

Grieving for Tony Soprano: How the public responds to the death of a brand

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In a testament to the pervasiveness of consumerism, studies have shown that consumers form subcultures, communities, and tribes around the brands they truly love. While much research has gone into understanding how these consumption collectives are formed, a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* examines consumer behavior around the death of a brand.

"Consumer researchers have thought a lot about what a consumption collective is and how they are formed and maintained, but have not worked extensively on what happens when they dissolve," write authors Cristel Antonia Russell (American University) and Hope Jensen Schau (University of Arizona). "Our research contributes to understanding what happens to a consumer collective when the focus of the community is extinguished. It details the demise of consumer collectives based on narrative brands that end."

The researchers spent over 10 years studying how consumers responded to the cancellation of popular television shows, including *The Sopranos* and *All My Children*. Their findings show that when a [brand](#) narrative still had more to give, the loss of closure was greatest, whereas the news was easier to accept when the narrative came to a more believable end.

According to the authors, what's truly lost is the sociality that surrounded the brand, not as much the brand itself. As such, when the brand dies so does that community. When respondents use the language of mourning and grief, the researchers observed the loss of the brand was experienced

on multiple levels ranging from personal to social to cultural.

"Brand managers have long considered issues such as what is a healthy lifespan for a brand, how can firms breathe new life into a dying brand, and when to bring back a dead brand," the authors conclude. "In the end, [consumption](#) sociality may itself be a victim of the brand loss. If a brand is central to a consuming collective, its death may prompt a complete dissolution of the collective or at least alter it in irremediable ways."

More information: Cristel Antonia Russell and Hope Jensen Schau. "When Narrative Brands End: The Impact of Narrative Closure and Consumption Sociality on Loss Accommodation." *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2014.

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