

# Using brands to vent relationship frustration

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Have you ever felt frustrated with your romantic partner, but nervous about bringing it up?

Researchers have discovered one safe way people in this situation vent their frustration: by buying something for themselves that is the opposite brand their partner would choose.

The investigators found that this strategy was used consistently by partners who were lower in relationship power. Imagine, for example, that you wake up to get ready for work and find dirty dishes in the sink—again. People higher in relationship power would ask their partners to do the dishes, but someone lower in power is less likely to express this because he or she is worried about harming the relationship, says lead author Danielle Brick, an assistant professor of marketing in the Peter T. Paul College of Business and Economics at the University of New Hampshire.

Later that day, this partner may head to the vending machine at work to grab a soda. Normally he or she chooses Diet Coke, but today he or she picks Diet Pepsi because the partner likes Diet Coke.

"By unconsciously choosing the opposite brand their partner prefers, people might feel better without realizing it," Brick says. "We found that consumers are using brand choice as a form of behavior to deal with conflict in relationships."

The researchers found this pattern in three different experiments. In one

of the studies, participants filled out a survey that measured their relationship power. Then they answered questions about their partners' preferred brand choices in six categories, including coffee, toothpaste and shoes. Then participants were told that they would complete a visual acuity task related to letters, but in reality they were subconsciously seeing their partners' names and words that evoked either frustration, sadness or neutral emotions. Finally, the participants were asked to choose what brands they preferred in the same six categories.

The researchers found that the partners who were low in relationship power and had been primed to feel frustrated were more likely to choose brands opposite to what partners preferred, otherwise known as "oppositional brand choices." People who were low in relationship power and primed with feeling sadness, however, were more likely to pick the same brand their [partner](#) preferred. "When people are sad, they tend to be more passive because they are ruminating, so they are not feeling actively oppositional toward their partners."

For partners who are feeling frustrated with their significant others, initial evidence from the study suggests that oppositional brand choices may be even more effective than venting or doing nothing in the face of relational conflict.

The findings also have implications for marketing, Brick says. "Marketers assume consumers are making conscious, deliberate choices, but actually there are other factors, sometimes even outside of their conscious awareness that are influencing their decisions," she says.

This study will appear in the April issue of the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

**More information:** [www.journals.elsevier.com/jour ... ng-brands-to-respond](http://www.journals.elsevier.com/journal-of-consumer-psychology/article/pii/S0010-028514000000)

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