

Brand-conscious consumers take bad news to heart

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Consumers with close ties to a brand respond to negative information about the beloved brand as they do to personal failure -- they experience it as a threat to their self-image, according to a new study by Tiffany Barnett White, a professor of business administration at Illinois. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Consumers with close ties to a brand respond to negative information about the beloved brand as they do to personal failure – they experience it as a threat to their self-image, according to a new study by a University of Illinois marketing expert.

Tiffany Barnett White, a professor of business administration, says consumers with a high self-brand connection maintained favorable brand evaluations even when presented with negative brand information, suggesting that the reluctance of brand-conscious consumers to lower their opinion of a brand might be driven more by a motivation to protect the self.

"When companies get consumers motivated about their products, they are just as motivated to protect the brand as they are themselves," White said. "So it's really more about the self than the brand. When people can self-affirm through other means and activities, they're not defensive at all."

According to the study, co-written by Shirley Y.Y. Cheng, of the Hong Kong Baptist University, and Lan Nguyen Chaplin, of the Villanova School of Business, brands become highly symbolic of a consumers' self-concept, so much so that consumers will defend their self-connected brands much as they would defend themselves from personal failure.

"Consumers are highly resistant to brand failure to the point that they're willing to rewrite history," said White, the Bruce and Anne Strohm Faculty Fellow at Illinois. "It not only explains why so many Toyota customers ignored the negative brand information in the aftermath of the highly publicized recalls, it also accounts for why they're quick to defend the company and why they would want to re-write history in a more positive way."

White says the research is scalable to brands in different industries.

"It's not just Coke versus Pepsi, Toyota versus Honda, or Apple versus Microsoft," she said. "Self-brand connections can extend into multiple markets. People may even think, 'I don't have any self-brand connections.' Well, pretty much everyone does. It turns out that these

self-brand connections are rather ubiquitous."

It can even extend to preferences for professional sports teams, although you don't have to be rabid Chicago Bears or Pittsburgh Steelers fan for those effects to register.

"In some cases, it can actually be a pretty subtle connection," White said.

And even when teams muddle through losing seasons (or in the case of Chicago Cubs fans, 100-plus years of losing seasons), the effects still hold.

"People are always motivated to have a positive self-evaluation," White said. "They want to think of themselves positively, and they want others to think positively of them. So when the Cubs are a mess, fans think of other ways to bolster their self-concept as Cubs fans. They talk about what a great ballpark Wrigley Field is during the summer. For highly connected fans, they're re-painting the picture of their love affair with the Cubs brand. Otherwise, it's not just that the Cubs have failed. It's that they, as fans, have also failed."

White cautions that brand-conscious consumers do have their limits. An Apple aficionado, for example, might be turned off by the squalid working conditions of the factories in China that churn out iPhones and iPads.

"That could actually sever a consumer's sense of self-brand connection," White said. "They could say, 'Look, if that's what they're about, then that's not something I want to be a part of.' " According to White, the big lesson for businesses is that the consumer is "really watching your brand, so your performance as a brand matters," she said.

"Brand failure is not something that just impacts your bottom line. It also

influences the consumers who have become attached to it. So that really points to getting [consumers](#) involved and invested with brands. Ultimately, they become almost co-partners. It's another positive benefit of brand loyalty, and even another way to think about [brand](#) loyalty."

More information: The study will be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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