

The business of fear: Can our favorite products provide emotional support?

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Worried that you could be in a car accident? Insurance company X can protect you and your family. Afraid you will lose your children to drunk driving? MADD can help you educate them to avoid drinking and driving. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, when a person-to-person support system is not available in a fearful situation, brands can act as a replacement source of emotional attachment.

"We look at how [fear](#) can impact evaluations of a new [brand](#)," write authors Lea Dunn and JoAndrea Hoegg (both University of British Columbia). "Our research shows that not only does fear have positive outcomes for brands, the presence of brands that provide support for consumers can allow them to successfully cope with fear itself."

The researchers conducted a series of four laboratory studies in which participants experienced fear in the presence of an unfamiliar brand. The authors specifically measured emotional brand attachment, a form of brand evaluation that is tied to the emotional connections consumers have with brands.

In one study, participants were asked to watch a movie and drink a new brand of sparkling juice. Movie choices were horror, action, or a documentary. Participants were asked to drink the juice during the movie, asked to wait, or given a choice to drink at leisure. Study results showed the most increase in [emotional attachment](#) to the juice in participants who viewed the horror movie and who were allowed to drink at leisure or asked to wait until the end of the movie.

Unlike previous studies that link negative emotions to negative brand associations, the authors found that exposure to fear resulted in a positive emotional brand attachment. They also demonstrated that a person's level of emotional attachment to a brand can increase without ever consuming or touching a product. These findings

have implications for companies using social media, advergaming, and product placement in media and entertainment.

"When consumers are scared, they will reach out to an available brand for comfort. In this act of reaching out to share the experience, brands help relieve a consumer's sense of fear. In turn, this shared experience leads to stronger emotional attachment," the authors conclude.

More information: Lea Dunn and JoAndrea Hoegg. "The Impact of Fear on Emotional Brand Attachment." *Journal of Consumer Research*: June 2014.

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