

# ATTACHMENT AND RITUALIZATION

*Seventy-thousand years ago*, a small group of people not so different from you or I, sat upon a hilltop that overlooked the southern tip of the great land mass that would one day be called Africa. While the views of the Southern Ocean sluicing into the jagged shore must have been as spectacular then as it is today, their attention was not focused out toward the sea, but upon the objects they held in their hands.

Mammoth bones and pieces of ochre were incredibly valuable to these people. Not because they could be used in trade or because they could satisfy some physical need, but because they could be engraved. And because they could be engraved, these bones and pieces of ochre became the most powerful objects ever created by human beings.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the bones were used in battle or maybe to heal the ill. The ochre might have been used to mark births or deaths, or even to help bring good weather to the area. Their exact use will never be known. But what is known is that over the ensuing thousands of years, the “descendants” of these objects would cause wars, heal the ill, take part in countless births, marriages and funerals, and make every human being whoever lived feel good, bad, lonely, or fulfilled.

Scholars have called these objects the earliest evidence of ritual activity, thus making their creators the world’s first ritual elders. But to simply call these people ritual elders is not entirely accurate, for they were in fact, the world’s first marketers.

Most marketing and branding articles purport to bring something new to the table. This article makes no such claims. Rather, its intent is to demonstrate that no matter how much culture, technology, and social organization have changed over the past seventy-thousand years, the basic structure of how human beings go about satisfying their needs, wants and desires today is no different today than it was when that small group of people sat upon that hill in Africa. Today’s most successful brands know this, and tomorrow’s will surely need to.

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<sup>1</sup> The location referred to is Blombos Cave, West Cape, South Africa.

## The Puzzling Case of Starbucks

Starbucks is unquestionably one of the great business successes of our time. By the current standards of marketing and branding thought however, it's also one of the most baffling. For what is truly special about it?

Is its coffee better than the competition's? Certainly not according nearly every comparison study. Is its food better? Microwaved breakfast sandwiches and pre-packaged salads and sandwiches? Are its products especially healthy or a great value? The truth is quite the opposite. Well, they have a great passion for their product, a motivated workforce, and great customer service. This is important no doubt, but certainly not distinguishable from most other successful brands.

What about values then? Aren't a brand's values more important than ever these days?

Yes they are. But while they are important, there is certainly nothing unique about Starbucks values. Three different coffee shops in my neighborhood all espouse the same values such as sustainability, social responsibility, etc. And these three coffee shops, like almost all others, allow their guests to linger and socialize in a comfortable manner, so there's really nothing special about the typical coffee house experience that Starbucks provides.



Customers line up to pay more at a coffee shop.

So it must be their legacy of great advertising or their exemplary loyalty program? Of course not. Starbucks built their business eschewing traditional advertising, and though their loyalty program is good in that it rewards customers, there is certainly nothing exceptional or revolutionary about it.

So what is the secret to Starbucks' success? The answer lies deeply embedded in our human nature. It's what our ancestors began 70,000 years ago.

## The Holy Grail Incorporation, Attachment, and Ritualization

The experience of people incorporating others or other things into their sense of self is as old as the human condition itself. First mother, then blanket or stuffed animal, then perhaps a toy car or doll, and eventually a smartphone. We've all seen it, and we've all lived through it.

The concept of incorporation is rooted in the psychological notion of attachment. Psychologists first became interested in a theory of attachment in the middle of the 20th century when John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth posited that a child's personality was in large part dependent upon the nature of their attachment, and ultimately separation, from their mother or other primary caregiver.<sup>2</sup>

Marketing academics became interested in applying the principles of attachment to marketplace behavior in the 1990's and early 2000's. Their logic was easy to follow and resonated with a universal experience: namely that people could become attached to brands just as easily as they could become attached to each other or to objects.

In 2010, C. Whan Park, Deborah J. MacInnis, Joseph Priester, Andreas B. Eisingerich, and Dawn Iacobucci published a landmark study which demonstrated that brand attachment strength, as defined by how strong a person incorporated a brand into their identity, is a better antecedent of desired marketplace behaviors such as purchase, brand share, need share, and advocacy than the traditionally used measure of brand attitude strength.<sup>3</sup>

In short, Park and company demonstrated that attached human beings, those who have incorporated the brand into their identity, will be more likely to undertake the behaviors that marketers seek. Subsequent work by Grisaffe, D. B. & Nguyen, H. P., Dunn and Hoegg, and Japutra, Ekinci, and Simkin, confirmed Park and company's work.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Bowlby, J. (1969). Attachment. Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Loss. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>3</sup> Park, C. Whan et al. (2010). Brand Attachment and Brand Attitude Strength: Conceptual and Empirical Differentiation of Two Critical Brand Equity Drivers. *Journal of Marketing*: November 2010, Vol. 74, No. 6, pp. 1-17.

<sup>4</sup> Grisaffe, D. B. & Nguyen, H. P. (2011). Antecedents of Emotional Attachment to Brands: *Journal of Business Research*, 64, pp.1052-1059.

Dunn, Lea and JoAndrea Hoegg (2014). The Impact of Fear on Emotional Brand Attachment: *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 152-168.

Japutra, Ekinci, and Simkin (2014). Exploring Brand Attachment, Its Determinants and Outcomes: *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, Vol. 22, No. 7.

This notion should not be foreign to any of our experiences. “I’m an American.” “I’m a Buckeye.” “I’m a Mac, she’s a PC.” We’ve all heard these and similar phrases. The language makes it clear: I am...we have incorporated our nationality, our sports teams, our choice in computers into our concept of self.

This concept is very important because it helps differentiate attachment from attitude strength and loyalty, the predominant goals and measures of current marketing and brand health.

Loyalty and attitude strength (liking, respecting, admiring) are very different. They require people to maintain a two party relationship: themselves and the person or thing they are loyal to or like. This two party relationship is always under assault from competitive sources as a bond between two parties can always be broken. A simple offer or promotion, as the old marketing model suggests, might do the trick.

On the other hand, once a person incorporates a brand into their concept of self, it is very difficult for the competition to extract that brand from that person’s identity. Think of the difference between getting one to change their favorite cereal or wireless provider versus getting someone to change their religious or national identity. That is the difference between loyalty and attachment.



People go to extraordinary lengths for things they are attached to.

There are also no limits to what someone may do for the attached brand, just as there are no limits to what he or she might do for other things that they incorporate into their identity such as their nation, religion, family, sports team, etc. Once again, think of the lengths that people go to for their nation, family, sports teams, etc. This is the power of attachment.

The implications of attachment are clear. If marketers can attach their brands, rather than get people to like or love them, they will be able to sell more, better insulate themselves against the competition, and produce more advocates. Reading between the lines, one can see even more benefits: reduced reliance on costly offer, promotion, and yes, loyalty programs. The seeds of reinventing the entire marketing model- awareness, offer, loyalty are there.

So the questions now become, how do human beings become attached to things? And, how can brands leverage this knowledge?