

# When a brand is like a secret lover

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Have you ever worried that people would judge you for buying a certain brand or frequenting a certain store, and tried to keep this information

secret?

It's no surprise that [secrecy](#) can intensify the connection between lovers, but could the same be true for [consumers](#) who are concealing their brand choices? Researchers have long known that lovers in an illicit relationship will attempt to suppress thoughts about the other, which only leads to more intruding thoughts about the lover. This creates a cyclical pattern known as obsessive preoccupation and ultimately increased attraction to the object of the secret, explains Veronica Thomas, one of the study authors and an associate professor at Towson University in Maryland. The study abstract was recently published online in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

To explore whether brand secrecy intensified an individual's connection to the brand, researchers conducted a series of experiments. First, they created a [survey](#) to determine if brand secrecy was a common phenomenon among consumers. They asked participants whether they had ever consciously not used a brand in front of others, avoided mentioning a brand, lied about a brand, or discretely used a brand in front of others. The [results](#) revealed that 66 percent of the respondents had kept at least one brand a secret, and nearly 40 percent listed embarrassment as the reason for the secrecy. One respondent, for example, didn't want people to know he or she had eaten at McDonald's because this choice didn't portray a healthy lifestyle. Another respondent didn't want people to know she shopped at Torrid, a store for plus-sizes.

In the next experiment, participants received a package of granola in the mail and were asked to eat the granola. One group was instructed to keep the consumption a secret, and the second group did not receive these instructions. Two weeks later, the participants answered questions that measured their connection to the granola brand, and the results showed that the secret-keeping group reported stronger self-brand connections than the no-secret group. The investigators were also eager to study

participants who decided on their own volition to keep a secret rather than being instructed to do so. In another experiment, 200 participants watched a video of an unknown musician and answered questions related to the experience. Two weeks later, the same participants received an electronic survey advertised as a continuation of the first study, but they were instructed not to participate if they had completed the previous survey.

Despite this caveat, more than 50 completed the second survey about the musician, which meant they were voluntarily lying. Next, the [participants](#) who had not lied received a message asking them to complete a similar survey. The results of the experiment revealed that lying increased thought intrusion and suppression, which led to stronger connections to the musician.

For consumers, the findings illuminate how secrecy about a brand can subconsciously elevate loyalty and connection to the product or experience. "Maybe we think a brand is ideal because we started to form a strong bond due to obsessive preoccupation related to secrecy," says Thomas.

For marketers, the results suggest that contrary to [popular belief](#), people who are embarrassed about using a brand may indeed be devoted customers. They might not promote the [brand](#) by word of mouth, but they may respond to offers to provide anonymous reviews. Offering these consumers more discreet forms of consumption, like online ordering, may also prove effective, says Thomas.

**More information:** Veronica L. Thomas et al, I Can't Get You Out of My Head: The Influence of Secrecy on Consumers' Self-Brand Connections, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1082](#)

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