

Human Brands: Investigating Antecedents to Consumers' Strong Attachments to Celebrities

This article explores recent advances in self-determination research to address why consumers develop strong attachments to "human brands," a term that refers to any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts. Study 1 uses a survey that is analyzed with structural equation modeling. Study 2 is qualitative and offers corroborating evidence for the proposed theoretical model. Study 3 extends the model with a more naturalistic sample and tests several alternative hypotheses using hierarchical regression. The results suggest that when a human brand enhances a person's feelings of autonomy and relatedness and does not suppress feelings of competence, the person is likely to become more strongly attached to it. This article documents that strong attachments are predictive of satisfied, trusting, and committed relationships and proposes that attachment strength may be a parsimonious proxy for consumer-brand relationship strength. The results imply that benefits would accrue to organizations such as entertainment firms and political parties that establish direct and routine interaction between human brands and consumers, that human brands to which consumers are attached offer significant potential as endorsers, and that organizations should address how to make the human brands they manage more authentic.

"When I go to the grocery store, people hug me. But that's OK. People do know me. They've seen me grow up on television."

—Michelle Kwan¹

In the past decade, academic and practitioner interest in consumer relationships has flourished (e.g., Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995). One approach to studying these relationships focuses on feelings of attachment and love (e.g., Carroll and Ahuvia 2006), which lay "at the core of all strong brand relationships" (Fournier 1998, p. 363).

This article focuses on consumers' attachments to human brands, a term that refers to any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts (e.g., Rindova, Pollock, and Hayward 2006). The central purpose of this article is to address why consumers form strong attachments to human brands. From a practical standpoint, advancing the understanding of the relationship between consumers and human brands is important because much of the success of the \$190 billion U.S. media and entertainment industry hinges on the successful positioning of one of its key assets, the celebrity (Plunkett Research

2004). Organizations spend vast sums annually in an effort to establish psychological connections between consumers and human brands, such as Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and Oprah (Serwer 2001). Firms even specialize in brand management with respect to dead celebrities, such as Steve McQueen and John Wayne (Halpern 2005). Similarly, in the 2004 U.S. presidential election, each of the two main political parties spent in excess of \$1 billion dollars in an effort to position their candidates favorably with voters (Edsall and Grimaldi 2004). That is, organizations are already dedicated to managing human brands and building emotional bonds with consumers. This article is an effort to explore this phenomenon methodically; it does so by advancing hypotheses and testing them in three studies. Study 1 uses a survey that is analyzed with structural equation modeling. Study 2 is qualitative and offers corroborating evidence for the proposed theoretical model. Study 3 extends the model with a more naturalistic sample and tests several alternative hypotheses using hierarchical regression.

Conceptual Foundation

Human Brands and the Branding Literature

"Your client, whether they are an athlete or an actor or an actress, has intangible assets: a name, a reputation, a credibility and an image. All of those attributes may be combined into something that could be made into a brand."

—Brian Dubin (quoted in Towle 2003)

This article's underlying premise is that human brands may be viewed as one of several operationalizations of the broader concept of a brand. In marketing, the term "brand" is typically applied to firms, products, and services, and in general, marketers accept that brands may be described in

¹Michelle Kwan, world champion figure skater, quoted in Horovitz (2003).

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terms of perceived quality, image, and so forth. Celebrities can also be considered brands because they can be professionally managed and because they have additional associations and features of a brand. Evidence for this idea can perhaps be most readily found in the context of political campaigns, in which the candidate's message, public appearance, endorsements, and so on, are all controlled by consultants and political parties in the hopes of managing perceived quality and brand image to increase "market share" at the polls (Simon, Gilgoff, and Samuel 2004). Likewise, the National Basketball Association recently established an off-the-court dress code for its players in an effort to improve the league's appeal by managing the image of its individual human brands (Lee 2005). However, many of the players (e.g., Allen Iverson) had previously established and lucrative images that were misaligned with the new dress code; this underscores the importance of understanding how to better manage the brand equity of individual human brands.

Why Attachments Matter

Considerable research has examined features of the various types of relationships that people form with human brands. For example, idolatry (Houran, Navik, and Zerrusen 2005), fandom (Leets, De Becker, and Giles 1995), and celebrity worship (Dietz et al. 1991) have been explored. Much of this research has been advanced under the rubric of attachment theory and its associated literature, which is both well articulated and relevant to marketing (Kleine and Baker 2004). Attachments are a type of strong relationship that people usually first experience as children with their parents; later in life, these attachments routinely develop with other "targets," such as human brands (Leets, De Becker, and Giles 1995). A person immersed in such an emotionally significant relationship normally perceives the relationship partner as differentiated and irreplaceable (i.e., target specific; see Hazan and Shaver 1994). When these types of relationships are experienced in reference to human brands, they are typically referred to as "secondary object" attachments and have been described as "intimacy at a distance" (Horton and Wohl 1956).

This article focuses on the strength of attachment, defined as the intensity of a person's target-specific emotional bond with a human brand. Prior research reveals that attachments are differentiated from other constructs. For example, the strength of an attachment is orthogonal to involvement, satisfaction, loyalty, and attitude favorability (Amblor et al. 2002; Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005).

This literature suggests that attachment theory can make a contribution to marketing because of the distinctive qualities of an attachment. For example, much as marketers may attempt to create relationships that are trusting, committed, and satisfied (Fournier, Dobscha, and Mick 1998), people routinely report elevated levels of each in their attachments to a variety of objects (Rempel, Ross, and Holmes 2001; Spake et al. 2004). Prior literature points to the independence of attachment strength from trust, satisfaction, and commitment, but the correlation among these constructs suggests that understanding how to create or intensify attachments could offer both an effective and an economical

means of achieving stronger marketing relationships. Indeed, Fournier's (1998) article on consumer-brand relationships suggests that feelings linked to attachments are fundamental to strong brand relationships. Therefore, attachment strength may provide a parsimonious and unidimensional indicator of "relationship quality" or strength.

Furthermore, more intense attachments are linked to several consequences that are desirable to marketers. For example, attachments in a marketing context may prevent consumer defections (Liljander and Strandvik 1995), increase consumers' forgiveness in the face of negative information (Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001), and predict brand loyalty and willingness to pay (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). If marketers understand what determines the strength of attachments, they may be in a better position to foster more durable relationships with consumers.

Finally, research implies that attachments may be pivotal to understanding customer-based brand equity, in which certain brands "resonate" with consumers and indicate financial value for the firm (Amblor et al. 2002; Keller 2001). For various reasons, therefore, contemplating what strengthens attachments seems to be an endeavor that is worthwhile from both a practical and a theoretical standpoint.

Relationship similarities. In some respects, relationships involving human brands are a hybrid of other relationships. For example, they are pertinent to marketing because of the central role of the consumer, but they are also a relevant extension of interpersonal research because they implicate a bona fide human being (e.g., David Beckham, Hilary Swank), not a comparatively inanimate object (e.g., Tide laundry detergent). Prior research has considered celebrities, well-known figures, and group entities, such as sports teams or musical acts, and has documented how they are similar to interpersonal relationships in many ways. For example, people often experience "seeming face-to-face" relationships with human brands who are "met as if they were in the circle of one's peers" (Horton and Wohl 1956, p. 215). These relationships evince many of the same expectations, cognitions, emotions, and behaviors that operate in normal interpersonal relationships to the point that a consumer might view a human brand as a pleasant companion, good friend, or romantic mate (Cole and Leets 1999; Rubin and McHugh 1987). Many of the same variables that provide the basis for interpersonal attachments operate with respect to human brands, such as increasing perceptions of a shared background and elevated social appeal (Cole and Leets 1999; Perse and Rubin 1989).

Relationship differences. Although research in marketing has embraced the idea that consumer relationships may be analogous to interpersonal bonds (Fournier 1998), there are differences between the two; however, in general, these important difference are underresearched. For example, Rubin and McHugh (1987) note that unlike interpersonal relationships, people's relationships with celebrities are less likely to be truly interactive (e.g., mutual self-disclosure and interrogation are not possible). However, the effect of these and other differences in relationship functioning is not well understood (Kleine and Baker 2004). Until their

impact is addressed, comprehension of how consumers' human-brand attachments form may be advanced by attending to theory development that is dependent on similarities between these contexts. That is, many of the same causes of strong attachments operate when the focal object is a person, a brand, or some hybrid of the two (i.e., human brands).

What Strengthens Attachments?

In general, it is construed that the chief function of attachments is to confer emotional security to the attached party by being responsive to a person's needs (Hazan and Shaver 1994). This theory is expanded on by recent work on fundamental human needs that suggests that if an object is responsive to a person's needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence (i.e., A-R-C), intense attachments may result (La Guardia et al. 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000).

Defining "autonomy." Autonomy refers to a person's need to feel that his or her activities are self-chosen, self-governed, and self-endorsed (Deci and Ryan 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000). Associated with the fulfillment of this need is a person's perception that he or she is free from pressure to behave in certain ways and is able to express him- or herself as he or she wishes. A person whose need for autonomy is satiated is likely to report feelings of "volition, agency, and initiative" (La Guardia et al. 2000, p. 368). Autonomy is similar to what Austin and Vancouver (1996, p. 357) label "self-determination," that is, a person's sense of freedom to make his or her own choices and to avoid feeling constrained or coerced.

Defining "relatedness." Relatedness refers to a person's need to feel a sense of closeness with others (Deci and Ryan 2000). The need for relatedness is a homonomous tendency; it is a desire to belong to a social sphere (Ryan and Deci 2000) and to avoid feeling isolated (Austin and Vancouver 1996). A person whose need for relatedness is satisfied is likely to report feeling "connected with and cared for by another" (La Guardia et al. 2000, p. 368).

Defining "competence." Competence refers to a person's innate, life-span tendency to seek feelings of effectiveness, achievement, and challenge in his or her activities (Deci and Ryan 2000). This idea is similar to what previous researchers have termed "mastery," which refers to a person's avoidance of mediocrity and decrements in performance (Austin and Vancouver 1996). A person whose need for competence is satiated will report feeling curious and skilled (La Guardia et al. 2000).

The identification of these three variables emerges from recent studies on human motivation, and "although motivation is often treated as a singular construct, even superficial reflection suggests that people are moved to act by very different types of factors" (Ryan and Deci 2000, p. 69). Rather than considering motivation as rising from general human needs, the current research attempts to parcel out the specific motivations and needs that are active in particular social spheres by "asking what kind of motivation is being exhibited at any given time" (Ryan and Deci 2000, p. 69). As such, this article proposes that the consumer-human-

brand dyad may describe a relationship context in which these three needs are potentially important because their fulfillment in that context may lead to carefully targeted feelings of attachment.

A-R-C as responsiveness. Autonomy, relatedness, and competence are fundamental human needs (Deci and Ryan 2000). They are different from most needs because they are universal, innate, and enduring. However, this article is not interested in the existence of these needs but rather in the notion that specific partners, such as human brands, might provide an individual with relational inputs to satisfy these needs; this concept is referred to as "responsiveness."

The idea of responsiveness is foundational to attachment research, and self-determination theorists propose that the fulfillment of the A-R-C needs qualifies as responsiveness (e.g., Deci and Ryan 2000). Responsive relational partners "are ones who respond in ways that promote a person's experienced satisfaction of these basic [A-R-C] psychological needs" (La Guardia et al. 2000, p. 368). People gravitate toward relationships that serve their A-R-C needs; social experiences that make people feel autonomous, related, and competent also promote stronger attachments.

Hypotheses

There is conceptual and empirical support for the view that a responsive object contributes to the creation of intense attachments, but much of this literature provides only indirect support, has been overlooked by marketing researchers, or has not been applied to the realm of human brands. Conceptually, Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that the satisfaction of A-R-C needs leads to the "development of secure attachments within specific relationships" (p. 326) because "proximal supports for basic psychological needs in any relationship ... play a crucial role in predicting feelings of attachment" (p. 262). Although Ryan and Deci focus on an interpersonal context, they propose that the A-R-C needs might be fulfilled in other ways, inviting the possibility that human brands qualify as responsive relationship partners.

Furthermore, La Guardia and colleagues (2000) asked participants to rate their levels of attachment security with respect to different interpersonal relationships. They also assessed the extent to which relationship partners satisfy participants' A-R-C needs. The results show that greater A-R-C feelings positively predict attachment security. However, because the study uses a composite measure of the A-R-C needs, it is not possible to determine the distinct contribution of each need in predicting attachment strength.

Autonomy. Empirical research suggests that there is a positive relationship between felt autonomy and attachment security in teenagers (Ryan and Lynch 1989). By providing an atmosphere in which autonomy is encouraged, parents facilitate the strengthening of attachment bonds. Prior work also documents a positive correlation between respondents' attachment and the extent to which their relationship partners make them feel autonomous in both interpersonal and human-brand contexts (Giles and Maltby 2004; Leak and Cooney 2001). Likewise, Schultz, Kleine, and Kernan (1989) argue that strong attachments are linked to the theme of individuation, reflecting a person's desire to feel

autonomous and in control of the self. They report that many objects to which respondents are strongly attached show evidence of this theme. Taken jointly, these results suggest that the degree to which a relationship partner serves the need for autonomy should positively affect the intensity of a person's attachment to that partner.

H₁: The more a person perceives a human brand as fulfilling his or her autonomy needs, the more intensely attached he or she will be to the human brand.

Relatedness. Similar to Deci and Ryan's (2000) previously discussed arguments, Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that the fulfillment of the need for relatedness by an object results in increased positive affect, such as feelings of attachment and love. In addition, prior literature has demonstrated empirically that many consumers who are strongly attached to particular objects show evidence of "integration," which, in part, refers to their preference to be connected and joined with others (Schultz, Kleine, and Keran 1989, p. 360).

H₂: The more a person perceives a human brand as fulfilling his or her relatedness, the more intensely attached he or she will be to the human brand.

Competence. As discussed previously, it is not possible to distinguish the independent effects of each A-R-C need on attachment strength in all prior empirical work (e.g., La Guardia et al. 2000). This is important when considering the dearth of empirical work that addresses the independent contribution of competence. Conceptually, research suggests that attachments can develop for reasons tied to self-cultivation and self-development (Kleine and Baker 2004), themes that are at least consistent with the idea of a person feeling competent as a result of consuming a particular object. For example, elderly people in nursing homes surround themselves with special possessions that serve as reminders of a lost sense of proficiency (Rubinstein and Parmelee 1992). Similarly, consumers who partake in certain high-risk consumption activities can develop a sense of both mastery and emotional bonds in those contexts (Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993), though it is unclear whether these bonds qualify as attachments because they may not be appropriately target specific. This research has not been tested in the context of human brands and provides only conceptual or indirect empirical support.

Evidently, the effect of the satiation of the need for competence on attachment is "a bit less straightforward" (La Guardia et al. 2000, p. 368). Although the satisfaction of both autonomy and relatedness needs is likely to occur primarily in emotionally significant relationships, a person's competence needs may be satisfied in contexts that are unrelated to attachment, for example, at leisure, work, or elsewhere (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993). Thus, if a husband fails to make his wife feel effective and capable (but does not actively make her feel ineffective or incapable), she may yet remain intensely attached to him because he satisfies her needs for relatedness and autonomy. Although theory implies that the fulfillment of the need for competence may qualify as responsiveness and thus produce intense attach-

ments, prior empirical research is less conclusive. Thus, there is reason to predict that the linkage between competence and stronger attachments may be either positive or nonnegative.

H_{3a}: The more a person perceives a human brand as fulfilling his or her competence needs, the more intensely attached he or she will be to the human brand.

H_{3b}: The relationship between how a person perceives a human brand to be fulfilling his or her competence needs and intense attachments is nonnegative.

Study 1

Study 1 is designed to test H₁–H₃ directly. In addition, because prior literature has described how strong attachments are associated with satisfied, trusting, and committed relationships (Feeney and Noller 1996; Simpson 1990) and because these variables are also pivotal to marketing relationships (Fournier, Dobscha, and Mick 1998), Study 1 examines whether strong attachments positively predict the three variables. This endeavor extends prior work to a novel context, permits the testing of the independence of these constructs from attachment strength, and highlights the managerial implications of consumer brand attachments.

Method

One hundred sixty-four undergraduate volunteers, solicited in signs posted around a university campus, were paid \$5 in exchange for filling out a survey that took most respondents approximately 15 minutes to complete. Young-adult respondents may be particularly well suited to studying the domain of human brands because they constitute a coveted target market for human-brand marketers and because it is common for them to develop attachments to human brands (Boon and Lomore 2001; Perse and Rubin 1989). Volunteers received one of two versions of an instrument whose preamble read as follows: "Many people think of themselves as being attached to certain celebrities or well-known figures (e.g., actors, athletes, singers ...). Think about a celebrity or well-known figure to whom you are very [not] attached." The two conditions (i.e., "very attached" and "not attached") were designed to create variance in responses on the dimension of attachment strength. Next, respondents answered a series of questions (in order) that mapped onto the dependent (i.e., attachment strength), independent (e.g., autonomy), and outcome (e.g., satisfaction) variables.

Measures

The measures for the A-R-C needs were taken from the work of La Guardia and colleagues (2000), who developed metrics appropriate for an interpersonal context (see the Appendix). Using two pretests, these measures were adapted to suit the current human-brand context, though minimal changes were actually required. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement (anchored by 1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 = "strongly agree") with a series of statements about the human brand (denoted as "XYZ"). The items for relatedness ($\alpha = .81$) were as follows: "XYZ makes me feel cared about" and "I feel a lot of

closeness with XYZ." Items for autonomy ($\alpha = .80$) included "XYZ makes me feel controlled and pressured to be certain ways" (reversed) and "XYZ makes me feel free to be who I am." Items for competence ($\alpha = .70$) included "Generally, XYZ makes me feel very capable and effective" and "XYZ makes me feel inadequate or incompetent" (reversed).

Previous research has argued that the degree to which people demonstrate separation distress is a good indicator of the strength of their attachment bonds (Berman and Sperling 1994). That is, with the real, imagined, or threatened separation from the object (e.g., death, loss), a strongly attached person will experience a negative emotional reaction that researchers can use as a measure of the intensity of the attachment bond. Prior research has advanced multi-item measures (Hazan and Shaver 1994; Hazan and Zeifman 1994) that were adapted and extended to the current context. The four items (anchored by 1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 = "strongly agree") show good reliability ($\alpha = .89$): (1) "I feel better if I am not away from or without XYZ for long periods of time"; (2) "I miss XYZ when XYZ is not around"; (3) "If XYZ were permanently gone from my life, I'd be upset"; and (4) "Losing XYZ forever would be distressing to me."

Finally, the instrument included several metrics to gauge some of the potential positive qualities associated with people's stronger attachments and to provide further evidence that attachment strength is differentiable from prior constructs. Specifically, respondents were administered three metrics that were adapted from the perceived relationship quality scale (Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas 2000), which taps the degree to which respondents assess their relationships to be satisfying, trusting, and committed. Although this scale has not been widely used in marketing, it shows excellent internal consistency and validity. The items (all anchored by 1 = "not at all" and 7 = "very much") for satisfaction ($\alpha = .97$) were as follows: "How satisfied are you with the relationship?" "How content are you with the relationship?" and "How happy are you with the relationship?" Similarly, items for trust ($\alpha = .92$) were as follows: "How much can you count on XYZ?" "How much do you trust XYZ?" and "How dependable is XYZ?" Finally, items for commitment ($\alpha = .98$) were as follows: "How dedicated are you to the relationship?" "How committed are you to the relationship?" and "How devoted are you to the relationship?"

Results

There was an enormous range in the types of human brands that respondents listed, including actors, musicians, politicians, and media personalities. These figures represent a target of investment by, for example, movie studios, record labels, and political parties in terms of promoting the human brands and managing their brand associations. A manipulation check composed of an alternative measure of attachment strength (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005) showed a significant difference between respondents in the weak- ($M = 1.86$) and those in the strong- ($M = 4.05$, $p < .05$) attachment conditions.

Results of a multivariate analysis of variance. The results of a multivariate analysis of variance provide initial support for the idea that A-R-C may be important in the production of stronger attachments. The mean of autonomy in the strong-attachment condition ($M = 3.66$, $SE = .18$) was higher than that in the weak-attachment condition ($M = 1.98$, $SE = .17$, $p < .05$). The mean of relatedness in the strong-attachment condition ($M = 2.94$, $SE = .14$) was significantly different from that in the weak-attachment condition ($M = 1.30$, $SE = .13$, $p < .05$), as was the mean of competence in the weak- ($M = 2.71$, $SE = .18$) versus the strong- ($M = 3.67$, $SE = .19$, $p < .05$) attachment condition.

Correlational analysis. A consideration of the correlation between the A-R-C needs and strong attachments marshals evidence of a significant linkage. Autonomy ($r = .62$, $p < .05$), relatedness ($r = .70$, $p < .05$), and competence ($r = .44$, $p < .05$) are each significantly correlated with attachment strength. In addition, the correlations among the A-R-C needs are positive ($r = .59-.75$; see Table 1).

Full structural models. The remaining analysis is conducted with structural equation modeling (AMOS). It is customary to evaluate structural models in reference to alternative conceptualizations of the data and by comparing fit statistics. As such, the analyses included three models.

Model 1 is the hypothesized model, with the A-R-C indicators loading onto their respective factors, which are allowed to correlate and, in turn, predict attachment strength. Model 2 is the same as Model 1, except that the latent A-R-C needs are modeled as uncorrelated. Finally, Model 3 depicts all the indicators for the A-R-C needs loading onto a single latent factor.

In each model, the relationships between the indicators and the latent variables are positive and significant. Model 1

TABLE 1
Correlation Matrix of Study 1 Measures

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Autonomy	—	.75	.69	.62	.11	.58	.55
2. Relatedness		—	.59	.70	.30	.72	.69
3. Competence			—	.44	.12*	.49	.45
4. Attachment strength				—	.25	.66	.66
5. Satisfaction					—	.46	.33
6. Commitment						—	.68
7. Trust							—

Notes: All $p < .05$, except * $p = .14$.

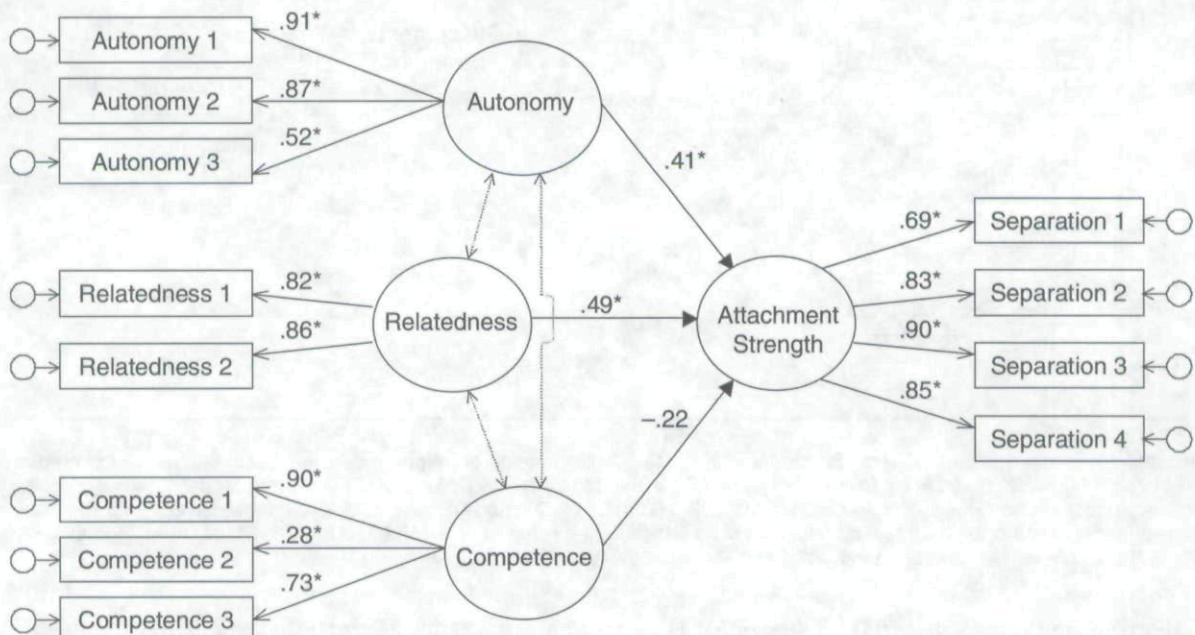
shows excellent minimum sample discrepancy divided by degrees of freedom ($\text{CMIN}/\text{DF} = 1.92$), comparative fit index ($\text{CFI} = .96$), and normed fit index ($\text{NFI} = .92$) statistics. Model 2, in which the A-R-C needs are uncorrelated, has universally unacceptable fit statistics and therefore is rejected. Specifically, the CMIN/DF statistic is inflated (6.04), and both the CFI (.77) and the NFI (.74) statistics are inferior. The fit statistics for Model 3 are mixed, with

acceptable CMIN/DF (2.98) and CFI (.91) values but a marginal NFI value (.87). Because of its better fit and because it has a significantly different chi-square ($\chi^2 = 92.27$, d.f. = 48) value from Model 3 ($p < .05$), Model 1 is superior (see Figure 1).

H_1 proposes that when a human brand fulfills autonomy needs, a person is more likely to become strongly attached to it. The path between autonomy and attachment strength

FIGURE 1
Summary of Study 1 Structural Models

A: Model 1



B: Model 2

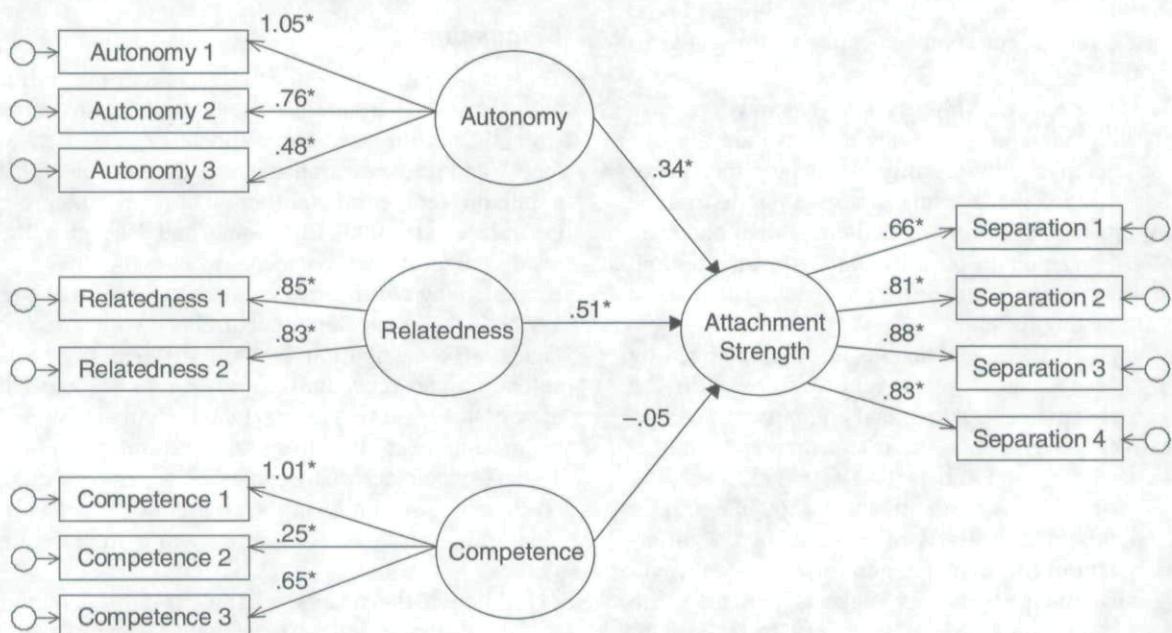
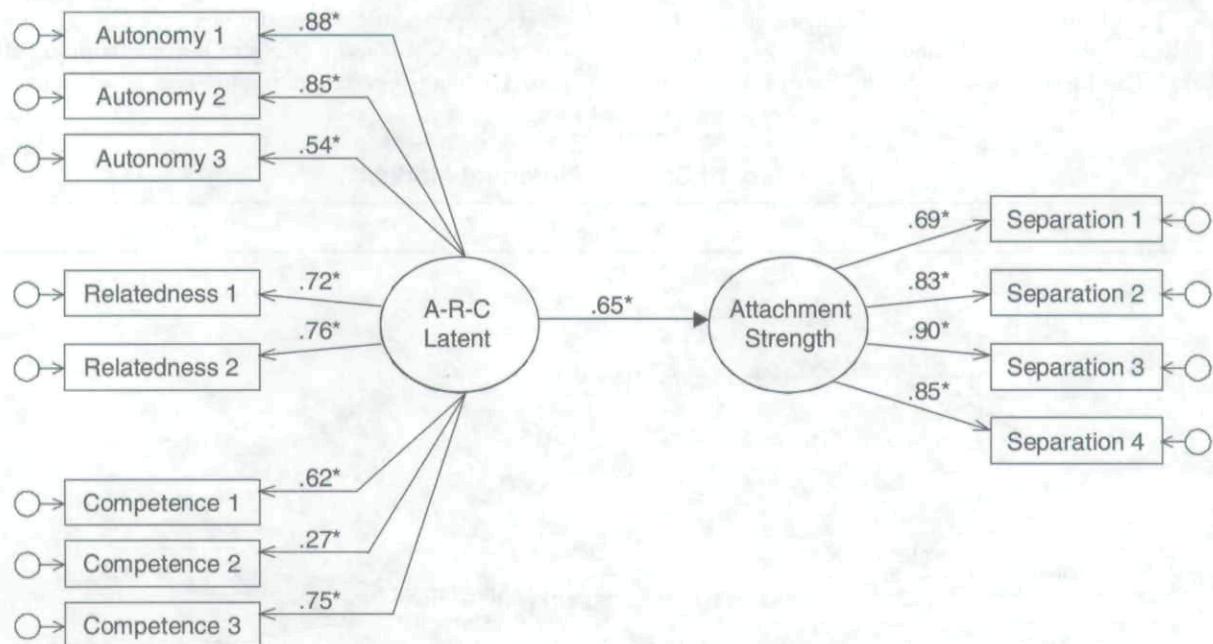


FIGURE 1
Continued

C: Model 3



* $p < .05$.

Notes: From Study 1, Model 1 shows all items for the independent variables loading onto their respective latent factors, which predict attachment strength ($\chi^2 = 92.26$, d.f. = 48; CMIN/DF = 1.92; CFI = .96; and NFI = .92). Model 2 is identical to Model 1, except that the A-R-C latents are uncorrelated ($\chi^2 = 307.95$, d.f. = 51; CMIN/DF = 6.04; CFI = .77; and NFI = .74). Model 3 shows all items for the independent variables loading onto one latent factor, which predicts attachment strength ($\chi^2 = 158.07$, d.f. = 53; CMIN/DF = 2.98; CFI = .91; and NFI = .87). All path estimates are standardized and shown above the respective path.

in Model 1 is positive ($\gamma = .41$, $p < .05$), in support of H_1 . The path between relatedness and attachment strength is also positive ($\gamma = .49$, $p < .05$), in support of H_2 . Finally, H_{3a} is rejected, but H_{3b} is supported; there is an insignificant relationship between competence and attachment strength. This finding allows for the possibility that a human brand must not negatively affect competence for a strong attachment to exist.

Outcome variables. Although increasingly intense attachments may have positive qualities, these are not due to a lack of construct orthogonality. An exploratory factor analysis that included the attachment strength items and the satisfaction, trust, and commitment items was conducted (see Table 2). The results show a clean four-factor solution; no inappropriate loadings exceed .3, suggesting that these constructs are distinguishable.

Furthermore, stronger attachments are characterized by consumers' perceptions of their relationships with the human brand as satisfied, trusting, and committed. The correlation matrix (Table 1) shows that attachment strength is positively correlated with satisfaction ($r = .25$, $p < .05$), trust ($r = .66$, $p < .05$), and commitment ($r = .66$, $p < .05$). In addition, a multivariate analysis of variance of the differences in satisfaction, commitment, and trust between weak- and strong-attachment conditions suggests that there are benefits associated with strong attachments. In the strong- versus the weak-attachment conditions, respondents

reported having greater satisfaction ($M = 4.46$, $SE = .18$ versus $M = 3.14$, $SE = .19$; $F = 25.17$, $p < .05$), commitment ($M = 3.59$, $SE = .16$ versus $M = 1.66$, $SE = .17$; $F = 71.56$, $p < .05$), and trust ($M = 3.68$, $SE = .16$ versus $M = 1.90$, $SE = .17$; $F = 60.16$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

The main contribution of Study 1 is that the fulfillment of autonomy and relatedness needs explains attachment strength, but the need for competence does not. Although theory and prior research suggests that an object that makes a person feel competent may bolster attachments (La Guardia et al. 2000; Rubinstein and Parmelee 1992), the results suggest that competence does not play a role in strengthening attachments to human brands. Although Table 1 reveals that competence is correlated with stronger attachments, its contribution is limited when the variance of autonomy and relatedness is taken into account. However, these same results suggest that the relationship between competence and attachment strength must be nonnegative. That is, an object that suppresses a person's competence needs may also diminish the strength of a person's attachment. This issue is considered again in the subsequent studies.

Although the results of Study 1 are encouraging, the choice of survey design dictates that some of the affective richness evident in consumers' attachments to human

TABLE 2
Study 1 Exploratory Factor Analysis with Relationship Constructs

Item	Factor			
	Satisfaction	Attachment Strength	Trust	Commitment
Satisfaction 1	.99			
Satisfaction 2	.95			
Satisfaction 3	.94			
Attachment Strength 1		.98		
Attachment Strength 2		.87		
Attachment Strength 3		.75		
Attachment Strength 4		.67		
Trust 1			.96	
Trust 2			.88	
Trust 3			.72	
Commitment 1				.97
Commitment 2				.93
Commitment 3				.91

Notes: Principal axis factoring with Promax rotation; all loadings >.3 are reported.

brands is lost (e.g., Rubin and McHugh 1987). It is clear from the literature that respondents use the same words to describe their attachments to human brands as they do to describe their strong interpersonal relationships (a result found by Fournier [1998] in reference to product brands). Study 1 builds primarily on the reliability and validity of the measures, whereas Study 2 employs a qualitative approach to corroborate the results of Study 1 and to flesh out some of the affective richness of consumers' attachments to human brands. In the process, Study 2 is intended to garner evidence that relationships characterized by strong attachments lie between and are comparable with both person-to-person (Hazan and Zeifman 1994) and product-brand (Fournier 1998) attachments.

Study 2

Study 2 is a qualitative study that evaluates evidence of the A-R-C needs in the context of human brands to complement the empirical results of Study 1. The use of qualitative procedures (Study 2) in conjunction with quantitative approaches (Studies 1 and 3) may be particularly well suited to research on attachments (Belk 1992) because, together, they richly describe the focal variable while statistically establishing the linkages among variables.

Method

Twenty-five undergraduate respondents were recruited on a university campus; each was paid \$5 in exchange for answering questions about human brands in writing. No limitations were provided about which or what type of human brands to discuss; respondents were instructed to discuss any human brand ("celebrity or well-known person") to whom they felt "attached." In addition to documenting the emotional quality of these stronger attachments, the aim was to determine whether the responsiveness of human brands, revealed by the A-R-C needs, was evident in the context of these attachments because prior research is not conclusive on this issue. A series of questions were posed; for example, respondents were asked to tell the story

of their first experience with the human brand, to describe their best memory involving the human brand, and to convey what the human brand meant to them. Thus, attachments were examined from the consumer's first-hand perspective on the basis of relatively unstructured descriptions of salient experiences with the brand (Fournier and Mick 1999). Two independent raters, who were blind to the purpose of the study, coded respondent feedback for evidence of strong attachments and the A-R-C needs. Disagreements between coders were resolved in discussions with the author.

Results

All responses showed evidence of the types of feelings typically associated with attachments of moderate to intense strength. In addition, 48% of responses indicate evidence of autonomy, and 60% show evidence of relatedness. Only one response shows evidence of the respondent experiencing feelings of competence. Incorporated into the subsequent sections are excerpts from the responses that tended to be extensive and thoughtful. In each, the respondent self-selected a human brand as the object of feelings of attachment. For example, one woman described a musical act in the following terms:

I can't really remember when I started loving them. At least 15 years ago, I think probably I fell in love with the song "Rose Coloured Glasses," and then they played a rink in a town close to me and a friend and I went to see them. It was a great place to see them play because you could dance and get really close to the stage. They had all these table and floor lamps on the stage. A really intimate setting, and there weren't that many people there. I think we paid \$7 a ticket. They absolutely rocked. I've been addicted to them since then.

In this excerpt, the respondent describes a "loving" relationship that has endured for years. This pattern was common; many respondents referred to powerful emotions while describing facets of the relationships that were interpreted as evidence of specific A-R-C needs. For example, a respondent wrote the following about a band:

I bought all of their albums without hearing them (I had only had the live one previous) and became obsessed with their talent. I went to see them for the first time ever and was so incredibly moved. I often found myself staring [sic] in awe at them during the show. I was even moved to tears on a few songs. After, I met Jim [lead singer] and got a picture taken with him, and I just couldn't believe at how nice he was. I had become from that experience, as other fans like to say, a Rodeohead. This was less than a year ago.

It is evident that this person's response to the band is affect laden. Furthermore, she now considers herself a "Rodeohead," a group of enthusiastic followers of the band (Blue Rodeo). Although this group appears to be fairly unstructured, many of its members gather in online forums (e.g., www.discussions.bluerodeo.com) to share stories, news, and opinions about the band. This excerpt demonstrates that a Rodeohead (and this respondent) enjoys social rewards that are linked to the band and that are interpreted as serving a need for relatedness. The following provides additional evidence of feelings of relatedness:

Ah, now this is a better story. Another live show. This was my 3rd of 3 concerts;... it was in April of 2000 I think (I haven't gotten to a show since then—starving student and all) at the Grand Theatre.... It was really a fantastic night, my dad and I went together. He's a bit of a fan himself, though not quite as die-hard as myself. It's something that has sort of brought us together. We didn't have the greatest of seats because we bought our tickets late, but it didn't matter too much because the venue was fairly small. It was really a pretty magical evening. I found myself getting lost in the music now and then, and I just couldn't keep my eyes from glossing over.... Anyway, I've rarely felt so emotionally connected to anything.

Here, the respondent's relationship with the band is explained by the notion that it brings her closer to her father, a fairly clear representation of relatedness, even while her feelings of attachment are also directed at the band itself. A similar result with respect to feelings of relatedness is evident from the following excerpt in reference to a sports team, the Detroit Pistons:

I used to attend games with my family as a child. I grew up watching Joe Dumars and Grant Hill all throughout high school. Basketball was a family event—a sanctuary—and I did my first internship with the company. The first game we went to was against the Portland Trailblazers—I was about 11 years old. Dennis Rodman grabbed 18 rebounds, and we cheered in the mid tier seats as they beat the Blazers by about 10 points. We had so much fun that game that going to the contests became a regular family event.

Other excerpts described people's adopting the mannerisms of various human brands, such as a male respondent who wrote, "I'm even a fan in their club. I own all of their CDs plus bootlegs. I even write and sign my name to reflect my love for them." This excerpt reveals evidence of relatedness ("fan in their club") and the type of self-endorsed behavior lying at the core of autonomy, reflected in the decision to model his signature after the style of print associated with the band's (Metallica) album covers.

Other passages showed similar modeling behavior that signifies a freedom to express the self. For example, a male

respondent wrote about a band, "I strive to be like them because they haven't sold out and they are nice people who treat others well," and another respondent indicated that a particular performer (DMX) "inspires me to be a true man who will love my family and give back to my community. He isn't just a rapper. He's a legend and a great role model. He's one crazy hard-knocks guy, but he's also normal cuz [sic] he has kids and a wife and I respect that." Perhaps no example better captures the intersection of self-expression, self-endorsed behavior, and the feeling of freedom associated with autonomy as the following excerpt provided by a male respondent in relation to a musical band:

As a musician myself (guitar, banjo, accordion, bass) I enjoy their folky-jazzy-rock vibe mixed with lyrics that hit home to me. Their songs are intelligent, well-crafted, and presented with impeccable taste. I think the fact that the band is accessible before and after many shows adds to their appeal. They sound like rock stars on stage—but act like normal guys off-stage. They provide songs that speak to me. They provide a middle-agreed [sic] family guy with the responsibilities of a family and mortgage and stressful career, an outlet to cut loose. They also inspired me to pick up my guitar and write songs again. My wife adores Jim Cuddy. Back in the mid-80's/early 90's the band was unique—now there is a whole industry (alt.country) dedicated to this blend of music. I am unique—as I follow a band that most everyone I meet has never heard of.

Finally, many respondents discussed objects they perceived as possessing a high degree of skill. For example, one respondent wrote about tennis player Martina Hingis having "a pretty solid game." Another respondent discussed Tori Amos as having "a spectacular singing voice, plays the piano masterfully, and is an amazing lyricist." One thought that Matthew McConaughey was "really good. We're talking Oscar here," whereas another described the World Wrestling Federation as follows: "The acting is superb and not just movie actors. These athlete/actors have to get each detail right because they are in front of a life [sic] audience 5–6 days a week." However, in all but one case, respondents attributed skill to the human brand. With one exception, none of the human brands appeared to make the respondents themselves feel competent. The single exception was a respondent who wrote the following about a band:

I like to emulate what they have raised me on (so I feel). They were a positive role model for me in my teen years, providing a degree of sanity and a beacon of relief in a turbulent world I dealt with during that time. I admire all these traits in them and try to make them a part of my life in my own, different ways. Even when I meet a goal. I then set out for a new one to challenge me.

Whereas this excerpt shows evidence of self-expression ("make them part of my life"), the reference to being challenged is interpreted as fulfilling his need for competence. In contrast to the needs for autonomy and relatedness, there was only limited evidence for respondents' feeling attached to a human brand because of feelings of competence.

Discussion

The juxtaposition of feelings indicative of the A-R-C needs and feelings of attachment provides correlational support

for the first and second hypotheses. The relative absence of feelings of competence experienced by the respondents does not contradict the results of Study 1. Both suggest that competence may be present but does not explain strong attachments in the context of human brands. However, there is also another possible explanation for this result, namely, that the nature of the human brands selected by respondents (primarily musical performers, athletes, and actors) or the age (18–25 years) of most respondents ruled out discussion of competence, which, in relation to other human brands (e.g., politicians, religious figures), might actually be linked to stronger attachments. However, it is clear that younger adults develop human-brand attachments (Boon and Lomore 2001; Cole and Leets 1999), suggesting that the choice of sample was appropriate (this issue is reexamined in Study 3). The instructions to respondents allowed them to discuss any human brand they desired. The predominance of actors, musicians, and sports figures in the sample corresponds to prior research that suggest that these are the most common categories of human brands that people typically describe (North, Bland, and Ellis 2005). Furthermore, respondents were clearly familiar with and actively contemplating the idea of skill and competence (e.g., Martina Hingis, Tori Amos), except that the attachment object was almost universally the target of such attributions. Study 3 further addresses the role of competence.

Study 2 presents evidence that respondents use the same words (e.g., love, adoration, emotional connection) to describe their attachments to human brands as they use in the context of other attachments (e.g., romantic). Thus, it would be premature to consider consumers' human-brand attachments trivial or unimportant; the meaningfulness and intense emotions ascribed to these relationships argue against this conclusion. Furthermore, although much of the literature cited in laying out the theoretical model originates in the interpersonal domain, the results suggest that the human-brand context is sufficiently similar to apply the A-R-C framework constructively.

In conjunction with Study 1, the results of Study 2 are encouraging, but additional support for the hypotheses and for the role of competence can be obtained by assessing attachment strength in a more natural environment. This is pursued in Study 3. In addition, consistent with the efforts of Study 2 to describe the phenomena more fully, Study 3 uses expanded measures of the A-R-C needs to ensure that the domain of these constructs is adequately captured.

Study 3

The hypotheses tested in Study 1 pertain to the role of the A-R-C needs in reference to human brands. Each is specified by self-determination theorists as potentially important to strengthening attachments. However, to address several alternative hypotheses, the analysis is expanded beyond the A-R-C needs. Specifically, there are other important human needs that are at the same high-order level of analysis as the A-R-C needs. For example, a recent publication that reviews and consolidates prior research on important human needs (see Sheldon et al. 2001) advances measures of vari-

ous needs discussed in the overlapping research of scholars such as Maslow, Epstein, and Atkinson; these needs are referred to as (1) "self-actualization," (2) "pleasure-stimulation," (3) "money-luxury," (4) "self-esteem," and (5) "popularity-influence." This background is important in the current context because the extant literature seems to advance indirectly the more expansive view that servicing needs unrelated to the A-R-C needs may also bolster attachments. Although the articles cited subsequently support or are consistent with the view that the A-R-C needs are important, they also propose that through the course of an object's serving additional needs, a consumer may develop feelings that are emblematic of stronger attachments.

For example, Keller (2001) indicates that when a consumer gains feelings of fun, excitement, and self-respect from a brand, he or she may be more likely to become attached to it. These feelings seem to mirror the needs for pleasure-stimulation and self-esteem (Sheldon et al. 2001). Therefore, a positive relationship between fulfillment of these two needs and increasingly strong attachments to human brands might be expected.

Similarly, Escalas and Bettman (2005) propose that a consumer will form self-brand connections when the brand helps him or her achieve goals, such as providing self-esteem, particularly when the brand is symbolic and when a person's in-group has already embraced the brand. This reasoning indicates that a person's needs for self-esteem, money-luxury (i.e., the brand's symbolic stature), and popularity-influence (i.e., the brand as a tool for a person to maintain position within a group) may be active in the process of attachment formation. In turn, this suggests that as an object services a person's needs for self-esteem, money-luxury, and popularity-influence, attachments become more intense.

Finally, Pimentel and Reynolds (2004) describe consumers who become more affectively committed to sports teams after undergoing a transcendent process of "sacralization," in which the team takes on meaningful status in the consumer's mind. This process seems consistent with Sheldon and colleagues' (2001) description of self-actualization, which refers to a person's identification of important aspects of life's meaning and purpose. Accordingly, it might be expected that the relationship between attachment strength and self-actualization, as well as the other basic needs, will be positive and significant.

H₄: The more a person perceives a human brand as fulfilling his or her needs for (a) self-actualization, (b) pleasure-stimulation, (c) money-luxury, (d) self-esteem, and (e) popularity-influence, the more he or she will be intensely attached to that human brand.

This hypothesis does not undermine the role of the A-R-C needs in strengthening attachments. It is possible that these additional needs are complementary. Study 3 retests the hypotheses with a nonstudent sample in a more naturalistic setting and considers these five alternative needs in an effort to address the rival hypothesis that the satisfaction of *any* important need explains stronger attachments.

Method

Adult respondents were recruited by posting a letter of solicitation on Web sites organized as online communities for or by fans of various celebrities. These sites provide forums in which people gather electronically to share their thoughts and feelings about a celebrity with like-minded people. These sites were targeted because they are accessible and populated by people who are communicative and familiar with (though not necessarily attached to) at least one celebrity. Along other dimensions, such as age, geographic location, and gender, there is enormous heterogeneity in membership within and among sites.

A soliciting message was posted at each forum, which directed volunteers to send an e-mail to a university-affiliated address that was set up to for this study. To provide an incentive, the soliciting letter informed people that respondents who completed the survey would be entered into a random drawing for one of five prizes of \$50 and would be eligible to receive a summary of the research. Those who sent an e-mail were directed to the location (i.e., a URL) of the survey, which was constructed for the Web using the nTreePoint software package. The study description, instructions, and order of presentation for the measures were nearly identical to those of Study 1, and respondents were randomly assigned to list a human brand to whom they either were or were not strongly attached.

Measures

The metric used to assess attachment strength was composed of the same four items used in Study 1 and showed good reliability ($\alpha = .93$; see the Appendix). The A-R-C needs were each measured with the items employed in Study 1; additional items were adapted from the work of La Guardia and colleagues (2000) and Sheldon and colleagues (2001). Compared with Study 1, these showed improved internal consistency ($\alpha_s = .83-.89$).

The preamble for each metric that assessed needs read, "When I see, hear, think about or interact with this celebrity..." The need for relatedness was measured with the two items from Study 1 plus four additional items: "I feel loved and cared about," "I often feel a lot of distance from this celebrity," "I feel like I am in contact with someone who cares for me and who I care for," and "I feel close and connected to a person who is important to me." The need for autonomy was measured with three items in addition to those used in Study 1: "I feel that my choices are based on my true interests and values," "I feel free to do things my own way," and "I feel that my choices express my 'true' self." The need for competence included three additional items: "I feel that I can successfully complete difficult tasks and projects," "I feel that I can take on and master hard challenges," and "I feel very capable in what I do."

Measures of other needs were included to assess the rival scenario that, in general, need fulfillment leads to strong attachments; these measures were adapted from the work of Sheldon and colleagues (2001). Respondents were asked in relation to each need the extent of their disagreement ("strongly disagree") or agreement ("strongly agree")

with certain statements. Items for self-actualization ($\alpha = .95$) were as follows: "I feel like I am 'becoming who I really am,'" "I feel a sense of deeper purpose in my life," and "I feel a deeper understanding of myself and my place in the universe." Pleasure-stimulation ($\alpha = .88$) was measured with the following items: "I feel I am experiencing new sensations and activities," "I feel intense physical pleasure and enjoyment," and "I feel I have found new sources and types of stimulation for myself." The three items tapping money-luxury ($\alpha = .91$) were as follows: "I feel I am able to buy most of the things I want," "I feel that I have nice things and possessions," and "I feel that I have plenty of money." The measure of self-esteem ($\alpha = .84$) was composed of the following: "I feel I have many positive qualities," "I feel quite satisfied with who I am," and "I feel I have a strong sense of self-respect." Finally, people's need for popularity-influence ($\alpha = .85$) was assessed by the following: "I feel that I am a person whose advice others seek out and follow," "I feel that I strongly influence other people's beliefs and behavior," and "I feel that I have a strong impact on what other people do."

Results

There were 107 respondents (26 males and 81 females), and they ranged in age from 18 to 60 years, with an average age of 33 years. Although gender and age were initially considered covariates in the subsequent analysis, neither predicted attachment strength and thus were dropped from the analysis. Although the instrument did not explicitly collect data on nationality, it was apparent from respondents' e-mail addresses and signatures that the sample was geographically diverse. For example, respondents appeared to be located in Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Uruguay, and the United States.

There was an enormous range in the types of human brands selected by respondents, including actors, comedians, models, directors, radio personalities, writers, singers, athletes, musicians, politicians, and royalty. For example, respondents listed Ben Affleck, King Albert II, Lucinda Williams, Mario Lemieux, Viggo Mortensen, Michael Biehn, and Joan Crawford. Respondents also varied significantly in their popularity, activity level (e.g., retirement status), and profession.

Correlation. Each of the three A-R-C needs was positively correlated with the measure of attachment strength (see Table 3). The correlations between attachment and autonomy ($r = .37, p < .05$), relatedness ($r = .31, p < .05$), and competence ($r = .20, p < .05$) were all positive and significant. In general, the correlation between attachment strength and the other needs was weak or nonsignificant: self-actualization ($r = .16, p = \text{not significant [n.s.]}$), pleasure-stimulation ($r = .19, p < .05$), money-luxury ($r = .15, p = \text{n.s.}$), self-esteem ($r = .09, p = \text{n.s.}$), and popularity-influence ($r = .19, p < .05$).

Hierarchical regression. Using hierarchical regression allows variables entered in prior stages to account for variance in the dependent variable (i.e., attachment strength)

TABLE 3
Correlation Matrix of Study 3 Measures

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Attachment strength	—	.38	.31	.20	.16*	.19	.15*	.09*	.19
2. Autonomy		—	.37	.60	.47	.20	.35	.33	.33
3. Relatedness			—	.52	.67	.52	.45	.42	.36
4. Competence				—	.56	.35	.46	.69	.45
5. Self-actualization					—	.76	.56	.48	.37
6. Pleasure-stimulation						—	.33	.38	.27
7. Money-luxury							—	.50	.44
8. Self-esteem								—	.66
9. Popularity-influence									—

Notes: All $p < .05$, except * $p = \text{n.s.}$

before the independent contribution of variables entered in subsequent steps is assessed. Thus, it provides a relatively conservative test of the contributions of the variables entered last.

Considering the weak relationships between attachment strength and the non-A-R-C needs that were revealed by the previous correlation analysis, it might be expected that there is little or no relationship between an object's fulfilling these alternative needs and attachment strength. A consideration of the hierarchical regression with the alternative (i.e., non-A-R-C) needs entered in the first step and the A-R-C needs entered second shows that this is true.

In Regression 1 (see Table 4), in which the A-R-C needs are not entered, none of the alternative needs significantly predicts attachment strength. The coefficients for self-actualization ($\beta = .01, p = \text{n.s.}$), pleasure-stimulation ($\beta = .20, p = \text{n.s.}$), money-luxury ($\beta = .13, p = \text{n.s.}$), self-esteem ($\beta = -.06, p = \text{n.s.}$), and popularity-influence ($\beta = .10, p = \text{n.s.}$) are uniformly insignificant. In light of (1) the weak or insignificant correlations between attachment and the independent alternative needs and (2) the weak to moderate correlations among the alternative needs, it is unlikely that this result is due to multicollinearity.

Likewise, in Regression 2, which includes the A-R-C needs in the second step, none of the alternative needs is a significant predictor of attachment strength. Combined with

the results from Regression 1, this demonstrates a lack of support for H_4 . However, the links between two of the three A-R-C needs and the dependent measure are significant. Specifically, autonomy ($\beta = .31, p < .05$) and relatedness ($\beta = .29, p < .05$) are significant predictors, but competence ($\beta = -.13, p = \text{n.s.}$) is not. Thus, the results of Study 3 support H_1 , H_2 , and H_{3b} .

Discussion

Study 3 mirrors Study 1, insofar as both reveal that the satisfaction of autonomy and relatedness predicts strong attachments. In interacting with human brands, people who are made to feel capable of self-expression and self-governance and those who are made to feel a sense of closeness and intimacy are likely to develop strong attachments. In Studies 1 and 3 and in support of H_{3b} , the relationship between competence and attachment strength was not significant, suggesting that at least in a celebrity context, feelings of efficacy are not fundamental to promoting stronger attachments. Furthermore, competence and five additional needs were considered but were found to be insignificant in Study 3; this suggests that general need fulfillment does not explain the creation of strong attachments. Although other predictors of attachment strength may be identified in further research, the results suggest that autonomy and relatedness play an important role.

TABLE 4
Study 3 Hierarchical Regression Results

Step in Hierarchical Regression	Predictor	Regression 1		Regression 2	
		Standardized Beta	<i>p</i> Value	Standardized Beta	<i>p</i> Value
Step 1	(Constant)		.00		.01
	Self-actualization	.01	.94	-.31	.15
	Pleasure-stimulation	.20	.24	.26	.12
	Money-luxury	.13	.43	.14	.37
	Self-esteem	-.06	.72	-.13	.50
	Popularity-influence	.10	.52	.10	.52
Step 2	Autonomy	—	—	.31	.03
	Relatedness	—	—	.29	.05
	Competence	—	—	-.03	.89

Notes: Dependent variable = attachment strength.

General Discussion

Study 1 revealed that consumer attachments to human brands result in elevated levels of satisfaction, trust, and commitment. Study 2 revealed the affective richness of the experience for consumers attached to human brands. Study 3 offered additional support for the theoretical model using a separate sample. On the basis of this and other research (e.g., Ambler et al. 2002; Thomson MacInnis, and Park 2005), it is reasonable to conclude that attachment strength is separable from trust, satisfaction, commitment, and a variety of other constructs, such as favorable attitudes and brand loyalty, that have been linked to strong relationships. The promise of attachment strength to marketers is that the construct is predictive of these and other relationship features (e.g., Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001; Liljander and Strandvik 1995), is theoretically rigorous and well articulated, and is achievable through two means (i.e., creating feelings of autonomy and/or relatedness). Few, if any, relationship constructs appear to offer the same comprehensive benefits as attachment strength, which may provide a useful means of conceptualizing and an efficient metric for assessing the strength of consumer-brand relationships.

Managerial Implications

If consumers can be made to feel autonomous and related, organizations may be able to foster strong attachments and thus enjoy the benefits of superior relationships with consumers. In general, human brands that make consumers feel appreciated, empowered, and understood succeed in creating feelings of autonomy. Similarly, feelings of relatedness are likely to be produced when a human brand promotes acceptance, openness, and belonging.

General conditions. For an attachment to form, the consumer must initially be minimally attracted in some way to the human brand, whether socially or in some other manner (Boon and Lomore 2001). In other words, an attachment is unlikely to develop if the starting point of the relationship is characterized by intense negative feelings or thoughts. This suggests that managers must introduce a human brand to the world carefully and deliberately and choose a positioning that is appealing and sustainable over time.

Need for interaction. The importance of human brands interacting with consumers was underscored by the qualitative results from Study 2, in which one respondent spoke of having his picture taken with the human brand. Repeated interaction between a consumer and the human brand reduces uncertainty and provides the basis for an attachment to grow (Berman and Sperling 1994), but in the context of human brands, it is not just the quantity but also the quality of interaction that matters.

With direct interaction, consumers are more likely to view the human brand as accessible, increasing the opportunity for feelings of autonomy and relatedness to be promoted. Although "being seen" (e.g., public appearances) may be acceptable as a form of indirect interaction, more direct means offer a richer, more rewarding choice. Firms should focus on determining how to make their human brands approachable. For example, technological alterna-

tives for direct interaction show potential not only because they expand the human brand's reach and exposure. If the human brand had a meaningful presence online through the use of blogs or chat rooms, attached consumers would gather to ask questions or to learn more about the human brand in his or her own words. An example of this direct approach is Mark Cuban, owner of the Dallas Mavericks basketball team, whose immense popularity is linked to his spending several hours daily answering e-mails from fans (Fielding 2005). The direct approach not only improves the quality of interaction but also may encourage feelings of autonomy and relatedness by reducing hierarchy, making consumers feel appreciated and understood, and reducing the prominence of economic motives by the human brand (Silvera and Austad 2004).

Interaction should also occur on a consistent basis (Beech, Chadwick, and Tapp 2000). Consumers may respond better to a human brand who has a routine that consumers may view as a guarantee of interaction. For example, Ellen DeGeneres is known for a daily segment on her show in which she invites the audience (both in the studio and watching on television) to dance with her. This is an especially astute move because of its regularity and because it simultaneously promotes feelings of autonomy (what DeGeneres calls "an expression of freedom") and closeness (dancing "with" a celebrity; see Elber 2005). Ensuring regular interaction between a consumer and a human brand helps create the conditions under which an attachment is likely to grow.

Role of authenticity. Human brands that are perceived as authentic are more readily embraced (Cole and Leets 1999; Perse and Rubin 1989). Research has elaborated on authenticity (Rose and Wood 2005), but what the term means in reference to a human brand remains an underresearched topic. However, several ideas are promising (see Tolson 2001). For example, authenticity is best developed slowly and deliberately, thus signaling a long-term view, and by avoiding perceived opportunism by the human brand, which can signal that the human brand has "sold out." Likewise, when human brands are seen publicly in a nonperforming role, they should not be "perceived as acting" (Tolson 2001, p. 445), because this may lead consumers to feel manipulated and to view the human brand as lacking credibility. In Study 2, one consumer spoke appreciatively of the band to which he was attached acting "like normal guys off-stage." Away from their trade, human brands should not be viewed as trying too hard to convey an image, or they will risk being viewed as "pretenders."

The role of competence. In all three studies, competence was not effective in bolstering attachments in the context of human brands. If the popular press is any indication, consumers can form attachments to human brands who lack any appreciable skills (e.g., Paris Hilton). However, human brands who make consumers feel incompetent are likely to weaken attachments or prevent them from forming in the first place. For example, when comedian Dennis Miller joined the Monday Night Football broadcast team, his addition was intended to halt a slide in ratings. However, on the show, Miller used indecipherable analogies, complex diction, and obscure references that alienated his audience and

made them feel inadequate and unintelligent. In other words, many viewers were made to feel incompetent; this not only caused a weakening of any possible preexisting attachments but also prevented any new attachments from forming. Although consumers do not become attached to a human brand through feelings of competence, the results suggest that managers must nonetheless be careful not to permit the degradation of competence to be linked to their human brand.

However, caution must be taken in extending these results to other domains in which attachment and self-determination theories may provide a useful road map to building attachment bonds. For example, with respect to product functional brands that are intended to solve consumption-related problems (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986), consumers may experience feelings of competence as a result of brand use. Similarly, consumer relationships that implicate particular service providers, such as coaches or psychologists, may be explicitly designed to develop particular skills, and it is common for strong attachments to develop in such contexts (Colin 1996). However, only further empirical study of the issue can ascertain whether attachments in these contexts become strong because of the servicing of competence needs or whether competence is merely a correlate without any meaningful effect when the variance of autonomy and relatedness are taken into account.

Potential as endorsers. Marketing research that has considered human brands has tended primarily to address the choosing and measuring of the effectiveness of celebrity endorsers to enhance the appeal of a brand (Agrawal and Kamakura 1995). Although the current article does not directly address the use of human brands as endorsers, prior research and this article imply that human brands to whom consumers are attached may be unusually effective. One way to assess the appeal of a particular celebrity is the Q ratio, a commonly used but sometimes "misleading" measure of popularity indicated by the celebrity's familiarity and likeability (Knott and St. James 2002, p. 1428). Compared with the likeability dimension, an attachment is more significant and profound to an individual (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). Although consumers may *like* many celebrities, they will be strongly attached to only a few and be willing to sacrifice for and invest in these human brands to a greater extent.

In a related vein, research suggests that consumers who have positive feelings toward a particular brand are more likely to embrace a brand extension because of a more automatic and direct transfer of positive affect to the affiliated product (Yeung and Wyer 2005). This result occurs even when the extended brand has comparatively poor fit with the core brand, which implies that attachment may facilitate a highly effective transfer of feelings from the human brand to the sponsored object. In the context of celebrity

endorsers, this suggests that there does not necessarily need to be a high degree of fit between an endorser and a particular brand if there is a strongly attached target market. A firm employing a human brand to whom consumers are strongly attached as an endorser may anticipate greater returns and insulation from transgressions (e.g., celebrity involvement in scandals; see Knott and St. James 2002) than a firm using a human brand who is merely well liked.

Limitations and Further Research

A result of these studies that has not yet been addressed is the overall weakness of attachments to human brands. In Study 2, respondents used language that suggested that their attachments were strong and emotionally significant. This result mirrors prior qualitative work on different types of consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998; Schultz, Kleine, and Kernan 1989). However, respondents in Study 1's strong-attachment condition reported attachment scores that, on average, hovered around the scale midpoint. The attachment scores in Study 3 were stronger than those in Study 1. Both studies used the same measure of attachment strength, but respondents in Study 3 may have been evangelical about the human brand they selected. After all, Study 3 respondents were recruited from online communities revolving around human brands. Although many of the participants in the low-attachment condition reported weak-attachment scores, (e.g., Orlando Bloom = 1.8/7, Matt Crane = 1.0/7), most respondents in the high-attachment condition reported scores greater than 6.5/7 (e.g., Ben Affleck, Julie Andrews, Bobby Valentine). These human brands seemed to play a more central role in the Study 3 respondents' lives than might otherwise be normally expected. Furthermore, although the same language might be used to describe interpersonal and consumption attachments (e.g., Study 2), relationships implicating the latter may be weaker in general. Human-brand attachments are probably best viewed as supplementary and subsidiary (Colin 1996). The implication for qualitative research on marketing relationships is that quantitative methods provide a useful perspective that may not be evident from qualitative approaches alone (Belk 1992).

Systematic research into what tactical choices are likely to promote autonomy and relatedness is needed. For example, do self-service models of service delivery or product customization promote autonomy by making consumers feel more self-expressive or self-governing? Do autonomy and relatedness need to be created from scratch, or can firms draw on existing feelings targeted elsewhere? Does possessing one or more strong consumption-related attachments mean that a person experiences elevated life satisfaction, or as alluded to by prior research (Kleine and Baker 2004), are there other, negative effects? Given the power of the strong attachments, answering these questions would be a worthwhile undertaking.

APPENDIX
Summary of Measures in Studies 1 and 3

Measure	Study 1			Study 3		
	Items	α	M	Items	α	M
Attachment strength	4	.89	2.33	4	.93	5.72
Autonomy	3	.80	2.69	6	.85	5.68
Relatedness	2	.81	1.90	6	.89	4.23
Competence	3	.70	3.10	6	.83	5.19
Self-actualization				3	.95	4.42
Pleasure-stimulation				3	.88	4.49
Money-luxury				3	.91	3.46
Self-esteem				3	.84	5.18
Popularity-influence				3	.85	4.45

Notes: All measures use seven-point Likert scales anchored by "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree."

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