

The Merits of Happy Consumption: Positive Affect and Psychological Ownership

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Psychological ownership (PO), i.e., the extent to which something feels like “mine” (Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks 2003) is a powerful predictor of consumers’ behavior. It induces people to approach (Peck, Barger, and Webb 2013), defend (Baer and Brown 2012), and make sacrifices for targets that they perceive to own (Kamleitner and Feuchtl 2015; Kamleitner and Rabinovich 2010), including brands. Moreover, it can affect long-term attitudes and behaviors, such as loyalty (Fuchs, Prandelli, and Schreier 2010).

At the core of PO lies a possessive claim, which is reflected in the routes that have been shown to induce it - familiarity with, investment into, and perceived control over an object (Pierce et al. 2003). More than anything, however, ownership is emotionally significant. An emerging body of work suggests that objects (perceived as) eliciting positive affect may be particularly prone to become psychologically appropriated (Forgas and Ciarrochi 2001). To date, affect has not been considered among the primary routes of PO, although it could provide an additional link between the suggested ways in which we lay claim to objects and the emergence of PO. In this paper, we combine several streams of literature to establish positive affect as another essential route to PO. Three studies focusing on the affective experience of consuming branded products show that the happier consumers feel during consumption, the greater the extent to which they psychologically appropriate the consumed brand, which, in turn, fosters their intention to repeatedly engage with it.

We argue that the positive affect-brand PO link follows from approach tendencies accompanying the former (Elliot 2006; Lench, Flores, and Bench 2011). Feeling good often signals appropriateness of approach. Given that approach orientation is key to appropriation, positive affective experiences may also trigger feelings of ownership. Just like negative affect inform us that we have lost something valuable (Keltner, Ellsworth, and Edwards 1993), positive affect is likely to indicate how much we value a (psychological) gain.

Drawing on the literature on ‘affect-as-information’ (Clore, Gasper, and Garvin 2001), we further suggest that positive affect will mainly be used as an ownership signal, if the affective experience can be attributed to the consumed brand. In situations when consumers consider it as less informative of the consumed brand, we anticipate that the effect will be markedly reduced.

Study 1a provides preliminary (i.e., correlational) evidence for the relationship between positive consumption affect, PO and repeat consumption. 124 individuals (54% female, $M_{\text{age}}=35$ years) vividly imagined eating a package of branded waffles. They answered questions on positive affect (experienced happiness and joy on 100-point scales), PO (four items adapted from Van Dyne & Pierce 2004 and Peck & Shu 2009, e.g., “I feel like this is MY brand”) as well as their intended repeat consumption (“Would you be loyal to this brand?”, on 7-point scales).

A bootstrapped mediation analysis (Hayes 2012) reveals the predicted indirect effect of positive affect on repeat consumption via PO (95% CI [0.004, 0.016]; Table 1).

Study 1b replicates the findings from Study 1a across several functional (shower gel, butter) and experiential product (chips, waffles) categories. 168 individuals (55% female, $M_{\text{age}}=31$ years)

were prompted to imagine consuming all four randomly presented products and asked to report on positive affect, PO, and repeat consumption as in Study 1a.

Separate mediation analyses per category produce the same pattern as in Study 1a for all categories (95% CIs do not include zero; Table 1). Importantly, moderated mediation analyses (Hayes 2012) comparing each pair of product categories yield no moderating effect of category. Moreover, the effect occurs regardless of prior brand ownership, which we controlled for here.

Study 2 tests whether affect experienced during actual consumption can positively influence brand PO. Moreover, it tests whether brand type (experiential: nostalgic manufacturer brand vs. functional: budget private label) would influence the extent to which affect is implicitly considered as informative of PO. 146 individuals (51% female, $M_{\text{age}}=36$ years) were recruited to test waffles (experiential food product) and laundry detergent (functional non-food product) from either the experiential or functional brand at home while video-capturing themselves. They then completed a paper-pencil assessment of affect, PO (“This brand is A/MY” brand”) and intended repeat consumption.

Moderated mediation analyses for each product provide evidence for the hypothesized mediation (Table 1). Positive consumption affect influences repeat consumption by increasing PO. Importantly, we also find an interaction between positive affect and brand type on PO for both categories (waffles: [-.6721, -.0071], laundry detergent: [-.650, -.12]). Positive affect influences PO - and consequently repeat consumption - more for the experiential manufacturer brand than for the functional private labels.

Study 3 provides causal evidence for the relationship between positive affect and PO. 65 students (55% females, $M_{\text{age}}=22$ years) were recruited to test a new fictitious popcorn brand. During popcorn consumption, participants were randomly assigned to watch one of two pretested nature documentaries; priming positive and neutral affect respectively. PO and repeat consumption were assessed as previously.

Results reveal that individuals exposed to the positive video felt more PO for the consumed brand ($M=3.52$) than those exposed to the neutral one ($M=2.91$, $t(63)=1.903$, $p=.062$). Likewise, repeat consumption was higher in the positive ($M=3.61$) than in the neutral condition ($M=2.92$, $t(63)=1.962$, $p=.054$). Corroborating our previous findings, mediation analysis confirms that PO underlies the effect [-1.047, -.0024].

Table 1: Mediation Analyses - Studies 1-3:

Direct Effects	Positive Affect → Brand PO	Brand PO → Repeat Consumption	Positive Affect → Repeat Consumption	Indirect Effect Bootstrapped 95% CI
Study 1a				
Waffles	$\beta=.290, p=.002$	$\beta=.400, p=.000$	$\beta=.447, p=.000$	[0.004, 0.016]
Study 1b				
Waffles	$\beta=.406, p<.001$	$\beta=.372, p<.001$	$\beta=.317, p<.001$	[0.006, 0.026]
Shower gel	$\beta=.416, p<.001$	$\beta=.461, p<.001$	$\beta=.219, p=.019$	[0.008, 0.025]
Chips	$\beta=.402, p<.001$	$\beta=.377, p<.001$	$\beta=.301, p=.003$	[0.005, 0.026]
Butter	$\beta=.299, p=.003$	$\beta=.504, p<.001$	$\beta=.243, p=.005$	[0.005, 0.022]
Study 2				
Waffles	$\beta=.476, p<.001$	$\beta=.707, p<.001$	$\beta=.150, p=.011$	[-0.200, -0.010]
Laundry detergent	$\beta=.415, p<.001$	$\beta=.434, p<.001$	$\beta=.384, p<.001$	[-0.130, -0.004]

Study 3

Popcorn	$\beta=.233, p=.062$	$\beta=.734, p<.001$	$\beta=.240, p=.054$	[-1.047, -.0024]
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The current research is the first to demonstrate that positive affect may instill possessive feelings for brands, in turn influencing people's intention to engage with that brand long-term. Across multiple correlational and experimental studies with a total of 6 product categories, 2 brand types, imagined and real consumption, we consistently find that positive affect elicits PO for the consumed brand, which, in turn, predicts intended repeat consumption. We also find evidence that this process may be due to affect-attribution in the sense of "If it makes me happy, it should be mine". Emotionally positioning brands may thus strengthen consumer-brand relationships in more ways than previously assumed. It turns happy consumers into possessive and eventually loyal ones.

Word Count: 993

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