

# DOES THE COFFEE ON THIS DATE TASTE GOOD OR DO GOOD? BRAND SIGNALING AND ATTACHMENT INSECURITY DURING RELATIONSHIP INITIATION

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## ABSTRACT

*Brands can be important relationship partners for consumers, but they cannot replace human connections. Instead, brands can influence how others perceive consumers by communicating their personalities. With loneliness being a global issue, a significant unanswered question is how our brand choices impact our ability to initiate relationships with others. Our research shows that it depends on the brand itself; whether its core associations align with creating superior offerings or promoting social responsibility. In human relationships, warmth more than competence, leads to satisfying interpersonal interactions. Accordingly, our research indicates that socially responsible brands, which convey warmth, have an advantage in seeking human connections, particularly when potential partners have adaptive relationship models. However, when individuals face relationship insecurity, the type of insecurity (attachment avoidance versus attachment insecurity) affects their response to potential blind dating scenarios.*

**Keywords** *Brand relationships, Social responsibility, Relationship insecurity, Attachment*

## INTRODUCTION

In the U.S., most people are considered lonely. This problem is particularly pronounced among younger consumers, such as Generation Z and Millennials. Over one fifth of Millennials report that, outside of their families and partners, they have no friends. Generation Z is even lonelier:

*“Generation Zers (adults ages 18-22) surveyed are significantly more likely than any other generation to say they experience the feelings described in the statements associated with loneliness (e.g., feeling alone, isolated, left out, that there is no one they can talk to, etc.). In fact, more than half of Gen Zers (adults ages 18-22) identify with 10 of the 11 feelings associated with loneliness. Feeling like people around them are not really with them (69%), feeling shy (69%), and feeling like no one really knows them well (68%) are among the most common feelings experienced by those in the Generation Z (adults ages 18-22).”*

These findings illustrate the unhappy reality that consumers, particularly younger ones, find it challenging to form relationships with others, even as acquaintances. Deep and fulfilling relationships are less common, and more challenging to create. COVID-19 made relationship formation even more challenging, as face-to-face communications were limited due to health concerns. While society has largely reopened, relationship challenges remain.

Since brands can represent important relationship partners in consumers' lives, brand managers may seek to position their brands as relationship partners for consumers. While brand relationships can provide stability in consumers' lives, they cannot replace human ones. Instead, brands can influence relationships with other people by outwardly communicating consumers' personalities to others. According to the self-congruity theory, consumers prefer a brand that is aligned with their self-identities. That is, consumers may utilize a brand to establish their own self-identities (Hung and Lu, 2018) by integrating a brand into either the current self-identity or desired self-identity (Batra et al., 2012). Accordingly, people tend to make inferences of others' personalities based on the clothes they wear or cars they drive, especially when they do not have enough information about others. Therefore, brands signaling certain attributes might affect their consumers' ability to initiate relationships with others.

At a broad level, brands can position their attributes along two dimensions: ability vs. social responsibility. Ability associations fulfill the core reason that a brand exists, representing its capacity to deliver satisfying products. Social responsibility associations represent a brand's commitments to society and its efforts at improving social good or welfare. Prior research has examined how the associations facilitate the acceptance of new products (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Johnson *et al.*, 2019), or generally contribute to positive business or brand outcomes. An auxiliary benefit of some of this research, however, has been that researchers now understand that these types of associations are appealing for different reasons and align to different objectives, including social ones (Johnson *et al.*, 2018). In part, the nonequivalence of the associations within social contexts is based on what the associations signal to others.

A brand positioned along ability associations may be perceived as competent or capable, while a brand positioned on social responsibility associations may be perceived as warm (Johnson *et al.*, 2019). Competence and warmth are, within interpersonal contexts, viewed as two of the most essential dimensions that define the personalities of other people or groups (Rosenberg et al, 1968; Fiske et al, 1999; Kervyn et al, 2012). Competence can show that an individual is capable, industrious, and effective at pursuing their goals while warmth aligns to kindness, trust, and is generally viewed as an essential element of healthy relationships. Germane to the selection of a relationship partner, as brands communicate who we are to others, the dimensions may have important implications for singles who are preparing to start a new relationship. Intuitively, then it can be hypothesized that single persons with healthy relationship views might be excited about the prospect of a date with someone who is warm. However, what about people who feel insecure about relationships?

As mentioned earlier, the data suggest that relationship insecurity may be more prevalent and relevant than most might imagine. If a brand can provide signals of the suitability of a relationship partner, how are those same signals interpreted by someone who experiences relationship insecurity? To answer this question, the current research examines the important role

that brands can play in forming relationships with others, particularly potential relationship partners within a blind dating context both for healthy relationships and also for persons who experience relationship insecurities.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Identity Signaling through Brands

Consumers commonly confer human personality dimensions onto and develop relationships with brands (Macinnis and Folkes, 2017) that are processed akin to person-to-person relationships (Aaker, 1997; Aaker, 2004). Like interpersonal relationships, brand relationships can “serve as anchors” (Fournier, 1998, p. 360) throughout consumers’ lives.

Furthermore, self-congruity (i.e., the alignment between a consumer’s self- identities and brand images) affects consumers’ preferences (Govers and Schoormans, 2005; Branaghan and Hildebrand, 2011). According to previous research, consumers prefer brands that align to their self-identities (Branaghan and Hildebrand, 2011). In other words, a brand may help consumers to express their own self- identities (Hung and Lu, 2018), which can lead consumers to integrate a brand into their self-identities (Batra et al., 2012). Brands thus become essential in defining and outwardly communicating consumers’ identity to others and interpreting cues from others (e.g. Belk 1988). Personality traits in brands can be communicated through product-related attributes, a brand name, or advertising approach (Batra, Lehmann, and Singh, 1993). In so doing, brands and other consumption activities can facilitate interpersonal relationship formation between consumers (Veloutsou, 2009) in categories diverse as motorcycle enthusiasts (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Johnson *et al*, 2013), Star Trek aficionados (Kozinets, 2001), lonely diner patrons (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2007), or various other activities that tie people together through common consumption patterns (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) that contribute to consumers’ interpersonal and brand relationships (Schau *et al*, 2009; Johnson *et al*, 2015).

### Person-to-Person Perceptions

In human relations, the two most foundational dimensions of person-to-person and social perceptions align to competence (e.g. capability, expertise) and warmth (e.g. kindness, sincerity) perceptions (Rosenberg *et al*, 1968; Fiske *et al*, 1999; Kervyn *et al*, 2012). Together, competence and warmth have been established to account for bulk of the foundation for evaluating perceptions of other people or social groups (Fiske *et al*, 1999).

Competence perceptions refer to a person or group’s abilities; whether they are capable, skillful, creative, or otherwise likely to succeed in the pursuit of their goals (Kervyn *et al*, 2014; Fisk *et al*, 2006). A foe lower in competence may be viewed as less of a threat, but also as capable of providing fewer relational benefits vis-à-vis a competent person (Fiske and S. T., 2012). By contrast, a person or group that ranks highly on the dimension warmth is generally viewed as helpful, generous, or friendly while a person, social group, or entity that ranks lower on the dimension may be viewed as exploitative, untrustworthy, or cold (Kervyn *et al*, 2014; Fiske *et al*, 2006).

## Ability and Social Responsibility Associations

The personality dimensions described in the previous section (i.e., competence and warmth) can align to brand positioning strategies (Fournier and Alvarez, 2012; Aaker et al, 2012; Johnson et al, 2018) and asymmetrically affect consumers' brand expectations (Yang and Aggarwal, 2014).

In their seminal work on brand associations, Brown and Dacin (1997) demonstrated that brands can be construed on two core dimensions – ability and social responsibility. A brand that is positioned based on ability provides a signal to consumers that its products and services are of a high quality, while a brand positioned on social responsibility demonstrates that the brand has made commitments to giving, philanthropy, producing societal benefits (Hutton et al, 2001; Biehal and Shenin, 2007; Luo and Bhattacharya, 2006). While the former places emphasis on profits, the latter recognizes for-profit businesses as integral parts of society, and thus responsible for contributing to societal benefits (Polonsky, 2017). Respectively, ability and social responsibility associations enhance competence and warmth perceptions (Johnson et al, 2019). Because the associations – like competence and warmth – fulfil different forms of relational expectations, they have the potential to unequally affect consumers' evaluations. That is, like people, competent organizations are viewed as reliable, responsive, dependable, and efficient while warm organizations are viewed as honest, genuine, cheerful (Aaker et al, 2010).

When Brown and Dacin (1997) introduced the two types of associations, they emphasized the importance of both, but their results across multiple contexts suggested that ability associations were more diagnostic to product evaluations than social responsibility associations. Given that the primary purpose of brands and companies is to create products and services in order to generate a profit (Berens and van Riel, 2004), it is perhaps intuitive that ability associations have generally been found to be more diagnostic in informing consumers' assessments of products and service evaluations. Indeed, research findings have typically supported the relative importance of the two associations. Gürhan-Canli & Batra (2004), for instance, showed that ability associations such as innovativeness affected consumers' perceptions of high-risk products while social responsibility did not. Similarly, Berens *et al* (2007) showed that the effect of poor social responsibility associations on product evaluations could be compensated by strong ability associations for products, stocks, and job options – the opposite, that poor ability could be compensated by positive social responsibility, was not found. Finally, Biehal *et al* (2007) found that ability messages that emphasized quality had a larger effect on a portfolio of products than social responsibility.

Within interpersonal relationships, the dimension of warmth tends to correspond more closely to intimate relationships, as the dimension aligns to positive intentions and stable social traits of others (Freddi et al, 2013). Consumers likewise are more apt to identify with a warm versus competent brand (Kolbl et al, 2019) but may be reluctant to purchase from a warm brand if they question the brand's competence (Aaker et al, 2010). However, recent findings suggest that social responsibility may be more valuable than might be assumed. Social responsibility can: affect purchase intentions, evaluations, and loyalty (Deng and Xu 2017); be leveraged as a way

of responding to service failures (Hutton *et al*, 2001); lead to improved profits or performance (Johnson *et al*, 2018; Miller *et al*, 2020), or be communicated via social media to elicit positive responses from consumers (Saxton *et al*, 2019). Accordingly, companies spend heavily on developing a strong and favorable corporate image aligned to social responsibility (Hutton *et al*, 2001).

Consumers differ, however, in their responses to social responsibility endeavors. Consumers who prioritize concern for relationship partners are more accepting of social responsibility messages that align to warmth while those who place a lower level of priority on relationships are more accepting of ability messages that increase competence perceptions (Johnson *et al*, 2019). Similarly, consumers may prioritize social responsibility and warmth over ability and competence in a social setting (Johnson *et al*, 2018). Hence, research demonstrates that i) competence and warmth can be conveyed based on ability and social responsibility brand messages and that ii) these dimensions affect how consumers' approach consumption experiences. However, it is unclear how these dimensions might interact with individual differences in the ways consumers conceive of and approach interpersonal relationships.

### **Interpersonal Relationships: Attachment Theory**

An emerging area in brand relationship research draws from the social psychology of interpersonal relationships, applying concepts from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2016). Attachment was defined as a "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" by Bowlby (1969, p. 194). Attachment theory proposes that people develop mental models of relationships based on experiences with close others. Ideally, close others are reliable and responsive sources of care and support, leading to a sense of attachment security and generally adaptive relationship cognition and behavior. However, as described above, people may feel insecure about their relationships with others. Using attachment theory-based definitions of insecurity (described in further detail below), researchers have found as many as half of the population may be insecure, and 88% have experienced an important previous relationship characterized by insecurity (Baldwin *et al*, 1996; Konrath *et al*, 2014).

Two main forms of attachment insecurity are attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety. If others are consistently unreliable and unresponsive to one's needs, attachment avoidance develops. Attachment avoidance is characterized by negative mental models of relationship partners, a devaluation of communal goals for connection and intimacy, discomfort with dependency, and prioritization of self-reliance. If others are inconsistently reliable, sometimes responsive and sometimes unresponsive, then attachment anxiety develops. Attachment anxiety is characterized by a negative mental model of the self, hyperactivation of communal goals and preoccupation with relationships, but ambivalent expectations about whether partners will meet one's needs and sensitivity to rejection.

Research examining how attachment insecurity affects brand relationships is in its infancy. Swaminathan, Stillely and Ahluwalia (2009) found that only people high in attachment avoidance were influenced by brand features with low (high) avoidance predicting preference for

sincere (exciting) brands. By contrast, Proksch, Orth and Cornwell (2015), focusing on anticipated emotional experiences, found that a brand's potential to enhance one's competence increased brand engagement for people low but not high in attachment anxiety; they did not assess attachment avoidance.

## HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Both warmth and competence are key dimensions in determining interpersonal attraction in that they indicate how a potential relationship partner's care for the self and their potential to facilitate one's goals, respectively (Montoya and Horton, 2013). However, relationship context matters: close relationships such as family, friendships, and romantic relationships are characterized by their deep interdependence and communal nature (Clark and Mills, 2011). Between people, the warmth dimension aligns to the goal of social cohesion and aids in evaluating the primary intentions and social traits of strangers (Freddi *et al*, 2013). Similarly, because the partner's reliable responsiveness to one's own needs is so important to such close relationships, warmth is typically prioritized in these types of relationship partners and critical to their successful initiation and development (Abele and Brack, 2013; Clark *et al*, 2019).

With respect to brand associations, most research has demonstrated that ability associations tend to have greater diagnostic value for product evaluations (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Gürhan-Canli and Batra, 2004; Berens *et al*, 2007; Biehal *et al*, 2007). However, more recent research illustrates that the diagnostic value of the two associations can differ depending on consumers' goals (Johnson *et al* 2018).

Accordingly, it is hypothesized that persons with a healthy model of relationships will seek out cues of a potential relationship partner's warmth (versus competence). Because social responsibility aligns to warmth (versus competence which does not provide this evidence), persons with a healthy model of relationships will react more favorably when a potential date selects brands based on social responsibility over ability.

*Hypothesis 1: In aggregate, consumers will anticipate higher satisfaction with their date when the brand connotes warmth through social responsibility (versus competence through ability).*

While social responsibility associations (versus ability) may lead to higher expectations for those with healthy relationship expectations, a firm's social responsibility strategy is only tenable if it aligns to consumers' values or concerns (Kuokkanen and Sun, 2020). Researchers have examined a congruence between consumer characteristics and a firm's social responsibility endeavors can promote a positive response. Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) defined C-C congruence as the compatibility between a firm's social responsibility endeavors and consumers' identities, a concept that has been supported within their and other research. For persons with healthy relationship models, social responsibility can provide evidence in line with their goals.

However, related research suggests that goals aligned to social responsibility may be moderated by perceptions of relationships. Indeed, Johnson *et al*. (2019) showed that social responsibility is valued more by those who value close relationships and care for the well-being of others versus those with a self-oriented relationship model. Similarly, attachment insecurities

will alter consumers' values and primary concerns. Hence, we hypothesize that consumers' attachment insecurity (avoidance, anxiety, and their intersection) will moderate responses to brands that demonstrate warmth through CSR versus brands that demonstrate competence based on ability-based messaging.

Activated by warmth, communal norms may signal relationship openness (Clark, 1984). People high in attachment anxiety value communal goals, although they have ambivalent expectations about whether these goals will be met (McClure *et al.*, 2014). Accordingly, more anxious people are expected to prefer warm versus competent brands, as signals of warmth may alleviate rejection insecurities.

*H2a: More anxious individuals seek signals of communal goals and will anticipate higher satisfaction with their date when the brand connotes warmth through social responsibility (versus competence through ability).*

People high in attachment avoidance, on the other hand, are expected to be more comfortable with competent brands, as competence aligns to their values of independence and self-reliance. By contrast, warm brands may trigger insecurities about intimacy and closeness among avoidant individuals who devalue communal goals and experience discomfort associated with signals indicating relationship formation. Thus, for persons with attachment avoidance who find the prospect of entering into a relationship with someone new, we propose that signals of warmth are frightening. Simply, signals of warmth show that a potential date is socially available, that they are kind, and are potentially ready to form the type of relationship that persons with attachment avoidance seek to avoid.

*H2b: More avoidant individuals avoid signals of communal goals and will anticipate lower satisfaction with their date when the brand connotes warmth through social responsibility (versus competence through ability).*

Finally, we present competing exploratory hypotheses that pose different effects based on inconsistent prior findings within the literature. Given that the signals communicated by brand warmth are hypothesized to have opposing effects on anxious versus avoidant people—alleviating anxious insecurities about rejection, but activating avoidant insecurities about intimacy—we also consider potential interactions between anxiety, avoidance, and branding.

People high in both forms of insecurity have an especially ambivalent and fearful form of attachment. Their responses in relationship situations can be fluctuating and inconsistent (Marks, Trafimow, & Rice, 2014) and they are often most at risk for negative relationship outcomes (Park *et al.*, 2018; Simpson and Rholes, 2002). Previous brand research focusing on fearful insecurity has found that they react more negatively to brand failure (Kordrostami & Kordrostami, 2019; Thomson, Whelan, & Johnson, 2012), but to date there is no research examining the interactive effects of anxiety and avoidance in the context of brand signaling.

Thus, we explore two alternative hypotheses, to focus separately on each condition and how warmth and competence signaling might affect the interplay between the two forms of insecurity:

*H3a: If the warmth condition is especially strong in evoking the closeness goals associated with attachment anxiety, then we would expect to find that the positive effect of attachment anxiety offsets the negative effect of attachment avoidance in this condition, such that for people higher in anxiety, the negative effect of avoidance is weaker. We would expect the lowest anticipated satisfaction with the date for people who were high in avoidance but low in anxiety.*

*H3b: If the competence condition is especially strong in alleviating the impact of avoidant insecurity, it may allow the closeness goals of the anxious to come into play. In this case we would expect the positive effect of attachment anxiety to offset the negative effect of attachment avoidance in this condition, such that for people higher in attachment anxiety, the negative effect of avoidance is weaker. We would expect the lowest anticipated satisfaction with the date for people who were high in avoidance but low in anxiety.*

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants and Procedures

A total of 288 participants were recruited from an online participant pool (<https://www.prolific.co/>). Participants were required to be single as an inclusion criterion. They were on average 28 years old (SD = 9 years), predominantly male (186 male, 99 female, 3 other/choose not to specify), heterosexual (222 heterosexual, 38 bisexual, 20 gay or lesbian, 8 other/choose not to specify), and single (250 single, 27 casually dating, 10 exclusive dating; 1 married).

Participants first completed demographic and personality measures, including the focal measure of attachment, the Experiences in Close Relationships - Short Form (ECR-S; Wei et al. 2017). The ECR-S measures both forms of insecurity, with 6 items measuring anxiety (e.g. “I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner.”) and 6 items measuring avoidance (e.g. “I try to avoid getting too close to my partner.”), from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Responses are averaged to create an anxiety score and an avoidance score.

Subsequently, participants were instructed to imagine meeting a blind date at a fictitious coffee shop selected by their date; this is an ecologically valid dating and shared consumption context, and one which should activate attachment concerns (Eastwick and Finkel, 2008, McClure and Lydon, 2014). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two scenarios wherein the coffee shop was described as signaling either competence (i.e. making good coffee using state-of-the-art techniques) or warmth (i.e. donating to charity and promoting social good; Johnson et al. 2019).

Specifically, participants read “Imagine that you are going on a blind date. Your date suggests that you meet up at a coffee shop of their choosing and sends you a link to an option that they think looks good, called CoHi Coffee. Your date mentions that there are many coffee shops in the area, but they thought this one looked best. It is new to you, so you click on the link to check it out before replying. The first thing that you notice when you open the website is this award, which is prominently displayed...”

For the competence condition, participants read:

ANNUAL NEW YORK COFFEE ROASTER AWARD (NYCRA) 2018 & 2019:

Great Taste Award

NYCRA hereby recognizes CoHi Coffee for its consistent, long-term commitment to:

- Quality Investments: 11% of sales invested into new coffee preparation technologies
- Quality Sourcing: all products are ISO certified, which ensures quality and consistency

In addition to engaging in stringent quality control processes for all of its products, CoHi's skilled and hard-working employees have demonstrated a high-level commitment to coffee roasting and brewing. Each year, CoHi employees are provided with 20 hours of paid training to enhance their ability to produce quality coffee and coffee-based beverages. Last year alone, CoHi's employees attended 47 training programs and interacted with over 750 coffee professionals.

For the warmth condition, participants read:

ANNUAL NEW YORK COFFEE ROASTER AWARD (NYCRA) 2018 & 2019:

Social Responsibility Award

NYCRA hereby recognizes CoHi Coffee for its consistent, long-term commitment to:

- Philanthropic Investments: 11% of sales are donated to benefit childhood education
- Ethical Sourcing: all are fair trade certified, which ensures that your purchase helps others

In addition to engaging in ethical sourcing processes for all of its products, CoHi's caring and friendly employees have demonstrated a high level of commitment to the community. Each year, CoHi employees are given 20 hours of paid time off to volunteer to support childhood education initiatives. Last year alone, CoHi's employees volunteered in 47 after school programs that directly benefited over 750 children.

The text was accompanied by a corresponding award graphic.

After reading about the competence- or warmth-signaling coffee shop, participants answered a series of questions about their feelings towards and expectations for the coffee shop/brand, the date, and prospective partner, including: expectations for the quality of the date experience (using a 7-item double-anchored scale, e.g. *very bad-very good, unpleasant-pleasant*) (Rajeev and Ray, 1986); excitement for the date, from 1 (*not very excited*) to 7 (*very excited*); and perception of the partner as warm (*sociable, caring, friendly, sensitive*) or competent (*capable, skilled, hard working, organized*) from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) (Judd et al., 2005). The items are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Summary of Measurement Items**

Variable	Items	Response Scale	Cronbach's $\alpha$	Reference
ECR - Anxiety	I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner.	1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)	.76	Wei et al. (2017)
	I find that my partner doesn't want to get as close as I would like.			
	My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.			
	I do not often worry about being abandoned. (reverse-scored)			
	I get frustrated if romantic partners are not available when I need them.			
	I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them.			
ECR - Avoidance	I try to avoid getting too close to my partner.	1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)	.73	Wei et al. (2017)
	It helps to turn to a romantic partner in times of need. (reverse-scored)			
	I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back.			
	I turn to my partner for many things, including comfort and reassurance. (reverse-scored))			
	I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my partner. (reverse-scored))			
	I am nervous when partners get too close to me.			
Expectations for the quality of the date experience	Very bad...Very good	1 (negatively-valenced item) to 7 (positively-valenced item) for all items	.94	Rajeev and Ray (1986)
	Very unfavorable...Very favorable			
	Unpleasant...Pleasant			
	Dislike...Like			
	Not worth the time to go...Worth the time to go			
	Undesirable...Desirable			
	Awful...Nice			
Excitement for the date	Not very excited...Very excited	1 (not very excited) to 7 (very excited)	n/a, single item	Judd et al. (2005)
Perception of the partner as warm	sociable	1 (not at all) to 7 (very much)	.85	Judd et al. (2005)
	caring			
	friendly			
	sensitive			
Perception of the partner as competent	capable	from 1 (not at all to) 7 (very much)	.89	Judd et al. (2005)
	skilled			
	hard working			
	organized			

## Manipulation Check

After reading about the coffee shop, to check attention to the description and therefore the manipulation, participants were asked to briefly describe what the coffee shop was known for. Participants' answers were examined by the research team and all indicated correct understanding (e.g. "Donating and helping kids education also volunteering" for the warmth condition and "Quality investments and sourcing. Also employees with great training." for the competence condition.).

## RESULTS

We began by testing our first hypothesis, that consumers will have more positive perceptions and expectations when the date suggests the warm rather than the competent brand. We conducted t-tests comparing the warmth/social responsibility condition (coded as 1) to the competence/ability condition (coded as 0). Hypothesis 1 was partially supported: Participants whose date suggested the warm brand thought their date had a warmer personality ( $M = 5.74$ ) than participants whose date selected the competent brand ( $M = 5.36$ ,  $t(286) = -3.30$ ,  $p = .001$ ); brand presentation did not affect perceptions of competence ( $t(286) = .68$ ,  $p = .49$ ). There was no effect of brand presentation on participants' expectations of the date experience ( $t(286) = -.06$ ,  $p = .96$ ) or their excitement for the date ( $t(286) = -.86$ ,  $p = .39$ ). (See Table 2).

**Table 2: Table for Hypothesis 1 results**

	Warmth Condition (N = 141)	Competence Condition (N = 147)		
Outcome	mean (SD)	mean (SD)	<i>t</i> (286)	<i>p</i>
Perceive date's personality as warm	5.74 (.91)	5.36 (1.03)	-3.30	.001
Perceive date's personality as competent	5.21 (.96)	5.29 (1.02)	.687	.493
Expectations for date experience	5.66 (.94)	5.66 (.92)	-.056	.955
Excitement for date	5.25 (1.02)	5.13 (1.31)	-0.859	.391

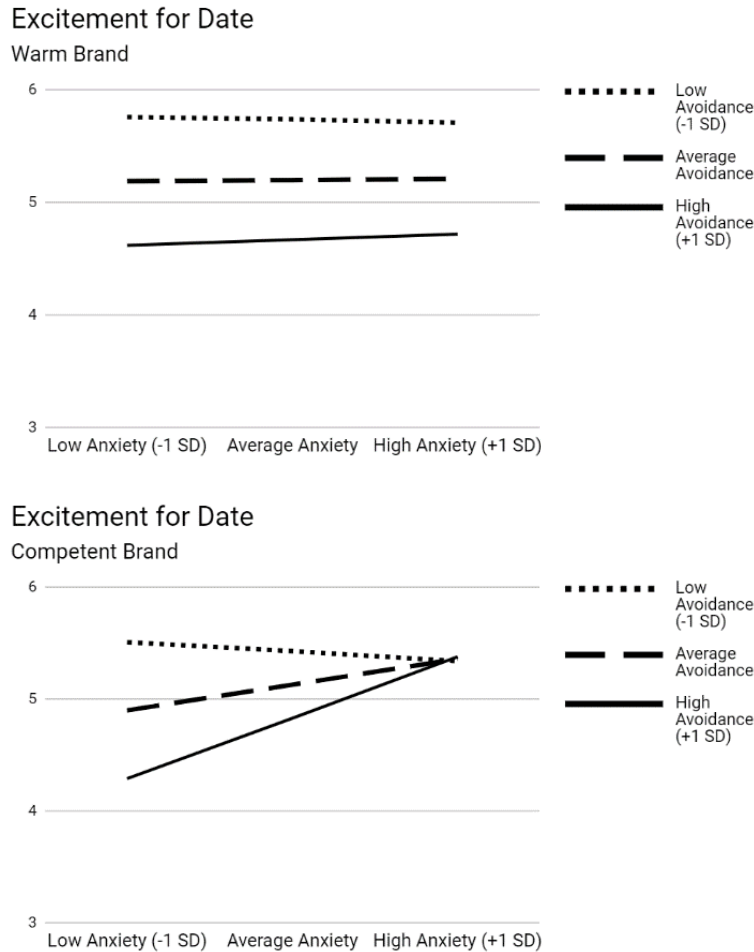
We next examined the second set of hypotheses about how the different forms of attachment insecurity would moderate the effects of brand presentation. We regressed each outcome onto the main effect of warm or competent brand presentation (effects-coded as 0.5 for warm and -0.5 for competent), the main effects of attachment anxiety and avoidance (standardized for ease of interpretation) and all two- and three-way interactions. Hypotheses 2a and 2b were largely supported, but qualified by further interactions between the two forms of insecurity.

With respect to perceptions of the prospective partner, participants higher in attachment anxiety perceived them as more warm ( $\beta = .13, p = .032$ ) but not more competent ( $\beta = .04, p = .54$ ), regardless of brand presentation condition. Participants higher in avoidance had more negative perceptions, seeing the prospective partner as less warm ( $\beta = -.15, p = .009$ ) and less competent ( $\beta = -.25, p < .001$ ), again regardless of brand presentation condition. However, these effects were qualified by interactions between anxiety and avoidance, such that the higher anxiety attenuated the negative impact of avoidance on the prospective partner's perceived warmth ( $\beta = .15, p = .013$ ) and competence ( $\beta = .15, p = .012$ ).

In regard to participants' expectations for the date, attachment anxiety did not have a main effect on either anticipated experience ( $\beta = .05, p = .39$ ) or excitement ( $\beta = .10, p = .07$ ). Participants higher in avoidance anticipated a more negative experience ( $\beta = -.26, p < .001$ ), but this was attenuated by higher anxiety (avoidance x anxiety:  $\beta = .16, p = .009$ ). Higher avoidance also predicted lower excitement for the date ( $\beta = -.35, p < .001$ ), again attenuated by higher anxiety (avoidance x anxiety:  $\beta = .16, p = .007$ ), but this was qualified by brand context (avoidance x anxiety x brand presentation:  $\beta = -.12, p = .034$ ).

With the competent brand, anxiety attenuated the negative effect of avoidance, but for the warm brand, anxiety did not attenuate the effect of avoidance; participants high in avoidance were less excited about the date at the warm coffee shop regardless of their anxiety level (see Figure 1 for an illustration of the interaction with the excitement outcome).

Figure 1: An illustration of the interaction with the excitement outcome



## IMPLICATIONS

### Theoretical & Practical Implications

This research is, to the best of our knowledge, the first to examine how ability versus social responsibility brand positioning strategies can have a role in facilitating intimate relationships between consumers. For persons with secure models of relationships, we found that a potential date’s choice of a date location based on social responsibility (versus ability) increased consumers’ perceptions of their date’s warmth, though not necessarily the date itself. This finding is important because it demonstrates how social responsibility can signal personality perceptions within a dating context, which can affect consumers’ expectations towards others. While the hypothesized main effect was only partially supported, which is surprising given that warmth has been established to be an important factor in successful relationships, the hypothesized interactions that were most important to this research were strongly supported.

Much as consumers seek to share limited aspects of their identity in certain contexts such as the workplace (Tian and Belk, 2005), our research suggests that consumers may also vary in their readiness to accept different aspects of identity based on both relationship stages and their present insecurities. For individuals who struggle with relationship insecurities (Baldwin et al, 1996, Konrath et al, 2014), initiating a relationship is challenging; some are anxious about and preoccupied with their relationships (i.e., attachment anxiety), while others seek to avoid intimacy and closeness that are hallmarks of meaningful relationships (i.e., attachment avoidance). These attachment insecurities prevent millions of people from benefitting from the psychological and health-related outcomes by creating a significant roadblock to forming positive interpersonal connections.

Our results suggest that a) individual differences in attachment and a brand's signaling along warmth or competence dimensions can impact consumers' relationships, and b) a brand's positioning along warmth or competence dimensions as communicated by ability versus social responsibility messages may be unequally evaluated based on the relationship insecurity form one holds (anxiety, avoidance, or the combination of both).

We find that attachment avoidance has consistent negative effects on outcomes across domains: higher avoidance predicts more negative expectations of the potential date experience, and the potential partner (regardless of branding). Avoidant participants seem to find the idea of the date aversive, consistent with previous research that shows they may not seek relational opportunities (McClure *et al*, 2010). For some outcomes, this negative effect of avoidance is mitigated for people who are also high in anxiety, reflecting the divergent processes that underlie these two forms of insecurity.

A brand's presentation as warm or competent, as communicated by ability versus social responsibility messages, affected both brand and interpersonal outcomes. When a potential partner suggests a date location that signals warmth, they are likewise presumed to be warm. Communal norms can signal openness to relationship formation (Clark, 1984; Clark *et al*, 2019), and as warmth is desirable in a relationship partner (Abele and Brack, 2013), this could improve dating success. Interestingly, although we did not ask participants about their own warmth, indications emerged that they may be adjusting their own identities to align with their perceptions of the potential partner: participants invited to the socially conscious coffee shop identified as more politically liberal. That said, a warm brand may not benefit everyone: people high in avoidance were less excited about the date at the warm coffee shop, and when asked to consider the potential partner for a long-term relationship, were put off by the warm brand. The combination of considering a more serious relationship with cues of warmth may be especially triggering of their insecurities (Birnie *et al*, 2009).

## **Originality/Value**

Though extant brand relationship research has examined how and why consumers use possessions in identity signaling and relationship formation and many studies have examined how social responsibility contributes to brand outcomes, none examined the effect of consumers' attachment models. Our research is among the first to examine how consumers' attachment

insecurities may temper the effects of brands on their willingness to form romantic relationships based on their positioning strategies (ability versus social responsibility). We advance beyond previous studies examining attachment and brands by more fully examining both insecurity types as well as their interaction.

By clarifying that the effects of warmth versus competence may depend on individual differences such as attachment insecurity, this research provides greater transparency into the nuanced conditions under which brand warmth versus competence may differently affect consumer responses. Additionally, this study emphasizes that brands can impact these responses based on their choice to position on ability versus social responsibility associations.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with all research, our research has some limitations. One limitation is both a weakness and strength. In particular, we required all participants to identify as single. Being single, however, does not necessarily mean that a person is at a stage within their life at which she or he would be willing to enter into a relationship – this is arguably a limitation. At the same time, identifying persons who are at point within their life stage in which they are willing to enter into a relationship would have certainly led to an omission of persons with relationship insecurities. As such, it may be valuable for future research to examine how some of these effects are moderated based on whether a person is actively searching for a partner by, for example, joining a dating website.

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