

**THE “UNOFFICIAL” NAMES: BRAND NICKNAMES, THEIR INFLUENCE ON
CONSUMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIPS AND AS RELATIONSHIP INDICATORS IN
ONLINE COMMUNICATION**

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the C. T. Bauer College of Business

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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June 2019

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor Dr. Vanessa Patrick, for the opportunity to embark on a career as a marketing scholar, and for her advice and guidance along this journey.

Thank you to the many wonderful teachers, scholars, and friends I have met in this field, I appreciate your company, care and encouragement.

To my dearest family, for your understanding and support. You are the reason for anything and everything I do.

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CITATION

Some material from this dissertation has been published in the following form:

Zhang, Zhe and Vanessa M. Patrick (2018), "Call Me Rollie! The Role of Brand Nicknames in Shaping Consumer-Brand Relationships," *Journal of Association for Consumer Research*, 3(2), 147-162.

ABSTRACT

Brand nicknames (e.g., Big Blue for IBM, Chevy for Chevrolet, Rollie for Rolex) are a common marketplace phenomenon. Marketers, however, hold polarized views about whether a brand should adopt or restrict the use of brand nicknames, and little academic research has shed light on this debate. With two essays, this dissertation investigates (1) the effects of brand nickname use on forging the consumer-brand relationship, and, (2) brand nickname use as a linguistic cue to signal brand attachment in a social environment such as online reviews, and its influence on perceived information authenticity of the marketing information. This dissertation contributes to the marketing literature by highlighting the importance of brand nickname use in the marketplace and extends the concept of brand attachment to the domain of consumers' social interaction. It also offers insights into brand trademark loss and the management of brand social media profiles and online reviews.

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CHAPTER 1. DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

This dissertation investigates a prevalent yet unexplored phenomenon – brand nickname use – in the marketplace. Brand nicknames are the “street names” or “monikers” of brands (i.e., Beemer for BMW, Wally World for Walmart, etc.) that may be defined as “the informal and descriptive names that serve as a substitute for a brand’s trademarked formal name” (Zhang and Patrick 2018). With two essays, this dissertation systematically investigates brand nicknames at both the individual (consumer-brand relationship maintenance, essay 1) and social level (peer-to-peer consumer interaction). The schematic below summarizes the focus of each essay and highlights the relationship between the two essays. While each individual essay builds on the related constructs in the context of the essay, the current chapter introduces brand nickname use as a general phenomenon in the marketplace and provides a brief overview of each essay.

[Insert Figure 1.1 about here]

BRAND NICKNAMES AND THE MIXED VIEWS OF MANAGERS

Consumers often refer to brands by their popular nicknames. In both online and offline conversations, consumers are more likely to say “Chevy” instead of “Chevrolet”, affectionately refer to Disney as “Mouse House” and mention that they picked up dinner from “B-Dubs” not Buffalo Wild Wings. In addition, the practice of brand nickname use also takes place at the product level. Products like cars (Bug for Volkswagen Beetle), shoes (Bred for Nike Air Jordan sneakers), luxury watches (Dirty Harry for Rolex GMT-Master 1675) and medicines (A-Bombs for Anadrol) are also often popularized by their nicknames.

While a number of brand nicknames seem to be popular among consumers, both marketing academics and practitioners have little knowledge about the scope and function of

brand nicknames as a strategic element of the marketing managers toolkit or any understanding of how or why brand nicknames may be an important element in the consumer-brand lexicon. This dearth of knowledge can be attributed largely to the fact that thus far there has been little or no academic research conducted to understand the brand nickname construct.

Consequently, this lack of understanding of the brand nickname phenomenon has resulted in mixed responses by marketers to brand nickname use. Some marketers embrace nicknames while others reject them. In 2013, McDonald's in Australia replaced its formal brand name with the nickname "Macca's" at multiple restaurant locations due to the popularity of the nickname (Lu 2013), formally adopting the nickname given by its customers. In contrast, General Motors has long opposed the nickname "Chevy"; and in fact, has demanded that its employees and dealers use *only* the official brand name "Chevrolet" at dealerships, in advertisements and even when speaking with friends and family, based on the belief that nicknames dilute the brand concept and can alienate consumers (Chang 2010). These opposing attitudes toward brand nickname use from companies and brand managers beg for a systematic investigation of this phenomenon and the understanding of whether and when the use of these unofficial names should be encouraged or restricted.

THE DEFINITION OF BRAND NICKNAMES

Evolved from "an eke-name", meaning an additional name (Wright 2012), a nickname is defined as "a usually descriptive name given instead of or in addition to the one belonging to a person, place, or thing" (Merriam-Webster dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nickname>) or "an informal name for someone or sometimes something, used esp. to show affection, and often based on the person's name or a characteristic of the

person” (Cambridge dictionary, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/nickname>).

Based on these definitions, we propose that a brand or product nickname in the marketplace refers to a descriptive name given by consumers or the public to serve as a substitution for a brand’s or product’s (trademarked) formal name. For example, “Rollie” for Rolex, “Beemer” for BMW, “Mickey D” for McDonald’s, “Tarjay” for Target and “Bug” for Volkswagen Beetle are considered as brand nicknames.

THE GENERATION OF BRAND NICKNAMES AND THEIR PREVALENCE IN THE MARKETPLACE

A brand can acquire a nickname in two major ways. First, some nicknames have a long history in the marketplace (e.g., Chevy for Chevrolet), and consumers may naturally and voluntarily adopt the nickname due to its popularity. Second, some brands rely on consumers’ creativity to generate a personalized nickname. For example, Chase Bank provides consumers with the option to give their personal accounts unique nicknames, while Nikon requests consumers to give their new acquisition a nickname during product registration. We hypothesize (and empirically confirm) that regardless of how a brand acquires or adopts its nickname, nicknames are popular with consumers and create a stronger attachment to brands than formal names. In fact, a web search for brands on the top 100 global brand love list (NetBase Brand Passion Report 2016) reveals that at least 16 brands on the list are commonly referred to by their nicknames, and some brands even have more than one nickname (see Table 1.1).

To more systematically investigate the prevalence of nickname use amongst consumers and to assess the general nature of commonly used nicknames, we conducted a survey (N = 150, 59% female, $M_{age} = 19.8$ years) at a large US university. The results revealed that not only are brand nicknames ingrained in consumers’ minds, but they also generally elicit positive attitudes

(in comparison to brand formal names). In the survey, respondents were given some examples of brand nicknames in the marketplace (e.g., Chevy for Chevrolet, Bloomies for Bloomingdale's) and were asked to list other brand nicknames they typically use. In addition, participants were asked to report their general liking and attitudes toward the brand nickname (in comparison to its formal/official name) on a 7-point scale (unfavorable/favorable, negative/positive, bad/good, unpleasant/pleasant, dislike very much/like very much; 1 = negative, 7 = positive; later combined into a general attitude index ($\alpha = .96$)). An independent research assistant coded these data based on our definition of brand nickname. The result reveals that 97% participants could recall at least one brand nickname that they use on a daily base and 79% of the participants could recall at least two (see Table 1.1 for some examples). Some brand nicknames appeared very popular and were mentioned by multiple participants. For example, Beamer for BMW (mentioned 14 times), Mickey D/Macs for McDonald's (mentioned 18 times), B(ee)-Dubs for Buffalo Wild Wings (mentioned 9 times) and Tar-jay for Target (mentioned 7 times).

Two key insights emerge from the use of nicknames from this pilot study: 1) The list of brand nicknames is extensive and exists across a variety of distinct industries. From entertainment (Mouse House for Disney) to technology companies (Mister Softee for Microsoft) to even sports teams (G-Men for New York Giants), consumers use nicknames to exhibit their attitudes toward brands, to form special bonds with brands, and to communicate what the brand means to them and how they want to be perceived as the consumer of that brand. 2) Consumers typically hold favorable attitudes and greater liking¹¹ toward the brand nickname in comparison

¹ Based on the coder's result, we excluded people (N=4) who responded with brand acronyms or formal names instead of nicknames. We compared the mean of reported general attitude with the midpoint (neutral) of the scale. A repeated-measures ANOVA with perfect sphericity revealed that participants hold significantly better opinion toward the brands when they are referred by nicknames ($M_{\text{neutral}} = 4.00$, $M_{\text{nickname}} = 5.57$, $F(1, 145) = 186.0$, $p < .001$).

to the brand official/formal name. This insight helps justify our focus on positive brand nicknames in facilitating brand attachment in this research.

[Insert Table 1.1 about here]

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Essay 1 investigates the influence of individual consumer's brand nickname use on their relationship with the brand. Drawing on findings from human nickname use, I demonstrate that positive and relevant brand nicknames help to evoke positive brand-related affective responses (EA), which further strengthens the cognitive bond that connects a consumer's self to the brand (SBC) and increases the strength of that bond (brand prominence). Ultimately, this results in a greater degree of brand attachment and brand relationship maintenance behaviors (e.g., additional purchases, positive WOM, defend the brand when others speak poorly about the brand, etc.).

Findings that emerged from this study of brand nicknames highlight some important managerial insights to marketing practitioners regarding brand management. For instance, this work illustrates the importance of protecting a brand's identity from nickname domain loss and trademark loss and incorporating the unique storytelling feature of brand nicknames into the brand's DNA. In addition, this study offers insights for social media and digital marketing regarding social media profile management as well as search engine results optimization of nickname search.

Hypotheses:

H1: Brand nickname use elicits a positive affective response to the brand.

H2: Brand nickname use positively influences consumers' brand attachment (SBC and brand prominence).

H3: Consumers' affective response (EA) mediates the relationship between brand nickname use and brand attachment.

H4: Brand nickname use results in a greater consumer willingness to invest in brand relationship maintenance behaviors as a result of the enhanced consumer-brand relationship.

Essay 2 extends brand nickname use into consumers' interpersonal communication and online social interactions. Synthesizing the theories of consumers' analogy-based knowledge transfer and uncertainty reduction, I propose that how a brand is referred to in an online review (i.e., by its formal name versus its nickname) can influence the readers' perception of the writer's relationship closeness and strength to the brand, and subsequently affect the readers' judgement of the review authenticity. Four studies provide converging evidence to show that brand nickname use leads to readers' perception of a writer's increased brand attachment, which boosts perceived review authenticity and promotes downstream consequences, such as WOM.

This research contributes to the branding literature by demonstrating the novel communication function of brand attachment in consumers' social interactions. It also provides managerial implications with respect to the strategic use of brand nicknames in effective marketing communication and online review management.

Hypotheses:

H1: Brand nickname use in an online review results in enhanced inferred brand attachment (IBA) compared to formal name use.

H2: Higher inferred brand attachment (IBA) results in higher perceptions of review authenticity.

H3: Brand nickname use in a review (compared to formal name use) results in downstream consequences such as enhanced willingness to share the review (online WOM), greater intent to comply with the review recommendations, and, greater perceived review helpfulness. These relationships are mediated by the perceived review authenticity.

H4: The nature of the brand attachment cue moderates the observed effect, such that subtle (overt) brand attachment cues enhance (reduce) perceptions of review authenticity.

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Figure 1.1 Summary Schematic: Brand Nickname Use Ties the Two Essays Together

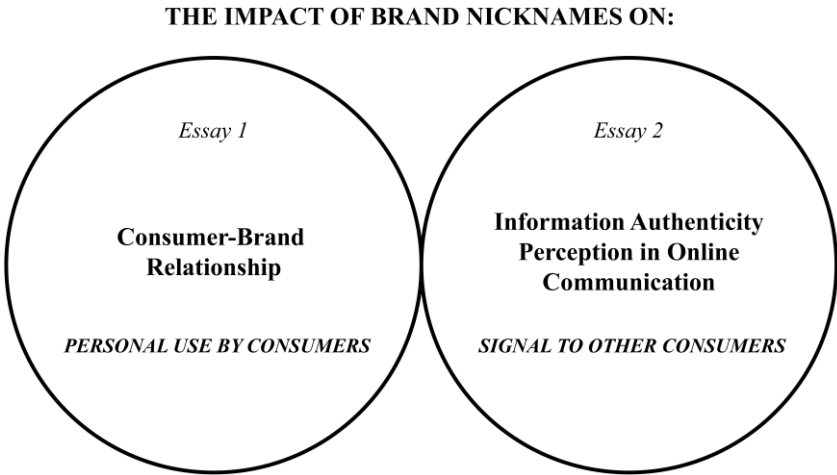


Table 1.1
Examples of Brand Nicknames

Brand*	Nickname	Industry
Bloomingdales ²	Bloomies	Retail
BMW ^{1, 2}	Beemer/Beamer	Automotive
Buffalo Wild Wings ²	B(ee)-Dubs	Food & Beverage
Burnettes Vodka ²	Burnies	Food & Beverage
Cadillac ²	Caddy	Automotive
Chevrolet ¹	Chevy	Automotive
Chick-fil-A ¹	Jesus Chicken	Food & Beverage
Cumberland Farms ²	Cumbies	Retail
Disney ¹	Mouse House	Entertainment
Dunkin Donuts ²	Dunks	Food & Beverage
IBM ¹	Big Blue	Technology
Louis Vuitton ^{1, 2}	Louie	Luxury
McDonald's ^{1, 2}	Mickey D/Macs (US), Macca	Food & Beverage
Microsoft ¹	Mister Softee	Technology
New York Giants ²	G-Men	Sports
Nordstrom ²	Nordy	Retail
Philadelphia Eagles ²	The Birds	Sports
Rolex ²	Rollie	Luxury
Starbucks ^{1, 2}	Four Bucks, Starbs	Food & Beverage
Target ^{1, 2}	Tar-jay	Retail
UPS ²	Big Brown	Service
Walmart ^{1, 2}	Wally World	Retail

* 1 = brands from Top 100 global brand love list, 2 = brands from pilot study

CHAPTER 2. ESSAY 1

CALL ME ROLLIE! THE ROLE OF BRAND NICKNAMES IN SHAPING CONSUMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

ABSTRACT

Brand nicknames (e.g., Big Blue for IBM, Chevy for Chevrolet, Rollie for Rolex) are a common marketplace phenomenon. Marketers, however, hold polarized views about whether a brand should adopt or restrict the use of brand nicknames, and, little academic research has shed light on this debate. With three studies, the current research investigates the impact of brand nickname use in shaping the consumer-brand relationship. Drawing on the use of personal nicknames in interpersonal relationships, the current research proposes that brand nicknames elicit positive brand related emotions (e.g., affection, love) and influence both the cognitive closeness (self-brand connection) and salience (brand prominence) components of brand attachment. This translates into downstream consequences of consumers' brand relationship maintenance behaviors. The theoretical and managerial contributions of this research, its limitations, and future directions for research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Consumers often refer to brands using nicknames: IBM is referred to as Big Blue, Buffalo Wild Wings is Bee-Dubs, Bloomingdales is Bloomies, Target is Tar-jay and Chevrolet is Chevy. Products like cars (Bug for Volkswagen Beetle), shoes (Bred for Nike Air Jordan sneakers), luxury watches (Dirty Harry for Rolex GMT-Master 1675) and medicines (A-Bombs for Anadrol) are also often popularized by their nicknames. Brand nickname practices are not uncommon in the marketplace and have been adopted by companies and consumers both officially and unofficially. Some brands embrace the nickname that consumers endow the brand with and celebrate the new identity created by their customers, while others try to diminish and restrict its use for fear of diluting the brand equity.

Despite the prevalence of brand and product nicknames in the marketplace and the polarized views about their use amongst marketers, to our knowledge there is little or no academic research that helps answer the question of the impact that nickname use has on the consumer-brand relationship. Notably, there is some available research on naming decisions for official or formal brand names (Park, Lawson and Milberg 1989; Park, MacInnis and Eisingerich 2015, 2016); however, the study of brand nicknames has received relatively little attention from researchers in marketing. The current research is designed to bridge this gap with the following specific objectives: (1) to investigate whether brand nickname use influences consumer-brand attachment (self-brand connection and brand prominence), (2) to identify the psychological mechanism underlying this effect, (3) to identify factors that might moderate the relationship, and, (4) to demonstrate the impact of brand nickname use on consumers' downstream brand relationship maintenance behaviors (e.g., purchase intent for other products of the same brand, intentions to perform difficult behaviors for the brand). Taken together, this research aims to

shed light on the dilemma that managers face about whether, and when, they should embrace or avoid brand nicknames for the brands that they manage.

Drawing on the existing, albeit limited, findings on personal nicknames in interpersonal relationships from the psychology literature, we argue that since a nickname is typically a term of endearment - an affectionate response to a person or object - when a brand is referred to by its nickname, it may elicit positive brand related emotions (e.g., affection, love) that help forge an emotional connection which results in a stronger brand attachment (SBC and brand prominence). As such, in this research we remain largely in the realm of positive nicknames, or those that do not have any negative connotations for the brand.

Our conceptual framework (see Figure 2.1) defines the scope of the current project and formalizes these arguments to propose that: (1) brand nickname use is more likely than formal name use to result in enhanced brand attachment (SBC and brand prominence) and brand relationship maintenance behaviors (studies 1-3); (2) brand nickname use elicits positive brand related emotions (measured as emotional attachment) which mediates the effect of nickname use on brand attachment (studies 1-3); and, (3) these effects are moderated by nickname relevance, such that only a relevant nickname that captures the essential brand concepts or product features elicits positive brand related emotions (study 3).

[Insert Figure 2.1 about here]

This research aims to make three theoretical contributions. First, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first academic study to investigate the practice of brand nicknames on the consumer-brand relationship and consumers' brand related behaviors. Second, we contribute to the branding literature in consumer behavior by demonstrating that brand nickname use elicits positive brand related emotions that forges an emotional connection with the brand to influence

brand attachment (SBC and brand prominence). Third, we provide some insights regarding the strategic use of nicknames as a marketing practice by demonstrating that the relevance of the nickname to a unique brand concept or product feature serves as a critical moderator that may influence the success of the nickname use.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. We first present our conceptual framework and theorize how and why a nickname strategy would influence the affective and cognitive facets of the consumer-brand relationship. We then present a series of three studies to test our hypothesis. We conclude with a discussion of our findings, discuss the theoretical contributions and emphasize the managerial importance of brand nickname use in the social and digital world, with implications for brand trademarks, protecting brand domain loss and social media marketing.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Consumers' Affective Response to Brand Nickname Use

Nicknames, in a social context, usually take the form of endearment and serve as a “tie sign” that carries unique meanings in constructing and solidify interpersonal relationships (Bell and Healey 1992; Goffman 1971). The tendency of giving nicknames and referring to people by their nicknames is imbued across different cultures in human history. Almost every president of the United States of America dating back to George Washington had at least one nickname (McCarthy 2017), and public opinions of celebrities and athletes are often shown in the form of nicknames (Palomares 2013; Knepper 2011). These personal nicknames often contain meanings of attitudes and associations, and can lead to closer and more intimate social relationships (Morgan, O'Neill and Harré 1979). In a qualitative research, Hopper, Knapp and Scott (1981) identified “expressions of affection” as one of the most frequently mentioned types for personal

idioms including nicknames. By illuminating communication norms associated with affection, idiosyncratic languages such as nicknames serve the function of “pair-bonding” – emphasize and reinforce the identity of the pair as special – which helps to build and strengthen relationship cohesiveness. Although limited, research in psychology shows that nicknames can facilitate satisfaction in interpersonal relationships between romantic partners (Bruess and Pearson 1993), family members (Landau 2015) and friends (Bell and Healey 1992). In a study of the effects of personal nicknames on marital satisfaction (Bruess and Pearson 1993), the authors found that when compared to formal names, nicknames (idiosyncratic expressions) play important communication roles between partners that lead to greater intimacy, loving and closeness in romantic relationships. It is suggested that nicknames may serve as important shorthand for affection that engenders close associations (Bolin 2005). By associating critical personal attributes and qualities, such as intimacy, love, trust, and friendship, nicknames aid in building intimate and successful personal relationships.

In the context of branding, Fournier (1998) suggested that consumers’ brand relationships can be viewed as analogous to human partnerships (e.g., friends, marriage partners). In light of this perspective, we argue that, similar to the consequences of personal nicknames in the social context, brand nicknames could facilitate and enhance consumers’ brand relationships by generating positive affective responses and forging a closer emotional bond between consumers and the brand. Nicknames, by their very nature, contain significant social meanings that reflect an individual’s beliefs and attitudes towards the target (friends, families or brands). Brand nicknames thus may facilitate consumers’ needs to connect with, attach to and endear those target brands by embedding social natures and emotional elements into their relationship with the brands. As Morgan et al. (1979) argued in their book “Nicknames, their origins and social

consequences”, a (nick)name “is not just a label or a mere neutral referential device, but is rich in content and many kinds of associations, the effect of a (nick)name may last a lifetime”. By adopting a nickname, a brand encourages the consumer-brand interaction to be similar to interpersonal interactions and strives to build an intimate relational partnership with its consumers. The use of brand nickname therefore may serve the function of “intimacy indicator” which leads to the association and perception of “closeness, trust or affection between the relationship pair” (Baxter 1987); these associations and perceptions, in turn, may invoke strong affective responses that help reinforce and strengthen the emotional bond consumers have with the brand. Compared to a brand’s formal name, a brand nickname embraces affection, love, connection and passion from people who bestow it; these qualities, in turn, generate a stronger degree of affection and emotional attachment toward the brand, making consumers feel they depend on the brand and trust the brand as a “buddy” that speaks to who they are as consumers (Park et al. 2016). As a result, when a brand is referred to or adopts a nickname generated by its consumers, it may no longer be perceived as an inanimate object; rather, consumers may regard the brand as close partner and trusted friend and are more likely to elicit positive affective responses toward the brand through nickname use.

Building on the attachment theory (Bowlby 1979) in psychology, Thomson et al. (2005) suggested that a key affective dimension of the consumer-brand relationship is emotional attachment (EA) and proposed a three-factor model to characterize such attachment using three emotional components (affection, passion and connection). As a comprehensive scale with good validity of examining consumers’ emotional attachments to brands, we rely on this EA scale to measure consumers’ affective responses toward brand nickname use in the current paper.

We thus hypothesize,

H1: Brand nickname use elicits a positive affective response to the brand.

Influences of Brand Nickname Use on Consumers' Brand Relationship

In addition to consumers' emotional responses, brand nickname use may further influence the cognitive closeness (self-brand connection and brand prominence) of consumers' brand relationship. Consumers' self-brand connection (SBC) captures "the degree to which consumers have incorporated the brand into their self-concepts" (Escalas and Bettman 2003). Self-brand connection suggests that consumers may perceive a brand as "being close to me as a person" (MacInnis and Folkes 2017) and resonate personal identity with a brand to reflect or construct one's actual or ideal self (Escalas and Bettman 2005; MacInnis and Folkes 2017). In addition to SBC, Park et al. (2010) further proposed a more comprehensive concept, namely brand attachment, to capture the strength of the bond connecting the consumer to the brand. As one of the most "core" constructs in the field of consumer-brand relationship (Albert and Thomson 2018), brand attachment consists of two critical factors: self-brand connection and brand prominence. Amongst the two factors, self-brand connection serves as the key idea of attachment by reflecting the bond connecting a person with the brand. Independent of SBC, brand prominence adds precision by measuring the strength of the cognitive (SBC) and affective (EA) bond that connects the brand to consumers.

Although brand attachment captures consumers' cognitive closeness to a brand, such cognitive representation is suggested to be "inherently emotional" (Park et al. 2010, p. 2). Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested that the formation of social bonds is generally associated with positive emotions; these positive affective responses, in turn, may help to solidify social attachments. As social beings, humans use social relationships to change and reinforce our self-

concepts, and rely on these relationships to impose structures and meanings in our lives (Aron and Aron 1996; Aron, Paris, and Aron 1995; Hinde 1995). A number of studies have found that social attractions and attachments are not only established but also increased and strengthened by positive affective experiences (Shaver, Hazan, and Bradshaw 1988; Gouaux 1971; Veitch and Griffitt 1976). As brand nicknames usually take the form of endearment and evoke positive emotional responses associated with affection and connection, we expect brand nickname use may positively influence consumers' cognitive closeness with the brand. Drawing on Fredrickson's broaden and build theory (2001) and Aron and Aron's (1986) self-expansion theory, we argue that the positive emotions (captured by EA) elicited by brand nickname use are likely to enhance the perceived overlap between the consumer and the brand, resulting in greater cognitive closeness (SBC) and strengthening the bond of the self-brand connection (brand prominence). This more strongly ties the consumer to the brand, resulting in a greater degree of brand attachment.

We thus hypothesize,

H2: Brand nickname use positively influences consumers' brand attachment (SBC and brand prominence).

H3: Consumers' affective response (EA) mediates the relationship between brand nickname use and brand attachment.

What are the downstream consequences when consumers feel connected with and attached to a brand? Prior research suggested that when the consumer-brand relationship gets stronger, it increases consumers' motivation to maintain their relationship with the brand. These brand relationship maintenance behaviors have been captured in the literature, including brand loyalty (Thomson et al., 2005), the adoption and acceptance of brand extensions (Fedorikhin,

Park and Thomson 2008), and the willingness to pay a premium price and perform difficult behaviors for the brand (Park et al., 2010). In the current research, we focus on similar downstream effects of brand nickname use. Specifically, we demonstrate that the connection forged with the brand, manifests itself over the longer term as brand relationship maintenance behaviors such as the willingness to purchase other products of the same brand and the intentions to perform difficult behaviors for the brand (willingness to use greater consumer resources to maintain the consumer-brand relationship; e.g., paying a price premium for the brand, recommending the brand to others, defending the brand when others speak poorly about it; Park et al., 2010).

H4: Brand nickname use results in a greater consumer willingness to invest in brand relationship maintenance behaviors as a result of the enhanced consumer-brand relationship.

The Moderating Role of Nickname Relevance

What are the factors that may influence the successful adoption of a brand nickname? Should brands adopt and embrace any nickname they are given? Herein, we suggest that an important antecedent for successful brand nickname adoption is the extent of nickname relevance to the brand concepts and product features. Based on our definition of brand nicknames, we further characterize nickname relevance as the extent to which a brand nickname depicts and captures the important concepts and distinctive attributes of the brand and its products. For instance, in order to encourage the use of the nickname “Belve”, Belvedere Vodka launched a campaign which carries the theme of “Believe” by promoting the brand concept of “trust your instincts - naturally smooth make it *Belve*” (Elliott 2010). Nickname relevance can take a variety of forms from phonetic similarity (to the brand/product name) to brand heritage to product

aesthetic attribute. Such descriptive feature is a critical element in our definition of brand nickname, and this inherent nature of nicknames can be seen in a great deal of real-world examples, such as Rollie for Rolex (phonetic similarity), Mouse House for Disney (brand heritage), and Bug for Volkswagen Beetle (aesthetic attribute).

Close to the concept of nickname relevance, prior research has highlighted several similar constructs as well as their influences on successful branding, such as product category association in brand name transfer (Chakravarti, MacInnis and Nakamoto 1990), brand concept consistency in brand extensions (Park, Milberg and Lawson 1991; Aaker and Keller 1990) and the role of element “fit” in consumer information processing (MacInnis and Park 1991). In general, this body of research adopted the theory of categorization (Rosch 1978; Rosch and Mervis 1975) and suggested that when feature overlap (between items) increases, it also enhances category coherence, which, in turn, facilitates information processing and brand extension. On the contrary, incoherent or low relevance often elicits negative affects and confusion, hinders information processing and decreases message learning (Edell and Staelin 1983; Bello, Pitts, and Etzel 1983).

With respect to brand nickname relevance, we draw on Park, Milberg and Lawson (1991) who suggested that consumers’ perception of brand coherence is a function of both brand-concept-consistency and product-feature-similarity. While brand concepts usually contain higher-order and more abstract brand-unique meanings (e.g., status, user-friendly), they fundamentally originate and evolve from concrete features (e.g., price, design feature) of specific products. Therefore, the perceived brand coherence largely depends on the overlap and relevance between the brand-concept and the unique configuration of product features. As an external reflection of perceived brand concept from consumers’ perspective, brand nicknames, thus, need

to catch and depict important and distinctive product or brand features in order to increase their associations with the given brand, and to support, complete and reinforce these brand concepts.

Consequently, we argue that a relevant nickname helps to increase perceived overlap and shared associations between the nickname with the brand, which resonates and enhances the emotional connection consumers feel for the brand. In contrast, a nickname that is irrelevant or low in relevance does not permit such connection, which diminishes the emotional resonance and blocks the pathway of forming brand attachment. In other words, brand nicknames with high relevance are therefore more likely to generate a positive affective response *related to the brand* and facilitate greater emotional connection and stronger associations with the brand, which ultimately strengthens the consumer-brand relationship.

Therefore, we hypothesize:

H5: The effects of brand nickname use on consumers' affective response to the brand is moderated by brand nickname relevance such that brand nicknames with high (low) relevance enhance (diminish) the stated effects.

OVERVIEW OF THE EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

We present a set of three studies to support our theorizing. In study 1, we provide evidence to support our main hypothesis that brand nicknames (in comparison to formal brand names) facilitate a closer and more intimate consumer-brand relationship. Specifically, we demonstrate that brand nickname use evokes positive brand related emotions (measured by emotional attachment) and facilitates a greater self-brand connection. Further, we demonstrate that this links to greater willingness to perform brand relationship maintenance behaviors (assessed in this study as a greater likelihood to purchase other products from the same brand).

Notably, this study replicates the findings across two nickname source conditions (self-generated or other-generated). In study 2, we replicate the main effect and provide evidence for the underlying mechanism. In this study, the downstream brand relationship maintenance behaviors include (1) purchase intention of other products from the brand, and (2) intention to perform difficult behaviors for the brand (Park et al. 2010). In addition, we further extend our findings by showing that a nickname practice does not only influence consumers' self-brand connection, but also the brands prominence – the strength of the bond connecting a consumer with the brand. Specifically, we measure consumers' brand attachment (Park et al. 2010) – a construct that encompasses both SBC and brand prominence (the strength of the bond). Study 3 explores a boundary condition for the brand nickname effect, namely, the moderating role of nickname relevance. This study shows that the effects observed above only occur for nicknames that are high in relevance (the nickname depicts or captures a brand/product feature) and only high relevant nicknames influence both brand-consumer relationships and consumers' downstream brand relationship maintenance behaviors.

Study 1

Study 1 was designed to demonstrate the focal phenomenon – brand nickname use evokes positive brand related emotions (measured by EA), which leads to a greater self-brand connection (SBC) and ultimately higher intentions to perform brand relationship maintenance (BRM) behaviors (willingness of purchasing additional products from the same brand). In addition, we aim to demonstrate that the source of the nickname (self-generated or other-generated) has little influence on the proposed effects.

Procedure and Measures

One hundred and ninety-eight undergraduate students (53% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 22.8$ years) at a large US university participated in this online study in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to 3 conditions (official name, self-generated nickname, and other-generated nickname). Participants were asked to imagine that after participating in a satisfaction survey at a dentist's office, they were selected as a winner and received a new electronic toothbrush called "ESC Sonic Essence Rechargeable Electric Toothbrush – IPX 268" from the (fictitious) brand "ESC" for free. The toothbrush was described as having a patented sonic technology that quickly removes food residue to make teeth cleaning faster. Participants were then told to visit the brand's website and register the product in order to activate its 3 year product warranty. All participants were directed to a page that simulated a product registration page of a company website.

In the official name condition, participants were asked to type in the formal product name to finish the registration process. In the other-generated nickname condition, participants were told that other ESC customers have given the toothbrush a nickname "the speedy", and participants were asked to type the nickname "the speedy" in order to finish the registration process. In the self-generated nickname condition, participants were encouraged to generate a nickname that would be suitable for the toothbrush and type in the nickname to finish the registration process. After registration, participants were asked to imagine that they had used the toothbrush every day for a month.

Participants then reported EA on a brand emotional attachment scale (Thomson, et al. 2005) and SBC on a self-brand connection scale (Escalas and Bettman 2003). In addition, participants reported their willingness to purchase other products from the ESC brand (ESC hair oil, ESC toothpaste, ESC bodywash, ESC skin lotion: 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; later

combined into a BRM behavior index ($\alpha = .86$). Participants were asked to indicate how familiar they were with the brand ESC (“how often have you seen the brand ESC before”, “ESC is a well-known brand”, “I am familiar with ESC”: 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; later combined into a familiarity index ($\alpha = .92$)). Since the ESC brand was a fictitious brand, we saw no differences in familiarity across the three conditions ($F(2, 195) = .20, p = .82$).

Results

Emotional Attachment. An ANOVA with the three experimental conditions as the independent variable and EA as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect ($F(2, 195) = 4.99, p = .008$). Follow up contrasts showed that participants in the self-generated nickname condition reported a significantly stronger emotional attachment to the brand ($M_{\text{self}} = 4.23$) compared to participants in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{formal}} = 3.39, t(195) = 3.15, p = .002$). Participants in the other-generated nickname condition also reported a stronger, albeit marginal, emotional attachment to the brand ($M_{\text{other}} = 3.87$) compared to those in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{formal}} = 3.39, t(195) = 1.79, p = .075$). However, there was no significant difference between the self-generated and other-generated nickname conditions ($p = .17$). These results lend support to hypothesis 1.

Self-brand Connection. A similar ANOVA with SBC as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect ($F(2, 195) = 6.19, p = .002$). Follow up contrasts revealed that participants in both the self-generated nickname condition ($M_{\text{self}} = 3.99, t(195) = 3.34, p = .001$) and the other-generated nickname condition ($M_{\text{other}} = 3.81, t(195) = 2.65, p = .009$) reported a significantly stronger self-brand connection than those in the formal brand name condition ($M_{\text{formal}} = 3.13$). At the same time, there was no significant difference between the self-generated and other-generated condition in terms of SBC ($p = .48$). These results lend support to hypothesis 2.

BRM Behavior. Participants in the nickname conditions showed a higher purchase intention for additional products from the same brand ($F(2, 195) = 3.97, p = .02$). Participants in both the self-generated nickname condition ($M_{\text{self}} = 3.46$ vs. $M_{\text{formal}} = 2.82, t(195) = 2.70, p = .007$) and the other-generated nickname condition ($M_{\text{other}} = 3.31$ vs. $M_{\text{formal}} = 2.82, t(195) = 2.06, p = .041$) reported a significantly higher purchase intention for additional ESC products than those in the formal brand name condition. Once again, there was no significant difference between the self-generated and other-generated condition ($p = .51$). These results lend support to hypothesis 4.

Mediation Analysis. As predicted, the result of serial mediation analysis (with independent variable [IV] = name condition, [M1] = EA, [M2] = SBC, and dependent variable [DV] = BRM (brand relationship maintenance behaviors); Hayes 2013, model 6: 5,000 bootstrapped samples) demonstrated that the effect of brand nicknames on BRM was driven by EA and SBC (95% CI for indirect effect = [.0016, .1654]; Figure 2.2). These results lend support to hypothesis 3.

[Insert Figure 2.2 about here]

Discussion

Study 1 provides support for the hypothesis that brand nickname use positively influences brand-consumer relationships and consumers' brand relationship maintenance behaviors. These results demonstrate that compared to formal names, brand nicknames make consumers feel more connected and attached to the brand, and this enhanced brand connection and attachment leads to increased purchase intentions of additional products from the same brand. In addition, the results suggest that the source of the nickname (self-generated and other-generated) has little influence on the proposed effects as no significant differences between the two nickname conditions were found. In the study that follows, we aimed to provide evidence for the influence of brand nickname use on the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the consumers - brand attachment.

Study 2

Study 2 was designed with three objectives in mind: (1) to replicate the effects of brand nicknames on brand attachment (Park et al. 2010) by measuring both SBC and brand prominence, (2) to replicate the mediating effect of emotional attachment, and, (3) to broaden the downstream brand relationship maintenance behaviors by including consumers' intention to perform difficult behaviors for the brand (Park et al. 2010).

Procedure and Measures

Design and Participants. One hundred and eighty six undergraduate students (55% female, $M_{age} = 21.5$) at a large US university participated in this online study in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to two conditions (official name and self-generated nickname).

The procedure was similar to that of study 1, but with a different product category (a virtual reality headset). Participants were told that they had just won a free virtual reality headset from the brand “WalWonder” after participating in an unrelated customer survey. The features of the headset were described in an identical manner across both conditions. Similar to study 1, the participants were directed to a registration page to register the product. Participants in the formal name condition were asked to type the formal name (WalWonder 3D virtual reality headset) in order to finish the registration process; whereas participants in the nickname condition were asked to generate a nickname for the product and type it in order to complete product registration. After registration, participants were asked to imagine that they had used the device every day for a month.

Participants then completed the questionnaire, responding to the dependent variables in the order in which they are presented below. Emotional Attachment (EA) was measured using the same scale as in Study 1. Self-brand connection and brand prominence were measured by a

brand attachment scale (Park et al. 2010, $\alpha = .93$), which contains two items for self-brand connection and two items for brand prominence. Two different scales assessed BRM behaviors. Similar to study 1, participants first reported their willingness to purchase other products from the brand (a WalWonder protective case, a WalWonder solar charger, WalWonder Bluetooth earphones: 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; later combined into an index ($\alpha = .80$)). A second measure was adopted from Park et al. (2010) in which we measured consumers' intentions to perform ten difficult behaviors for the brand. This scale is a more general behavioral measure that indicates consumers' overall behavioral tendencies in terms of positive WOM, switching behaviors as well as defending the brand when others speak poorly about it. Items include "recommending the brand to other people", "paying more for the brand than other brands", "waiting for several months to buy product from this brand rather than buying similar products from other brands", etc. (1 = not at all, 7 = very likely; $\alpha = .90$). In addition, participants were asked to indicate how funny they thought the names were (WalWonder for the formal name condition, nickname for the nickname condition, 1 = not at all, 7 = very much) and how familiar they are with the brand "WalWonder" by using the same measures from Study 1. Results showed no differences in humor perceptions ($F(1, 184) = 1.63, p = .20$) or familiarity ($F(1, 184) = .41, p = .52$) across the conditions so these variables are not discussed further.

Results

Emotional Attachment. A one-way ANOVA with EA as the dependent variable showed that participants in the nickname condition indicated a stronger brand emotional attachment in comparison to the formal name condition ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 4.39, M_{\text{formal}} = 3.44; F(1, 184) = 16.19, p < .001$). These findings replicated the findings of study 1 and lend support to hypothesis 1.

Brand Attachment (SBC and Brand Prominence). A one-way ANOVA with brand attachment as the dependent variable revealed that brand attachment (SBC and brand prominence)

varied significantly between the two conditions ($F(1, 184) = 5.76, p = .017$), as participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 3.85$) showed an increased brand attachment compared to those in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{formal}} = 3.26$). Further analysis showed that participants in the nickname condition felt a stronger self-brand connection ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 3.76, M_{\text{formal}} = 3.13; F(1, 184) = 5.83, p = .017$) and an increased brand prominence ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 3.95, M_{\text{formal}} = 3.39; F(1, 184) = 4.40, p = .037$) compared to those in the formal name condition. These findings replicated the findings of study 1 and lend support to hypothesis 2.

BRM Behaviors. Participants in the nickname condition reported higher purchase intentions for the three additional products compared to those in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 3.96, M_{\text{formal}} = 3.37; F(1, 185) = 5.53, p = .02$), supporting hypothesis 4. In addition, participants in the nickname condition were also more willing to perform difficult behaviors for the brand in comparison to those in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 4.20, M_{\text{formal}} = 3.81; F(1, 184) = 4.92, p = .028$), also supporting hypothesis 4.

Mediation Analysis. The results of serial mediation analysis (Hayes 2013, model 6: 5,000 bootstrapped samples) are shown in Figure 2.3. These results indicated that the effects of brand/product nicknames on consumers' downstream brand relationship maintenance behaviors were indeed driven by consumers' brand emotional attachment and brand attachment, supporting hypothesis 3².

[Insert Figure 2.3 about here]

Discussion

² We also considered the possibility that nicknames may be processed more fluently and thus measured phonetic fluency (as control variable) by asking participants to report "how difficult is it for you to say or pronounce the brand (nick) name" (1 = very easy, 7 = extremely difficult). We did find that nicknames were easier to pronounce ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 1.37, M_{\text{formal}} = 2.27; F(1, 184) = 20.23, p < .001$), but mediation analysis did not support fluency as the mediator (Hayes 2013, model 4, 5,000 bootstrap) for EA (95% CI, -.2602, .0317) or brand attachment (95% CI, -.2557, .0889). In other words, fluency did not mediate the effect of nickname use on emotional attachment or brand attachment.

Study 2 provides support for hypotheses 1-4. Consistent with our theory, the results show that nickname use positively influences consumers' affective responses toward the brand, which translates into an enhanced brand attachment and downstream brand relationship maintenance behaviors. We extended our findings in study 1 by showing that the nickname practice does not only enhance consumers' self-brand connection to the brand, but also increases the strength of the bond connecting the brand and consumer's self. Furthermore, we broadened our behavior measures by showing that the nickname practice influences more than just consumers' decisions about additional purchases from the brand, but it also increases consumers' general intentions to perform other difficult behaviors for the brand, including positive WOM, switching behaviors as well as defending the brand when others speak poorly about it.

Study 3

Study 3 aims to explore a key aspect of a brand or product nickname that we theorize makes it work favorably for the brand – nickname relevance. We show that only when a nickname has high relevance does it result in positive brand related emotions and brand attachment, which in turn translates into greater willingness to perform BRM behaviors.

Procedure and Measures

Design and Participants. Two hundred and twenty six people from Amazon Mechanical Turk participated in the study for pay. Among them, five people failed to pass attention check and were excluded from the study, resulting in a total number of two hundred and twenty one people (56% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 36$ years) for analysis. Participants were randomly assigned to each condition in a 2 (name type: nickname vs. formal name) \times 2 (relevance: high vs. low) between-subject design.

The procedure of study 3 was similar to that of studies 1 and 2. Participants were asked to imagine that they just received a “GenEdge USB 3.0 Waterproof Flash Drive (32GB)” from the brand “GenEdge”. The description stated that the flash drive looks thinner and lighter than a typical USB and is waterproof.

In the formal name with high brand relevance condition, participants were asked to type the brand’s formal name “GenEdge” in order to finish the registration process. In the formal name with low brand relevance condition, participants were told the brand “GenEdge” wanted to be referred to by its acronym “GE”, although “GE” typically refers to another brand – “General Electric”. This manipulation aims to make the acronym “GE” have low brand relevance with “GenEdge”. Participants were asked to type “GE” to finish the registration process in this condition. For both high- and low-relevance nickname conditions, participants were told consumers gave the brand a nickname “Genie”. In the low relevance condition, no reasons were given to explain why the nickname “Genie” was given. In the high relevance condition, participants were told the nickname “Genie” aptly captures the product features (small and portable, “like a genie in a bottle”) and reflects the product safety feature (waterproof) as the flash drive has genie-like powers to keep their data safe. After registration, participants were asked to imagine that they had used the flash drive every day for a month. Participants were asked to keep the brand (nick)name in mind when answering the subsequent questions.

Manipulation Check. As a manipulation check for relevance, participants indicated (1) how close they thought the (nick)name is to the brand “GenEdge”; (2) to what extent do they think the (nick)name is related to or associated with the brand “GenEdge”; (3) to what extent they thought the (nick)name is related to the safety features of the flash drive; and (4) to what extent

they thought the (nick)name reflects the aesthetic features (thin and light) of the flash drive (1 = not at all, 7 = very much; later combined into an index ($\alpha = .84$)).

Emotional Attachment and Brand Attachment. Emotional attachment and brand attachment (SBC and brand prominence) were measured using the same scales from Study 2.

BRM Behaviors. Similar to study 1 and 2, participants reported their willingness to purchase other products from the brand (a GenEdge hard drive, a GenEdge smart phone, a second generation of GenEdge flash drive: 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; later combined into an index ($\alpha = .80$)). In addition, participants reported their intentions to perform ten difficult behaviors for the brand (Park et al. 2010).

Control Variables. Participants reported how familiar they were with the brand “GenEdge” by using the same measures as described for Studies 1 and 2. Results showed participants were equally (un)familiar with the brand GenEdge ($F(3, 217) = 1.88, p = .13$).

Results

Manipulation Check. An ANOVA with name conditions as the independent variable and nickname relevance as the dependent variable revealed that participants considered the brand formal name “GenEdge” ($M = 5.36$) and the nickname “genie (high relevance)” ($M = 4.36$) to be significantly more related to the brand in comparison to the brand acronym “GE” ($M = 2.69$) and the nickname “genie (low relevance)” ($M = 3.44$; $F(3, 217) = 42.55, p < .001$).

Brand Emotional Attachment. A 2 (name) \times 2 (relevance) on EA revealed the hypothesized main effect of nickname use ($F(1, 217) = 5.68, p = .018$) qualified by a significant interaction ($F(1, 217) = 5.15, p = .024$; figure 2.4). When name relevance was high with respect to the brand/product features, a nickname generates a stronger brand emotional attachment (3.31 vs. 2.36, $F(1, 217) = 10.69, p = .001$). This difference, however, disappeared when name relevance was low (2.51 vs. 2.49, $F(1, 217) = .007, p = .94$).

[Insert Figure 2.4 about here]

Brand Attachment. A similar ANOVA on brand attachment revealed the hypothesized main effect of nickname use ($F(1, 217) = 6.31, p = .013$) qualified by a significant interaction ($F(1, 217) = 5.10, p = .025$; figure 2.5). When name relevance was high with respect to the brand/product features, a nickname generated a stronger brand attachment (3.51 vs. 2.55, $F(1, 217) = 11.24, p = .001$). This difference, however, disappeared when name relevance was low (2.62 vs. 2.57, $F(1, 217) = .03, p = .86$).

[Insert Figure 2.5 about here]

BRM Behaviors. A similar ANOVA on purchase intention of additional products revealed the hypothesized main effect of nickname use ($F(1, 217) = 4.26, p = .04$) qualified by a significant interaction ($F(1, 217) = 3.00, p = .085$; figure 2.6). When name relevance was high with respect to the brand/product features, a nickname lead to stronger purchase intention (3.98 vs. 3.23, $F(1, 217) = 7.11, p = .008$). This difference, however, disappeared when name relevance was low (3.04 vs. 2.98, $F(1, 217) = .055, p = .82$).

[Insert Figure 2.6 about here]

In addition, a similar ANOVA on intentions to perform difficult behaviors revealed the hypothesized main effect of nickname use ($F(1, 217) = 10.39, p = .001$), and the predicted interaction ($F(1, 217) = 2.59, p = .109$; figure 2.7). When name relevance is high with respect to the brand/product features, a nickname leads to stronger brand attachment (3.72 vs. 2.90, $F(1, 217) = 11.52, p = .001$). This difference, however, disappeared when name relevance was low (3.00 vs. 2.72, $F(1, 217) = 1.32, p = .25$).

[Insert Figure 2.7 about here]

Moderated Mediation Analysis. We tested our moderated-mediation model with Hayes (2013) PROCESS macro (model 7) with 5,000 bootstrapped samples. We used name type (official name vs. nickname) as the independent variable, emotional attachment as the mediator, brand attachment as the dependent variable, and name relevance as the moderator. As predicted, we found a moderating effect of nickname relevance on the relationship between name type and emotional attachment ($\beta = .92$; $t = 2.27$; $p = .02$). In addition, we found a significant indirect effect of name type on emotional attachment when nickname relevance was high (CI: .28 to 1.15), but not when nickname relevance was low (CI: -.38 to .42). The direct effect was not significant ($p = .29$). Therefore, our moderated mediation model was supported.

Discussion

Study 3 provided support for hypotheses 1-5 and demonstrated the moderating role of nickname relevance - a key aspect of brand/product nickname. Consistent with our hypotheses, the results suggested that only when a nickname has high relevance could it lead to positive emotional responses, which were later translated into enhanced brand-consumer relationship and brand relationship maintenance behaviors.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Does Target benefit from consumers referring to it as Tar-jay? Should brands encourage consumers to personalize their products with nicknames? Prior to the current research, the benefits – or pitfalls – of brand nicknames were largely unknown. The current research demonstrates that brand nickname use can be a strategic input to help shape the consumer-brand relationship. Specifically, we find that brand nicknames positively influence consumer-brand relationships with respect to consumers' affective responses (EA), cognitive responses (SBC)

and brand prominence. By evoking positive brand-related emotions, we show that brand nickname use forges the cognitive bond that connects consumer's self to the brand (SBC) and increases the strength of the bond (brand prominence), resulting in a greater degree of brand attachment and brand relationship maintenance behaviors.

We present one pilot study and a set of three studies that demonstrate that a nickname is more likely to forge an emotional attachment and cognitive closeness than a formal brand name (studies 1-3). These enhanced brand attachments further translate into brand relationship maintenance behaviors (studies 1-3), and these effects are moderated by nickname relevance (study 3). Taken together, the current research suggests relevant brand nicknames positively influence consumer-brand relationships and facilitate consumers' brand relationship maintenance behaviors.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The insights from this research make two important contributions to the existing literature on consumer-brand relationships. First, by situating our research in the study of brand nicknames, we shed light on a pervasive marketplace phenomenon that has thus far remained uninvestigated in the academic literature. The impact of brand nickname use in shaping the consumer-brand relationship helps answer some fundamental yet unresolved questions about the strategic role that brand nicknames play in the marketplace and serves as the basis for future research in this area. Second, we illustrated the importance of nickname relevance and its impact on brand nickname success. Building on and extending the literature on brand coherence, we proposed and empirically demonstrated that a good brand nickname should depict and capture important concepts and distinctive attributes of the brand in order to generate stronger associations and

greater overlap. Such coherence, in turn, helps the brand to support, complete and reinforce its key brand concepts and to build a stronger connection with its consumers.

The insights of this research also highlight the managerial importance of brand nicknames to marketing practitioners. Herein, we discuss four implications of brand nicknames for marketers: (1) the value of brand nickname in social media marketing, (2) the benefits of protecting a brand nickname via trademarks, (3) the importance of protecting a brand's online identity from nickname domain loss and social media profile management, and (4) the unique storytelling aspect of brand nicknames to inform the brand's DNA.

Brand nicknames are products of social interactions, and, by their very nature, carry a great deal of social information that can serve as a unique means of communication with consumers. As consumers use different types of language when they talk about brands on social media and these language choices may influence information processing and effectiveness of communication, one might postulate that brand nickname use may help a brand attract consumers on social media in comparison to its formal names as nicknames more accurately depict how actual consumers speak of the brand. Brands should, thus, utilize and take advantage of this invaluable "gift" in order to maximize its potential on social media platforms.

Second, given the popularity and prevalence of some brand nicknames, it might become important and necessary for brands to protect these valuable, albeit intangible, assets by trademarking these nicknames in order to avoid unnecessary legal issues. For example, when Cristiano Ronaldo named his line of underwear by his popular nickname CR7, it got him into a legal battle as that nickname had been previously trademarked and owned by a different clothing line (Chung 2014). While securing marketable nicknames is legal, the Lanham Act (15 U.S.C. §1052(c)) prohibits "the registration of marks that consist of a living individual's name or

likeness without the individual's written consent” (Batterman et al. 2015). Thus, it appears from our non-expert perspective that non-human nicknames are more likely to be protected via a trademark than a human name that might falsely imply a connection to some person, celebrity or actor.

Similar to the idea of protecting brand nicknames via legal means, it is equally important to protect brand nicknames as a valuable component of a brand’s online identity. Given the potential power and significance that brand nicknames have in social media marketing, brands need to carefully manage their nicknames through various digital channels (e.g., website, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.). Brands need to ensure that consumers can easily find the brand through their popular nicknames on search engines and social media platforms in order to minimize the risk of “hijacking” from rivals or unrelated businesses (Saracino 2013). Thus, it might be necessary for brands to register their domain addresses (names) with brand nicknames and use brand nicknames for their social media profiles. For instance, despite the popularity of “beemer” or “beamer” for BMW among consumers, neither www.beemer.com nor www.beamer.com were registered by BMW and are currently owned by an unrelated marketing agency (Saracino 2013). In terms of protecting a brand’s online identity, it is much easier to prevent (registering a domain name, creating a social media profile using the nickname) than trying to reclaim it when it’s gone.

Lastly, brand nicknames can potentially play a significant role in telling the brand story which can inform and shape the brand’s DNA. Luxury brands have leveraged the storytelling power of brand nicknames which might in turn instill specific emotions (like pride and awe, Williams et al. 2018) and facilitate a stronger partnership with the brand. For instance, the iconic Chanel classic quilted handbag is popularly referred to by its nickname - the 2.55 bag. The name

2.55 represents the birth date of the bag – it was created by Coco Chanel in February 1955 (Clinton 2014). This nickname allows Chanel to weave a story about the heritage of the brand and contribute to the rich brand DNA of Chanel. Based on this, we propose that brands should strategically embed their popular nicknames into the brand heritage and encode them into brand's DNA.

Directions for Future Research

The current research raises some interesting questions that will need to be addressed in the future. First, we question whether there are any individual differences (e.g., education level, chronic/situational loneliness, individual materialism, personal relationship with the brand) that might influence the preference of brand formal name or nickname? For example, would consumers who have fewer social connections be more likely to connect with brands and products that have nicknames? Will the nature of consumer-brand relationship (e.g., a monogamous vs. a polygamous brand relationship) affect consumers' preference of brand nickname use (Aggarwal and Shi 2018)? Research findings that link brand nickname, brand anthropomorphism, and their consequences on consumers' social relationships will add substantial theoretical value to this area and could provide practical implications that may influence consumers' personal well-being. Second, how might brand nicknames affect perceived brand personality traits? Brands are often given human-like personality traits (Aaker 1997). Similar to social judgment of people, brands can be evaluated on the dimension of warmth and competence (Fiske et al. 2002). The findings from the current paper suggest brand nicknames increase consumers' perception of the brand on the affective dimension (warmth). However, could nicknames also influence perceived brand competence? Are consumers more likely to

perceive a brand as *less* competent or efficient when it is referred to by its nickname? Could this perhaps link to what the nickname is? Follow up research on when and how brand nicknames might influence brand competence judgments would provide a more complete and general picture to better evaluate the influence of nicknames on brand evaluation and attitude formation. Third, we call for future research to explore the possible differences between the use of self-generated nicknames versus the adoption of existing nicknames. Although we did not find significant differences between the two in our current investigation (study 1), the IKEA effect (Norton, Mochon and Ariely 2012, Mochon, Norton and Ariely 2012) would suggest that people generally like, and feel more committed, to their own creations. Therefore, self-generated nicknames may lead to greater fondness for the target brand and serve as a means by which marketers can foster stronger attachments with a new product acquisition. Future investigation on this issue will lead to better understanding about when, why and under what circumstances would self-generated nicknames work better than common nicknames. Another important issue to consider is whether brand nicknames might backfire under certain circumstances such as situations of product wrongdoings, brand transgression, and brand betrayal (Puzakova, Kwak, and Rocereto 2013; Joireman, Grégoire, and Tripp 2016; Park and John 2018; Reimann 2018). Although brand nicknames seem to facilitate and enhance consumer-brand relationships in general, such informal expressions may lack sincerity and seem unprofessional in some cases. For example, the use of brand nicknames in a product recall statement may make the statement seem glib, leading consumers to perceive the brand as underestimating the severity of the situation, which may damage the consumer-brand relationships. Therefore, it becomes necessary for further research to look into the boundary conditions associated with brand nickname use.

A Norwegian proverb aptly captures our brand nickname research by declaring “*A cherished child has many names*”. Our research shows that a brand that has a positive and relevant nickname, does indeed, result in the brand becoming cherished.

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Figure 2.1
Conceptual Framework

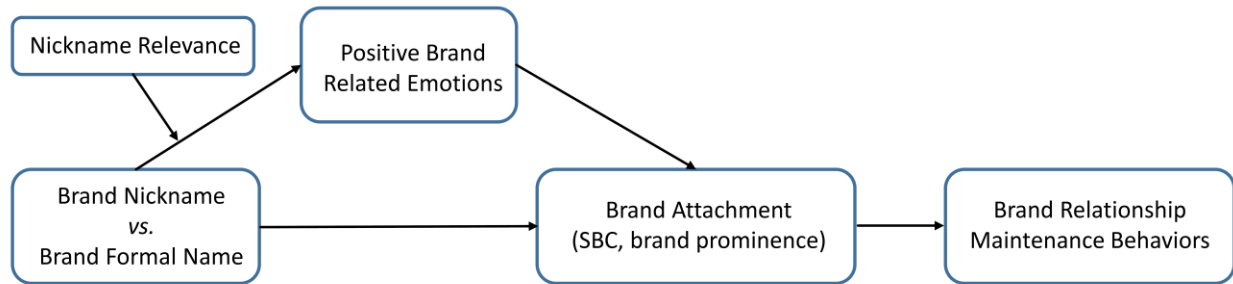


Figure 2.2
Serial Mediation Analysis for Study 1

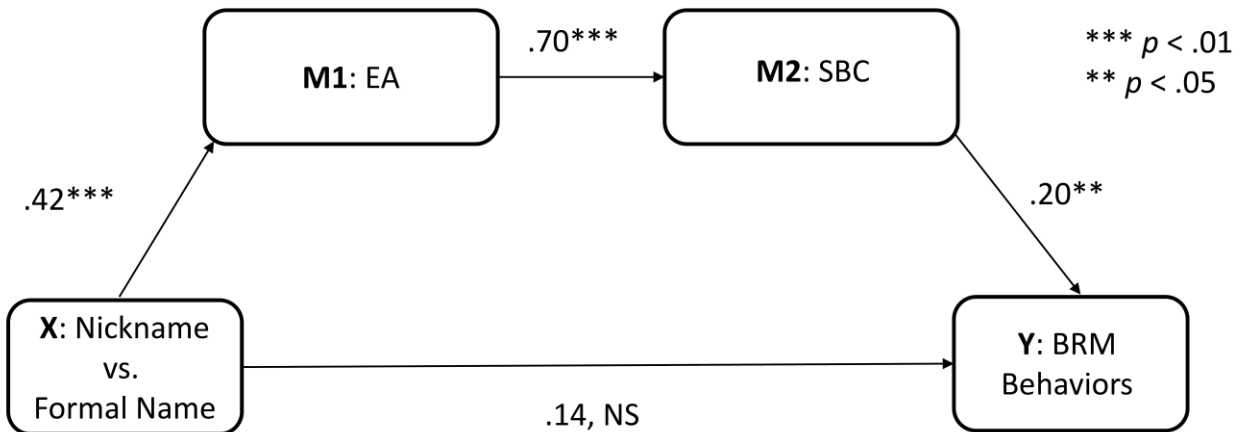
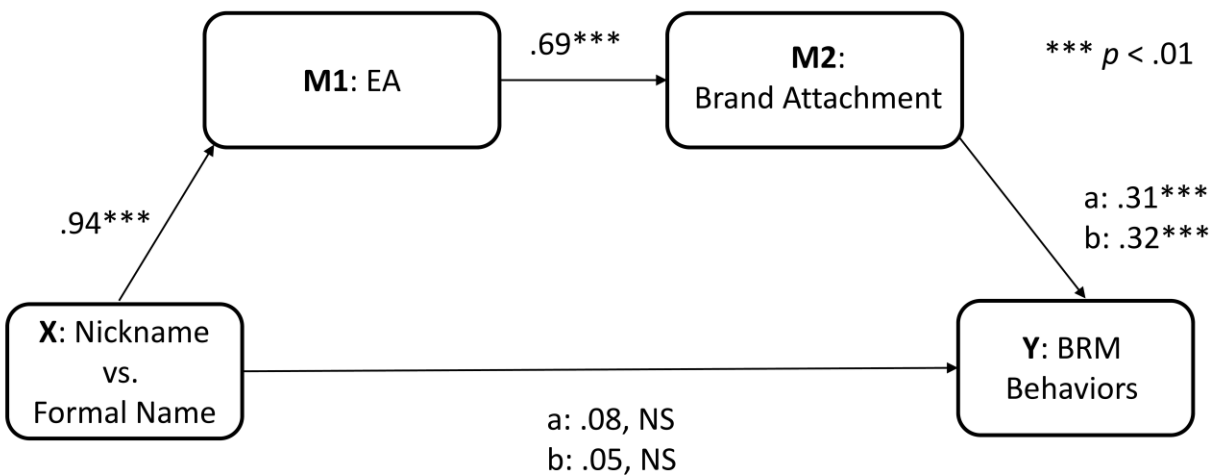


Figure 2.3
Serial Mediation Analysis for Study 2



a: DV = additional purchases; 95% CI for indirect effect = [.0796, .4066]
b: DV = willingness to perform difficult behaviors for the brand; 95% CI for indirect effect = [.0974, .3831]

Figure 2.4

How Nickname Relevance Affect Consumers' Brand Emotional Attachment

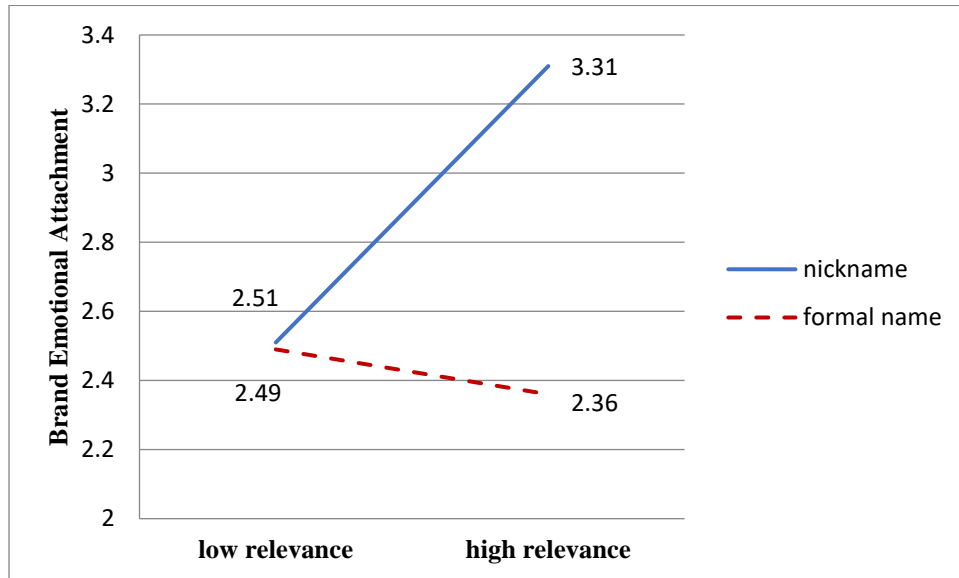


Figure 2.5

How Nickname Relevance Affect Consumers' Brand Attachment

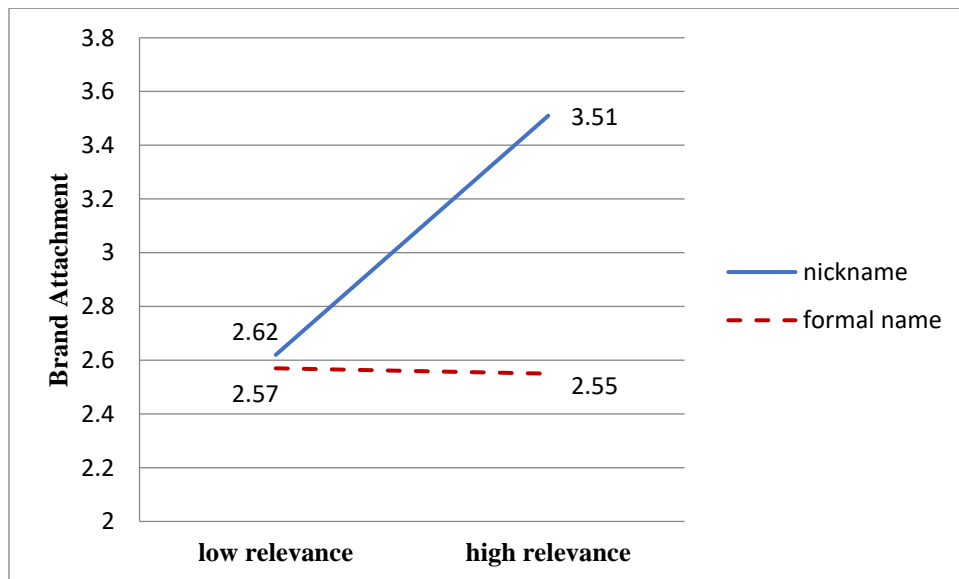


Figure 2.6

How Nickname Relevance Affect Purchase Intention

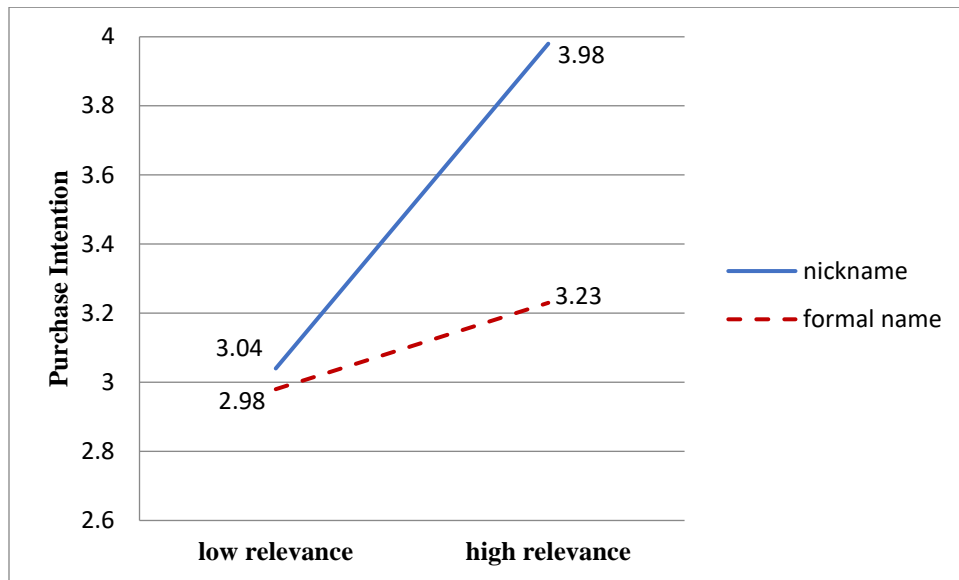
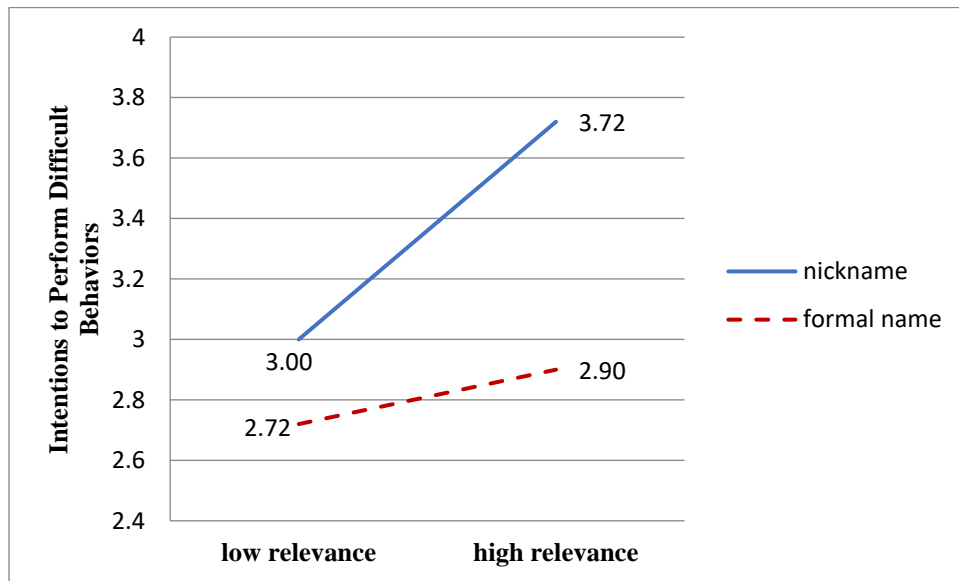


Figure 2.7

How Nickname Relevance Affect Consumers' Intentions to Perform Difficult Behaviors



CHAPTER 3. ESSAY 2

THE STREET CRED OF TARJAY: BRAND NICKNAME USE INFLUENCES PERCEIVED INFORMATION AUTHENTICITY

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the effect of using different ways to refer to a brand (formal name vs. brand nickname) on consumer perceptions of online review authenticity. Drawing on consumers' analogy-based knowledge transfer theory and uncertainty reduction theory, we demonstrate that brand nickname use (e.g., Big Brown for UPS, Mickey D for McDonald's and Tarjay for Target) in online reviews serves as a signal of the writer's relationship closeness with the target brand. This *inferred brand attachment* (IBA) can boost perceived review authenticity and lead to important downstream consequences such as online WOM, perceptions of review helpfulness and willingness to comply with the review recommendations. However, the nature of the brand attachment signal (subtle vs. overt) moderates this effect. A pilot study and four experiments provide converging evidence to support these arguments. This research extends the concept of brand attachment into consumers' social interactions and demonstrates the function of IBA in interpersonal communication. It also offers managerial insight with respect to the strategic use of brand nicknames in effective marketing communication and online review management.

INTRODUCTION

Sifting “real” information from that which is “fake” is a challenging task in today’s digital landscape. The large amount of fraudulent information, whether fake reviews or copycat websites, increases consumer information search costs, violates consumer privacy and enhances the likelihood that consumers are misled to make less optimal choices (Malbon 2013, Miyazaki and Fernandez 2001, Flanagin et al. 2011). Researchers have identified numerous quantitative factors that might be associated with fictitious reviews, such as the frequency with which first-person pronouns, emotional words, and conjunctions are used (Anderson and Simester 2014, Berzack 2011, Newman et al. 2003), and have suggested protocols to follow and checklists to adhere to, to help consumers identify fake information. Despite this, recent reports suggest that the success rate of detecting fictitious online reviews by consumers remain dismally low - around 49%-52% - not much better than guessing by chance (Kronrod, Lee and Gordeliy 2017).

This general inability of consumers to accurately identify fake online content has led researchers to ask another fundamental question: What indicators do consumers rely on to help them differentiate between authentic versus fake information in a digital world? In other words, how do consumers sift the grain from the chaff when seeking information online? The initial answer to that question appears to lie in understanding what it means to be a socially aware human being with the ability to transfer offline experiences to online ones. Indeed, a growing body of research now identifies some social and psychological factors often prevalent in the offline world, that individuals rely on to identify fake information online. An example of this type of online social cognition is the work by Jun, Meng, and Johar (2017) who found that perceived social presence reduced people’s likelihood of fact-checking statements in social settings.

In the current work we contribute to this stream of research to suggest that how a consumer refers to a brand in an online review, can influence the perceived authenticity of the review by shaping the readers inference of the review writer's brand attachment. Specifically, we introduce the use of an informal brand reference – brand nicknames – as a novel factor that may influence consumers' judgments of online review authenticity.

Brand nicknames are the “street names” or “monikers” of brands (i.e., Beemer for BMW, Wally World for Walmart, etc.) that may be defined as “the informal and descriptive names that serve as a substitute for a brand's trademarked formal name” (Zhang and Patrick 2018). The literature dealing with personal idioms suggests that nicknames serve as important shorthand for affection that suggests intimate relational associations (Bolin 2005). Research shows that nickname use in interpersonal relationships, whether for romantic partners, friends or family members, serves as a linguistic signal of relationship closeness (Bruess and Pearson 1993). By situating our research in the study of how linguistic cues can signal relationship quality (e.g., Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi 2012), we demonstrate that consumers rely on their intuition and existing knowledge structures in the offline world of interpersonal communication to be able to sort the “real” brand-related information in an online environment from that which might be “fake”.

Drawing on the theory of cross-domain knowledge transfer theory (Gregan-Paxton and John 1997), we argue that consumers transfer their knowledge of nickname use from offline interpersonal interactions to the realm of brands in the digital world. Specifically, if a review writer uses a nickname to refer to a brand, review readers are likely to infer that the writer has a strong personal tie and close relationship with the brand. We describe the readers' perception of the writer's relationship closeness and strength as *Inferred Brand Attachment* (IBA). Extending

the work of Park et al. (2010) that describes the consumer-brand relationship as an attachment or bond, we define IBA as the *perceived* strength of the bond between another consumer with a brand in a social context. In other words, while one might feel a strong attachment to Coke (brand attachment), one might infer that a friend has a strong attachment to Pepsi (inferred brand attachment).

Furthermore, drawing on the social signaling and consumers' persuasion knowledge literatures, we demonstrate that brand nicknames serve as a subtle signal of brand attachment. As such we demonstrate that the nature of the brand attachment cue (direct vs. subtle) moderates our hypothesized effect. Specifically, we demonstrate that a subtle signal of brand attachment (i.e., brand nickname use) shapes IBA more effectively than an overt signal and correspondingly results in the perception of the review being authentic. In other words, we expect that the use of an explicit brand attachment cue (e.g., stating "I am a big fan of this brand") activates consumers' persuasion knowledge (consumers' beliefs and theories of marketers' motives and persuasion attempts, Friestad and Wright 1994) and decreases perceived authenticity of that review, while brand nickname use (a subtle brand attachment cue) is less likely to do so.

Our full conceptual framework is shown in Figure 3.1.

[Insert Figure 3.1 about here]

This research aims to make three theoretical contributions to the literature on branding, online communication between consumers and integrated marketing theory. First, we broaden the study of brand attachment from how it is typically treated as the *consequence* of a consumer-brand relationship to how brand attachment can serve as a signal of relationship quality when it is communicated via one's linguistic choice in a *social context*. As such, we extend the concept of brand attachment into consumer's social interactions by demonstrating that brand attachment

can also be used as a relationship closeness indicator or antecedent that may subsequently influence the effectiveness and quality of *interpersonal communication*. Second, we shed light on an important yet understudied marketing phenomenon, namely brand nickname use. We propose that consumers transfer their knowledge about nickname use from day-to-day interpersonal interactions in social contexts in the offline world to make inferences about brand information in the online world. Relying on this intuition, we demonstrate that consumers rely on *how* a brand is referred to (formal name vs. nickname) to help identify fake information online. Third, we underscore the importance of encouraging brand nickname use to managers. We build on Zhang and Patrick (2018) to show that brand nicknames can serve as a means by which online communities can communicate authentically, and credibly, about the brand.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. We first theorize how and why how a brand is referred to (brand nickname vs. formal name) in online reviews may result in different levels of inferred brand attachment (IBA). We then use uncertainty reduction theory as a lens to explain how IBA may facilitate consumers' perception of information authenticity. We then present a pilot study and a series of four studies to test our hypotheses. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical contribution of our findings and emphasize the managerial implications of brand nickname use as well as brand attachment in the social environment.

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

Research in marketing communication has a rich history of exploring the influences of language choices on consumer information processing and behavior. Findings from this domain have revealed that subtle linguistic variations may significantly change how consumers understand and process marketing information and lead to distinctive behavioral consequences

such as WOM (Hamilton, Vohs, and McGill 2014), goal pursuit (Patrick and Hagtvedt 2012), financial liability (Fausey and Boroditsky 2010), product evaluation (Levin and Gaeth 1988) and choices (Levin, Schnittjer, and Thee 1988).

Within this broad domain, a stream of research has specifically looked into how linguistic variations may shape consumers' relationships with brands (Sela et al. 2012, Zhang and Patrick 2018). For example, Sela et al. (2012) showed that minor language variations (i.e., "we" vs. "you and the brand") affect consumers' attitudes toward brands while Zhang and Patrick (2018) demonstrated that the use of relationship-implying language such as brand nicknames (e.g., Chevy for Chevrolet) facilitates consumer self-brand connection and feelings of attachment to the brand.

Interestingly, prior research has mainly examined the use of language variation on individual consumer's *personal* relationship with the brand. However, a potential gap in the literature concerns the understanding of how one consumer's choice of brand-related language (e.g. formal name vs. nickname use) can influence another consumer's perception of the consumer-brand relationship. To develop our theorizing, we begin by first documenting evidence regarding the prevalence of brand nickname use in the marketplace. We then present a theoretical lens to understand when and why brand nicknames use may serve as a relationship closeness cue and influence message recipients' perception of information authenticity.

Brand Nicknames and Their Use in Marketplaces

Many brands are popularly known and referred to by their "street names" or nicknames. Some well-known examples include Beemer for BMW, Mickey D for McDonald's, Dunks for Dunkin Donuts, Wally World for Walmart, and Tarjay for Target (for a more complete list, see

Zhang and Patrick 2018). The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a (human) nickname as “a usually descriptive name given instead of or in addition to the one belonging to a person, place, or thing” and the Cambridge dictionary defines a nickname as “an informal name for someone or sometimes something, used esp. to show affection, and often based on the person’s name or a characteristic of the person”. In the context of branding, brand nicknames are defined as “the informal and descriptive names that serve as a substitute for a brand’s trademarked formal name” (Zhang and Patrick 2018). Since the majority of brand nicknames used by consumers are affectionate and positive, we focus only on the use of positive nicknames in the current work.

Existing research on brand nicknames suggests that brand nicknames originate from phonetic similarity (Rollie for Rolex), brand heritage (Mouse House for Disney), or product attributes (Bug for Volkswagen Beetle), and can be useful marketing tools to enhance consumers’ relationship quality with brands (Zhang and Patrick 2018). These authors found that consumers are more likely to forge a strong and more intimate relationship with a brand if encouraged to use a brand nickname (vs. the formal name) to refer to a newly acquired product from that brand. Little else in the academic literature sheds light on how differences in the way one consumer refers to a brand might influence another consumer’s perceptions and judgments of brand-related information, particularly in online social platforms.

Why is the online world important in this context? We propose that the open, social and somewhat informal nature of social and digital channels lends a novel context to investigate informal brand elements such as nicknames are used to communicate brand-related information. In a pilot study we conducted (N = 123), 29% of the participants indicated that they encounter brand nickname use in online communication (e.g., online reviews, social media posts) “frequently” or “all the time”, and 50% participants indicated that they see brand nicknames use

at least “sometimes”. Perhaps most interestingly, and germane to the current research, participants perceived that when someone uses a nickname to refer the brand in online posts, he or she has a closer and stronger relationship with the brand ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 5.28$, $M_{\text{formal name}} = 3.99$; $F(1, 121) = 32.18$, $p < .001$; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

Brand Nickname use facilitates Inferred Brand Attachment (IBA)

Names and name referring are powerful ways that symbolize social connection and relationship closeness. Finch (2008) argued that human names are an essential “part of the fabric of daily life” and serve as critical social markers to *display* the closeness of certain relationships and to *shape* social perceptions of that relationship. Therefore, names and naming are a valuable lens by which people understand a given relationship in a social context.

The literature of personal idioms reveals that personal nickname use constitutes and reflects the identity of a relationship (Bell and Healey 1992). In the context of social relationships, certain words and phrases may carry unique meanings and serve as important shorthand for affection that casts close relational associations (Bolin 2005). Baxter (1987) identified personal idioms such as human nicknames serve as a major function of relationship exclusivity to promote togetherness and share between the relationship parties. Such a function provides psychological seclusion and may provide a sense of relationship exclusivity and closeness by showing the relationship being special. As has been witnessed in a number of interpersonal relationships such as romantic partners (Bruess and Pearson 1993), friends (Bell and Healey 1992), family members (Landau 2015), and even celebrities with their fans (Roland 2016), nicknames frequently serve as symbolic of relationship closeness and quality. As the product of social interactions, human nicknames have been documented as relationship “tie signs” that make “evident the (special) nature of the relationship to others” (Bell and Healey 1992).

The question that concerns us in the present research is whether the social signaling value of nicknames in the offline world, is transferred to the domain of brands in the online world. Drawing on an understanding of analogy-based knowledge transfer, we theorize that a consumer's choice of brand reference (nickname vs. formal name) can influence other consumer's inferences about the consumer's relationship closeness with the brand.

Analogical learning refers to the process of which consumers transfer existing knowledge from a familiar domain (the base) to a novel domain (the target) (Gentner 1989, Gregan-Paxton and John 1997, Moreau, Markman and Lehmann 2001, Moreau, Lehmann and Markman 2001). During this process, consumers are likely to categorize the novel domain into the most similar domain based on the properties of the known category. Once such categorization is found and formed, consumers use their existing knowledge from the familiar domain to make inferences and judgments about the targets in the novel domain (Moreau, Markman and Lehmann 2001). For example, relying on analogical learning, people may use their past experiences of familiar situation or people to evaluate new social experiences (Mussweiler and Rüter 2003) and to judge strangers (Andersen and Chen 2002).

With respect to the interpretation of brand nickname use in online reviews, we argue that a review reader is likely to apply their knowledge of human nickname use in interpersonal interactions to the realm of consumers' interaction with the brand, and consequently to infer the writer's relationship closeness with the brand. Since *human* nicknames usually serve as the relationship symbol of an intimate and close *interpersonal relationship*, we expect that the readers may apply such knowledge into interpreting one's relationship quality with brands. When the review writer uses a brand nickname (in comparison to a brand formal name) to refer

to the target brand, readers are more likely to believe the writer has a stronger and closer relationship with the brand.

We capture the readers' perception of the writer's relationship closeness and strength as *Inferred Brand Attachment* (IBA). Brand attachment is defined as "the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self" (Park et al. 2010), we therefore define IBA as one consumer's perception of the strength of the bond connecting another consumer with the target brand. In other words, IBA reflects the extent and strength of an individual's (e.g., the review writer) self-inclusion and personal tie with a brand *from a third party's perspective* in a social environment. Since how the brand is referred to can serve as a cue to signal one's intimacy and closeness with a target brand, we expect that in comparison to formal names, brand nickname use may lead the observer or message recipient (e.g., the review reader) to infer that the message sender (e.g., the review writer) has a higher level of attachment to the target brand,

We thus hypothesize:

H1: Brand nickname use in an online review results in enhanced inferred brand attachment (IBA) compared to formal name use.

Inferred Brand Attachment (IBA) Enhances Perceived Review Authenticity

A significant portion of human social interactions is communicated non-verbally. People consciously or unconsciously evaluate and judge a situation by observing others' facial expressions, body gestures, eye movements or even dresses. Unfortunately, text-based online communication is generally devoid of non-verbal cues (emojis are a notable exception; Li, Chan and Kim 2019), which might explain the prevalence of factitious online reviews.

In fact, media richness theory (Daft and Lengel 1986) points out that since text-based communications are low in media richness, they are high in communication uncertainty. Communication uncertainty is defined as “having a number of possible alternative predictions or explanations” (Redmond 2015). Specifically, the lack of face-to-face interaction (e.g., voice, tone, facial expression, body language) in online reviews enhances the communication uncertainty making it more difficult for readers to evaluate the review and raise doubts about the authenticity of the information (i.e., written by a real user or posted by someone who is incentivized to do so, etc.). As such, readers will be more motivated and driven to seek additional information in order to reduce the uncertainty associated with the information (Berger and Calabrese, 1975). By actively looking for additional information, readers seek to better *explain* and *predict* the writer’s true thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

We theorize that IBA serves as a diagnostic cue to help review readers reduce the uncertainty associated with a review and differentiate an authentic review from an inauthentic one. Park et al. (2010) argued that a consumer’s brand attachment contains both a *self-brand connection component* (relationship closeness) and a *brand prominence component* (relationship salience). The *self-brand connection* component reflects the bond connecting a person with the brand; whereas the *brand prominence* component indicates the ease and frequency of brand related thoughts and feelings to one’s mind. Since IBA reflects both the self-brand connection and the brand prominence of the other consumer’s brand attachment, IBA can influence the perception of the information authenticity.

The perceived *brand relationship closeness* reflected in IBA helps the review readers to infer that there are strong cognitive and emotional ties between the review writer and the brand. Such relationship closeness may help review readers to identify true brand users from those who

are not, and help the readers *explain* the motivation underlying the writer's review. Indeed, since one way to enhance information credibility is to make the review writer more identifiable (Berger, 2014), we propose that if a reader infers that the writer has a true relationship with the brand via IBA, they are more likely to believe the information provided by the writer to be authentic.

The *relationship salience component* of IBA reflects the writer's brand related thoughts and feelings, which may further assist the readers to *predict* the review authenticity. Park et al. (2010) suggested that as consumers' brand prominence enhances, consumers' brand-related thoughts and feelings are more likely to become part of their memory and are easier to be brought to mind automatically. Accordingly, the heightened IBA is likely to make the reader to infer that the review content can accurately reflect the writer's natural and automatic brand-related mental representations (e.g., thoughts and autobiographical brand memories), which would boost the authenticity of the review by making it more spontaneous and natural.

In sum, we expect that through the process of uncertainty reduction, a heightened IBA may help the review readers (1) to develop the reasonable causal relational structure *to explain* the writer's behavior (why did the writer post a review?), and, (2) to *predict* the writer's true thoughts, feelings and opinions regarding the review (is the writer telling the truth?). Taken together, we hypothesize:

H2: Higher inferred brand attachment (IBA) results in higher perceptions of review authenticity.

Furthermore, prior research suggests that the increased diagnosticity of a review can increase consumers' confidence of a decision and willingness to share the information with (Hovland, Janis and Kelley 1953). Thus, when a reader perceives the review to be more authentic,

it should naturally increase the perceived utility of the information. Therefore, we expect that the enhanced review authenticity can result in a number of important downstream consequences, such as consumers' willingness to share the review information through WOM, perceive the review information to be more helpful (Moore 2015) and demonstrate the intent to comply with the review recommendations (Cheung, Lee and Rabjohn 2008).

We thus further hypothesize:

H3: Brand nickname use in a review (compared to formal name use) results in downstream consequences such as enhanced willingness to share the review (online WOM), greater intent to comply with the review recommendations, and, greater perceived review helpfulness. These relationships are mediated by the perceived review authenticity.

Nature of the Brand Attachment Cue: Subtle vs. Overt

So far, we have demonstrated that the presence of IBA via brand nickname use can positively influence readers' judgments of review authenticity. It is reasonable to inquire what it is about the brand nickname cue that makes it a credible signal of the consumer-brand relationship, and how it compares with other direct or more overt signals of the relationship?

To answer these questions, we explore an important dimension of linguistic cues – linguistic directness. We suggest that information can either be directly stated or logically implied (Hosman 2002; Berger and Heath 2007). Communicators have a choice about how clear (unequivocal) or how vague (equivocal) they are in their choice of language, which can shape how the perceiver interprets the information. Moreover, a central tenet in communication is that

in addition to *what* is said (content), *how* it is said matters (manner). While the theories of interpersonal signaling generally suggest that explicit or overt signals are easy to identify and thus facilitate communication (Berger and Heath 2007), some evidence has shown that subtle signals are more efficient to be decoded between people who are “in the know” and are therefore preferred (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes and Drèze 2010). Similarly, research in interpersonal communication suggests that message senders may avoid direct expression of his or her opinion by using equivocal languages. This strategy may allow more freedom for the receivers to interpret the sender’s opinion and lead to greater source credibility and message acceptance (Hosman 2002).

In the case of brand attachment, we propose that the nature of the brand attachment cue (subtle vs. overt) can influence the perceived authenticity of the review. We expect that when brand attachment is subtly implied via the use of a brand nickname, rather than more overtly via direct statements about brand attachment, perceptions of review authenticity are enhanced. Specifically, we argue that IBA more effectively facilitates the process of uncertainty reduction when it is conveyed via subtle linguistic cues (e.g., brand nickname use) rather than explicit or overt statements (e.g., directly saying that “I love this brand”).

The subtle nature of brand attachment cues, such as brand nickname use, makes their presence seem spontaneous and unplanned, as if the information about the quality of the consumer-brand relationship is revealed or “leaked” by the writer instead of deliberately showcased. As Bernstein (1964) argued that “the speech of intimates... reduces the need for the speakers to elaborate their intent verbally and to make it explicit”. When linguistic cues become implied and subtle, readers are less likely to believe that the message was designed to persuade. As a result, readers are less likely to associate the use of a subtle brand attachment cue with the

review writer's persuasion motive (e.g., product recommendation, Friestad and Wright 1994). In contrast, the explicit and overt display of brand attachment cues may result in the reader inferring that the writer knowingly presented these linguistic features in the message *in order* to intentionally boost the validity and persuasiveness of the message. Campbell and Kirmani (2000) suggest that the accessibility of an ulterior motive is influenced by the degree of association between the motive and the influence agent (e.g., review writer). For example, when a salesperson uses tactics that are strongly associated with selling, the motive (making a commission by selling) becomes more accessible for the influence agent (the salesperson) than other motives (e.g., trying to improve personal communication skills, helping others). Similarly, we expect that when brand attachment cues are presented in an explicit and direct manner, consumers are more likely to perceive that the review writer is actively attempting to change the readers' perception and opinion (about the brand) by purposefully emphasizing his or her personal connection with the brand. We thus hypothesize:

H4: The nature of the brand attachment cue moderates the observed effect, such that subtle (overt) brand attachment cues enhance (reduce) perceptions of review authenticity.

EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

We present a pilot study, a Twitter historical data analysis, and four experiments to support our theorizing. The pilot study establishes the frequency and prevalence of brand nickname use in online peer-to-peer communication. A Twitter historical data analysis incorporates three real-world brands to illustrate that brand nickname enhances perceived authenticity (measured by retweet rate and number of likes) on social media. Study 1 provides evidence to support the main hypothesis that nickname use (both manipulated and primed)

influences IBA and enhances perceived review authenticity. Study 2 replicates the main effect and demonstrates that it is the concept of a “nickname”, rather than the specific word that’s being used for the nickname, that serves as the driving force for this effect. Study 3 provides evidence for the hypothesized underlying mechanism. Specifically, it shows that brand nickname use in online reviews leads readers to believe the review writer has a stronger attachment to the target brand. This enhanced IBA from the readers’ perspective, may further boost the perceived review authenticity, and lead to downstream consequences such as WOM. Study 4 explores a boundary condition for the use of brand attachment cues in online communication. Specifically, it demonstrates that brand nicknames serve as a subtle brand attachment cue, and it is this subtlety that underlies its effectiveness. In this study, the nature of the brand attachment cue (overt vs. subtle) is manipulated to show that the use of a subtle cue (brand nicknames) is more effective in enhancing perceived review authenticity while the overt display of one’s closeness with the brand does not. Taken together these studies implicate brand nickname use as a way by which consumers infer authenticity of online communication. In addition, the studies underscore the importance of the “nickname concept” (study 2) and the subtlety of brand nicknames as a brand attachment cue (study 4) as factors that underlie the effectiveness of brand nickname use.

Pilot Study

The purpose of the pilot study was to establish the popularity of brand nickname use in peer-to-peer online communication.

One hundred and twenty three paid Amazon Mturk workers (Female = 37%, $M_{age} = 33.0$) completed a short survey. Participants were first given some examples of brand nicknames (e.g., Chevy for Chevrolet, Big Blue for IBM, etc.) and asked to indicate “How often do you see brand

nicknames in online communication, such as online reviews and social media posts, and such?” (1 = never, 5 = all the time). In addition, participants were asked to list a few brand nicknames that they commonly see in online posts and to indicate where they usually see them (e.g., online reviews, social media posts, or other platforms).

Results

The results revealed that the majority of participants encounter brand nicknames on a regular basis (See Figure 3.2 for details). Only 21% of the participants indicated that they rarely or have never seen any brand nicknames in online review or social media posts.

[Insert Figure 3.2 about here]

Furthermore, some brand nicknames were very popular in online communication and were mentioned multiple times by different participants. Examples include Mickey D for McDonald’s (mentioned 24 times), Wally World for Walmart (mentioned 15 times), B-Dubs for Buffalo Wild Wings (mentioned 8 times), Chevy for Chevrolet (mentioned 7 times). In terms of the online channel where participants recall seeing nicknames most widely used, social media posts came out to be the most popular (68%), followed by online reviews (27%) (See Figure 3.3 for details).

[Insert Figure 3.3 about here]

Twitter Historical Data Analysis

This study provides real-world evidence to support our main argument that brand nickname use may facilitate perceived information authenticity and result in downstream consequences such as information sharing. To do so, a third party vendor scraped historical Twitter data from June 11th to July 10th 2019 for three brands: Chevrolet, Buffalo Wild Wings,

and New England Patriots. Based on the results of the pilot study reported, Chevy, Bdubs and Pats are common and familiar nicknames for Chevrolet, Buffalo Wild Wings and the New England Patriots, respectively.

For each brand, we collected tweets that used either the brand formal name or the nickname as hashtag in the post (e.g., #Chevy or #Chevrolet), which yielded 12,136 total tweets (7,163 tweets for formal names and 4,973 tweets for nicknames) for the dataset. Our dataset also included the number of retweets (shares) and likes for each tweet, which served as the real-world measures of reader's perceived authenticity of the information tweeted. We also collected the number of followers for each account, which we used as a control variable, since posts from accounts with more followers will be exposed more and are more likely to get shared.

We chose to focus on brand name hashtags is because hashtags are powerful labels for social media contents. These labels can highlight the topic and help others to easily find the topics they are interested. Therefore, our data collection can be more focused on the current topic (brand names) rather than collecting content that has little relevance to the brand (e.g., a post irrelevant to the brand but merely mentioned the brand name). Furthermore, hashtags have been argued to serve as an emotional outlet to express one's sentiment to the public (Campbell 2018). This feature makes hashtags more suitable and consistent with our theorizing, because names serve as emotional bonds in social contexts.

Results

We ran an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with the name condition (nickname vs. formal name) as the independent variable, number of retweets (share) as dependent variable, and number of followers for each account as covariate. Analysis revealed that tweets with brand nickname hashtags ($M = 1.15$) were retweeted significantly more than tweets with brand formal

name hashtags ($M = .52$, $F(1, 12133) = 37.94$, $p < .0001$). A similar ANCOVA analysis with number of likes as the dependent variable also showed that tweets with brand nickname hashtags ($M = 7.26$) also received more likes than those with formal name hashtags ($M = 2.44$, $F(1, 12133) = 45.76$, $p < .0001$).

In addition, we looked into each brand separately. For Chevrolet, 6,509 tweets used the brand formal name for hashtags, and 4,517 tweets used nickname (Chevy) hashtags. An ANCOVA analysis with name condition as the independent variable, number of retweets (share) as dependent variable, and number of followers for each account as covariate revealed that nickname hashtagged tweets ($M = 1.04$) were retweeted significantly more than brand formal name hashtags ($M = .53$, $F(1, 11023) = 14.11$, $p < .0001$). A similar ANCOVA analysis with number of likes as the dependent variable also showed that tweets with brand nickname hashtags ($M = 7.47$) also received more likes than those with formal name hashtags ($M = 2.54$, $F(1, 11023) = 45.76$, $p < .0001$).

For Buffalo Wild Wings, 224 tweets used the brand formal name for hashtags, and 61 tweets used nickname (Bdubs) hashtags. An ANCOVA analysis with name condition as the independent variable, number of retweets (share) as dependent variable, and number of followers for each account as covariate revealed that nickname hashtagged tweets ($M = .97$) were retweeted significantly more than brand formal name hashtags ($M = .25$, $F(1, 282) = 9.92$, $p = .002$). A similar ANCOVA analysis with number of likes as the dependent variable also showed that tweets with brand nickname hashtags ($M = 3.18$) also received more likes than those with formal name hashtags ($M = 1.00$, $F(1, 282) = 15.94$, $p < .0001$).

For New England Patriots, 430 tweets used the brand formal name for hashtags, and 395 tweets used nickname (Pats) hashtags. An ANCOVA analysis with name condition as the

independent variable, number of retweets (share) as dependent variable, and number of followers for each account as covariate revealed that nickname hashtagged tweets ($M = 2.36$) were retweeted significantly more than brand formal name hashtags ($M = .43$, $F(1, 822) = 39.89$, $p < .0001$). A similar ANCOVA analysis with number of likes as the dependent variable also showed that tweets with brand nickname hashtags ($M = 5.48$) also received more likes than those with formal name hashtags ($M = 1.59$, $F(1, 822) = 11.55$, $p = .001$).

Therefore, our Twitter historical data analysis across three real-world brands provided real-world support for our central hypothesis that brand nickname use in social media communication facilitate shares and likes of the information, which are good indicators of perceived information authenticity. In the lab experiments that follow, we replicate this finding and provide insight into the process mechanism that underlies this effect.

Study 1: Brand Nickname use Enhances Perceived Review Authenticity

Study 1 was designed to demonstrate the main effect that brand nickname use in online reviews can enhance perceived review authenticity, which in turn, may result in enhanced perceived review helpfulness and a higher intent to share the information.

Procedure and Measures

Two hundred and fifty one paid Amazon MTurk workers participated in this between-subject study. Among them, twenty-four participants failed to pass the attention checks and were excluded from the analysis, leaving two hundred and twenty seven participants (Female = 37%, $M_{\text{age}} = 34.1$) for the final analysis.

Participants were given the cover story in which they were considering purchasing a new electric toothbrush from the brand “Viomove”. All participants were shown a picture of a set of

Viomove electric toothbrushes and were told that due to the unique product design (the toothbrush looks like a tumbly toy), Viomove toothbrush has a popular nickname – Tumbly – in the marketplace. This nickname manipulation is based on the nickname classification of product attributes. Participants were then directed to a popular review website and read the customer review written by a user “Alex”. Participants were randomly assigned to either the nickname or the formal name condition. In both review conditions, Alex mentioned the identical features of the toothbrush – it was effective in removing plaque, quiet while running, and easy and fun to use. The only difference between the conditions is that Alex always used the brand formal name (Viomove) to refer to the brand in the formal name condition, but the brand nickname (Tumbly) to refer to the brand in the nickname condition. Participants were then asked to evaluate Alex’s review of the toothbrush.

Measures:

Manipulation Check: After reading the review, participants indicated whether Alex used the brand formal name or the brand nickname to refer to the brand in the review.

Perceived authenticity of the review. Participants reported perceived authenticity of the review they just read (to what extent do you think: Alex’s review is a fake review (reverse coded), Alex’s review is a paid advertisement (reverse coded), Alex’s review is genuine and sincere, Alex’s review is done fairly; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Later combined into a perceived authenticity scale ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Perceived review helpfulness. Participants indicated how useful they thought the review was by answering “Was the review helpful to you” (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

WOM. Participant indicated their willingness to “recommend Alex’s review to another friend who is also thinking about buying the toothbrush” (1 = not at all, 7 = very much), which served as the measure of information sharing behavior.

Results

Manipulation Check: A Chi-square test revealed statistically significant results ($\chi^2(1) = 185.14, p < .001$). 95% of the participants in the formal name condition and 96% of the participants in the nickname condition answered correctly based on the experimental condition.

Perceived review authenticity: A one-way ANOVA with perceived authenticity of the review as the dependent variable showed that participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 5.27$) perceived the review to be significantly more authentic in comparison to those in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{formal name}} = 4.58$; $F(1, 225) = 11.01, p = .001$).

Perceived review helpfulness. Participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 5.30$) also indicated that the review was more helpful than participants in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{formal name}} = 4.71$; $F(1, 225) = 9.41, p = .002$).

WOM: A similar one-way ANOVA with WOM as the dependent variable revealed that participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 4.32$) were more likely to recommend the review to other friends in comparison to those in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{formal name}} = 3.88$; $F(1, 225) = 3.37, p = .068$).

Mediation Analysis: As predicted, the result of mediation analysis (Hayes 2017, model 4: 5,000 bootstrapped samples; IV = name condition, M = perceived review authenticity, DV = helpfulness of the review) showed that the mean indirect effect was positive and significant

(.4370), with a 95% confidence interval excluding zero (.1774 to .7135). The direct effect was not significant ($p = .3034$).

A similar mediation analysis with WOM as the dependent variable showed that the mean indirect effect was positive and significant (.4539), with a 95% confidence interval excluding zero (.1768 to .7377). The direct effect was not significant ($p = .9725$).

Discussion

Study 1 provides initial support for our main hypothesis that how a brand is referred to in an online review (formal name vs. brand nickname) can influence reader's perception of information authenticity and downstream consequences such as perceived information helpfulness and WOM. These findings provide empirical support for H2 and H3.

However, one may argue that the observed effect may come from the specific word that's been used for the nickname (i.e., Tumbly sounds nicer/more fun than Viomove). In the study that follows, we show that it is the nickname concept that is essential in driving the effect – not the specific word that is used.

Study 2: Implicating the concept of a “Nickname” versus any Name

The goals of study 2 were three-fold. First, we aimed to replicate the main finding from study 1. Second, we aimed to demonstrate that our hypothesized nickname effect, stemmed from the meanings and associations people have about nickname use and not the actual name itself. In other words, this study was designed to establish that being a nickname is an important identifying feature underlying the effectiveness of brand nickname use, regardless of what the nickname is. The study therefore adds an additional condition in which the nickname is used as

the formal name, which we hypothesize will diminish the proposed effect. Third, since it is possible that brand nickname use may not only serve as a relationship cue, but it might also suggest that the writer is an brand expert (has more brand-related knowledge), we rule out this competing underlying mechanism.

Procedure and Measures

Two hundred and ninety-one paid Amazon MTurk workers participated in this between-subject study. Among them, thirteen participants failed to pass the attention checks and were excluded from the analysis, leaving two hundred and seventy eight (Female = 46%, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.2$) for the final analysis.

In this study, participants were randomly assigned into three experimental conditions (formal name, nickname, and “nickname as formal name” condition; for ease of exposition we will refer to this last condition as the control condition). All participants were told that they were looking to buy a new wireless headset. For participants in the formal name and nickname conditions, the cover story and manipulation was similar to study 1. Specifically, participants in these two conditions were told that they are considering purchasing “ByrTech IPX7 Waterproof HD Stereo Earbuds Headset” from the brand “ByrTech”; and due to an elegant product design and high-quality sound, BryTech headsets have a popular nickname – Birdie – among the consumers. This nickname manipulation is based on the nickname classification of phonetic similarity and product attributes.

In the cover story for the control condition the name “Birdie” was used as the formal brand name. Specifically, participants were told that the headset they are considering to purchase is “Birdie IPX7 Waterproof HD Stereo Earbuds Headset” from the brand “Birdie”.

All the participants then were directed to a popular review website and read the customer review written by a user “Alex”. In all the conditions, Alex’s review stated that the headsets were easy to use, comfortable to wear and had flawless sound quality. The only difference across the conditions was how the brand was referred to in the review (ByrTech for the formal name condition, Birdie for nickname and control condition).

Measures

Perceived review authenticity ($\alpha = 0.92$) and helpfulness of the review were measured on the same scales used in study 1. In addition, participants also indicated their willingness to “report Alex’s review as a fake review to the website”, which serves as the behavioral response to identifying fake review. Participants also reported perceived Alex’s knowledge about the brand ByrTech by indicating “to what extent do you think Alex is an expert of this brand of headsets; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much.

Results

Perceived review authenticity: A one-way ANOVA with perceived review authenticity as the dependent variable ($F(2, 275) = 6.12, p = .003$) showed that participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 4.59$) perceived the review to be significantly more authentic than participants in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{formal}} = 3.72; t(275) = -3.49, p = .001$) or control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = 4.09; t(275) = -2.02, p = .045$). The difference between the formal name condition and control condition was not significant ($p = .14$) suggesting that it is not the name “Birdie” that matters, but that it is used as a nickname.

Helpfulness of the review: A similar one-way ANOVA with helpfulness of the review as the dependent variable ($F(2, 275) = 3.16, p = .044$) revealed that participants in the nickname

condition ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 4.66$) perceived the review to be significantly more helpful than participants in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{formal}} = 4.05$; $t(275) = -2.47, p = .014$). In addition, participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 4.66$) perceived the review to be marginally more helpful than participants in the control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = 4.24$; $t(275) = -1.69, p = .093$). The difference between the formal name condition and control condition is not significant ($p = .432$).

Reporting the review as a fake review: A similar one-way ANOVA with the willingness to report the review as a fake review as the dependent variable ($F(2, 275) = 5.83, p = .003$) showed that participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 2.12$) are less likely to report the review as a fake review than participants in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{formal}} = 3.00$; $t(180) = 3.35, p = .001$) or control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = 2.79$; $t(180) = 2.59, p = .011$). The difference between the formal name condition and control condition is not significant ($p = .439$).

Perceived brand-related expertise: A similar one-way ANOVA with perceived brand-related expertise of the review as the dependent variable revealed there's no significant difference across conditions ($F(2, 275) = .356, p = .701$). An analysis of contrast showed there's no significant differences between any two conditions ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 3.94, M_{\text{formal}} = 3.87, M_{\text{control}} = 3.74$; $p > .40$ between either two conditions). These results suggest that perceived brand related knowledge is unlikely to be the possible mediator to explain the observed effect.

Mediation analysis: The result of mediation analysis (Hayes 2017, model 4: 5,000 bootstrapped samples; IV = name condition, M = perceived review authenticity, DV = helpfulness of the review) showed that the mean indirect effect was positive and significant (.3139), with a 95% confidence interval excluding zero (.1379 to .4897). The direct effect (-.0100) was not significant ($p = .9079$).

The result of mediation analysis (Hayes 2017, model 4: 5,000 bootstrapped samples; IV = name condition, M = perceived review authenticity, DV = reporting the review as a fake review) showed that the mean indirect effect was negative and significant (-.1383), with a 95% confidence interval excluding zero (-.2487 to -.0516). The direct effect (-.2974) was also significant with a 95% confidence interval excluding zero (-.5537 to -.0411).

Discussion

Study 2 replicated the results from study 1. More importantly, Study 2 showed that the observed effect comes from the reviewer's usage of a nickname to refer to the brand, rather than the actual nickname itself. Notably Buffalo Wild Wings was launched in Latin America as B-Dubs, based on our results this use of the popular nickname as the formal name of the restaurant may not confer the same benefits that stem from brand nickname use. In the study that follows, we aimed to demonstrate the proposed mechanism underlying this effect. That is, brand nickname use may indicate the review writer's relationship quality with the brand, which can be perceived as *inferred brand attachment* (IBA) from the readers' perspective. Such brand attachment inference can further boost the authenticity of the review information.

Study 3: The Mediating Role of Inferred Brand Attachment

In study 3, we demonstrate that the use of brand nickname in online reviews lead readers to make inferences about the review writer's relationship with the target brand. As hypothesized this inferred brand attachment (IBA) serves as the driving force for the readers to make judgments of review authenticity. Furthermore, we extend our measure of the downstream behaviors (measures) by showing that the increased review authenticity can also improve the acceptance/persuasiveness of the information (e.g., readers are more likely to take writer's

advice about the product recommendations). In addition, we further rule out perceived brand-related knowledge as the competing mediator for this effect.

Procedure and Measures

One hundred and fifty seven undergraduate students at a large US university participated in this between-subject study in exchange for extra credits. Among them, twelve participants failed to pass the attention check and were excluded from the analysis, leaving one hundred and forty five participants (% female = 62.1%, $M_{age} = 22.2$) for the analysis.

The manipulation and procedure is similar to that in study 1 and 2. Specifically, participants were told that they are looking to buy a new smart speaker and were considering the “AcouTech Voice Activated Smart Speaker” from the brand “AcouTech”. All participants were shown a set of pictures of the AcouTech smart speakers and were told that due to the unique product design (ball-shaped) and advanced AI technology (it’s a smart device), the speaker has a popular nickname the “Magic Ball” among the consumers. This nickname manipulation is based on the nickname classification of product attributes. Participants then were directed to a popular review website and read the customer review written by a user “Alex”. Participants were randomly assigned to either the nickname or the formal name conditions. In both review conditions, Alex said that the speaker was easy to use, responded quickly to voice commands and was versatile in performing a variety of tasks. Again, the only difference between the conditions is the formal name (Magic Ball) and nickname (AcouTech) Alex used in the reviews.

Measures

Inferred brand attachment (IBA). Participants reported their inferred brand attachment using an inferred brand attachment scale adopted from Park et al. 2010. Specifically, participants

reported to what extent do *they* feel Alex is attached to the brand (e.g., “to what extent do you feel that this brand is part of Alex and who Alex is”, “to what extent do you feel that Alex is personally connected to this brand”, etc. 1 = not at all, 7 = very much), $\alpha = 0.80$.

Other measures: Participants reported perceived authenticity of the review using the same information authenticity scale from study 1 and 2 ($\alpha = 0.87$). Participants reported WOM willingness and perceived review helpfulness by using the same measure from study 1 and 2. In addition, participants report their intent to comply with the recommendations from the review (Cheung, Lee and Rabjohn 2008): I would take Alex’s advice about product recommendations, I would be willing to rely on Alex to make the right choice (about purchasing the speaker), I am comfortable letting Alex have complete control over my purchase decisions (of the smart speaker); later combined into an information acceptance scale, $\alpha = .89$.

Furthermore, to control for brand related knowledge as an alternative mediator, participants reported Alex’s knowledge about the brand using the same measure from study 2.

Results

Inferred brand attachment (IBA): A one-way ANOVA with IBA as the dependent variable revealed that participants in the nickname condition reported a significantly higher IBA ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 4.75$) in comparison to the formal name condition ($M_{\text{formal name}} = 4.04$; $F(1, 143) = 9.84, p = .002$).

Perceived review authenticity: A similar one-way ANOVA with perceived review authenticity as the dependent variable showed that participants perceived the review in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 4.03$) to be more authentic than the one in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{formal name}} = 3.29$; $F(1, 143) = 9.27, p = .003$).

WOM: A similar one-way ANOVA with WOM as the dependent variable revealed that participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 3.71$) are more likely to recommend the review to other friends in comparison to those in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{formal name}} = 2.74$; $F(1, 143) = 10.09, p = .002$).

Perceived review usefulness. Participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 4.23$) also indicated that the review is more helpful than participants in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{formal name}} = 3.60$; $F(1, 143) = 4.02, p = .047$).

Intent to comply to the review. Participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{nickname}} = 3.38$) are more likely to rely on Alex and his/her advices about the brand to make a purchase decision than those in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{formal name}} = 2.62$; $F(1, 143) = 8.06, p = .005$).

Perceived brand related knowledge: An ANOVA with the two experiment conditions as independent variable and brand knowledge as the dependent variable revealed insignificant results ($F(1, 143) = .20, p = .66$; $M_{\text{nickname}} = 4.19$; $M_{\text{formal}} = 4.06$). These results suggest that perceived brand related knowledge is unlikely to be the possible mediator to explain the observed effect.

Mediation analysis: The results of serial mediation analysis (Hayes 2017, model 6: 5,000 bootstrapped samples) are shown in figure 3.4. These results indicated that the effects of brand nickname use on the downstream consequences (i.e., WOM, helpfulness, and acceptance) were indeed driven by IBA and perceived review authenticity.

Similar serial mediation analysis by replacing IBA with perceived brand related knowledge indicated no significant indirect effect for WOM (95% CI = -.0479, .1017), helpfulness (95% CI = -.0416, .0972), and acceptance (95% CI = -.0426, .1009).

[Insert figure 3.4 about here]

Discussion

Study 3 replicated the results from study 1 and 2, and implicated IBA as the mechanism underlying the observed effect. Specifically, study 3 demonstrated that brand nickname use in online reviews may signal the review writer's relationship closeness and strength with the brand. These signals, in a social environment, can lead to the formation of inferred brand attachment (IBA) from the readers' perspective. Extending brand attachment from the realm of the consumer-brand to an inference in a social environment, helps explain why and how brand nickname use can result in enhanced information authenticity and the downstream behaviors. Furthermore, study 3 showed that although nickname use positively influences readers' impression about the authenticity of the information through IBA, it does not systematically change readers' perception of the writer's brand-related knowledge. This argument, supported by our data, appears to be consistent with the definition and dimensions of brand attachment Park et al. (2010) suggested and offers additional empirical support to differentiate the two constructs.

Study 4: The Moderating Role of Nature of the Brand Attachment Cue

The purpose of study 4 is to explore whether the nature of the brand attachment cue (subtle vs. overt) can influence the reader's judgments about the writer and the review. In line with the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad and Wright 1994), we expect our findings to hold only when brand attachment is conveyed in a subtle manner (i.e., through brand nickname use) but not when explicit brand attachment cues (e.g., directly saying things like "it is a brand I feel connected to") are used.

Procedure and Measures

Five hundred and forty-three undergraduate student at a large US university participated in between-subject study for exchange of extra course credit. Among them, seventy-seven participants failed to pass the attention check and were excluded from the analysis, leaving four hundred and four participants (% female = 58%, $M_{\text{age}} = 21.4$) for the analysis.

The procedure of this study was similar to that of the previous studies. The cover story states that the participant is looking to purchase a portable charger from the brand “ESC”. The ESC charger was described to charge cellphones at a high speed which has earned the brand a popular nickname amongst consumers – Speedy. This nickname manipulation is based on the nickname classification of product attributes.

Participants then were randomly assigned into one of the three experimental conditions: nickname condition (subtle BA cue), formal name condition (no BA cue), and overt linguistic cue condition (overt BA cues). All the participants were then directed to a popular review website and read the customer review written by a user “Alex” to help them make a purchase decision. In each condition, Alex reviewed the product in the same way, except for the language used to manipulate brand attachment. In the subtle IBA cue condition, Alex refers to the brand by its nickname “Speedy”, whereas in the other two conditions, Alex refers to the brand by its formal name “ESC”. In addition, to manipulate brand attachment using direct linguistic cues (in the overt IBA cue condition), we adopted the manipulation from Fedorikhin, Park, Thomson 2008 by having a few sentences in Alex’s review to overtly indicate Alex’s brand attachment (e.g., “I am a big fan of this brand”, “I love my ESC charger”, etc.).

After reading the review written by Alex, participants reported IBA ($\alpha = 0.84$) on the same scale as study 3 and the directness of how Alex showed his/her attachment to the brand

(indirect/direct, implicit/explicit, subtle/overt, later combined into an BA directness scale, $\alpha = 0.70$), which served as manipulation check. Participants also indicated perceived review authenticity ($\alpha = 0.90$), intent to comply to the review ($\alpha = 0.87$), review helpfulness, as well as WOM. These measures are the same as to the previous studies.

Results

Manipulation Check: An ANOVA with three experiment conditions as independent variable and directness of the brand attachment cue as the dependent variable revealed a significant difference between the condition ($F(2, 465) = 11.20, p < .001$). Follow up contrasts revealed that participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{subtle}} = 5.20, t(463) = 3.63, p < .001$) and the formal name condition ($M_{\text{no cue}} = 5.10, t(463) = 4.45, p < .001$) both reported Alex showed his/her attachment to the brand in a more subtle way than those in the overt linguistic cue condition ($M_{\text{overt}} = 5.69$). The difference between the nickname and formal name condition, however, is insignificant ($t(463) = -.74, p = .46$). These results indicate that both brand nickname use and overt linguistic cues can equally enhance IBA, however, they differ in the perceived directness.

Inferred brand attachment (IBA): An ANOVA with three experiment conditions as independent variable and IBA as the dependent variable revealed a significant difference between the conditions ($F(2, 465) = 11.30, p < .001$). Follow up contrasts revealed that participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{subtle}} = 5.06$) reported a significant higher IBA than participants in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{no cue}} = 4.51, t(463) = -3.59, p < .001$). However, IBA didn't vary significantly between the nickname condition and overt linguistic cue condition ($M_{\text{subtle}} = 5.06, M_{\text{overt}} = 5.19, t(463) = .83, p = .41$).

Perceived information authenticity: An ANOVA with three experiment conditions as independent variable and perceived review authenticity as the dependent variable revealed a significant difference between the conditions ($F(2, 465) = 17.40, p < .001$). Follow up contrasts revealed that participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{subtle}} = 4.61$) believed the review to be significantly more authentic than those in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{no cue}} = 4.08, t(463) = -2.91, p = .004$) and those in the overt linguistic cue condition ($M_{\text{overt}} = 3.52, t(463) = -5.90, p < .001$). The difference between the formal name condition and overt linguistic cue condition is also significant ($t(463) = -3.09, p = .002$). These results suggest that although overt linguistic cues enhance readers' inferred brand attachment of the writer, it actually decreased the perceived authenticity of the information.

Intent to comply with the review: An ANOVA with three experiment conditions as independent variable and intent to comply to the review as the dependent variable revealed a significant difference between the conditions ($F(2, 465) = 9.04, p < .001$). Follow up contrasts revealed that participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{subtle}} = 3.56$) were more likely to take Alex's advice in the review than those in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{no cue}} = 3.11, t(463) = -2.61, p = .009$) and those in the overt linguistic cue condition ($M_{\text{overt}} = 2.82, t(463) = -4.22, p < .001$). The difference between the formal name condition and the overt linguistic cue condition is marginally significant ($t(463) = -1.67, p = .096$).

Perceived review helpfulness: An ANOVA with three experiment conditions as independent variable and perceived review helpfulness as the dependent variable revealed a significant difference between the conditions ($F(2, 465) = 11.59, p < .001$). Follow up contrasts revealed that participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{subtle}} = 4.79$) considered the review to be more helpful than those in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{no cue}} = 4.26, t(463) = -2.56, p = .011$)

and those in the overt linguistic cue condition ($M_{\text{overt}} = 3.79$, $t(463) = -4.81$, $p < .001$). The difference between the formal name condition and the overt linguistic cue condition was also significant ($t(463) = -2.33$, $p = .020$).

WOM: An ANOVA with three experiment conditions as independent variable and WOM as the dependent variable revealed a significant difference between the conditions ($F(2, 465) = 6.16$, $p = .002$). Follow up contrasts revealed that participants in the nickname condition ($M_{\text{subtle}} = 3.94$) considered the review to be more helpful than those in the formal name condition ($M_{\text{no cue}} = 3.36$, $t(463) = -2.70$, $p = .007$) and those in the overt linguistic cue condition ($M_{\text{overt}} = 3.23$, $t(463) = -3.32$, $p = .001$). The difference between the formal name condition and the overt linguistic cue condition, however, is insignificant ($t(463) = -.66$, $p = .512$).

Discussion

Study 4 investigated the influences of the manner by which IBA cues are conveyed on readers' perceived review authenticity. Our results show that when IBA cues are displayed in an implicit manner such as brand nickname use, IBA boosts information authenticity. These results are consistent with our previous findings. However, when IBA cues are presented in an explicit manner, IBA actually decreases review authenticity, which is possible due to the activation of consumers' persuasion knowledge. These results highlight the importance of the manner of how brand attachment should be revealed in social environments.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Consumers' brand attachment has proven to be critical and central to consumer-brand relationship management and has drawn significant interest from both marketing academics and

practitioners (Park et al. 2010; Albert and Thomson 2018). While previous research typically treats brand attachment as the consequence of a *binary* relationship, the current research extends and builds on the existing findings by demonstrating the role of communicating brand attachment in a social context. By situating our research in the domain of online communication, we demonstrate that different ways in which a brand is referred to by a review writer can influence the readers' perception of the writer's brand attachment (quality of the relationship the review writer has with the brand) and shape perceptions of the authenticity of the review and other downstream consequences such as WOM.

We present a pilot study, a Twitter historical data analysis, a set of four studies to support our theorizing. Specifically, we illustrate that review readers rely on how the brand is referred to to infer the writer's brand attachment (IBA) (study 3 and 4) and to evaluate review authenticity (Twitter historical data analysis, study 1-4). We demonstrate that the "power" of the brand nickname lies in the notion that it is an alternative moniker for the brand (study 2) and that it cues brand attachment subtly rather than overtly (study 4). We also rule out the competing explanations of brand knowledge (study 2 and 3) as a mechanism underlying our effect. Taken together, the current research suggests that brand nickname use in an online review can positively influence readers' perception of information authenticity.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The insights from this research make three theoretical contributions to the literature on branding and marketing communication. First, by placing brand attachment in the social context, we shed light on a novel function of brand attachment within consumers' interpersonal communications. We demonstrate that brand attachment cues can signal a consumer's

relationship closeness with the brand, and can further influence how message receivers (e.g., review readers) perceive and process information provided by the sender (e.g., review writers). Through the investigation of how individual's brand attachment via language variation in the social environment may affect *other consumers'* judgment and perception, brand attachment is no longer examined as the consequence of the consumer-brand relationship; rather, it serves as the *antecedent* of interpersonal communication between consumers. This novel perspective opens a new avenue and serves as the basis for future research in the area of brand attachment. In addition, while previous research typically focused on how consumers use possessions (e.g., products, brands) to show social status and identity, the current work suggests that relationship-indicating cues, such as IBA, may have the same signaling effects and are thus used by consumers in their social interactions.

Second, by switching the research focus from the consumer-brand relationship to peer-to-peer consumer interaction, the current research highlights the importance of brand attachment in successful marketing communication with respect to user-generated-content (UGC). Results from this research suggest that IBA positively shapes message receiver's perceived information authenticity.

Third, we shed light on the role of linguistic directness of brand attachment cues in consumers' interpretation of brand related information. Consistent with the literature on consumer persuasion knowledge, we found that the directness with which brand attachment is conveyed can affect the message receiver's judgments of the writer-brand relationship as well as the authenticity of the review.

This research also highlights the managerial importance of brand attachment use in social settings. We highlight (1) the strategic use of subtle brand attachment cues in effective marketing

communication to enhance perceived information authenticity and to gain consumer trust, (2) the potential detrimental effects of the misuse of brand attachment cues in fraudulent marketing practices, and, (3) the necessity of including brand attachment cues as a potential measure in detecting possible fictitious marketing information and call for solutions on this issue from future research.

First, brands need to strategically identify additional brand attachment cues and encourage the use of these cues in UGC. In the current research, we mainly focused on the use of one type of linguistic variation – brand nickname use – to signal brand attachment in online reviews. However, one could imagine that depending on the nature of the digital platforms, (subtle) brand attachment cues may take a variety of forms and exist in other types of UGC. For example, consumers may use twitter hashtags, Instagram pictures, YouTube videos, and such to signal their brand attachment in public. Therefore, brands need to systematically identify different brand attachment cues that are unique to the brand (e.g., unique hashtag such as “ihearttarjay”). It also would be worthwhile for brands to promote and encourage the use of these cues in consumers’ social media posts in order to facilitate communication efficiency and WOM.

In addition, marketing practitioners and policy makers should be aware of the potential misuse of brand attachment cues in fraudulent marketing practices. As some brand attachment cues are relatively easy to be copied and included in UGC (e.g., including a hashtag in fake Twitter posts), one may purposely include these cues in incentivized and fake marketing information in order to mislead consumers. Especially when brand attachment cues are combined with other features of deception (Kronrod et al. 2017), identification of authentic marketing information may become more complex and challenging for everyday consumers. Therefore, it is

necessary for marketing practitioners and policy makers to consider the detrimental consequences of the potential misuse of brand attachment cues in online social environments.

Moreover, considering the serious legal consequences of inauthentic reviews for companies, professional online sellers might want to measure or benchmark brand attachment levels to include it into their analysis of detecting fictitious reviews. For example, if a brand is referred to only by its nickname across a majority of the reviews on Amazon.com, it may actually be the indicator that these reviews are fake or bulk copied.

Directions for Future Research

The current research also raises some interesting questions that need to be addressed in the future. First, we call for future research to identify and explore additional representations of brand attachment in consumers' social life. During consumers' every day interactions with brands, they may use all sorts of verbal (nicknames, hashtags, slangs, etc.) and visual (selfie, emoji, selfies) tools to express and signal their connections and attachments to brands. This leaves plenty of space for both marketing academics and practitioners to identify potential communication elements to target and engage different consumer segments.

Second, the current research mainly focused on one important dimension of UGC, namely, authenticity of the information. However, brand attachment signals might also influence other dimensions of marketing information (e.g., sincerity, accuracy, etc.) in different contexts such as firm-generated-content (FGC) or face-to-face communication. Given that firms nowadays are actively using social media to interact with consumers and to broadcast brand-related information, we question how might the presence of IBA influence consumers' judgements and perceptions when the message comes from the firm itself or someone who works

for the firm? For example, should Target refer to itself as Tarjay through its official social media account? Would IBA make the celebrity endorsement effect stronger or backfire? In addition, it would be interesting to test the effectiveness of IBA in richer media channels. That is, would IBA lose its power when the media gets richer, such as face to face communication? Future research could explore under what circumstances would IBA become inefficient or backfire.

Lastly and probably most importantly, it is necessary to develop solutions to systematically include brand attachment indicators into the analysis of fake review detection. As discussed in the managerial implication section, fraudulent marketing practices may take advantage of the signaling utility of brand attachment and use it in a misleading way. Therefore, future research should look into developing algorithm and strategies to better assess the role of brand attachment in effective marketing communication.

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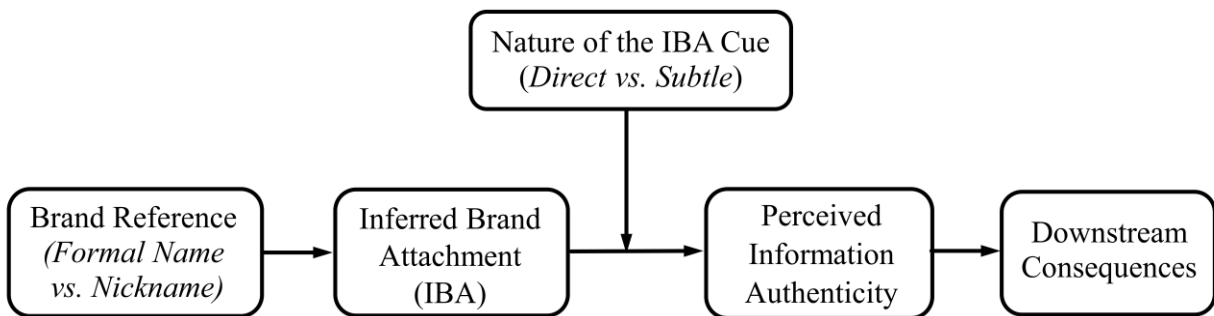


Figure 3.1 Conceptual Framework

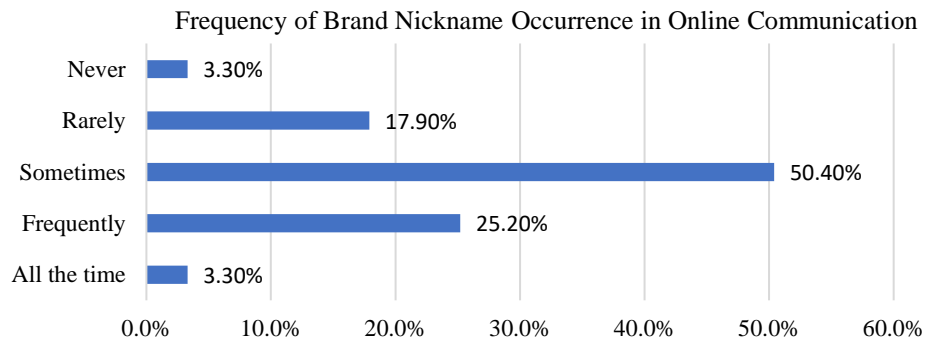


Figure 3.2 Frequency of Brand Nickname Use in Online Communication

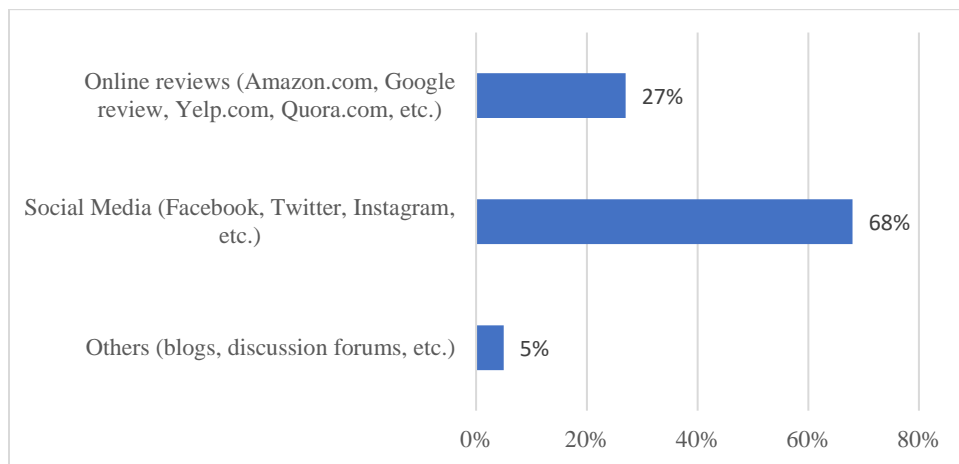


Figure 3.3 Platforms of Where Brand Nicknames are Seen by Consumers

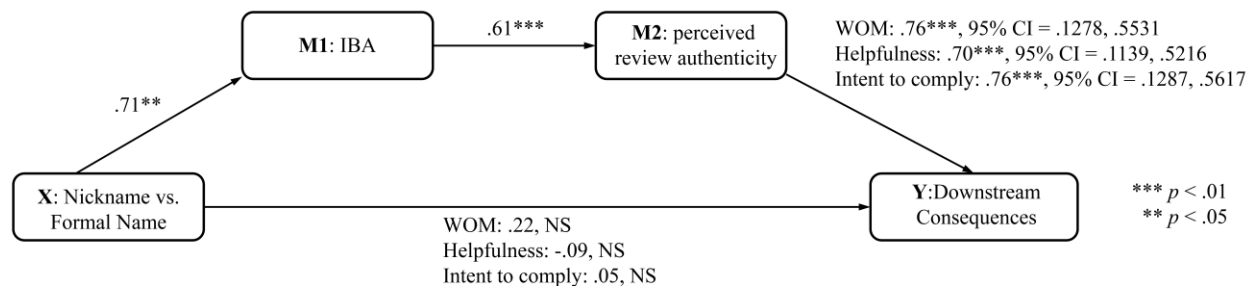


Figure 3.4 Serial Mediation Analysis for Study 3