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Emotional branding pays off: how brands meet share of requirements through bonding, companionship, and love

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Abstract

Emotional branding is defined here as the consumer's attachment of a strong, specific, usage-relevant emotion—such as Bonding, Companionship, or Love—to the brand. The present large-scale survey of buyers of frequently purchased consumer products finds that, for such products, full-strength emotional branding is attained among, at most, only about 25 per cent of the brand's buyers but that, if attained, it pays off massively in terms of personal share of purchases. Emotional branding may well be more widely effective for high involvement, positively motivated products (not surveyed here). It seems that advertising can generate the expectancy of strong, specific, emotional attachment, but very favorable brand usage experience must follow if this approach is to be successful. In general, the traditional benefit-based "USP" advertising strategy seems less risky with lesser though more widespread effectiveness.

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Emotional Branding Pays Off

Abstract: This large-scale survey demonstrates that consumers' acquisition of strong emotional attachment to the brand pays off in terms of a significantly greater volume of purchase of the brand (SOR%). The specific emotions are measured by the practitioners' "pick any" item-battery, in which the consumer checks only those emotions felt at full strength. The specific emotions of Bonding (in which the consumer checks "yes" to the item "It's 'my' brand") and Love ("yes" to "I would say that I feel deep affection, like 'love,' for this brand and would be really upset if I couldn't have it") are shown to be effective for a wide range of consumer products. The specific emotion of Companionship ("yes" to "This brand is like a 'companion' to me") seems to be effective for functional products such as gasoline that provide an ongoing complementary usage experience. The share-of-requirements (SOR%) return to these attachment-like emotions is *at least as great* as that of a favorable Brand Attitude for "hedonic" products and is actually *greater* for "utilitarian" products. However, emotional attachments to the brand are much more difficult for brand marketers to attain for the brand than a favorable attitude, and further research is needed to verify that advertising plays a significant role in creating these attachments.

INTRODUCTION

Emotional branding – defined as the successful attachment of a *specific* emotion to a brand – is an increasingly popular advertising strategy (see Roberts, 2004; Rossiter and Bellman, 2005). Notable examples include attachment of the specific emotion of "nostalgia" to the Kodak brand of film, "bonding" to the Jim Beam bourbon brand, and "love" to the McDonald's brand. Perusal of recent campaigns in *Advertising Age* and *Admap* suggests that emotional branding is at least as widely used nowadays as the more traditional "key benefit" advertising strategy, which works by instilling a favorable overall *attitude* toward the brand (see Mayer, 1958, for the first account of the "USP" key-benefit approach and see Rossiter and Bellman, 2005 for a benefit-based *and* emotion-based brand attitude model). Prior to the present study, however, no study has documented the behavioral effectiveness of emotional branding.

The present study, conducted with a large and nationally representative sample of consumers, examines the effectiveness of five quite widely targeted attachment-like emotions, labeled as Trust, Bonding, Resonance, Companionship, and Love. These emotions are measured in an extreme full-strength manner by using the practitioners' "free choice," or "pick any" procedure (see Barnard and Ehrenberg, 1990). The effectiveness measure is the consumer's purchase "share-of-requirements," or SOR%, a volume-based sales metric favored by marketing managers (see Baldinger and Rubinson, 1996, and Hu, Lodish, Krieger, and Hayati, 2009). The behavioral effectiveness of the emotional approach overall is assessed by forming a summary variable called Brand Emotional Attachment. The SOR% predicted by Brand Emotional Attachment is then compared with that of the traditional predictor of purchase, Brand Attitude (see Axelrod, 1969, and Achenbaum, 1972).

METHOD

Overview

For the present study, an online survey of brand perceptions, attitude ratings, and usage was conducted by the Interactive Television Research Institute in Perth, Australia, among members of the public who belong to the institute's consumer panel. In the Perth market, U.S. and U.K. brands dominate in most consumer product categories aside from beer, where Australian brands have the largest market shares. The product categories included in the survey were gasoline and laundry detergent ("utilitarian" products for which the emotional approach would not be expected to work well) and beer and instant coffee ("hedonic" products for which the emotional approach should work well). Men were surveyed for gasoline and beer, and women were surveyed for laundry detergent and instant coffee, representing historically and respectively the main buyers of these types of products.

Consumer sample

Just over one thousand (1,025) consumers from the panel volunteered to participate in the survey. The screening questions required participants to be buyers of the product category, and so the more widely bought products resulted in women making up approximately two-thirds of the overall sample. Sample sizes by product category were 338 men for gasoline, 244 men for beer, 606 women for laundry detergent, and 468 women for instant coffee.

Almost half of the participants, 46%, were in the 18-34 age group, which is generally regarded as the prime age target for new consumer product brands. The participants were also

more "upmarket," with 32% in professional occupations, than either the Australian population (19% professionals) or the U.S. population (13% professionals).

Consumer product brands

All brands available in the Perth market in each product category were included in the survey. There were 25 brands of laundry detergent, 18 brands of beer, 13 brands of instant coffee, and eight brands of gasoline. The brands were represented in the online questionnaire by their full-color packs or logos so as to facilitate correct recognition (see Rossiter and Bellman, 2005) and to more validly measure brand emotional associations and brand attitude by presenting the brand as it is encountered at the point of purchase.

Measures

New single-item measures of the specific brand emotions – the main independent variables – were developed in a pretest for the present study. In keeping with best measurement practice in brand and advertising tracking studies (the practice of leading research companies such as Ipsos/ASI and Millward Brown), the new measures were administered in "pick any," or "free choice," format; participants were asked to check – that is, "pick" – only those descriptions that, in their mind, apply to the brand. Consumers had to pick them absolutely, not rate them relatively or by degree. Participants' answers were scored as "picked" = 1, and "not picked" = 0. The wording of the specific-emotion measures – thoroughly checked for clear consumer understanding in the open-ended pretest – was as follows:

- Trust: "I trust this brand"

- Bonding: "I regard it as 'my' brand"

- Resonance: "I use this brand because it fits my 'self-image'"

- Companionship: "It is like a 'companion' to me"

- Love: "I would say that I feel deep affection, like 'love,' for this brand and would be really upset if I couldn't have it"

The alternative independent variable, Brand Attitude, or A_b, was measured with a single semantic-differential item: "Bad...Good" (see Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007, for evidence of the validity of this single-item measure of attitude). This was a 7-step bipolar measure scored -3 to $+3$. Participants rated all brands and were instructed to give an expected A_b rating, based on the brand's pack or logo, if they didn't know the brand and to give a zero rating only if they truly felt neutral about a brand.

The dependent variable, Brand Purchase Volume, was measured as share-of-requirements (SOR%) using the constant sum method (e.g., Baldinger and Rubinson, 1996). Each participant was asked to allocate 100 percentage points across the brands that he or she had bought over the past year. The online software in the questionnaire prompted the participant to check that the shares added to 100%.

FINDINGS

Three major findings are reported and discussed. First, the incidence of the specific attachment-like emotions for the average brand the consumer *buys* in each product category is examined. Second, the relationships of the specific emotions to the dependent variable, SOR%, are graphed for brands that the consumer buys in each product category. Finally, an overall Brand Emotional Attachment variable is computed and its predictive correlation is compared with the predictive correlation of Brand Attitude for predicting the brand's percentage SOR.

Incidence findings

The incidences (in percent) of consumers who have attained the specific associations of Trust, Bonding, Resonance, Companionship, or Love for the average brand that they *buy* in each of the four product categories are shown in Figure 1. The results in the figure show that consumers fully Trust most – but not all – of the brands that they buy. Gasoline brands had the lowest incidence of Trust, with the average brand of gasoline bought trusted by 59% of male buyers. The incidence of Trust was 69% to 80% for the average brand in the three other product categories.

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Figure 1 about here

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The results in the figure reveal the difficulty of attaining stronger attachment-like emotions for brands of consumer products. Bonding (it's "my" brand) was achieved among only about 20% of consumers for the average brand that they buy – lower in the gasoline category among men and higher among women consumers for the average brand of instant coffee. Resonance (fits my "self-image") was achieved for just 20% of gasoline brands and reached only 9% for the average brand of beer that men buy. Companionship (it's like a "companion") and Love (feeling "deep affection") were emotions reported by just 1% to 8% of consumers for the average brand bought, or about 4% overall for brands of consumer products.

Specific emotions and SOR%

Cross-tabulations of Trust, Bonding, Resonance, Companionship, and Love with the personal share of requirements (SOR%) that each specific attachment-like emotion "delivers" for the brand are shown in Figure 2. The horizontal line in each of the graphs indicates the *average* share of requirements, in percent, given to those brands that the consumer *buys*.

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Figure 2 about here

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For gasoline, the average brand bought (by men) accounted for an SOR of 30% (see first graph in the figure). Being regarded as a Trusted brand of gasoline did not guarantee a high volume of purchase of that brand. On the other hand, two of the attachment emotions, Bonding (it's "my" brand) and Companionship (it's like a close friend), deliver more than double the average purchase volume (SOR%), such that the "bonded" or "companion" brand accounts for two-thirds of the consumer's purchases in the category.

For beer, the average SOR of 21% indicates that the average male beer drinker shares his purchases over about five brands and is thus not very loyal (see second graph in the figure). Trust in the brand does not raise the brand's share of consumption above this average level. However, two of the emotional attachments – Bonding and, somewhat surprising for men to admit, Love – evidently increase the brand's SOR to an above-average 32% and 38%, respectively.

For laundry detergent, women buyers, on average, report using an average of just over three of the 25 available brands (shown in the third graph in the figure by the average SOR of

31%). Trust, surprisingly, delivers a *below-average* SOR of only 24%. On the other hand, Bonding delivers almost double the average SOR, 60%, for "my" brand of laundry detergent, and Love, somewhat surprisingly for this utilitarian product, delivers an above-average SOR of 54% for the "loved" brand.

For instant coffee, the average female buyer reported buying slightly fewer than three different brands over the past year. Instant coffee brands have the highest loyalty – highest of the four products surveyed – an SOR of 37% for the average brand bought (see fourth graph in the figure). Trust is not sufficient to ensure loyal purchasing, delivering a below-average SOR of 29%. However, those women who say "it's 'my' brand" (Bonding) or that they feel something like "love" for the brand and would be "upset" without it (Love) buy and use that brand over 50% of the time, compared with the 37% share of requirements for the average instant coffee brand.

Brand emotional attachment "versus" brand attitude

The traditional best predictor of Brand Purchase Volume (SOR%) is Brand Attitude (called Overall Brand Rating in the study by Achenbaum, 1972, and see also Rossiter and Eagleson's, 1994, reanalysis of the results of the ARF's Copy Research Validity Project, which reveals Overall Brand Rating to be a strong and reliable predictor of brand purchase volume). To test this traditional predictor against emotional attachment to the brand, a new variable called Brand Emotional Attachment was constructed. This new variable was a weighted composite of the four strongest attachment-like emotions, omitting Trust because it was such a weak predictor (see Figure 2), and ordering the other four emotions in terms of their apparent strength of attachment, thus Resonance = 1, Bonding = 2, Companionship = 3, and Love = 4. For a given

brand, only the consumer's strongest checked emotion was counted, so that scores on Brand Emotional Attachment could range from 0 to 4.

Brand Emotional Attachment (EA_b) and Brand Attitude (A_b) were then compared as separate predictors of the brand's Share-of- Requirements (SOR%). The predictive validity coefficients were computed using polychoric correlations, a strength-of-relationship statistic that is fair to the different-length ordinal rating scales (0 to 4 for EA_b and -3 to $+3$ for A_b). The results are shown in Table 1.

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Table 1 about here

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Brand Emotional Attachment proved to be a significantly better predictor – overall – than Brand Attitude: $r_p = .67$ for EA_b versus $r_p = .55$ for A_b ($p < .05$). By product category, Brand Emotional Attachment predicts "utilitarian" gasoline brand purchase share much better than does Brand Attitude (surprisingly, among male buyers) and also significantly better for the other utilitarian product, laundry detergent (among women buyers). For the two more "hedonic" products, beer and instant coffee, Brand Emotional Attachment predicts SOR% equally as well as does the traditional predictor, Brand Attitude.

DISCUSSION

This is the first study to investigate the behavioral effects of specific brand emotions of the "attachment" variety, starting with Trust and progressing to the very strong emotion of (quasi-romantic) Love for the brand. The attachment-like emotions, Trust, Bonding, Resonance,

Companionship, and Love were measured in the extreme zero-one, "pick any" manner favored by practitioners in brand-tracking studies. This extreme measure records absolute, not relative, full-strength levels of specific emotions, which partly accounts for their incidence (beyond Trust) being so low. For the average brand *bought* by the consumer, Bonding is achieved by about 20% of consumers and Resonance, Companionship, and Love by only about 4% of consumers.

Those consumers who become Bonded to the brand ("it's 'my' brand"), those who regard it as a Companion, or those who admit that they feel something akin to Love for the brand, reward the marketer with substantially greater purchase and usage of the brand (higher share-of-requirements, SOR%) than if they "merely" develop a favorable, above-neutral Brand Attitude. These "emotionally attached" consumers are therefore the brand's most profitable customers, especially considering that they would have no need of price promotions to keep buying the brand.

The one *specific* attachment emotion, in addition to Trust, that *doesn't* work well – perhaps because it may apply only to major "lifestyle" products – is Resonance (the feeling that the brand "fits my 'self-image'").

Most interestingly, Brand Emotional Attachment predicts brand purchase volume *better* than Brand Attitude for "utilitarian" products, such as gasoline and laundry detergent, perhaps because these products are usually "unemotional" so that the rare emotionally regarded brand stands out. The two approaches work *equally well* for "hedonic" products like beer and instant coffee – an unexpected finding because the EA_b approach (emotional branding) might be expected to be superior for these presumably more "emotional" products. Emotional branding also seems to be just as effective among men as among women, contrary to the stereotype that women are more receptive than men to "emotional" appeals, and especially to the subclass of

appeal based on personal attachment. Fournier and Yao's (1997) widely cited brand attachment results, for instance, were obtained with women consumers.

Future research is needed to determine whether *advertising* can be used to instill or at least facilitate consumers' emotional attachment to brands. It is not at all clear that consumers can be told or urged via ads to regard the brand as "their brand" (Bonding), or to see it as a Companion or a Love-object. Indirect "modeling" seems more likely to be effective, such as in McDonald's "I'm lovin' it" campaign (see Rossiter and Bellman, 2005, for a favorable assessment of this successful but initially professionally criticized campaign). Nevertheless, the possibility remains that most consumers who become "attached" to brands do so solely as a result of very rewarding usage experience – and very little or not at all from advertising. Advertisers therefore need a definitive answer from well-controlled field tests of their campaigns to know whether "emotional branding" is really worth pursuing in place of the more traditional key-benefit or "USP" approach which is aimed at the apparently easier goal of increasing the consumer's brand attitude.

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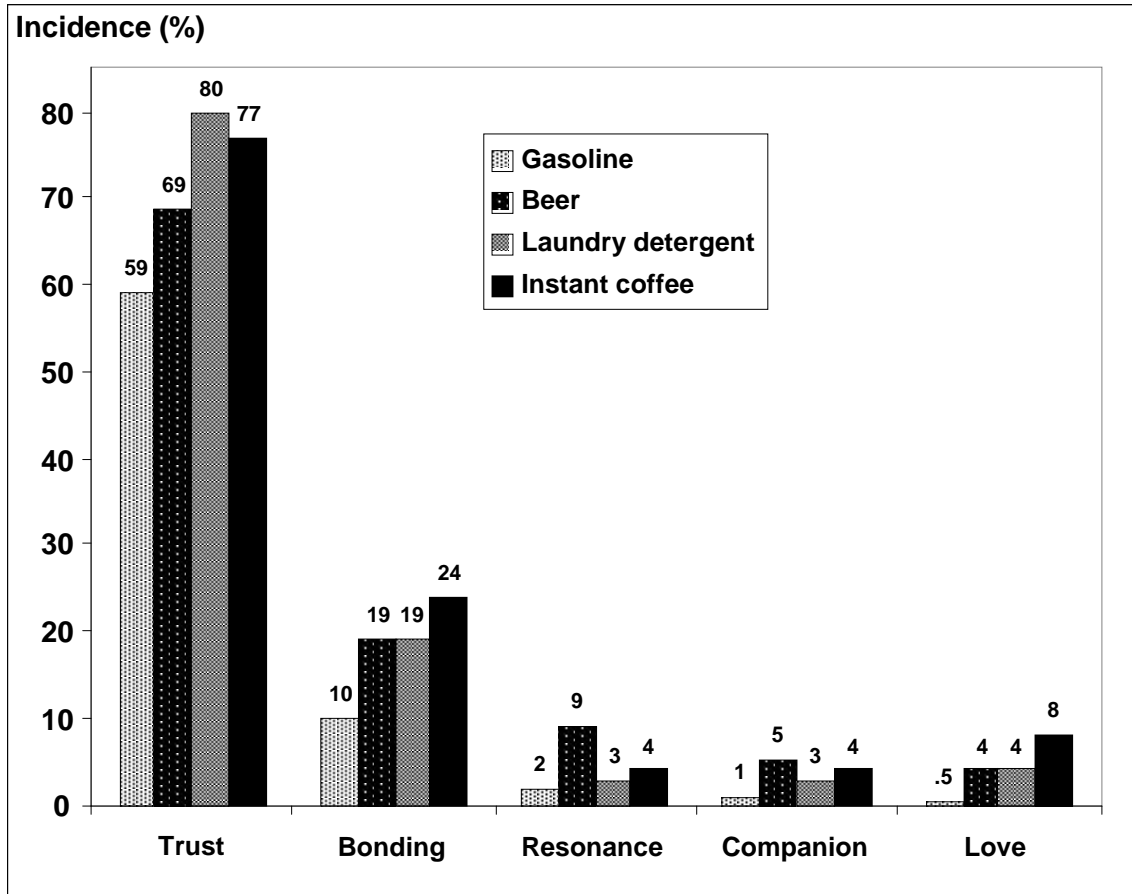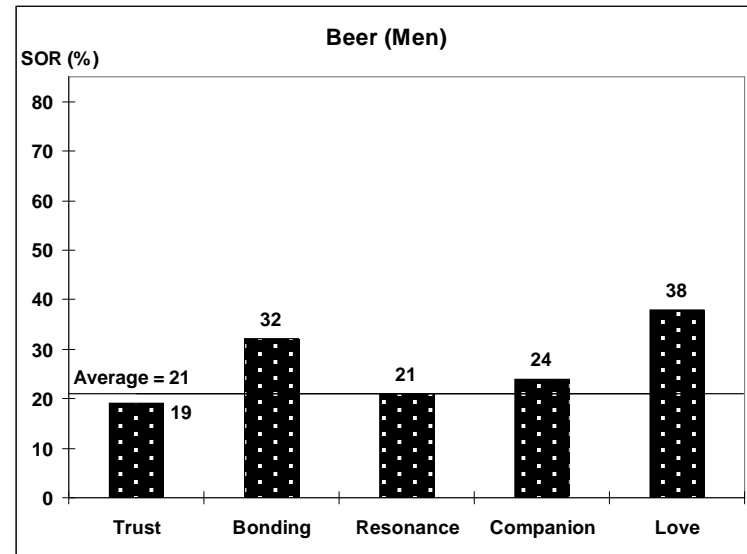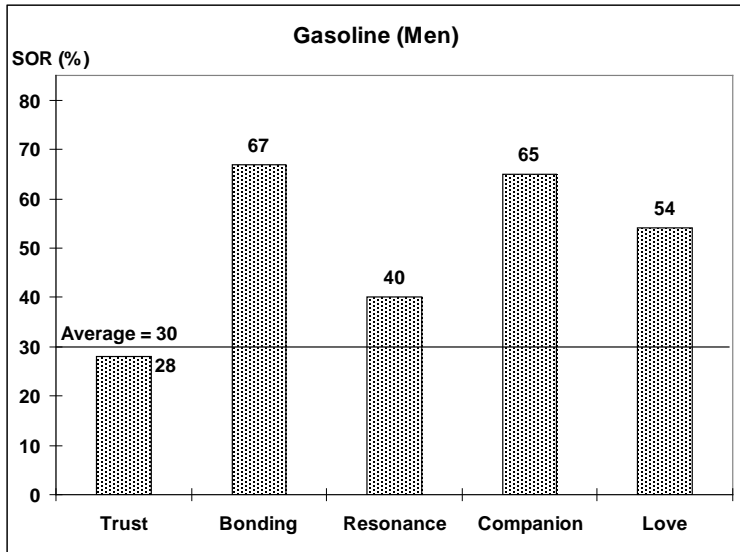
Figure 1 Percent of Consumers Who Report "Trust," "Bonding," "Resonance," "Companionship," or "Love" for the Average Brand That They *Buy* in Each Product Category
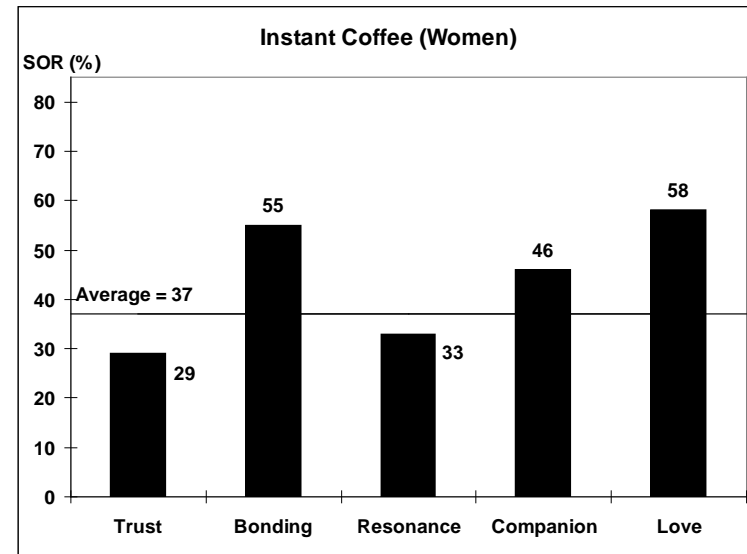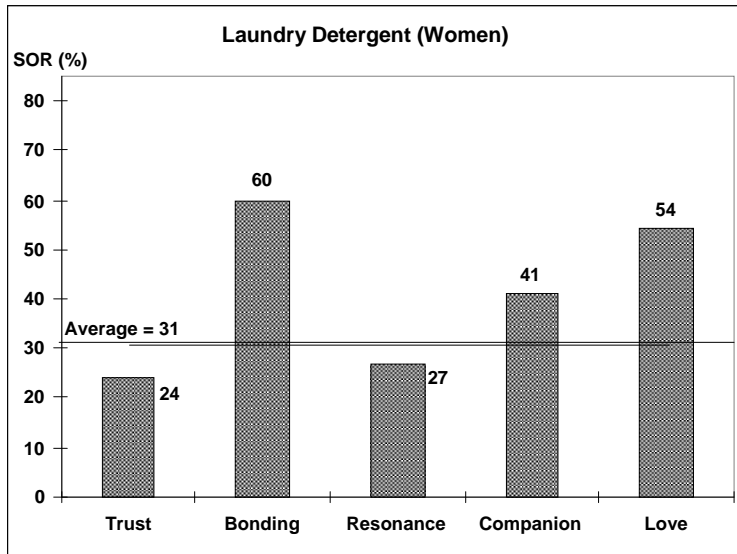
Gasoline (Men)

SOR (%)

Trust	Bonding	Resonance	Companion	Love
28	67	40	65	54

Average = 30

Beer (Men)

SOR (%)

Trust	Bonding	Resonance	Companion	Love
19	32	21	24	38

Average = 21

Figure 2 Share-of-Requirements (SOR%) Delivered by "Trust," "Bonding," "Resonance," "Companionship," and "Love" for the Average Brand that the Consumer *Buys* in Each Product Category

TABLE 1

Predictive Validity Coefficients (Polychoric Correlations) for Brand Emotional Attachment and Brand Attitude Predicting Share-of-Requirements (SOR%) for Brands in Each Product Category and Overall

Predictor Variable	Gasoline (338 men)	Laundry Detergent (606 women)	Beer (244 men)	Instant Coffee (468 women)	*Overall (N = 1,656)*
Brand Emotional Attachment	.63[a]	.68[a]	.64[a]	.71[a]	*.67[a]*
Brand Attitude	.36[b]	.58[b]	.67[a]	.64[a]	*.55[a]*

Notes: Different superscripts (a and b) mean that the correlations differ on a *z*-test at $p < .05$. Overall results (italicized) are equally-weighted averages across the four product categories.