What’s In and What’s Out: Questions on the Boundaries of the Attitude Construct

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While reasonably comprehensive in nature, Cohen and Reed’s integrative attitude model may benefit from an articulation of the boundaries of the attitude construct. As evidence, the present comment focuses on the extent to which attitudes can or should account for hot affect-based brand relationships and stronger forms of behaviors consumers reveal with brands. The authors recommend that the boundary conditions of the attitude construct can be elucidated by differentiating attitudes from a construct termed “emotional attachment.” Potential differences between these two constructs are articulated.

Cohen’s and Reed’s model (2006, in this issue) represents an elegant and reasonably comprehensive integration of findings that characterize the attitude formation literature. Undoubtedly, it will guide substantial future work in the attitude domain. Although the model’s scope is extensive, one issue not fully addressed by Cohen and Reed concerns the conceptual boundaries of the attitude construct, particularly with respect to (a) consumers’ relationships with consumption objects and (b) the types of behaviors predicted by attitudes.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH CONSUMPTION OBJECTS

Outside of the attitude literature, one finds considerable discussion of consumers’ emotional connections with a variety of consumer objects—from pets to places, sports teams to movie stars, special possessions to brands. The nature and character of these connections is reflected in Fournier’s (1998) discussion of consumers’ brand relationships and the dimensions of love, commitment, intimacy, and passion that seem to characterize them (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). Clearly, consumers have positive attitudes toward such objects; however, it is not clear whether those attitudes account for these hot affect-based brand relationships or indeed whether they should.

TYPES OF BEHAVIOR

Traditional attitude models rightly focus on the attitude-behavior relationship; however, one wonders whether the attitude construct can adequately capture the types of behaviors of potential interest to marketers. For example, one might identify a behavioral hierarchy that reflects both stability in the object-behavior linkage and resources devoted to the object. The base level of the hierarchy can be characterized by purchase behavior yet uncertainty, behavioral instability, and/or lack of clarity in commitment to repeat purchase. Behaviors at this level reflect simple brand preference. At a higher level, consumers reveal strong response tendencies such as loyal patronage, resistance to competing alternatives, and forgiveness of mishaps. Behaviors at this level reflect consumers’ commitment to the object. A still higher level is characterized by such behaviors as price insensitivity, involvement in brand communities, and brand advocacy, reflecting investment of resources (e.g., money, time, and one’s own credibility) in the brand. From a marketing perspective, the brand investment stage represents the destination stage for any brand (whether an object, person, or place). One wonders whether attitudes, defined as generalized predispositions to behave toward an object, can or should be expected to predict stronger forms of behaviors, that is, the behaviors at higher levels as well as those at the base level.

WHEREIN LIES THE DOMAIN OF ATTITUDES?

Several approaches may be taken to address the above noted issues. We describe three of these below.

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Approach 1

One approach is to suggest that the domain of attitudes can readily accommodate these effects. One might, for example, say that attitude dimensions such as strength and extremity account for the intense affect described above and that social identity–based attitude formation processes (e.g., Shavitt and Nelson 2000) and the tripartite view of attitudes as cognitive, affective, and behavioral in nature can accommodate such brand relationships.

While that approach may have merit, the conceptual properties (Converse 1995) and measurement issues associated with the attitude strength construct (see Wegener et al. [1995 for a review) beg the question of its potential to explain these outcomes. The extremity dimension seems inadequate because it reflects very positive evaluations or the degree of confidence with one’s evaluation, not the intense, hot, emotion-laden emotions that characterize strong brand relationships. Work on identity-based attitudes is oriented more toward an evaluation-based and utilitarian approach than toward the hot affective outcomes described above. Finally, there are differences between most contemporary theorists and the original proponents of the tripartite theory in the way affect is defined (see Petty, Fabrigar, and Wegener 2003), making it difficult to use this perspective to accommodate hot emotions.

Approach 2

Another approach is to continuously expand the domain of the attitude construct by adding and refining process mechanisms. For example, one might propose that attitudes reflect global and undifferentiated affect (representing both feelings and evaluations) based on object-relevant beliefs (cold affect) and emotions (hot affect). One might then argue that linking behaviors to the hot affective outcomes described above. Finally, there are differences between most contemporary theorists and the original proponents of the tripartite theory in the way affect is defined (see Petty, Fabrigar, and Wegener 2003), making it difficult to use this perspective to accommodate hot emotions.

Approach 3

A third approach is to sharply delineate the boundaries of the attitude construct, clearly articulating what it is and what it is not. Although such delineation is beyond the scope of this commentary, we offer some preliminary ideas regarding the merits of this latter approach, suggesting that brand attitudes are conceptually, psychologically, and behaviorally distinct from a construct that we (and others) term emotional attachment.

EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT

Emotional attachment is a relationship-based construct that reflects the emotional bond connecting an individual with a consumption entity (e.g., brand, person, place, or object). A consumer’s emotional attachment to a consumption entity induces a state of emotion-laden mental readiness that influences his or her allocation of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral resources toward a particular target (i.e., object, person). Emotional attachment is evidenced by, among other things, psychological and behavioral outcomes not typically linked to attitudes: proximity-seeking behaviors, separation distress, a sense that the attachment object offers a safe haven, and mourning of its loss (Bowlby 1979). Emotional attachment entails evaluative properties like attitudes, but it also includes hot affect, reflecting the motivational and emotional properties associated with a relationship bond.

Beyond its conceptualization, attachment may also differ from brand attitudes in its antecedents, formation processes, and effects. Although complete discussion of these differences is beyond the scope of this commentary, we identify several below.

First, while the concept of self (self-schema) is a relevant one for the attitude construct (Escalas and Luce 2004), it is inherently tied to attachment (Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993; Reed and Bolton 2005). Self-implications involve not only social identity but also hedonic dimensions, such as sensory pleasure, nostalgia, aesthetics, or sexual desire that result in “hot affect.” The formation of attachments may thus be less dependent on factors such as argument strength or source credibility than is the case with strong and extreme brand attitudes.

Second, attachment has strong motivational and behavioral implications such as proximity maintenance (i.e., desire to be close) and willingness to defend and invest (e.g., cognitive, financial resources) in the attachment object (Bowlby 1979; Hazan and Shaver 1994; Johnson and Rusbult 1989). These antecedents and formation processes create temporal stability in the attachment-behavior relationship, with strong emotional attachment being more likely than attitudes to predict behaviors that reflect commitment and investment in the consumption object (see Thomson et al. 2005).

Third, strong self–object linkages result in a rich set of schemas, exemplars, and affectively laden memories linked to the object (Mikulincer et al. 2001). Self-implication also results in frequent and automatic linkages between the attachment object and the self, thereby making the attachment object a categorization cue.

One implication of these effects is that consumers may exhibit ready acceptance of extensions to high-attachment brands, independent of similarity between the parent and the extension brand. This is so not only because categorization is rapid and emotional linkages are transferred but
also because consumers wish to maintain the relationship between themselves and the attachment object and resist object-self separation (see Hazan and Shaver 1994; Johnson and Rusbuldt 1989). Extreme and strong brand attitudes low in emotional attachment may not have these same effects.

Clearly, these differences are speculative and worthy of empirical validation. Nonetheless, they are relevant to the larger question of considering the boundaries of the attitude construct. Cohen and Reed’s article is to be commended for its ability to synthesize prior literature into a coherent and parsimonious model. At issue here is what should be considered to fall within and outside the boundaries of that model.

REFERENCES