Bragging as Self-presentation**

What we call bragging colloquially has been studied as self-presentation. People strive to create a positive impression of their characteristics, achievements or status (Leary 1995). Any behavior intended to create such a positive image of one in the minds of others is called self-presentation (Schlenker 2003). Whether intentional or not, our public presentations on social networking (e.g., Facebook.com) and micro-blogging (e.g., Twitter.com) websites are, in essence, online self-presentations. A common way to craft a favorable self-presentation is to verbally convey favorable self-related information, which has alternatively been labeled as bragging (Berman et al. 2014), self-promotion (Jones and Pittman 1982; Rudman 1998), boasting (Brown and Levinson 1987), self-praise (Dayter 2014), positive self-description (Holtgraves and Srull 1989) or more generally as positive self-disclosure (Miller et al. 1992). However, bragging is differentiated from other positive self-disclosures by an element of ‘one-upmanship’ (Dayter 2014; Miller et al. 1992) which is defined as “the art or practice of achieving, demonstrating, or assuming superiority in one's rivalry with a friend or opponent by obtaining privilege, status, status symbols, etc.” (Dictionary.com). Translating these ideas into the brand domain, brand-related bragging can be defined as conveying an association with a *status*-signaling brand.

Having “status” suggests that one has a higher position compared to others on any dimension (e.g. wealth, cultural capital, altruism) deemed important by a reference group

or society as a whole (Hyman 1942; Marwick 2010; Nelissen and Meijers 2011). Implicit in this definition of status is the idea that a person with higher status is *better* and not just *different* from others, which is also at the core of the one-upmanship associated with bragging (Miller et al. 1992). Status, just like bragging, depends on the local context. As status is measured “in the eyes of others”, status symbols differ depending upon the consumer’s reference group (Marwick 2010) and any brand can be used to brag as long as it conveys a higher position on a dimension valued by a particular reference group. For example, for some people, mentioning a luxury brand such as Porsche would constitute bragging, while for others, owning a Prius would be considered brag-worthy (Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh 2010). Marwick (2010) showed that typical status symbols like clothes and cars meant little to Silicon Valley tech workers who, however, do not shy away from bragging about attending events like TED and South by Southwest to signal status.

Brand-related bragging as defined here is different than most of the bragging described in online word-of-mouth (WOM) research, which is focused on explicitly bragging about one’s knowledge or expertise in a domain while writing reviews (Packard, Gershoff, and Wooten 2016; Packard and Wooten 2013). However, bragging can also be done piggybacking on the symbolic properties of the product or brand itself (Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012; Taylor, Strutton, and Thompson 2012). Goffman (1959) suggests that props, such as brands, play a very important role in self-presentation. The brands we mention in our social media communications convey important information about us, as brands are rich and meaning laden symbols in our society (Levy, 1959;

Holman, 1981; McCracken, 1986; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Solomon, 1983). In the context of brand-related bragging on social media, the symbolic value (or status) associated with a brand is transferred to the self by conveying an association with the brand. You don't need to say "Look! How rich or charitable I am". You can just mention your Porsche or your weekend spent working for 'Habitat for Humanity'. In a sense, brand-related bragging is bragging outsourced to a brand; more specifically, to the symbolic associations of the brand.

This research on brand-related bragging is also different from past work on conspicuous consumption (Berger and Ward 2010; Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2012; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010; Veblen 1899), which has focused primarily on the distinction between conspicuous versus inconspicuous display of a brand. Though research on conspicuous display has shown that subtle or inconspicuous signals can be effective in conveying one's higher status without coming across as trying too hard (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010), it is difficult to be subtle in a display context without compromising the strength of the signal. In the social media context, however, linguistic communication gives consumers more latitude than mere display in terms of how to frame brand mentions to signal status. Written communication allows for more time to craft brand mentions in subtle ways due to its asynchronous nature (Buffardi and Campbell 2008). Computer-mediated environments also make digital association with brands easier by relaxing the material constraints of ownership (Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012; Schau and Gilly 2003). All of these affordances of online media can help consumers craft their brand-related bragging in subtle ways.

### **Tradeoffs Involved in Brand-related Bragging**

“But Blippy also failed to gain traction outside its early adopter user base because, for some folks, there’s something awkward and braggy about sharing lists of things you’re buying. Price or no price, it’s one thing to Instagram your fabulous new shoes, but posting the purchase on a site dedicated to posting purchases can cross that invisible line between sharing and showing off. Mine will need to tread carefully there.” – a quote by Perez (2012) in a TechCrunch article on why purchase sharing social network ‘Blippy’ (launched in 2009) failed and why its new avatar ‘Mine’ (launched in 2012, which has also been closed to the public subsequently) needs to tread carefully. This quote illustrates how people are quick to judge others based on their social media posts about brands, which in this case led to the failure of a social media platform. People are often confronted by others’ mentions of the brands they own or like on social media (Hollenbeck and Kaikati 2012). However, as the above quote by Perez (2012) suggests, mentioning brands on social media can lead to less than favorable impressions, both for the consumers who posted the information and potentially, for the brand itself (Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2012). There is an inherent tension in bragging due to the tradeoffs involved for both communicators and brands.

This dissertation explores the tradeoff inherent in bragging for the communicator in terms of the basic dimensions of warmth and competence. Research has shown that warmth and competence are the two fundamental dimensions on which we judge other

people (Cuddy, Fiske and Glick 2008). In this literature, the warmth dimension captures others' perceived intentions and is comprised of traits such as friendliness, trustworthiness, sincerity whereas the competence dimension captures others' ability to pursue their intentions and is comprised of traits such as intelligence, wealth and confidence. As observers care about warmth and competence while making interpersonal judgments, actors try to portray these traits by engaging in self-presentation (Holoien and Fiske 2013; Leary 1995). Bragging about one's achievements, skills or status is a common way to appear competent (Berman et al. 2015; Godfrey et al. 1986; Jones and Pittman 1982). Although bragging can increase audiences' perceptions of the braggart's competence, it costs the braggart in terms of likability and perceived warmth (Berman et al. 2015; Godfrey et al. 1986; Fragale and Grant 2015; Pfeffer et al. 2006).

In the context of brand-related bragging, providing others new information about one's association with high status brands can benefit communicators by increasing their perceived competence. Research has shown that status-signaling brands can convey "both the control of valuable resources and the skills to acquire them" (Nelissen and Meijers 2011, 352). Based on costly signaling theory, Nelissen and Meijers (2011) showed that status-signaling brands enhance a person's competence as perceived by others and elicit preferential treatment in social interactions. However, observers generally perceive a compensatory relationship between warmth and competence related traits in both groups and individuals (Holoien and Fiske 2013). For example, elderly people are seen as warm but incompetent and Asians as cold but competent. Perceivers form compensatory inferences about both warmth and competence even when they have information only

about one dimension (Judd et al. 2005). This compensatory relationship becomes even more salient in the case of bragging. Though the content of a braggish message provides information about one's competence, it creates a doubt about the communicator's motives in the mind of the audience, and makes braggarts look disingenuous and unlikable (Berman et al. 2015; Fragale and Grant 2015). Therefore, for the communicator engaged in brand-related bragging the tradeoff is between boosting one's perceived competence while incurring perceived warmth related costs.

Similarly, brand-related bragging also entails tradeoffs for the mentioned brands. Most brands seek increased visibility and hence, value brand mentions. On the downside, these mentions can lead to less than favorable impressions of the brand (Ferraro et al. 2013). Specifically, Ferraro et al. (2013) showed that conspicuous use of a brand not only leads to negative attitude toward the conspicuous user but also leads to negative attitude toward the brand (via the negative attitude toward the user) at least for observers with low self-brand connection. Lee, Motion, and Conroy (2009) showed that identity based brand avoidance is one of the three major reasons why consumers avoid a brand in addition to negative experience based and moral reasoning based avoidance. Central to the relationship between consumer actions and brand avoidance is the notion of brand-user imagery (Hogg, Banister, and Stephenson 2009), which is defined as a consumer perception of a brand's typical user (Sirgy, 1982). Consumers identify with brands that evoke positive user imagery and distance themselves from brands associated with negative user imagery (Hogg et al. 2009; Ogilvie 1987). Lee, Motion, and Conroy (2009) showed that avoidance of brands associated with negative reference groups may be based

on generalizations of the image of a typical brand user. As consumers don't like others who are seen as bragging (Pfeffer et al. 2006), they are likely to avoid brands associated with the user imagery of a braggart.

While I am focusing on the negative effects of brand-related bragging on communicators and brands, there are societal costs associated with such bragging as well. Brand-related bragging can lead to consumer envy and an "expenditure arms race" leading to a culture of excessive consumption (Belk 2011; Frank, 2005). The more people mention their desirable possessions on social media, the more envious other people might become stimulating purchases and more bragging. As many people are exposed to a single person's bragging on social media, this bragging might in turn make other people envious leading to a vicious cycle. As the acceptable standards for our consumption ultimately depend on others' consumption, such a bragging arms race at a societal level can shift our frame of reference about optimum consumption upwards and could lead to loss of consumer welfare (Frank 2005).

### **Mitigating the Negative Effects of Bragging**

People are sensitive to the negative social effects of bragging. They want to present an attractive image of themselves to others, but at the same time do not want to appear as if they are trying to do so (Jones and Wortman 1973). Therefore, they use a host of indirect bragging strategies in both face-to-face and online interactions to control negative inferences from bragging (Dayter 2014; Miller et al. 1992; Sekhon et al. 2015;

Sezer, Gino, and Norton 2015). These subtle bragging strategies have also been referred to as “humblebragging” strategies based on a recently coined pop culture term for under-the-radar bragging (Sezer, Gino, and Norton 2015; Wittels 2012). Some of these strategies have been shown to be effective (Hareli and Weiner 2000); whereas others have been found to be ineffective (such as, bragging in the guise of complaining) (Sezer, Gino, and Norton 2015). Next, I will discuss some of the successful “humblebragging” strategies studied in the domain of bragging about personal characteristics or achievements.

One way to make bragging more acceptable is shifting the focus away from the self. Two common ways to do this are 1) by crediting someone external to self for one’s accomplishments (Hareli & Weiner 2000) and 2) by crediting someone else for the actual communication showing one in positive light (Pfeffer et al. 2006; Sekhon et al. 2015). In other words, distancing self from one’s accomplishments or from talking about those accomplishments can lead to positive evaluations. For example, Hareli and Weiner (2000) found that accounts ascribing success to external factors such as luck or help from others are seen as modest. Consumers can also use this strategy by bragging about one’s possessions and showing gratitude simultaneously by attributing whatever one has to others- a relative, friend, or even God- shifting the focus of communication away from the self (Sekhon et al. 2015). Similarly, having another person present the desirable information on one’s behalf (Pfeffer et al. 2006) or even restating someone else’s positive statements about self can lead to more positive evaluations as compared to self-praising (Speer 2012). Adding disclaimers to positive

self-presentational statements such as “I don’t want to brag, but. . .” or “I’m not sure I should say this. . .” also leads to distancing of the self from bragging statements (Dayter 2014) and can lead to more favorable evaluations.

People also try to tone down their bragging on social media by tempering the positivity of their self-related claims. For example, people append contextual cues such as emoticons, internet slangs such as lol (abbreviation for “laughing out loud”) to positive statements about the self in order to convey that they are not taking themselves too seriously (West and Trester 2013). Adding a self-deprecating comment along with positive information about self is another way to be considered likeable while bragging about positive traits (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013). In fact, self-deprecating and “bragging in the guise of complaining” are the two most common humblebragging strategies discussed in the popular press (Wittels 2012). Additionally, bragging that is relevant to the communication context is less likely to be viewed as a violation of conversational norms, and therefore, is viewed more favorably (Grice 1975; Holtgraves 2002). Tal-Or (2010) showed that observers do not judge the braggarts who create a context for talking about their accomplishments during an interaction.

All the tactics discussed above are ways to mitigate negative effects of bragging about abilities or achievements (and not about brands) on communicator impressions. However, if consumer actions like bragging can tarnish the image of typical brand users, it is important for brands to try to avoid the user imagery related costs while still benefiting from increased visibility. My dissertation specifically focuses on brand-related bragging and ways to manage the tradeoffs associated with it for both communicators and

brands.

I propose that the impressions formed based on brand-related bragging may not just be a matter of whether a high status brand is mentioned but how it is mentioned. In my qualitative work on mentions of high status brands on Twitter (Sekhon et al. 2015), I realized that high status brand mentioning comes in different forms. I saw people talk passionately about their luxury cars and professing their love for their high-end bags. They often used Twitter hashtags like “#Misseditbadly”, “#mylove”, “#mybaby” along with mentions of status-signaling brands. I realized that what they were doing was essentially conveying attachment to the mentioned brands and maybe that gave them a pass as compared to someone who was mentioning the same brands without conveying any attachment. In this dissertation, I look at conveying brand attachment as a novel strategy specific to the marketing domain that can help mitigate the negative effects of brand-related bragging for both communicators and brands. Next, I will discuss the brand attachment construct and how conveying attachment can help one manage the tradeoffs of brand-related bragging.

## **ROLE OF BRAND ATTACHMENT IN BRAND-RELATED BRAGGING**

### **Brand Attachment Cues**

Research has shown that consumers can build and maintain diverse types of relationships with brands (Fournier 1998) characterized by over 50 dimensions (such as hierarchical versus egalitarian). However, the strength of a relationship has always been considered the focal dimension for its capacity to consider a range of other dimensions and outcomes (Fournier 2009). One approach to study the strength of consumer-brand relationships focuses on consumers' attachment to brands. Bowlby (1979) defined attachment as an emotion-laden bond between a person and a specific object. In the brand relationships domain, brand attachment is defined as a psychological state of mind in which a strong bond connects the brand with the self (Park et al. 2010; Park, MacInnis, and Priester 2008). According to MacInnis, Park and Priester (2009), strong brand attachment characterizes brand relationships that resemble committed partnerships or best friendships described by Fournier (1998), communal relationships described by Aggarwal (2004) and love relationships described by Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi (2012). Brand attachment is an important driver of consumer behavior leading to a host of beneficial behaviors for a brand such as brand loyalty, willingness to pay a premium, positive word-of-mouth etc. (Park et al. 2008).

Considerable research in marketing has looked at both the antecedents and consequences of brand attachment (Dunn and Hoegg 2014; Hadi and Valenzuela 2014; Malar et al. 2011; Park et al. 2010). However, the literature on brand attachments and

consumer-brand relationships in general has focused on the effect of attachment on consumers and brands in the relationship from the point of view of the focal consumer or the brand (Fournier 1998; Park et al. 2010). This dissertation adds to this literature by showing how others use information about a consumer's brand relationships while making judgments about the focal consumer as well as the brand. More specifically, it shows that there is value in conveying one's attachment to a brand while bragging as it can impact outside observers' perception of the target consumer and the brand.

Park et al. (2008) conceptualizes brand attachment as a psychological state. I propose that observers can perceive this psychological state of brand attachment in another person based on certain verbal and non-verbal indicators. Proximity maintenance, separation distress and sacrificing personal resources for the brand are common non-verbal indicators of brand attachment (Matherly 2013; Park, MacInnis and Priester 2009). Therefore, mentioning a brand by default indicates some level of attachment with the brand as it involves spending discretionary resources such as time, energy and self-image related resources (i.e. facing a risk of social ridicule by publicly conveying association with a brand). However, one can also convey brand attachment in verbal communication through the content of the message by adding certain cues to their communication. I define a brand attachment cue as any signal that indicates a consumer's attachment to a particular brand. Sekhon et al. (2015) found that consumers routinely use brand attachment cues, that is, phrases such as "My love", "My baby" to refer to their cars and handbags in their tweets. Here is an example tweet from their data where a consumer is tweeting about her Mercedes and using an attachment cue "My baby": "*My baby survived*

*the hail without a scratch! #Mercedes”*

Batra et al. (2012) argued that fuzzy concepts such as brand love are hard to define in terms of necessary and sufficient criteria and are best conceptualized as prototypes (Rosch 1975). Therefore, I suggest that the features of brand attachment prototype that can indicate attachment to an observer include “not only elements of the phenomenon itself but also antecedents and outcomes” (Batra et al. 2012, 3). Hence, for the purpose of this research, I will focus on various indicators of the brand attachment prototype without making the distinction of whether they are antecedents or consequences of brand attachment.

The different facets of strong brand relationships (Fournier 1998) provide the required broad theoretical framework that captures the essential elements of the brand-attachment phenomenon itself as well as its proximal behavioral, affective and cognitive antecedents and consequences, all of which can be translated into brand attachment cues. Based on exploratory research (Sekhon et al. 2015) and review of the literature on different facets of strong brand relationships (Fournier 1998), a range of brand attachment cues are developed and discussed below. This list is not intended to be an exhaustive list of cues indicating brand attachment nor is this research a comprehensive exploration of all possible brand attachment cues. However, it shows that different facets of consumer brands relationships can be used as a theoretically grounded source to generate a broad range of attachment cues. Moreover, sometimes a particular brand attachment cue can be seen as tapping into multiple facets of strong brand relationships, which is even better in terms of conveying brand attachment to observers.

### *Love and Passion Cues*

Emotions such as love and passion are at the heart of all strong brand relationships (Fournier 1998). Consumers often talk about their experiences with their loved brands in positive emotional terms (Batra et al. 2012). Positive emotions are considered such an essential component of brand attachment that the feelings accompanying strong brand relationships (such as affection, passion, and connection) can be used as a reliable measure of brand attachment (Thomson et al. 2005). Such positive emotional reactions also represent the “hot” affect originating from brand-self linkages (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007; Park et al. 2010). Therefore, statements professing one’s love for a brand such as “Love my \_\_”, can indicate brand attachment to others.

### *Self-Brand Connection Cues*

Self-brand connection (SBC) is the extent to which a consumer has incorporated a brand into his/her self-concept (Escalas 2004; Escalas and Bettman 2003). Brands are used to create one’s self-concept as well as express one’s identity and life themes (Fournier 1998). The self-connection facet of brand relationship quality (Fournier 1998) taps into the idea of SBC being an important indicator of strong consumer brand relationships. Integration of the loved brand into a consumer’s identity is also a central aspect of brand love (Batra et al. 2012). When a consumer sees a brand as part of one’s self, cognitive and emotional links are established with the brand leading to the psychological state of brand attachment (Park et al. 2010). Therefore, statements such as “It is so me”, “part of me”, “part of my life”, “feeling connected to it” can indicate brand attachment.

### *Interdependence Cues*

According to Fournier (1998), frequent and more intense brand interactions lead to a high degree of interdependence that characterizes strong brand relationships. This high degree of interdependence leads to missing the brand when it is not available. In fact, consumers can mourn the loss of their possessions as a lessening of self (Belk 1988). Both interpersonal and brand literatures have showed that a clear indicator of the strength of a person's attachment is distress (or negative emotional reactions) upon experiencing separation from an attachment object (Bowlby, 1979; Fedorikhin, Park, and Thomson 2008; Weiss 1988). In fact, Fedorikhin et al. (2008) manipulated high versus low attachment for a brand by asking participants to imagine feeling separation distress (versus not) for it. Therefore, statements such as “Can’t live without it”, “missing it” can be considered indicators of attachment to a brand.

### *Commitment Cues*

Commitment to a brand leading to relationship longevity is a common feature of strong brand relationships (Fournier 1998). Having a long history with a brand is also a frequently mentioned feature of brand love (Batra et al. 2012). As brand interactions accumulate over a period of shared history, the brand occupies an important place in the consumer’s personal narrative further strengthening the consumer-brand bond (Batra et al. 2012; Fournier 1998). Thomson et al. (2005) also argues that emotional attachment with a product often originates from long-term interactions between consumers and products. Therefore, statements conveying one’s behavioral commitment and long history with a brand such as “we go long back” can indicate brand attachment.

### *Intimacy Cues*

One of the important characteristics of human as well as brand relationships is intimacy (Fournier 1998; Miller and Lefcourt 1982). According to Fournier (1998) intimacy in consumer brand relationships is characterized by a detailed knowledge structure built around the brand and a special meaning of the brand in consumer's life as a result of frequent interactions over time. These elaborated meanings keep the brand salient in consumer's life. Later research also found prominence of brand-related thoughts to be an important component of both brand attachment and brand love (Batra et al. 2012; Park et al. 2010).

A feature of intimacy particularly relevant for this research is embellishment of the brand meaning, say, through assignment of a personal nickname to a brand (Fournier 1998) or anthropomorphizing the brand in general, due to its ability to convey attachment to an observer. Fournier (1998) argues that brands must be anthropomorphized to be considered as relationship partners. Rauschnabel and Ahuvia (2014) also showed that perceived anthropomorphism of a brand is an important antecedent of brand love. Use of anthropomorphic language to talk about a brand/product indicates attachment to it (Frost and Hartl 1996; Timpano and Shaw 2013). The literature on consumer brand relationships (Fournier 1998) and brand love (Batra et al. 2012) suggests that consumers use certain terms for brands they are attached to that are generally reserved for relationship partners. Therefore, use of anthropomorphic language for brands such as naming them, using interpersonal relationship terms (such as "my love", "my baby"), using animate pronouns (such as "she is a beauty"), or using agentic trait descriptions

(Chandler and Schwarz 2010; Schultz, Kleine and Kerman 1989) can signal one's brand attachment.

In this section, we looked at cues that can be interpreted as indicators of brand attachment when added to a message. The persuasion literature in marketing has looked at other types of message cues that can impact the interpretation and persuasiveness of a communication. For example, Main, Aditya, and Dahl (2014) showed that opinion similarity cues lead to increased persuasiveness of a message. Chen and Lurie (2013) showed that presence of temporal contiguity cues i.e. words and phrases indicating temporal proximity between consumption and review writing increase the perceived value of the review. Packard, Gershoff, and Wooten (2016) found that when word-of-mouth senders brag about their expertise in reviews, persuasion is decreased in the presence of negative trust cues but increased in the presence of positive trust cues. Kirmani and Zhu (2007) also demonstrated that certain message cues can provide context to a communication making advertiser's manipulative intent more or less salient. Similarly, I suggest that when brand-related bragging communication includes cues conveying one's attachment to the brand, it impacts the motives that the audience infers for the behavior which in turn impact the impressions formed of the communicator and the brand. In the next section, I will discuss two types of motives that the audience can infer for WOM in general and for brand-related bragging in particular. Further, I will explore the mechanisms through which adding attachment cues to brand-related bragging can impact motive inferences.

### **Difference between Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motives**

Since Dichter's (1966) seminal article on WOM communication, extensive research has looked at what motivates consumers to share product and brand related messages (Berger 2014). Like any other behavior, the motivation to engage in WOM can be intrinsic or extrinsic (Godes et al. 2005). Behavior is considered extrinsically motivated when performed in order to obtain a reward that is external to the action itself, such as status, recognition or monetary rewards. In contrast, behavior is considered intrinsically motivated when performed because of personal interest, that is, for the inherent value of the activity (Amabile et al. 1994; Deci and Ryan 2000). For example, consumers might talk about their Mercedes because they derive intrinsic pleasure from expressing their love for the brand or because they want to signal their wealth.

According to the WOM literature, two common intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for engaging in WOM are product/brand involvement and self-presentation respectively (Dichter, 1966; Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster 1998). Individuals attached to particular brands or involved in particular product categories engage in WOM for self-expression reasons (Park et al. 2010; Richins and Root-Shaffer 1988). On the other hand, self-presentation is considered a common extrinsically motivated driver of word-of-mouth transmission. Consumers are motivated to share WOM to craft a positive image by signaling expertise, displaying connoisseurship or achieving status (Angelis et al. 2012; Hennig-Thurau and Walsh 2003; Packard and Wooten 2013).

Though this dissertation focuses on motivations for brand mentioning, research on

purchase motivations has also shown that brands people buy may serve a more extrinsic (also called social adjustive) function or more intrinsic (also called value-expressive) function (Shavitt 1990). Whereas the social-adjustive function enables consumers to gain approval in social situations, the value-expressive function helps them affirm and express their attitudes and values (Grewal et al. 2004; Wilcox et al. 2009). Wilcox et al. (2009) makes a clear distinction between the intrinsic motive of self-expression and extrinsic motive of self-presentation by showing that consumers who prefer luxury brands for social adjustive reasons are more likely to purchase a counterfeit brand as compared to the ones who prefer luxury brands for value expressive reasons.

### **Motive Inferences for Brand-related Bragging**

A fundamental difference between firm-to-consumer versus consumer-to-consumer (i.e. WOM) communication is that the latter is assumed to be free of any sales related motives (Godes et al. 2005). In fact, the general consensus is that consumers trust the motives of WOM sources due to their altruistic motives in sharing product information (Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2003; Nielsen 2012). On the other hand, communication by firm agents is often doubted as it is seen to be driven by self-interest. Literature on skepticism of communicator motives has generally focused on inferences of the persuasive intent in firm-to-consumer communications (Friestad and Wright 1994). However, such suspicion of communication motives is likely to occur for WOM sources too, especially when motives for sharing

WOM are ambiguous.

From the audience's perspective, intentional behaviors (such as sharing WOM) are usually interpreted in terms of the communicator's motives and the communication context contributes to motive identification (Ames, Flynn, and Weber 2004; Reeder 2009). People not only interpret the content of others' self-disclosures but also attempt to understand the speaker's motives behind sharing that particular information (Miller et al. 1992; Wyer, Swan, and Gruenfeld 1995). Therefore, attributions for self-disclosure become part of the meaning that the audience assigns to the communicator's message.

Likewise, people attempt to make sense of bragging via basic attributional principles. The audience tries to explain others' bragging behavior and if the communication context provides an explanation for the behavior, negative evaluations become less likely (Holtgraves, 2002). For example, Holtgraves and Srull (1989) showed that when people disclose positive information about themselves in response to a question, others view them less negatively than if the same statements are made in the absence of a question. Based on this research, I suggest that people interpret brand-related bragging in the context of the communicator's relationship with the mentioned brand.

Given the fundamental distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motives, a key inference that observers make on being confronted with another consumer's mention of a high status brand is about whether the person has mentioned the brand for extrinsic reasons such as positive self-presentation (by mentioning that you own a high status brand) or intrinsic reasons such as inherent enjoyment derived from talking about the

brand. Others' naïve theories about brand attachment can play a crucial role in this inference making process. I am suggesting two possible theoretical mechanisms (described below) through which attachment cues lead to higher inferences of intrinsic (relative to) extrinsic motives.

#### *Association of Attachment Relationships with Intrinsic Rewards*

Batra et al. (2012) showed that the brands consumers are attached to are often associated with intrinsic rewards. These authors interviewed consumers about the criteria they used to make classifications between the brands they loved and those that they did not love. The authors found that interactions with strongly-loved brands deliver intrinsic rewards which is a key factor that set such brands apart from the rest. Respondents reported that the brands that provide *only* extrinsic rewards aren't loved but instead used for other reasons.

Experimental research by Seligman, Fazio, and Zanna (1980) made a similar claim about the differential role of extrinsic versus intrinsic rewards in the inter-personal love domain. Couples were induced to adopt either an extrinsic or an intrinsic mindset regarding their reasons for associating with each other. Then, their liking and love for each other were assessed. The results showed that the induced salience of extrinsic rewards led couples to report less love but not less liking. Therefore, the authors argued that love is the result of the labeling of positive affect on to intrinsic rather than extrinsic concerns. When relational aspects of a product/brand become salient, instrumental considerations become less important and focus is shifted from instrumental benefits onto relational benefits (Chandler and Schwarz 2010). Therefore, conveying attachment to a

brand is likely to bring it into the domain of close relationships, which are based on more intrinsic rather than extrinsic benefits (Seligman et al. 1980).

### *Conveying Brand Attachment as Authentic Self-Expression*

In the last section, we discussed how attachment relationships themselves are associated with more intrinsic rewards. In this section, we discuss how conveying attachment can be seen as authentic self-expression leading to inferences of intrinsic motives for brand mentioning. This dissertation proposes that when attachment to a brand is conveyed, observers are likely to infer that the communicators are attempting to express their true selves. Consumers are attached to brands that are inherently tied to their self-concept (Escalas 2004; Park et al. 2010). Malar et al. (2011) showed that brand attachment is higher when a brand's personality matches consumers' actual self as compared to their ideal self. As people are considered more authentic when their actions reflect their true selves (Deci and Ryan 2002) and authenticity is often associated with absence of extrinsic motives (Handler 1986; Kernis and Goldman 2006; Minor 2011), being seen as expressing one's true self by conveying attachment to a brand should decrease attributions of extrinsic motives.

In addition to interpreting attachment cues as indicators of a consumer's strong self-defining relationship with a brand, the audience can also interpret them as emotional disclosure on the part of the communicator, further increasing perceptions of authenticity. Emotional expressions (both in verbal and non-verbal forms) help to make sense of social interactions by conveying information about a communicator's motives (Fridlund 1994; Van Kleef 2009). As emotions are perceived as spontaneous (Hochschild 1983) and

emotional disclosure is considered as a deeper revelation of self than non-affective dimensions of disclosure (Altman and Taylor 1973; Chelune 1975), people are likely to consider emotional disclosure as more authentic. For example, information that a brand's corporate owner is passionate about the product rather than motivated by profit increases perceptions of the brand's authenticity (Minor 2011). In the consumption domain, Ger and Belk (1999) showed that consumers try to portray themselves as "passionate connoisseurs" instead of "vulgar materialists" by talking about their passion for a particular possession or consumption experience (188). Therefore, conveying attachment while mentioning a brand is likely to be categorized not as bragging but as sharing of one's genuine passion and affection for a brand.

In sum, I suggest that when a brand-related bragging communication includes cues conveying one's attachment to the brand, others see intrinsic motives such as personal enjoyment or self-expression (compared to self-presentation) as more likely explanations for the behavior. These inferred motives then impact the impressions the audience forms of the communicator as well as the brand.

## **CONSEQUENCES OF CONVEYING ATTACHMENT IN BRAND-RELATED BRAGGING**

### **Impressions of the Communicator**

An audience's interpretation of the motives behind a brand mention should influence their impression of the communicator. As discussed earlier, while bragging might boost communicators' perceived competence by giving the audience more information about their abilities, it hurts their perceived warmth and overall likability by creating doubt about their intentions. Bragging is usually associated with the extrinsic motive of enhancing one's reputation (Berman et al. 2015; Holtgraves and Srull 1989; Tal-Or 2010) and extrinsic motives are more likely to signal disingenuousness. Vonk (1999) showed that the reduced likability of both self-promoting and self-deprecating communicators is mediated by the inference that the communicators' claims are driven by self-presentational motives rather than the motive to provide accurate information about the self. On the other hand, people value others who behave consistently with their true inner thoughts and feelings (Leary 1995; Van Boven et al. 2010; Vonk 1999). For example, Van Boven et al. (2010) showed that people have more positive attitude towards those whose choices reflect intrinsic versus extrinsic motives. In this research, people were asked to evaluate two individuals faced with a choice between extrinsically and intrinsically appealing jobs. Respondents formed more positive evaluations of the person who chose the job with more intrinsic appeal (more recreation opportunities, friendlier work atmosphere) but less extrinsic appeal as compared to the one who chose

the job with more extrinsic appeal (higher prestige and salary) but less intrinsic appeal.

Therefore, inferences of higher intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) motives for brand mentioning behavior should lead to more positive impressions of the communicator both in terms of perceived warmth and general likability. In sum, I suggest that the audience interprets a communicator's brand-related bragging in the context of the communicator's relationship with the mentioned brand. When attachment to a brand is conveyed while engaging in brand-related bragging, it leads to higher inferences of intrinsic motives leading to more favorable impressions of the communicator.

### **Impressions of the Brand**

Brand users displaying positive traits help create positive user-imagery whereas those displaying negative traits tarnish it (Hogg et al. 2009; Lee, Motion, and Conroy 2009). Building on the widespread evidence that negative information has a larger impact than positive (Baumeister et al. 2001), Campbell and Warren (2012) showed that brands are more likely to acquire the negative than the positive personality traits associated with a celebrity endorser. Similarly, if consumers form negative impressions of the communicators engaged in brand-related bragging, it is likely that they will also form negative impressions of the users of that brand in general. However, by increasing intrinsic motive inferences and thus improving impressions of the communicator, attachment cues can help create positive user imagery and prevent creation of negative user-imagery even after exposure to brand-related bragging.

Therefore, I hypothesize the following:

**H1:** Presence (vs. absence) of attachment cues in brand-related bragging leads to more favorable impressions of the communicator.

**H2:** Presence (vs. absence) of attachment cues in brand-related bragging leads to more favorable brand user imagery.

**H3:** Presence (vs. absence) of attachment cues in brand-related bragging impacts impressions of the communicator and brand through higher perceived attachment which in turn leads to higher intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) motive inferences.

Next, I will turn to moderator variables that are theoretically and substantively relevant to the context of word-of-mouth on social media. I expect that these factors can impact either the diagnosticity or credibility of attachment and therefore, can attenuate the positive effects of conveying brand attachment while bragging. These moderators will also help me demonstrate robustness and mechanism by which brand-related bragging impacts impressions.

## **CREDIBILITY AND DIAGNOSTICITY OF ATTACHMENT CUES**

A brand attachment cue is essentially a signal- an indicator of an unobservable quality. According to Donath (2007), a signal is effective only if the receiver believes the signal. As signals can be deceptively manipulated for selfish reasons, their credibility can be doubted by the receivers, particularly if it is not costly to produce them Donath (2007). In the context of this research, adding brand attachment cues to a message does not cost the communicator much. Therefore, their credibility can be suspected by the audience, particularly if it has a salient reason to do so. I suggest that salience of extrinsic motives can reduce credibility of attachment cues as attachment relationships are expected to be based on intrinsic rather than extrinsic benefits (Batra et al. 2012; Seligman et al. 1980). If the communication context makes an extrinsic motive salient, it can make the attachment cue non-credible and presence (vs. absence) of the cue should not lead to higher perceived attachment by the audience in such cases. Therefore, the causal chain from presence of attachment cues to communicator and brand impressions should break at first step itself and attachment cues should impact neither perceived attachment nor motive inferences.

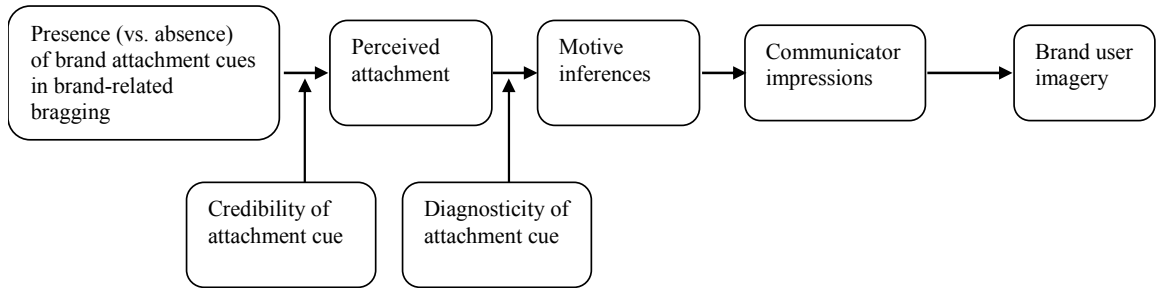
On the other hand, there could be instances where the cue is credible (and leads to higher perceived attachment) but is not considered diagnostic of the communicator's motives in that particular context. Based on the accessibility-diagnostics model (Feldman and Lynch 1988), I suggest that increasing the accessibility of an extrinsic motive can decrease the diagnosticity of alternative motives (such as brand attachment) for

judging the communicator's reasons for brand mentioning. For example, direct information about a communicator being incentivized by a brand can reduce the diagnosticity of perceived attachment for the judgment at hand, which is, inferring motives for brand mentioning. Therefore, if the salience of an extrinsic motive impacts the diagnosticity of attachment cues it should impact motives inferred even if it does not impact perceived attachment. Finding the effect of salience of extrinsic motives on perceived attachment and/or inferred motives will also help generate additional evidence for the proposed mediating mechanism.

In sum, if the communication context makes extrinsic motives salient, it can attenuate the beneficial effects of conveying attachment on communicator and brand impressions by either making attachment cues non-credible and/or non-diagnostic of one's motives. In both cases, the audience is likely to keep on inferring extrinsic motives for brand mentioning even if the communicator conveys attachment to the brand.

**H4:** The beneficial effects of using brand attachment cues in brand-related bragging are mitigated if the cues are seen as non-credible and/or non-diagnostic of motives in a particular communication context.

A series of four studies investigated the hypotheses described in the previous section and conceptually depicted in figure 1.



**Figure 1. Conceptual Model**

## EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Four studies reported in this section support the proposed hypotheses and show that the predicted effects of attachment cues are generalizable across four status-signaling brands from two product categories using five ways of conveying attachment. Study 1 finds support for my hypothesis that conveying attachment while engaging in brand-related bragging leads to more favorable attitudes toward the communicator and that this effect operates through perceived attachment and intrinsic motive inferences. Study 2 shows that the positive effect of conveying attachment while engaging in brand-related bragging also extends to brand-user imagery and is generalizable to different ways of conveying attachment. It also shows that conveying attachment helps communicators manage the warmth and competence related tradeoffs inherent in brand-related bragging. Studies 3 and 4 explore the boundary conditions of this effect by either reducing the credibility or diagnosticity of attachment by making salient two different types of extrinsic motives i.e. status and money.

### Pretest 1

To operationalize brand-related bragging versus a no-bragging control, I selected brands that varied in perceived status within the participant population. In a pre-test, 20 MTurk participants rated 17 car brands on familiarity, likeability and status, each on 7 point scales (not at all familiar/very familiar; dislike very much/like very much; not at all high status/very high status). Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for pretest 1. Based

on the results, I selected Mercedes, BMW and Audi as high status brands (means differing from the status scale midpoint  $M_{\text{Mercedes}} = 6.4$ ,  $t(19) = 14.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{\text{BMW}} = 6.4$ ,  $t(19) = 14.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{\text{Audi}} = 5.75$ ;  $t(19) = 8.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Participants were familiar with these brands ( $M_{\text{Mercedes}} = 5.65$ ;  $M_{\text{BMW}} = 5.75$ ;  $M_{\text{Audi}} = 5.45$ ) and viewed them favorably ( $M_{\text{Mercedes}} = 5.5$ ;  $M_{\text{BMW}} = 5.45$ ;  $M_{\text{Audi}} = 5.65$ ), differing significantly from the midpoint of the scale in all cases (all  $p$ 's  $< .001$ ).

Using the same pre-test, I also selected a lower status brand for study 2. Though participants were familiar with Toyota ( $M = 6.05$ ) and viewed it favorably ( $M = 5.2$ ) (differing significantly from the midpoint of the scale, both  $p$ 's  $< .01$ ), it was not seen as a high status brand as the mean status rating did not differ significantly from the scale midpoint ( $M = 4.0$ ;  $t(19) = 1.7$ ,  $p > 0.1$ ). Moreover, BMW was seen as significantly higher status than Toyota ( $M_{\text{BMW}} = 6.4$ ;  $M_{\text{Toyota}} = 4.0$ ,  $t(19) = 9.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ) supporting the use of BMW and Toyota as relatively high and low status brands respectively in study 2.

<b>Brands</b>	<b>Familiarity</b>	<b>Attitude</b>	<b>Status</b>
Mercedes	<b>5.65</b> <i>1.57</i>	<b>5.50</b> <i>1.24</i>	<b>6.40</b> <i>0.88</i>
BMW	<b>5.75</b> <i>1.65</i>	<b>5.45</b> <i>1.28</i>	<b>6.40</b> <i>0.88</i>
Audi	<b>5.45</b> <i>1.76</i>	<b>5.65</b> <i>1.46</i>	<b>5.75</b> <i>1.21</i>
Toyota	<b>6.05</b> <i>1.28</i>	<b>5.20</b> <i>1.01</i>	<b>4.00</b> <i>1.30</i>
Honda	<b>5.95</b> <i>1.43</i>	<b>5.00</b> <i>1.08</i>	<b>4.10</b> <i>1.25</i>
Ford	<b>6.15</b> <i>0.93</i>	<b>4.85</b> <i>1.66</i>	<b>4.10</b> <i>1.89</i>
Kia	<b>5.40</b> <i>1.76</i>	<b>4.05</b> <i>1.73</i>	<b>3.45</b> <i>1.36</i>
Hyundai	<b>5.70</b> <i>1.69</i>	<b>4.70</b> <i>1.72</i>	<b>3.40</b> <i>1.39</i>
Porsche	<b>5.65</b> <i>1.63</i>	<b>5.35</b> <i>1.35</i>	<b>6.40</b> <i>0.82</i>
Volkswagen	<b>6.05</b> <i>1.19</i>	<b>5.05</b> <i>1.43</i>	<b>4.35</b> <i>1.09</i>
Jaguar	<b>5.65</b> <i>1.50</i>	<b>5.35</b> <i>1.27</i>	<b>6.20</b> <i>0.83</i>
Nissan	<b>5.65</b> <i>1.50</i>	<b>5.15</b> <i>1.39</i>	<b>4.40</b> <i>1.54</i>
Chevrolet	<b>6.10</b> <i>1.37</i>	<b>5.05</b> <i>1.64</i>	<b>4.00</b> <i>1.52</i>
Tesla	<b>4.05</b> <i>2.16</i>	<b>4.75</b> <i>1.62</i>	<b>5.20</b> <i>1.88</i>
Volvo	<b>5.60</b> <i>1.47</i>	<b>5.20</b> <i>1.32</i>	<b>5.10</b> <i>1.48</i>
Lamborghini	<b>5.20</b> <i>1.85</i>	<b>5.15</b> <i>1.39</i>	<b>6.80</b> <i>0.41</i>
Lexus	<b>5.55</b> <i>1.70</i>	<b>5.10</b> <i>1.65</i>	<b>5.80</b> <i>1.11</i>

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Pretest 1**

Note: Means are in **bold** and standard deviations in *italics*

### **Development of Stimuli**

To make the brand-related bragging stimuli realistic, I based them on the popular microblogging site Twitter.com, which allows users to post 140-character updates on a public profile, or ‘timeline’. Microblogging updates can be considered parts of an

autobiographical narrative and therefore, can achieve the goal of positive self-presentation (Dayter 2014; Leary and Kowalsky 1990; Puschmann 2009).

In order to generate tweets that explicitly convey attachment to a brand, I identified cues that could indicate a consumer's attachment to and relationship with a brand based on our exploratory research (Sekhon et al. 2014) and review of the literature on consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998) and brand love (Batra et al. 2012). Attachment cues were generated via tapping into facets of strong brand relationships such as passion/love, interdependence, commitment and self-brand connection (Fournier 1998). I also used anthropomorphic language cues that could convey brand attachment (Chandler and Schwarz 2010; Rauschnabel and Ahuvia 2014; Timpano and Shaw 2013) via tapping into the intimacy facet of brand relationships (Fournier 1998). I then translated these cues into Twitter hashtags and appended the hashtags to the control tweets to generate experimental tweets that explicitly conveyed brand attachment while keeping rest of the message the same.

### **Study 1: Mentioning High Status Brands**

Study 1 tested hypothesis H1, that is, looked at the effect of conveying attachment on attitude towards communicators who mention a high status car brand using one of three high status brands (Mercedes, BMW or Audi) as replicates.

### *Procedure*

MTurk participants ( $n = 301$ ; 57% female) were asked to imagine checking their Twitter feed and seeing a tweet from a casual acquaintance named Pat. They read the following instructions:

“On the next page you will see a tweet posted by a person named Pat. Take some time to imagine that Pat is a casual acquaintance of yours; you don't know much about Pat but you are following Pat on Twitter. Now imagine that you are checking your Twitter feed and you see a Tweet from Pat. Please take your time to read the tweet on the next page carefully. You will be asked several questions about it.”

After reading the tweet, the participants indicated their perceptions of Pat's attachment to the brand, attitude towards Pat, attitude towards the brand, assessment of Pat's motives for tweeting and demographic information. The complete scales are given below in the “measures” section.

### *Manipulation*

Presence (vs. absence of) an attachment cue was manipulated in a tweet by adding a cue tapping into the brand relationship facet of love/passion (Fournier 1998) in the form of a Twitter hashtag. Participants read one of the following six tweets in a between-subjects design

Tweets without attachment cues:

*Driving around on Friday night #Mercedes (#BMW) (#Audi)*

Tweets with attachment cues:

*Driving around on Friday night #LoveMyMercedes (#LoveMyBMW)*

*(#LoveMyAudi)*

#### *Measures*

Perceived attachment to the brand was measured by adapting Thomson, MacInnis, and Park's (2005) scale to reflect the point of view of observers, rather than individuals' perception of their own brand attachment. Specifically, participants rated the extent to which following words described the communicator's typical feelings towards the brand: affectionate, friendly, loved, passionate, delighted, captivated, bonded, attached, and connected (1 = "Not at all", 9 = "Very much") ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ) (adapted from Matherly 2013).

The dependent variable of interest was attitude towards the communicator, which was measured using three items ("dislike/like," "negative/positive" and "unfavorable/favorable"), all on 9-point scales ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ). Attitude towards the brand was also measured using the same three items ( $\alpha = 0.98$ ). Inferred motives were measured by asking participants whether they thought that Pat tweeted about the Mercedes/BMW/Audi because of "intrinsic rewards such as personal enjoyment rather than extrinsic rewards such as status" (1 = *primarily extrinsic rewards*, 9 = *primarily intrinsic rewards*) (adapted from Van Boven et al. 2010). As potential control variables, participants also indicated how much they personally feel connected to the brand mentioned (1= not at all; 9= very much) and how much they think that people use the mentioned brand for showing off (1= not at all; 9= very much).

### *Results and Discussion*

Given the lack of any theoretical basis for expecting the effects of conveying attachment to be qualified by the high status brand replicate factor, as well as the failure of the two-way interaction term to attain significance in all subsequent analyses (all  $p$ 's > 0.1), I collapsed across the three replicates. The results reported here are without including any covariates and examinations of covariates only strengthened the reported effects. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for this study. I first examined whether perceived attachment was higher when attachment was conveyed in the tweet. Consistent with expectations, a one-way ANOVA revealed an effect of attachment cue ( $F(1, 299) = 23.04, p < .001$ ) on perceived attachment to the mentioned brand, with higher perceived attachment in the cue condition ( $M = 7.71$ ) compared to the no cue condition ( $M = 6.96$ ). Because mentioning a brand on social media is in itself likely to signal some brand attachment, perceived attachment was high overall (Park et al. 2009).

H1 predicted that presence (vs. absence) of attachment cues in brand-related bragging leads to more favorable impressions of the communicator. As predicted, conveying attachment led to more positive attitudes towards the communicator ( $M = 5.53$ ) compared to the no cue condition ( $M = 5.00; F(1, 299) = 5.40, p < .05$ ). Further, inferred motives for tweeting were perceived as relatively more intrinsic in the cue condition ( $M = 4.37$ ) compared to the no cue condition ( $M = 3.28; F(1, 299) = 13.87, p < .001$ ).

There was no effect of the presence (vs. absence) of attachment cue on attitude towards the mentioned brands ( $M_{\text{cue}} = 6.5; M_{\text{No cue}} = 6.7; p > .4$ ). The attitude measure

might not be sensitive enough to capture changes in brand impressions based on a single exposure to a bragging tweet, particularly for the strong brands used in this context. Therefore, the following studies focused on brand user imagery, which is likely to be more sensitive in terms of measuring the effect of negative consumer actions on brand equity (Hogg et al. 2009).

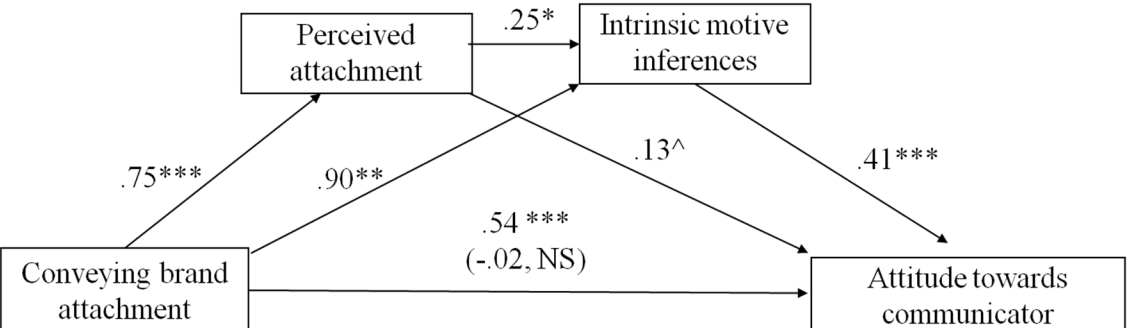
<b>Measures</b>	<b>No Cue (n=151)</b>	<b>Cue (n=150)</b>
Perceived attachment	<b>6.96</b> <i>1.56</i>	<b>7.71</b> <i>1.11</i>
Inferred intrinsic motives	<b>3.28</b> <i>2.43</i>	<b>4.37</b> <i>2.63</i>
Attitude towards communicator	<b>5.00</b> <i>2.04</i>	<b>5.53</b> <i>1.87</i>
Attitude towards mentioned brand	<b>6.68</b> <i>1.78</i>	<b>6.51</b> <i>1.99</i>

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Study 1**

Note: Means are in **bold** and standard deviations in *italics*

*Multistep Mediation Analysis.* H3 hypothesized that conveying attachment while bragging will lead to higher perceived attachment which will increase inferences intrinsic motives, which in turn leads to more favorable attitude towards the communicator. To test this hypothesis, I used the bootstrapping procedure SPSS PROCESS (Hayes 2013) and estimated a serial mediation model (Model 6). Consistent with the prediction, the indirect effect of conveying attachment on attitudes towards the communicator through perceived attachment and inferred motives was significant (figure 2) because the 95% confidence interval (CI) around the estimate excluded zero (B = 0.54; SE = .14; 95% bootstrap CI: 0.32 to 0.85), supporting H3. However, there was no direct effect of attachment cues on attitude towards the communicator (B = -0.02, SE = .20, 95%

bootstrap CI: -0.41 to .37). In sum, this study showed that conveying attachment while bragging leads to more positive attitudes towards the communicator via perceived attachment and motive inferences for brand mentioning.



**Figure 2. Multistep Mediation Model in Study 1**

Note: The path coefficients are unstandardized betas. Values in parentheses indicate the effect after controlling for mediators. ^ $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## **Study 2: Generalizing Across Attachment Cues**

Study 2 had three main goals: 1) to show that the effects of study 1 generalize across other ways of conveying attachment; 2) to show that the effect of conveying attachment while bragging impacts brand-user imagery (as hypothesized in H2), and 3) to show that conveyed attachment while bragging helps one manage the tradeoff between warmth and competence. To achieve the first goal, this study used five tweets mentioning a high status car brand (BMW) while conveying brand attachment in different ways. To achieve the second goal, brand-user imagery was measured. To achieve the third goal, this study had to show that one can benefit in terms competence perceptions by bragging as compared to not bragging while avoiding the warmth related costs by bragging with attachment cues as compared to bragging without attachment cues. Therefore, this study had two control tweets that did not explicitly convey attachment – one mentioning BMW to show the difference in perceived warmth between conveying attachment (vs. not) while bragging and another mentioning the relatively low status car brand Toyota (a no-bragging control) to show the difference in perceived competence between bragging and not bragging. To keep the bragging and no-bragging control conditions equivalent, the no-bragging condition was operationalized as mentioning of a low status brand in the same tweet as the one used in the bragging condition.

### *Procedure*

The procedure stayed the same as in study 1. MTurk participants ( $n = 871$ ; 59.3% female) read a tweet from a casual acquaintance (please see Appendix 1 for complete instructions) and responded to a series of questions regarding perceived brand attachment, attitudes toward the communicator, perceptions of communicator's warmth and competence, brand user imagery and inferred motives for tweeting. Finally, participants rated the perceived "bragginess" of the tweets to confirm that the tweets mentioning a high status brand (BMW) are seen as more braggish than the one mentioning a low status brand (Toyota). The complete scales are given below in the "measures" section.

### *Manipulation*

Participants read one of the following seven tweets in a between-subjects design. The first five tweets included attachment cues tapping into different facets of strong brand relationships (Fournier 1998) such as passion/love, interdependence (separation distress), commitment (long history with the brand), and self-brand connection; as well as anthropomorphic language (Rauschnabel and Ahuvia 2014) respectively. The sixth tweet was a "no attachment control" and the seventh was a "no-bragging" control condition.

*Driving around on Friday night #BMW #MyLove*

*Driving around on Friday night #BMW #Can'tLiveWithoutIt*

*Driving around on Friday night #BMW #WeGoWayBack*

*Driving around on Friday night #BMW #It'sPartOfMe*

*Driving around on Friday night #BMW #SheIsABeauty*

*Driving around on Friday night #BMW*

*Driving around on Friday night #Toyota*

### *Measures*

To measure Pat's perceived attachment to the brand, I asked "To what extent do you think Pat's typical feelings towards the Toyota brand can be characterized by affection, love, passion, captivation, connection, attachment, friendship, delight, bondedness?" ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ; Thomson et al 2005). Then, after indicating their overall attitude towards Pat ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ) as in study 1, participants also rated Pat on a number of specific traits capturing warmth (warm, friendly, nice) ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ), sincerity (authentic, genuine, sincere) ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ) and competence (financially well-off, successful, wealthy) ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ) all on 9-point scales (1= not at all; 9= very much).

Brand-user imagery was measured (Sirgy, 1982) by asking participants to generate three adjectives describing typical owners of a BMW/Toyota. Participants saw the following instructions:

"We're interested in finding out which adjectives or characteristics come to mind when you think of a typical BMW/Toyota owner. For example, you might describe a typical Banana Republic user with adjectives polite and intelligent but also boring and unambitious. Please think about the kind of person who typically owns a BMW/Toyota. Imagine this person in your mind and then write three adjectives that describe a typical owner of a BMW/Toyota."

Finally, perceived braggyness of the tweet was measured using three items:

boastful, braggy, and humble (reverse-coded) on a 9-point scale (1= not at all; 9= very much;  $\alpha = 0.82$ ).

In response to the open-ended brand-user imagery question, 567 unique adjectives were generated. Table 6 shows all the adjectives mentioned at least five times and the percentage of times that trait was mentioned. To quantify the favorability of brand user image adjectives generated by our participants, a separate group of 386 MTurk coders was asked to rate the desirability of these adjectives and the likability of someone possessing these traits on 7-point scales (1= not at all; 7= very much) (adapted from Van Boven et al. 2010). Each coder rated 30 randomly chosen adjectives and each adjective was rated by an average of 20 coders. These ratings provided a composite measure of favorability of brand-user imagery ( $r = 0.98$ ).

### *Results and Discussion*

The 12 participants who failed to identify the tweet that they saw in an attention check question were dropped, leaving 859 participants in our analyses. The exclusion of participants was not related to the experimental conditions or their interaction. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for this study. Given that this study had seven between-subject conditions, I used the planned contrasts shown in tables 2 and 3 to make relevant comparisons with the two control conditions.

*Braggyness of the Tweet.* As expected, tweets mentioning BMW were perceived as more braggy than were tweets mentioning Toyota ( $F(6, 852) = 59.29, p < .001$ ). Planned contrasts revealed that perceived braggyness of each of the tweet mentioning BMW was higher as compared to the Toyota-control tweet (see Table 3 for the means

and Table 4 for the t-value of every contrast). Thus, mentioning a high status brand (versus a low status brand) leads to greater perceived braggyness.

*Perceived Competence.* I expected that bragging (e.g., mentioning a high status brand) would improve perceptions of competence relative to a control condition mentioning a low status brand. Consistent with this prediction, the communicator was perceived as more competent when the tweets mentioned BMW versus Toyota ( $F(6, 852) = 39.43, p < .001$ ). Planned contrasts revealed that the perceived competence of the communicator was higher for each of the tweets mentioning BMW as compared to the Toyota-control tweet. This shows that there are benefits of brand-related bragging in terms of creating competence impressions.

	<b>BMW- Can't Live Without It</b> (n=125)	<b>BMW- It's Part of Me</b> (n=125)	<b>BMW- My Love</b> (n=119)	<b>BMW- She Is a Beauty</b> (n=124)	<b>BMW- We Go Way Back</b> (n=122)	<b>BMW- Control (No cue)</b> (n=124)	<b>Toyota- Control (No cue)</b> (n=120)
Perceived attachment	<b>7.33</b> <i>1.42</i>	<b>7.36</b> <i>1.39</i>	<b>6.98</b> <i>1.67</i>	<b>7.14</b> <i>1.32</i>	<b>6.97</b> <i>1.50</i>	<b>6.58</b> <i>1.50</i>	<b>5.81</b> <i>1.82</i>
Inferred intrinsic motives	<b>3.62</b> <i>2.45</i>	<b>3.28</b> <i>2.14</i>	<b>3.80</b> <i>2.58</i>	<b>3.83</b> <i>2.61</i>	<b>4.00</b> <i>2.58</i>	<b>3.00</b> <i>2.22</i>	<b>5.87</b> <i>2.18</i>
Braggyness of the tweet	<b>7.62</b> <i>1.30</i>	<b>7.81</b> <i>1.21</i>	<b>7.45</b> <i>1.48</i>	<b>7.59</b> <i>1.32</i>	<b>7.23</b> <i>1.51</i>	<b>7.66</b> <i>1.36</i>	<b>4.98</b> <i>1.70</i>
Perceived competence	<b>7.22</b> <i>1.50</i>	<b>7.12</b> <i>1.23</i>	<b>7.17</b> <i>1.35</i>	<b>7.35</b> <i>1.36</i>	<b>7.11</b> <i>1.29</i>	<b>6.90</b> <i>1.45</i>	<b>5.06</b> <i>1.55</i>
Perceived warmth	<b>5.52</b> <i>1.72</i>	<b>5.31</b> <i>1.55</i>	<b>5.50</b> <i>1.67</i>	<b>5.80</b> <i>1.54</i>	<b>5.81</b> <i>1.67</i>	<b>5.06</b> <i>1.48</i>	<b>6.01</b> <i>1.54</i>
Perceived sincerity	<b>5.38</b> <i>1.90</i>	<b>4.91</b> <i>1.73</i>	<b>5.05</b> <i>1.99</i>	<b>5.41</b> <i>1.81</i>	<b>5.54</b> <i>1.92</i>	<b>4.54</b> <i>1.70</i>	<b>5.66</b> <i>1.77</i>
Attitude towards communicator	<b>5.67</b> <i>2.21</i>	<b>5.24</b> <i>1.96</i>	<b>5.31</b> <i>2.08</i>	<b>5.62</b> <i>1.93</i>	<b>5.75</b> <i>2.00</i>	<b>4.80</b> <i>1.76</i>	<b>5.94</b> <i>1.74</i>
Favorability of brand-user imagery	<b>5.19</b> <i>1.67</i>	<b>4.86</b> <i>1.52</i>	<b>4.83</b> <i>1.72</i>	<b>5.15</b> <i>1.41</i>	<b>5.13</b> <i>1.61</i>	<b>4.71</b> <i>1.58</i>	<b>6.49</b> <i>1.06</i>

**Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Study 2**

Note: Means are in **bold** and standard deviations in *italics*

Contrasts (with Toyota-Control)	Braggyness of the tweet	Perceived competence
Contrast 1 BMW-Control	14.77**	10.27**
Contrast 2 My Love	13.50**	11.68**
Contrast 3 Can't Live Without It	14.60**	12.07**
Contrast 4 We Go Way Back	12.34**	11.39**
Contrast 5 She Is A Beauty	14.41**	12.81**
Contrast 6 It's Part Of Me	15.65**	11.52**

**Table 4. T-values for Contrasts with Toyota-Control as Reference in Study 2**

*Note: One-tailed significance values:  $^{\wedge}p < .10$ ,  $*p < .05$ ,  $**p < .01$*

*As all the contrasts above are planned contrasts, Bonferroni corrections are not required here. However, when pairwise post-hoc comparisons are made with Bonferroni corrections, all results shown above remain significant.*

*Perceived Attachment.* Overall, the tweet type had a significant impact on perceived attachment ( $F(6, 852) = 15.37, p < .001$ ). As expected, planned contrasts revealed that perceived attachment was higher for all tweets conveying attachment as compared to the BMW-control tweet. In contrast, perceived attachment was lower for the Toyota-control tweet as compared to the BMW-control tweet (see Table 3 for the means and Table 5 for the t-value of every contrast). Though the two control tweets did not convey attachment to either of the brands, mentioning BMW led to higher perceptions of attachment as compared to Toyota which is not unexpected. It is likely that the participants made an umbrella judgment about perceived attachment based on the status of the mentioned brand such that the communicator mentioning the higher status brand was seen as more attached to it. Similar (and expected) differences were found between the two control tweets for other measures too. As the BMW-control tweet was seen as

more braggy compared to the Toyota-control tweet, it led to more negative attitudes towards the communicator, lower perceived warmth, lower perceived sincerity, lower intrinsic motive inferences as well as less favorable brand-user imagery. Please note that this does not mean that BMW users are in general seen less favorably than Toyota. It just shows that being exposed to consumer actions like name-dropping of a brand on social media hurts the image of BMW users more as compared to Toyota users as mentioning a higher status brand is perceived as more braggy than mentioning a lower status brand.

Contrasts (with BMW-control)	Perceived attachment	Attitude towards communicator	Favorability of user imagery	Perceived warmth	Perceived sincerity	Inferred intrinsic motives
Contrast 1 My Love	2.07*	2.06*	0.60(NS)	2.17*	2.18*	2.59**
Contrast 2 Can't Live Without It	3.89**	3.51**	2.45*	2.26*	3.62**	2.05*
Contrast 3 We Go Way Back	2.04*	3.81**	2.13*	3.71**	4.29**	3.27**
Contrast 4 She Is A Beauty	2.88**	3.30**	2.26*	3.67**	3.76**	2.72**
Contrast 5 It's Part Of Me	4.04**	1.79*	0.78(NS)	1.24(NS)	1.60^	0.92 (NS)
Contrast 6 Toyota-Control	-3.96**	4.56**	9.07**	4.67**	4.76**	9.32**

**Table 5. T-values for Contrasts with BMW-Control as Reference in Study 2**

*Note: One-tailed significance values: ^ $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$*

*As all the contrasts above are planned contrasts, Bonferroni corrections are not required here. However, when pairwise post-hoc comparisons are made Bonferroni corrections, some of the results shown fail to reach significance.*

*Attitude towards the Communicator.* The tweet type had a significant impact on attitudes towards the communicator ( $F(6, 852) = 4.76, p < .001$ ), in support of hypothesis H1. H1 predicted that presence (vs. absence) of attachment cues in brand-related bragging leads to more favorable impressions of the communicator. As predicted, planned contrasts revealed that attitudes towards the communicator were higher for all

tweets conveying attachment as well as for the Toyota-control tweet as compared to the BMW-control tweet. Thus, regardless of how attachment is conveyed, it improves the impression of the communicator engaged in brand-related bragging.

*Favorability of brand-user imagery.* The tweet type had a significant impact on favorability of brand-user imagery ( $F(6, 852) = 18.54, p < .001$ ), in support of hypothesis H2. H2 predicted that presence (vs. absence) of attachment cues in brand-related bragging leads to more favorable brand user imagery. With two exceptions, planned contrasts revealed that the user imagery for the mentioned brand was more favorable for all tweets conveying attachment as well as for the Toyota-control tweet as compared to the BMW-control tweet. The effect of favorability of user imagery was not significant for the “#MyLove” and “#It’sPartOfMe” cues. Overall, the effects for these two cues were weaker than others across all measures. My intuition behind this finding is that these two cues, as operationalized here, are not as strong as others. Consumers can use the word “love” loosely for brands without really meaning it (Batra et al. 2012); thus saying that one loves BMW may not be seen as a particularly strong and credible indicator of attachment by the audience. Similarly, the cue “#It’sPartOfMe” could be seen by observers as making a statement that one is as good as a BMW and in a way more even more braggy which is supported by the fact that this tweet was rated the highest on the perceived bragginess measure. Overall, the results show that conveying attachment improves favorability of user imagery in the case of brand-related bragging.

BMW -Can't Live Without It		BMW- It's Part Of Me		BMW- My love		BMW- She Is A Beauty		BMW- We go way back		Toyota- Control (No cue)		BMW- Control (No cue)	
Trait	%	Trait	%	Trait	%	Trait	%	Trait	%	Trait	%	Trait	%
wealthy/rich	15.45	wealthy/rich	18.52	wealthy/rich	15.47	wealthy/rich	22.31	wealthy/rich	15.45	smart	6.39	wealthy/rich	16.27
successful	5.15	snobby	4.23	successful	5.25	successful	5.51	successful	5.15	practical	3.89	successful	3.94
arrogant	3.52	arrogant	3.97	snobby	3.04	snobby	3.94	arrogant	3.52	average	3.61	snobby	3.67
pretentious	3.25	successful	3.70	arrogant	2.76	materialistic	3.41	pretentious	3.25	intelligent	3.33	arrogant	3.15
snobby	2.44	materialistic	2.91	ambitious	2.49	ambitious	3.15	snobby	2.44	middle class	2.78	materialistic	3.15
materialistic	2.44	pretentious	2.12	pretentious	1.93	flashy	1.84	materialistic	2.44	boring	2.50	ambitious	2.36
well off	2.44	ambitious	2.12	stuck up	1.66	arrogant	1.57	well off	2.44	frugal	2.50	snooty	1.84
ambitious	2.17	smart	1.85	classy	1.66	conceited	1.57	ambitious	2.17	normal	2.22	flashy	1.57
confident	1.63	shallow	1.85	materialistic	1.66	classy	1.31	confident	1.63	loyal	2.22	confident	1.57
smart	1.63	rude	1.32	smart	1.38	fancy	1.31	smart	1.63	hard working	2.22	well off	1.57
stylish	1.36	intelligent	1.32	flashy	1.38	show off	1.31	stylish	1.36	friendly	2.22	selfish	1.31
intelligent	1.36	classy	1.32			pretentious	1.31	intelligent	1.36	fun	1.94	smart	1.31
		cocky	1.32							nice	1.67	pretentious	1.31
		driven	1.32							economical	1.67	snob	1.31
		flashy	1.32							responsible	1.39	snobbish	1.31
										dependable	1.39		

**Table 6. Brand User Imagery Adjectives for Study 2**

Note: All adjectives mentioned at least five times and the percentage of times they were mentioned

*Inferred Intrinsic Motives.* The tweet type had a significant impact on inferred intrinsic motives ( $F(6, 852) = 18.08, p < .001$ ). Planned contrasts revealed that inferred intrinsic motives were higher for all tweets conveying attachment with one exception, as well as for the Toyota-control tweet as compared to the BMW-control tweet. The inferred motives were not different for the “#It’sPartOfMe” cue due to the reasons discussed before. This shows that conveying attachment leads to higher intrinsic motive inferences for brand mentioning.

*Perceived Competence.* I expected that bragging (e.g., mentioning a high status brand) would improve perceptions of competence relative to a control condition mentioning a low status brand. Consistent with this prediction, the communicator was perceived as more competent when the tweets mentioned BMW versus Toyota ( $F(6, 852) = 39.43, p < .001$ ). Planned contrasts revealed that the perceived competence of the communicator was higher for each of the tweets mentioning BMW as compared to the Toyota-control tweet. This shows that there are benefits of brand-related bragging in terms of creating competence impressions.

*Perceived Warmth.* The tweet type had a significant impact on both perceived warmth ( $F(6, 852) = 5.18, p < .001$ ) as well as perceived sincerity ( $F(6, 852) = 5.77, p < .001$ ) of the communicator. As expected, planned contrasts revealed that both perceived warmth and perceived sincerity of the communicator was higher for all tweets conveying attachment, again with the exception of “#It’sPartOfMe” cue, as well as for the Toyota-control tweet as compared to the BMW-control tweet. This shows that conveying attachment particularly improves the warmth and sincerity impressions of the

communicator engaged in brand-related bragging irrespective of the way the attachment is conveyed.

In sum, the effect of conveying attachment on attitude towards the communicator was replicated for five different attachment cues. In addition, the results showed that the communicators mentioning BMW were seen as more competent than the ones mentioning Toyota. Moreover, tweets mentioning BMW were seen as more braggish than the one mentioning Toyota. However, for the tweets mentioning BMW, the communicator was seen as more warm and sincere when the tweet conveyed attachment to BMW. Finally, participants generated more favorable brand-user imagery for three of the attachment cues as compared to the no cue condition, suggesting that conveying brand attachment can mitigate the negative effect of brand-related bragging on the equity of the brand. In sum, this study shows that conveying attachment can help both communicators and brands manage the tradeoffs inherent in brand-related bragging by getting the benefits in terms of conveying competence while avoiding the warmth related costs.

Next two studies look at the boundary conditions of the positive effect of conveying attachment in brand-related bragging communications as hypothesized in H4. I show that the communication context can impact either the credibility or diagnosticity of attachment cues by increasing the salience of extrinsic motives and therefore, can attenuate their positive effects. I look at how the communication context can increase salience of two different types of extrinsic motives (i.e. status and money) and therefore can impact the credibility and/or diagnosticity of attachment cues.

### **Study 3: Making Status Motives Salient**

Though most consumers brag on social media by mentioning their high status brands in a subtle way, there are instances of blatant bragging (Sekhon et al. 2015). As bragging is by default associated with the extrinsic motive of enhancing one's reputation (Holtgraves and Srull 1989; Tal-Or 2010), blatant brand-related bragging can make the extrinsic motive of status-signaling particularly salient which can either reduce the credibility or diagnosticity of attachment cues. In such cases, conveying attachment may not make clearly braggy posts immune to extrinsic motive inferences. In study 3, the message was manipulated to be blatantly braggy by including the high purchase price of the mentioned brand, making the extrinsic motive of status-signaling particularly salient in order to test H4. This study also aimed to show evidence of mediation via moderation through salience of extrinsic motives. To ensure that the results are generalizable across product categories, I used a different high status brand (Apple Watch) from a different product category. A separate pretest was done to make sure that the participant population is familiar with the Apple brand and that it is considered high status.

#### *Pretest 2*

As in pretest 1, 32 MTurk participants rated three watch brands and three outerwear brands on familiarity, likeability and status each on 7 point scales (not at all familiar/very familiar; dislike very much/like very much; not at all high status/very high status). Table 7 shows the descriptive statistics for pretest 2. Participants perceived Apple Watch to be a high status brand differing significantly from the midpoint of the

scale ( $M = 5.5$ ;  $t(31) = 8.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Also, participants were familiar with the brand ( $M = 4.4$ ;  $t(31) = 3.70$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and viewed it favorably ( $M = 4.25$ ;  $t(31) = 3.74$ ,  $p < .01$ ) differing significantly from the midpoint of the scale. Moreover, the Apple Watch brand was also seen as significantly higher status than another familiar watch brand-Timex ( $M_{\text{Apple}} = 5.5$ ;  $M_{\text{Timex}} = 4.3$ ,  $t(31) = 3.2$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Based on the pretest results, Apple Watch was used as a high status brand in studies 3 and 4.

<b>Brand</b>	<b>Familiarity</b>	<b>Attitude</b>	<b>Status</b>
Apple Watch	<b>4.44</b> <i>1.44</i>	<b>4.25</b> <i>1.14</i>	<b>5.50</b> <i>1.39</i>
Samsung Gear	<b>3.69</b> <i>1.89</i>	<b>4.53</b> <i>1.19</i>	<b>4.63</b> <i>0.83</i>
Timex	<b>4.81</b> <i>1.89</i>	<b>4.94</b> <i>1.48</i>	<b>4.34</b> <i>1.49</i>
Patagonia	<b>2.91</b> <i>2.02</i>	<b>4.16</b> <i>1.44</i>	<b>4.47</b> <i>1.37</i>
Canada Goose	<b>1.81</b> <i>1.47</i>	<b>3.81</b> <i>1.20</i>	<b>3.97</b> <i>1.43</i>
Columbia Sportswear	<b>4.00</b> <i>2.13</i>	<b>4.66</b> <i>1.43</i>	<b>4.50</b> <i>1.41</i>

**Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for Pretest 2**

Note: Means are in **bold** and standard deviations in *italics*

### *Procedure*

This study had a 2 (presence of attachment cue: cue vs. no cue) x 2 (bragging type: subtle vs. blatant) between-subjects design. As in the previous studies, MTurk participants ( $n = 510$ ; 56.7% female) read a tweet from a casual acquaintance (please see Appendix 1 for complete instructions) and responded to a series of questions regarding Pat's perceived attachment to the brand ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ), attitude towards Pat ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ), brand user imagery, inferred motives for tweeting and bragginess of the tweet ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ). In

response to the open-ended brand-user imagery question, 396 unique adjectives were generated. Table 9 shows all the adjectives mentioned at least five times and the percentage of times that trait was mentioned. Out of these 396 adjectives, 220 adjectives were different than those generated in study 2. Therefore, just these new adjectives were rated by a separate group of 149 MTurk coders who were asked to rate the desirability of these adjectives and the likability of someone possessing these traits on 7-point scales (1= not at all; 7= very much) (adapted from Van Boven et al. 2010). This resulted in a composite measure of favorability of brand-user imagery ( $r = 0.97$ ) where each adjective was rated by an average of 20 coders and each coder rated 30 adjectives.

#### *Manipulations*

Same tweet was made blatantly braggy by adding the high purchase price of the mentioned brand, an Apple Watch, in the tweet. Participants read one of the following four tweets in a between-subjects design

Subtle bragging without (*with*) attachment:

*Well-accessorized for Friday night outing with my #AppleWatch (#SheIsABeauty)*

**Blatant** bragging without (*with*) attachment:

*Well-accessorized for Friday night outing with my **600\$** #AppleWatch  
(#SheIsABeauty)*

#### *Measures*

All the measures used were the same as study 2 with the only difference being for the measure for intrinsic/extrinsic motives. Instead of using a bipolar scale as done in

previous studies (based on Van Boven et al. 2010), inference of intrinsic and extrinsic motives was measured separately, as two unipolar scales for personal enjoyment and status-signaling. Participants indicated how much they thought that Pat tweeted the given message because of - 1) "intrinsic rewards" such as personal enjoyment? (1 = "Not at all", 9 = "Very much") and 2) because of "extrinsic rewards" such as status (1 = "Not at all", 9 = "Very much"). This allowed for exploring whether conveying attachment impacts inferences of only intrinsic motives, only extrinsic motives or both in conjunction.

### *Results and Discussion*

The 16 participants who failed to identify the tweet that they saw in an attention check question were dropped, leaving 494 participants in our analyses. The exclusion of participants was not related to the experimental conditions or their interaction. Table 8 shows the descriptive statistics for this study.

*Bragginess of the Tweet.* Though the tweets in all conditions were seen as high on perceived bragginess (higher than 7.4 on a 9-point scale), there was only a significant main effect of the type of bragging on perceived bragginess of the tweet ( $F(1, 490) = 46.91, p < .01$ ) such that the tweet was seen as more braggy in the blatant bragging condition ( $M = 8.31$ ) as compared to the subtle bragging condition ( $M = 7.55$ ).

*Attitude towards the Communicator.* The effect of conveying attachment (vs. not) and type of bragging on attitude towards the communicator was examined. There was a significant main effect of bragging type ( $F(1, 490) = 31.59, p < .001$ ) such that the attitude towards the communicator was significantly more positive in the subtle bragging condition ( $M = 5.2$ ) as compared to the blatant bragging condition ( $M = 4.2$ ). More

importantly, there was a significant interaction effect between presence of attachment cue and the bragging type ( $F(1, 490) = 4.46, p < .05$ ). H4 predicted that the beneficial effects of using brand attachment cues in brand-related bragging are mitigated if the communication context makes the cues non-credible or non-diagnostic of motives. When the bragging was subtle, conveying attachment led to more positive attitude ( $M = 5.57$ ) as compared to not conveying attachment ( $M = 4.87; F(1, 490) = 7.49, p < .01$ ), replicating the results in previous studies. In contrast and as predicted in H4, when the bragging was blatant, conveying attachment did not lead to differences in attitude towards the communicator ( $M = 4.17$ ) as compared to not conveying attachment ( $M = 4.24; F(1, 490) = 0.07, NS$ ). These results show that when bragging is blatant, conveying attachment no longer leads to positive attitude towards the communicator.

*Favorability of Brand-user Imagery.* There was a marginal interaction effect between the presence of attachment cue and the bragging type ( $F(1, 490) = 3.44, p = .06$ ). When bragging was subtle, conveying attachment led to more favorable brand-user imagery ( $M = 5.32$ ) as compared to not conveying attachment ( $M = 4.89; F(1, 490) = 5.40, p < .05$ ). In contrast and as predicted in H4, when bragging was blatant, conveying attachment did not lead to differences in favorability of brand-user imagery ( $M = 4.83$ ) as compared to not conveying attachment ( $M = 4.89; F(1, 490) = 0.10, NS$ ). These results show that when bragging is blatant, conveying attachment no longer leads to more favorable brand-user imagery.

*Perceived Attachment.* There was a significant main effect of conveying attachment ( $F(1, 490) = 6.94, p < .01$ ) such that perceived attachment was higher in the

attachment condition ( $M = 6.57$ ) as compared to the control condition ( $M = 6.18$ ). There was also a marginal main effect of the type of bragging ( $F(1, 490) = 3.43, p = .07$ ) such that perceived attachment was higher in the subtle bragging condition ( $M = 6.52$ ) as compared to the blatant bragging condition ( $M = 6.24$ ). More importantly, there was a significant interaction effect between the presence of attachment cue and the bragging type ( $F(1, 490) = 4.63, p < .05$ ). When bragging was subtle, conveying attachment led to higher perceived attachment ( $M = 6.87$ ) as compared to not conveying attachment ( $M = 6.16; F(1, 490) = 11.63, p < .01$ ). In contrast, when bragging was blatant, conveying attachment did not lead to higher perceived attachment ( $M = 6.27$ ) as compared to not conveying attachment ( $M = 6.20; F(1, 490) = 0.12, NS$ ). These results show that when bragging is blatant, the attachment cue itself becomes non-credible impacting perceived attachment.

*Extrinsic versus Intrinsic Motives.* Finally, I tested the effects on inferred intrinsic and extrinsic motives. As inferred intrinsic and extrinsic motives were measured separately as two unipolar scales, I first analyzed the effects on the two types of motives separately. Though the interaction effects were directional and as predicted in both cases, they failed to reach significance. Therefore, a bipolar index of relative intrinsic motives was created by subtracting the inferred extrinsic motive from inferred intrinsic motives. The effect was analyzed again on this relative intrinsic motive index. There was a significant main effect of bragging type ( $F(1, 490) = 5.99, p < .05$ ) such that the participants inferred significantly more intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) motives in the subtle bragging condition ( $M = -1.84$ ) as compared to the blatant bragging condition ( $M =$

-2.44). More importantly, as predicted, there was a marginal interaction effect between the presence of attachment cue and the bragging type ( $F(1, 490) = 3.55, p = .06$ ). When bragging was subtle, conveying attachment led to higher intrinsic motive inference ( $M = -1.47$ ) as compared to not conveying attachment ( $M = -2.21; F(1, 490) = 4.53, p < .05$ ). In contrast, when bragging was blatant, conveying attachment did not lead to differences in intrinsic motive inference ( $M = -2.54$ ) as compared to not conveying attachment ( $M = -2.34; F(1, 490) = 0.3, NS$ ). These results show that when bragging is blatant, conveying attachment no longer leads to inferences of higher intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) motives.

Measures	Subtle bragging		Blatant Bragging	
	Cue ( <i>n</i> =124)	No Cue ( <i>n</i> =127)	Cue ( <i>n</i> =121)	No Cue ( <i>n</i> =122)
Braggyness of the tweet	<b>7.47</b> <i>1.45</i>	<b>7.64</b> <i>1.36</i>	<b>8.37</b> <i>0.85</i>	<b>8.25</b> <i>1.16</i>
Perceived attachment	<b>6.87</b> <i>1.45</i>	<b>6.16</b> <i>1.78</i>	<b>6.27</b> <i>1.77</i>	<b>6.20</b> <i>1.63</i>
Inferred intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) motives	<b>-1.47</b> <i>2.65</i>	<b>-2.20</b> <i>2.56</i>	<b>-2.54</b> <i>2.59</i>	<b>-2.34</b> <i>3.13</i>
Attitude towards communicator	<b>5.57</b> <i>2.07</i>	<b>4.87</b> <i>1.79</i>	<b>4.17</b> <i>1.99</i>	<b>4.24</b> <i>2.20</i>
Favorability of brand-user imagery	<b>5.32</b> <i>1.39</i>	<b>4.89</b> <i>1.37</i>	<b>4.83</b> <i>1.65</i>	<b>4.89</b> <i>1.54</i>

**Table 8. Descriptive Statistics for Study 3**

Note: Means are in **bold** and standard deviations in *italics*

Subtle Bragging				Blatant Bragging			
Cue		No Cue		Cue		No Cue	
Trait	%	Trait	%	Trait	%	Trait	%
wealthy/rich	12.43	wealthy/rich	11.79	wealthy/rich	8.66	wealthy/rich	11.64
trendy	3.97	trendy	6.41	trendy	4.72	trendy	4.76
tech savvy	3.17	techie/tech-savvy	6.67	tech-savvy	3.41	smart	2.65
intelligent	2.91	snobby	2.31	rich	3.41	intelligent	2.65
smart	2.65	arrogant	2.31	pretentious	2.62	techie/tech-savvy	4.23
snobby	1.85	well off	1.79	materialistic	2.62	pretentious	1.85
well off	1.85	smart	1.79	arrogant	2.62	snob	1.59
young	1.85	busy	1.28	smart	2.36	arrogant	1.59
successful	1.59	boring	1.28	intelligent	2.10	modern	1.32
nerdy	1.59	pretentious	1.28	techie	1.84	hip	1.32
shallow	1.32			successful	1.84	fashionable	1.32
wasteful	1.32			young	1.57	shallow	1.32
geek	1.32			fun	1.31	follower	1.32
superficial	1.32			boring	1.31	young	1.32
pretentious	1.32						
materialistic	1.32						

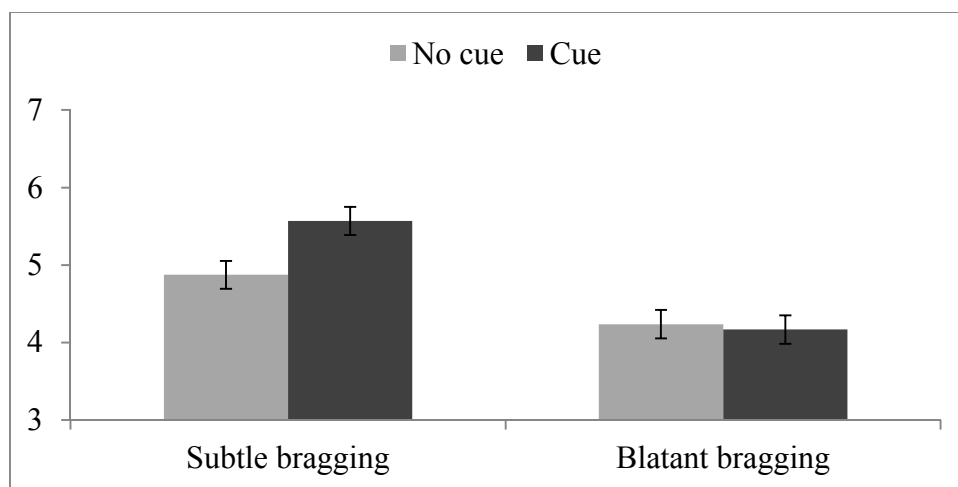
**Table 9. Brand User Imagery Adjectives for Study 3**

Note: All adjectives mentioned at least five times and the percentage of times they were mentioned

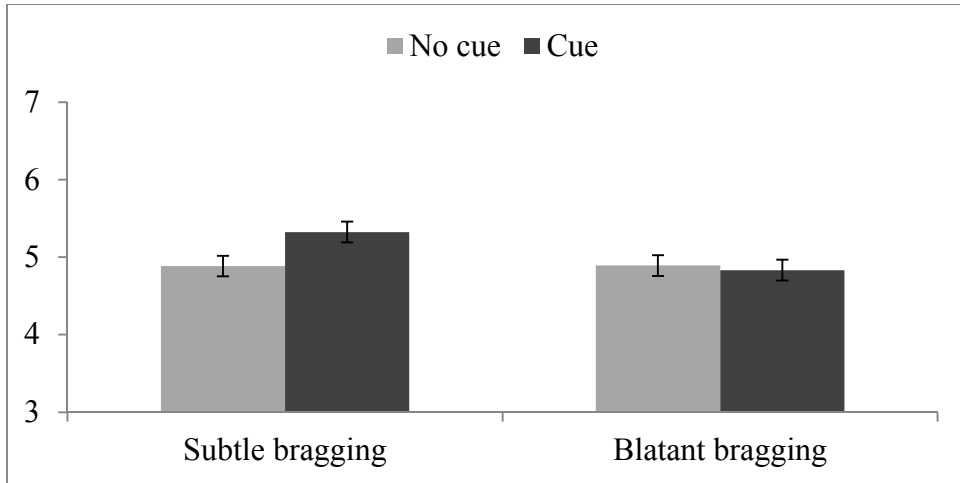
*Moderated Mediation.* To see if the interactive effect of presence of attachment cue (present vs. not) and bragging type (blatant or subtle) on favorability of brand-user imagery is mediated via attitude towards the communicators, a moderated mediation analysis was performed using 1000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs) in PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes 2013). First, the model regressed attitude towards the communicator on attachment cue (coded as 0 = cue absent, 1= cue present), bragging type (coded as 1= blatant and 0= subtle) and their interaction. The interaction predicted attitude towards the communicator ( $\beta = -0.77, t = -2.11, p < .05$ ). Second, the model regressed favorability of brand-user imagery on attitude towards the communicator

and the attachment cue. Attitude towards the communicator predicted favorability of brand-user imagery ( $\beta = 0.37, t = 13.47, p < .001$ ). Third, and most importantly, bootstrapping analysis revealed that attitude towards the communicator fully mediated the effect of conveying attachment on favorability of brand-user imagery for subtle bragging ( $B = 0.26; SE = .09; 95\% \text{ bootstrap CI: } 0.08 \text{ to } 0.43$ ) and not for blatant bragging ( $B = -0.03; SE = .10; 95\% \text{ bootstrap CI: } -0.22 \text{ to } 0.16$ ).

In sum, this study showed that conveying attachment while bragging no longer led to more favorable impressions of the communicator and the brand when bragging was blatant. Blatant bragging decreased the credibility of attachment impacting the perceived attachment. In addition to showing more evidence for the proposed process mechanism via perceived attachment and motive inferences, this study generalizes our results to a different product category.



**Figure 3. Attitudes towards the Communicator as a Function of Presence of Attachment Cue and Bragging Type in Study 3**



**Figure 4. Favorability of Brand-user Imagery as a Function of Presence of Attachment Cue and Bragging Type in Study 3**

### **Study 4: Making Monetary Motives Salient**

In study 4, the positive effects of conveying attachment were attenuated by making salient a different extrinsic motive for brand mentioning, that is, being incentivized by the brand in order to test H4. Moreover, this study showed evidence of mediation via motive inferences by moderating the main effect through experimental manipulation of motives. It is a common practice for firms to encourage consumers to engage in online WOM by offering incentives. Consumers are incentivized to create brand-related content in exchange for entries into prize drawings, discounts, redeemable points or rebates (Streitfeld 2012). However, disclosure of financial incentives increases doubt and accessibility of possible ulterior motives in the minds of the WOM recipients (Stephen, Du Plessis, Bart, and Goncalves 2014; Verlegh et al. 2004). As incentivized consumers have a financial incentive to convey attachment to a brand, the credibility or diagnosticity of their professed attachment to the brand is likely to be reduced. Therefore, when monetary incentives are made salient, conveying attachment to the mentioned brand should no longer lead to positive impressions and can even backfire as the attachment is likely to be considered inauthentic and deceptive.

#### *Procedure*

This study had a 2 (presence of attachment cue: cue vs. no cue) X 2 (brand mentioning incentives- salient vs. not) between-subjects design. The extrinsic motive of getting incentives from the brand was made salient by conveying that the mentioned brand (i.e. Apple Watch) was incentivizing current owners to mention the brand on

Twitter in order to create a buzz around the brand. The rest of the procedure stayed the same wherein MTurk participants ( $n = 432$ ; 48.4% female) read a tweet and responded to the same series of questions regarding Pat's perceived attachment to the brand ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ), attitude towards Pat ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ), brand user imagery, inferred motives for tweeting and braggyness of the tweet ( $\alpha = 0.72$ ). In response to the open-ended brand-user imagery question, 412 unique adjectives were generated. Table 11 shows all the adjectives mentioned at least five times and the percentage of times that trait was mentioned. Out of these 412 adjectives, 109 adjectives were different than those generated in studies 2 and 3. Therefore, just these new adjectives were rated by a separate group of 73 MTurk coders who were asked to rate the desirability of these adjectives and the likability of someone possessing these traits on 7-point scales (1= not at all; 7= very much) (adapted from Van Boven et al. 2010). This resulted in a composite measure of favorability of brand-user imagery ( $r = 0.98$ ) where each adjective was rated by an average of 20 coders and each coder rated 30 adjectives.

### *Manipulations*

Salience of extrinsic motives was manipulated by giving the following information in the “incentive salience” condition:

“On the next page you will see a tweet posted by a person named Pat about his/her Apple Watch. Apple Watch is running a social media promotional campaign where they are giving financial incentives (such as gift cards and free goodies) to Apple Watch owners for mentioning the Apple Watch brand on Twitter in order to create a buzz around Apple Watch.”

Then the participants read one of the following two tweets in a between-subjects design

Bragging without attachment:

*Well-accessorized for Friday night outing with my #AppleWatch*

Bragging **with** attachment:

*Well-accessorized for Friday night outing with my #AppleWatch **#SheIsABeauty***

### *Measures*

All the measures used were the same as study 3 with the only difference being the addition of the manipulation check for the salience of incentive motives. As a different extrinsic motive (monetary incentives) was made salient in this study, participants also indicated how much they thought that Pat tweeted the given message to get financial incentives from Apple (1 = "Not at all", 9 = "Very much").

### *Results and Discussion*

The 4 participants who failed to identify the tweet that they saw in an attention check question were dropped, leaving 428 participants in the analyses. The exclusion of participants was not related to the experimental conditions or their interaction. Table 10 shows the descriptive statistics for this study.

*Incentive salience manipulation check.* There was a main effect of incentive salience on monetary motive inferences, such that monetary motive inferences were higher when incentives were made salient ( $M = 6.46$ ) as compared to when they were not made salient ( $M = 3.17$ ;  $F(1, 424) = 232.46, p < .001$ ).

*Attitude towards the Communicator.* There was a significant interaction effect between presence of attachment cue and incentive salience ( $F(1, 424) = 4.60, p < .05$ ). H4 predicted that the beneficial effects of using brand attachment cues in brand-related bragging are mitigated if the communication context makes the cues non-credible or non-diagnostic of motives. When the incentives for brand mentioning were not made salient, conveying attachment led to more positive attitude ( $M = 5.93$ ) as compared to not conveying attachment ( $M = 5.19; F(1, 424) = 7.6, p < .01$ ). In contrast and as predicted in H4, when the incentives for brand mentioning were made salient, conveying attachment did not lead to differences in attitude towards the communicator ( $M = 5.48$ ) as compared to not conveying attachment ( $M = 5.55; F(1, 424) = 0.06, NS$ ). These results show that when incentives for brand mentioning are made salient, conveying attachment no longer leads more positive attitudes towards the communicator.

*Favorability of brand-user imagery.* There was a marginal interaction effect between presence of attachment cue and incentive salience ( $F(1, 424) = 3.08, p = .08$ ). When the incentives for brand mentioning were not made salient, conveying attachment led to more favorable brand-user imagery ( $M = 5.51$ ) as compared to not conveying attachment ( $M = 5.06; F(1, 424) = 4.89, p < .05$ ). In contrast and as predicted in H4, when the incentives for brand mentioning were made salient, conveying attachment did not lead to differences in favorability of brand-user imagery ( $M = 5.17$ ) as compared to not conveying attachment ( $M = 5.22; F(1, 424) = 0.06, NS$ ). These results show that when incentives for brand mentioning are made salient, conveying attachment no longer leads to more favorable brand-user imagery.

*Perceived Attachment.* There was a main effect of presence of attachment cue ( $F(1, 424) = 4.37, p < .05$ ) such that conveying attachment led to higher perceived attachment ( $M = 6.27$ ) as compared to not conveying attachment ( $M = 5.93$ ). There was also a main effect of incentive salience ( $F(1, 424) = 9.08, p < .01$ ) such that perceived attachment was higher when the incentives for brand mentioning were not made salient ( $M = 6.34$ ) as compared to when the incentives were made salient ( $M = 5.86$ ). There was no interaction effect. These results show that even when incentives for brand mentioning were made salient, conveying attachment led to higher perceived attachment. Therefore, the credibility of attachment was not doubted in this case.

*Extrinsic versus Intrinsic Motives.* Finally, the effects on inferred intrinsic (personal enjoyment) and extrinsic (status) motives were tested. As in study 3, the interaction effects failed to reach significance for each of the individual motives. However, as the main objective was to see the effect on inferences of intrinsic motives relative to status-signaling motives, a bipolar index of relative intrinsic motives (as compared to status motives) was created by subtracting inferred intrinsic motives from inferred status motives as was done in study 3. Then, I analyzed the effect on this relative intrinsic motive index. There was a significant main effect of conveying attachment ( $F(1, 424) = 5.68, p < .05$ ) such that the participants inferred significantly more intrinsic (relative to status) motives when attachment was conveyed ( $M = -1.1$ ) as compared to when it was not conveyed ( $M = -1.7$ ). More importantly, as predicted, there was a marginal interaction effect between presence of attachment cue and incentive salience ( $F(1, 424) = 2.73, p < .1$ ). When incentives were not made salient, conveying attachment

led to higher intrinsic (relative to status) inference ( $M = -0.65$ ) as compared to not conveying attachment ( $M = -1.66$ ;  $F(1, 424) = 7.99, p < .01$ ). In contrast, when incentives were made salient, conveying attachment did not lead to differences in relative intrinsic motive inference ( $M = -1.55$ ) as compared to not conveying attachment ( $M = -1.73$ ;  $F(1, 424) = 0.27, NS$ ). These results show that even if increasing the salience of an extrinsic motive does not impact credibility of an attachment cue, it can still impact its diagnosticity mitigating its effect on intrinsic motive inferences.

Measures	Incentives not salient		Incentives salient	
	Cue ( <i>n</i> =106)	No Cue ( <i>n</i> =104)	Cue ( <i>n</i> =109)	No Cue ( <i>n</i> =109)
Monetary incentive motive inference	<b>3.37</b> <i>2.19</i>	<b>2.97</b> <i>2.12</i>	<b>6.67</b> <i>2.22</i>	<b>6.26</b> <i>2.39</i>
Perceived attachment	<b>6.54</b> <i>1.63</i>	<b>6.14</b> <i>1.73</i>	<b>5.99</b> <i>1.57</i>	<b>5.72</b> <i>1.69</i>
Inferred intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) motives	<b>-0.65</b> <i>2.74</i>	<b>-1.66</b> <i>2.52</i>	<b>-1.55</b> <i>2.51</i>	<b>-1.73</b> <i>2.61</i>
Attitude towards communicator	<b>5.93</b> <i>2.00</i>	<b>5.19</b> <i>1.84</i>	<b>5.48</b> <i>1.96</i>	<b>5.55</b> <i>2.02</i>
Favorability of brand-user imagery	<b>5.51</b> <i>1.38</i>	<b>5.06</b> <i>1.48</i>	<b>5.17</b> <i>1.57</i>	<b>5.22</b> <i>1.55</i>

**Table 10. Descriptive Statistics for Study 4**

Note: Means are in **bold** and standard deviations in *italics*

Incentives not salient				Incentives salient			
Cue		No Cue		Cue		No Cue	
Trait	%	Trait	%	Trait	%	Trait	%
wealthy/rich	12.77	trendy	8.57	wealthy/rich	9.39	wealthy/rich	8.79
trendy	6.23	wealthy/rich	7.62	trendy	7.58	trendy	6.67
techie/tech-savvy	3.43	techie/tech-savvy	5.40	smart	2.42	Fun	3.03
intelligent	3.12	smart	3.49	intelligent	2.12	Pretentious	2.73
smart	2.18	follower	2.22	boring	2.12	follower	2.73
outgoing	1.87	hipster	2.22	fun	2.12	intelligent	2.73
pretentious	1.87	snobby	1.90	materialistic	2.12	Smart	2.12
happy	1.87	boring	1.90	flashy	1.82	techie	1.82
materialistic	1.87	successful	1.90	techie	1.82	stylish	1.82
ambitious	1.87	well off	1.90	follower	1.52	Ambitious	1.82
stylish	1.56	materialistic	1.59	pretentious	1.52	arrogant	1.82
hip	1.56	modern	1.59	nerdy	1.52	superficial	1.52
snobby	1.56	friendly	1.59	annoying	1.52	affluent	1.52
fashionable	1.56			fashionable	1.52	hipster	1.52
						modern	1.52

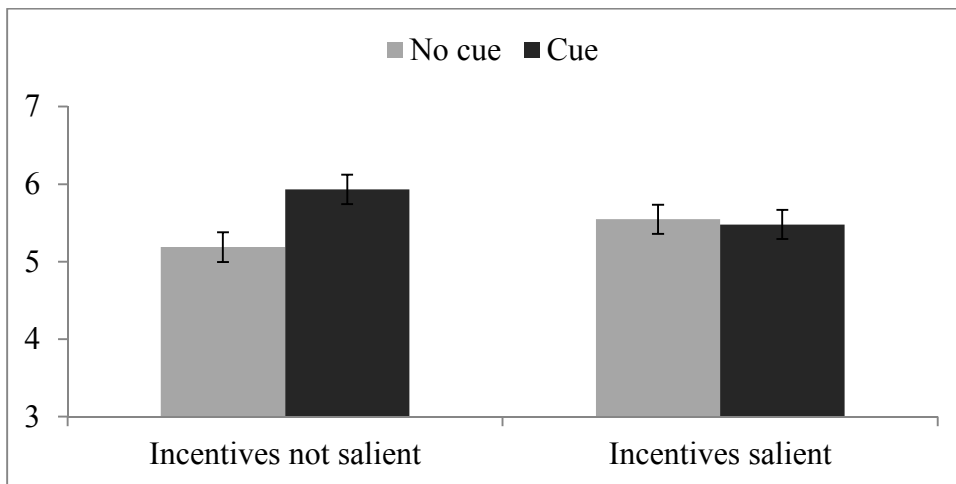
**Table 11. Brand User Imagery Adjectives for Study 4**

Note: All adjectives mentioned at least five times and the percentage of times they were mentioned

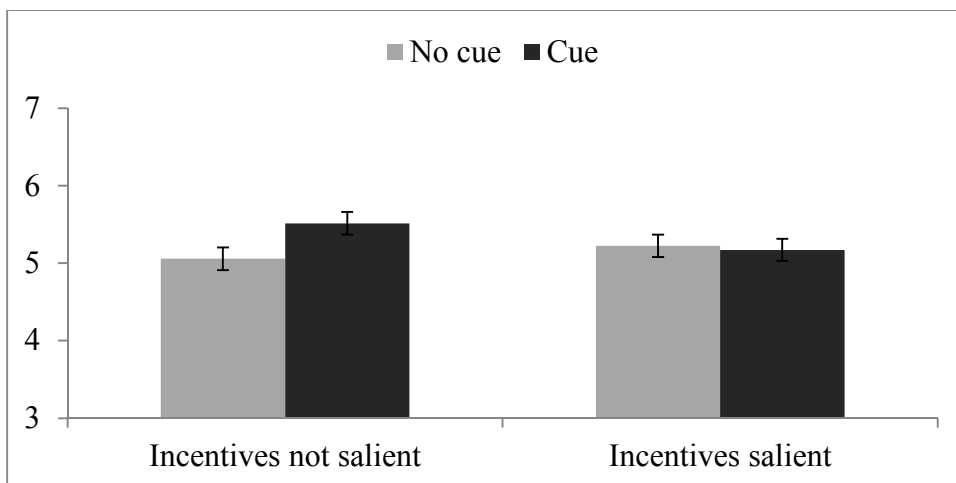
*Moderated Mediation.* To see if the interactive effect of tweet type (conveying attachment vs. not) and incentive salience (salient vs. not) on favorability of brand-user imagery is mediated via attitude towards the communicators, a moderated mediation analysis analyses was performed using 1000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs) in PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes 2013). First, the model regressed attitude towards the communicator on tweet type (coded as 0=not conveying attachment, 1=conveying attachment), incentive salience (coded as 0=incentives not salient, 1= incentives salient) and their interaction. The interaction predicted attitude towards the communicator ( $\beta = -0.81, t = -2.15, p < .05$ ). Second, the model regressed

favorability of brand-user imagery on attitude towards the communicator and presence of attachment cue. Attitude towards the communicator predicted favorability of brand-user imagery ( $\beta = 0.40, t = 12.55, p < .001$ ). Third, and most importantly, bootstrapping analysis revealed that attitude towards the communicator fully mediated the effect of conveying attachment on favorability of brand-user imagery when incentives were not made salient ( $B = 0.30; SE = .11; 95\% \text{ bootstrap CI: } 0.08 \text{ to } 0.51$ ) and not when incentives were made salient ( $B = -0.03; SE = .11; 95\% \text{ bootstrap CI: } -0.25 \text{ to } 0.17$ ).

Therefore, this study shows that conveying attachment can no longer help manage the tradeoffs of brand-related bragging if salience of other extrinsic motives (such as financial incentives) reduces the diagnosticity of attachment.



**Figure 5. Attitudes towards the Communicator as a Function of Presence of Attachment Cue and Incentive Salience in Study 4**



**Figure 6. Favorability of Brand-user Imagery as a Function of Presence of Attachment Cue and Incentive Salience in Study 4**

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

### Theoretical and Managerial Implications

Brand-related bragging is becoming common on social media both organically as well as due to marketers' actions (Bernstein 2012; Berger 2013). More and more firms are encouraging consumers to mention their brands on social media. However, past research suggests that negative consumer actions such as bragging can lead to brand dilution and brand avoidance (Ferraro et al. 2013; Lee, Motion, and Conroy 2009). This dissertation offers a holistic understanding of the effects of brand-related bragging and explores ways in which negative effects of such bragging on communicator and brand impressions can be attenuated. It shows that conveying attachment to a brand while bragging can lead to inferences of more intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) motives and can mitigate the negative effects of bragging on impressions of the communicator as well as the brand. It further shows that the positive effect of conveying brand attachment while bragging depends on the diagnosticity and credibility of attachment in a particular context, which in turn depends on whether the context makes extrinsic motives salient or not. In sum, this research leads to a broader theoretical framework that can help understand brand-related bragging and suggests practical ways to mitigate its negative consequences. Understanding brand-related bragging interactions on social media is also important due to their easily observable, highly public and contagious nature (Berger, 2013).

Until now, the WOM literature has mostly focused on the impact of reviews and explicit recommendations on brand image. However, consumers also mention brands when they talk about their everyday lives outside of a review/recommendation context. Sekhon et al. (2015) identified different narratives consumers create around their brand mentions. My dissertation extends that descriptive work by showing that mundane brand mentions can impact impressions of both communicators as well as brands. Most academic research on brand mentions maintains a gross definition of the construct, noting simply whether and under what conditions is a given brand mentioned or not (Berger, 2014). Marketing practitioners, on the other hand, focus just on the frequency of mentions and at the most, code the valence of brand-mentioning statements assuming that all mentions in positive/neutral statements are good as they increase brand visibility. This dissertation encourages a more nuanced understanding on the content and the context of brand mentions by exploring differential effects on brand impressions depending upon how the brands are mentioned. This perspective allows for managerial insights for the contexts in which to encourage brand mentions in order to build (rather than dilute) brand equity. This research can also be instrumental in incorporation of this important phenomenon into our existing theories of word-of-mouth and conspicuous consumption.

This research also makes other important contributions to the word-of-mouth literature. Though extensive research has looked at what motivates consumers to share WOM (Berger 2014), it is not clear how WOM recipients ascribe motives to a source and how these motive inferences impact the persuasiveness of WOM. As persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994) leads to motive inferences for firm-initiated

communication, this research will help understand motive inferences for consumer-initiated communications. Moreover, this research will also show how the cues impacting motive inferences for WOM communication are similar (such as monetary incentives) or different (such as brand attachment) than those for firm-initiated communication.

Additionally, word-of-mouth research has mostly examined whether, when and how frequently a particular product/brand is discussed with scant focus on the content of WOM (Berger 2014). However, recent work has begun to look at how WOM content impacts consumer and product evaluations (Hamilton, Vohs, and McGill 2014; Kronrod and Danziger 2013; Moore 2012). Our research has identified a novel WOM content dimension (brand attachment cues) specific to the marketing domain that has not been studied previously in either WOM or communication literatures and shows how it interacts with other theoretical and substantial constructs to impact communicator and brand impressions.

Another important contribution of this research is to the consumer impression formation literature, which has only focused on how people make inferences about other consumers based on the products/brands they purchase or display (Ferraro et al. 2013; Pancer 2013). Our research extends this research by investigating how the narrative that surrounds a brand-mentioning message leads to intrinsic or extrinsic motive inferences. By identifying the theoretical underpinnings of what leads to extrinsic and intrinsic motive inferences for brand mentioning, our research explicates the process by which brand dilution can occur from everyday brand mentions of consumers.

### **Future Research Directions**

An important future research question based on this dissertation is exploring theoretical reasons for why there was no significant effect of the “My Love” cue on brand-user imagery and of the “It’s part of me” cue on inferred motives, perceived warmth, perceived sincerity as well as brand-user imagery. This could be due to the inherent differences in the signaling value of the brand-relationship facets these cues are drawing from (passion/love and self-brand connection respectively) or due to the way these cues are operationalized in this research. The first reason seems improbable as the brand-relationship facets of passion/love and self-brand connection are considered the most essential components of any strong brand relationship (Fournier 1998; Park et al. 2010) and therefore, should be important indicators of brand attachment theoretically. However, I will consider some theoretical reasons behind both the reasons and suggest some future directions to explore.

I will consider the “It’s part of me” cue first as it has no/weak effects for a number of measures. Escalas and Bettman (2003) propose that consumers build connections with brands for either self-verification (constructing their self- concept) or self-enhancement (communicating their positive self-concept to others). This distinction between constructing versus presenting oneself using brands becomes even more relevant in the context of conveying self-brand connection with a status-signaling brand. When an attachment cue taps into self-brand connection facet, the way the cue is operationalized can make either self-construction or self-enhancement a more likely motive. I suggest that if the cue is operationalized by focusing on the overlap with the brand (particularly, a

status signaling brand) such as “It’s part of me” or “It is so me”, self-enhancement becomes a likely motive impacting the inferred motives as well as the sincerity of the communicator. The data from study 2 show that the self-brand connection cue was rated the lowest as compared to all other attachment cues on both of these measures. However, if the cue is focused on the connection one feels with the brand such as “feeling connected/bonded to it”, it can make self-construction as a more likely explanation for brand mentioning.

This distinction between two different types of cues tapping the self-brand connection facet could also be characterized as the cue being focused on the relationship (which is also the case with other facets such as love/passion, interdependence, commitment, intimacy etc.) or the cue being focused on one’s own self. When the self-brand connection cue is focused on the relationship (such as “feeling connected/bonded to it”), it is less likely to be seen as an attempt to enhance one’s self in others eyes. In contrast, when the cue is focused on the self (such as “It’s part of me”), it implies an overlap with the brand and could be seen by observers as claiming that one is as good as a high status brand and therefore, more braggy. The data from study 2 shows that the tweet with the self-brand connection cue was rated the highest in terms of braggyness, even higher than the tweet with no attachment cue. So, in a way, the weak results for this cue are due to a particular operationalization of the cue but there are theoretical reasons why this operationalization might not be the right way to convey attachment in order to avoid negative impressions related to bragging. Future research can explore the different effects of these two ways of tapping into the self-brand connection facet.

For the “My Love” cue, there was no effect for only the last measure in the causal chain- the brand-user imagery measure. This suggests that it could be about the strength of the manipulation and there are theoretical reasons why just saying “my love” might not be seen as a particularly strong indicator of attachment. Batra et al. (2012) suggest that consumers could loosely use the word “love” for brands without really meaning it; thus weakening the signaling potential of this cue. However, a cue tapping into the love and passion facet could also be framed as “crazy about it” or “passionate about it” which is likely to be a stronger indicator of attachment. These cues can also avoid the confusion regarding the word “love” being used more generally to indicate a liking or positive attitude which is not diagnostic of attachment for a status-signaling brand. Again, future research can look at the different effects of these two ways of tapping into the love and passion facet.

A limitation of this research and of this paradigm more generally, is that subtle differences in the way social media posts are framed can convey unintended information to the audience leading to confounds. According to Holtgraves (2002, 87), “linguistic-based impressions are part of a dynamic and contextually sensitive process”. For example, the same message content can lead to different impressions depending upon the communication medium, speech rate, gender, conversational topic or inferences for violation of conversational rules (Holtgraves 2002). For the sake of maintaining experimental control, Twitter hashtags were used in this research to convey attachment as well as mention brand names while keeping the rest of the message same in the experimental and control conditions. Future studies can generalize these findings from

conveying brand attachment via hashtags to conveying attachment as part of the message itself.

This dissertation also opens new avenues of research that can look at both positive and negative consequences of being seen as attached to brands. I explored one instance where perceived brand attachment leads to positive consequences i.e. in the case of brand-related bragging. However, there can be negative consequences as well. A common notion is that consumers can use attachment to material things as a substitute for personal attachments and other sources of meaning (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Kleine and Baker 2004). Future research can look at how conveying such a dysfunctional attachment to products and brands impacts the impressions of consumers as well as brands.

In this dissertation, I looked at how conveying attachment can mitigate negative effects of brand-related bragging. However, Sekhon et al. (2015) showed that consumers can use other brand mentioning tactics too and came up with a typology of brand mentions on social media. Even though marketers use these tactics, there is no empirical work looking at the downstream consequences of other brand mentioning strategies for the consumer conveying the information or for the mentioned brands. Future research can advance this dialogue by looking at differential effects of different *types* of brand mentions on communicator and brand impressions. Future research can also look at the effects of different types of brand mentions on consumers' self-perceptions.

Another fruitful direction to explore how the relationship between the communicator and the audience impacts motive inferences related to brand mentioning

on social media. If our close friends mention high status brands in their social media communication, we might give them the benefit of doubt and not infer extrinsic motives. On the other hand, literature shows that because we already know our friends and their accomplishments, a self-presentational goal is seen as less appropriate when conversing with friends versus strangers (Chen et al. 2009; Tice et al. 1995). Future research can look at how the strength of the communicators relationship with the audience (acquaintances, friends, or strangers) can impact motive inferences for brand-related bragging. Past history with the communicator can also impact motive inferences. If a friend's high status brand mentioning is encountered repeatedly, the discounting effects of attachment cues can wane, and perceivers will come to regard the repeated name-dropping of high status brands as especially diagnostic of the communicator's motives. As consumers usually emotionally attach to only a limited number of brands (Thomson et al. 2005), repeated mentioning of high status brands from multiple categories will reduce the signaling value of attachment cues and will lead to inference of extrinsic motives. Moreover, as consumers' encounters with others' brand-related bragging have become increasingly common, future research can explore the effects of such exposure on consumption as well as social media sharing decisions of the audience.

Future research can also look at the effects of brand-related bragging on brand personality inferences. Brand user-imagery is considered a central component of brand personality (Hogg et al. 2009), which is defined as 'the set of human characteristics associated with a brand' (Aaker 1997, 347). As this dissertation shows that brand-related bragging impacts brand-user imagery, it could be interesting to explore if brand-related

bragging has downstream effects on positive and/or negative dimensions of brand personality (Roper and Parker 2013).

Future research can also look at how the audience related variables play into the inferences they make based on others' brand mentioning behavior. For example, if the audience is in a state of suspicion, it can create doubt in the minds of the recipients of a message and prevents them from taking behavior at face value. Suspicion is defined as a "dynamic state in which the individual actively entertains multiple, plausibly rival hypotheses about the motives or genuineness of a person's behavior" (Fein 1996, 1165). and is considered an important moderator of persuasiveness of both interpersonal and advertising communication (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Darke and Ritchie 2007). Therefore, it can also have an impact on inferences drawn from others' brand-mentioning behavior.

Future research can also look at the effect of forum/medium type on the consequences of brand-related bragging. Diagnosticity of brand attachment can change depending upon the communication context, more specifically, the type of forum in which the brand is mentioned. Two common online contexts in which brands can be mentioned are - 1) a consumer's personal page (e.g., a personal Twitter feed, Facebook page or personal website) or, 2) a brand-specific page (e.g., a brand page on Facebook or a brand specific forum's page). Even if the content of a message remains the same, its interpretation may change depending upon where it is said i.e. the type of the forum and the norms associated with that forum (Gruenfeld and Wyer 1992). Whereas posts on one's personal page are expected to be about self in which one

shares self-related information with family and friends, posts on a brand-specific page are expected to be about the brand shared with other consumers who have an interest in the brand (Dholakia and Algesheimer 2010). Therefore, brand mentioning could be more normative on a brand page and the salient motive for such brand mentioning is likely to be attachment with the brand even in the absence of brand attachment cues.

In sum, this dissertation opens up several possibilities for further research, particularly in the domains of brand-mentioning and perceptions of brand-relationships. Future research can look at various factors related to the communicator, the audience, the message, the medium (or forum), the communicator-audience relationship as well as the communicator-brand relationship that can impact the inferences drawn about consumers mentioning brands on social media.

**APPENDIX 1: INSTRUCTIONS FOR ALL STUDIES**

On the next page you will see a tweet posted by a person named Pat. Take some time to imagine that Pat is a casual acquaintance of yours; you don't know much about Pat but you are following Pat on Twitter. Now imagine that you are checking your Twitter feed and you see a Tweet from Pat. Please take your time to read the tweet on the next page carefully. You will be asked several questions about it.”

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

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#### EDUCATION

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- 2016 (expected) Ph.D., Marketing, Boston University Questrom School of Business, Boston, USA
- 2008 M.B.A., Marketing, Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Lucknow, India
- 2006 Bachelor of Engineering (Computer Science), University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

#### RESEARCH INTERESTS

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Social Media, Self-presentation, Social Influence, Word-of-Mouth Communication, Effects of Technology on Consumer Behavior

#### TEACHING INTERESTS

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Digital Marketing, Social Media Marketing, Consumer Behavior, Marketing Management, Marketing Research, Marketing Strategy

#### DISSERTATION

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“It’s OK; They Do It Out of Love! The Role of Brand Attachment Cues in Brand-related Bragging”, MSI Research Grant #4-1873  
*Committee: Barbara Bickart (Chair), Remi Trudel, Susan Fournier*

#### PUBLICATIONS

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- Sekhon, Tejvir, Barbara Bickart, Remi Trudel and Susan Fournier (2015, forthcoming), “Being a Likable Braggart: How Consumers Use Brand Mentions for Self-presentation on Social Media,” in *Consumer Psychology in a Social Media World*, Claudiu Dimofte, Curtis Haugtvedt and Richard Yalch (eds.), Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe. ([Download](#))
- Alvarez, Claudio, Ozgun Atasoy, and Tejvir Singh Sekhon (2011), “MSI 50th Anniversary Celebration and Board of Trustees Meeting,” *Conference Summary MSI Report*, 11-301.

## CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

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- Special Session Chair and Organizer, “Sharing as Caring, Scaring, Bragging and Persuading: Motive Inferences for Sharing Word-of-Mouth on Social Media,” accepted for *Association for Consumer Research Conference*, October 1–4, 2015, New Orleans, LA
- Sekhon, Tejvir, Barbara Bickart, Remi Trudel and Susan Fournier (2015), “It’s OK; They Do It Out of Love! The Role of Brand Attachment Cues in Brand-related Bragging,” to be presented at the *Association for Consumer Research Conference*, October 1–4, 2015, New Orleans, LA
- Sekhon, Tejvir, Remi Trudel, and Barbara Bickart (2014), “Bragging Arms Race: Normalization of Bragging About Consumption Experiences,” *Association for Consumer Research Conference*, Poster Session, October 23–26, 2014, Baltimore, MD
- Sekhon, Tejvir, Barbara Bickart, Remi Trudel and Susan Fournier (2014), “Brand Mentioning Strategies: Using Brands for Self-Presentation on Social Media” *Brands and Brand Relationships Conference*, May 19–21, 2014, Boston, MA
- Sekhon, Tejvir, Barbara Bickart and Remi Trudel (2014), “Bragging Arms Race: Normalization of Bragging About Consumption Experiences,” *SCP Winter Conference*, Poster Session, March 6–8, 2014, Miami, FL
- Sekhon, Tejvir, Remi Trudel, and Barbara Bickart (2013), “Being a Likeable Braggart: Using Brands for Self-presentation on Twitter,” *32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Advertising and Consumer Psychology Conference*, June 13–15, 2013, San Diego, CA

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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|---------------|---|
| 2014 (Spring) | Instructor (with full responsibility for the course), Consumer Behavior, Boston University Undergraduate Program, Instructor evaluation: 4.23 / 5.0 |
| 2012 (Fall)   | Instructor (with full responsibility for the course), Consumer Behavior, Boston University Undergraduate Program, Instructor evaluation: 3.64 / 5.0 |
| 2014 (Fall)   | T.A., Marketing Analytics (taught by Professor Shuba Srinivasan), Boston University M.B.A. Program  |
| 2014 (Summer) | T.A., Marketing Management (taught by Professor Frederic Brunel), Boston University M.B.A. Program  |

### **RESEARCH IN PROGRESS**

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“Nutritional Information Learning Through Crowdsourced Feedback” with Remi Trudel, Oded Netzer and Jia Liu

“Bragging Arms Race: Normalization of Bragging About Consumption Experiences” with Barbara Bickart and Remi Trudel

“Understanding Brand Mentions in Social Media: Impact of Brand and Forum Characteristics on Brand Mentioning Strategies” with Barbara Bickart, Susan Fournier and Bob Rietveld

### **HONORS, AWARDS AND DISTINCTIONS**

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2014	Winner, MSI research grant competition (\$7800) on Social Interactions and Social Media Marketing
2014	Fellow, AMA-Sheth Foundation Doctoral Consortium, Northwestern University
2013	Fellow, Workshop on Behavioral Economics and Public Policy, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Boston, MA
2013	Fellow, MMA Fall Educators’ Conference Doctoral Consortium on Teaching
2011–2012	Doctoral Research Grant, Boston University – Questrom School of Business
2010–Present	Doctoral Fellowship, Boston University
2000–2008	National Talent Search Scholarship, merit based scholarship by Government of India to top one percent students

### **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

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2008–2009	Brand Manager, Wireless Data Business, Reliance Communications, Mumbai, India
2007 (Summer)	M.B.A. Marketing Intern, Johnson & Johnson, Mumbai, India

### **ACADEMIC SERVICE**

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Manager- BU Behavioral Lab; Assisted BU-affiliated researchers in conducting behavioral research; Managed student and paid subject pools (2014–2015)

Trainee reviewer of Journal of Consumer Research with Prof. Barbara Bickart (2013–2014)

Reviewer for Association for Consumer Research and Society for Consumer Psychology

## Conferences

Vice-President of BU Questrom Doctoral Association (QDA), Boston University (2013–2014)

**REFERENCES**

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