

Worshipping at the church of Ford: how modern brand devotion connects people online

Written by Simon Pervan, Associate Professor in Marketing and Department Chair Management and Marketing, Swinburne University of Technology



People disclosing their emotional responses to brands online, helps connect better with others. Facebook

It's all I ever think and talk about. They are everything to me.

With this sort of a passion you would think this person is talking about a loved one, but this person is actually talking about a car. And not just any car, a very specific brand of car.

It's gotten to the point where people express their views about certain brands with the reverence and dedication usually reserved for religion or politics. [Research](#) shows people use brands to substitute for important beliefs, especially where it reflects their own self-worth.

We decided to look at three major car brands to see how this plays out online. [Our study](#) examined more than 1,400 pages of data with hundreds of thousands of posts, from the Facebook sites for: Ford Fiesta, Honda Fit, and Volvo.

Our findings confirmed that social media allows people to disclose all sorts of information about their love for these brands, to seek out like minded people. They are searching for affirmation of their belief in a brand.

One Fiesta devotee posted this:

I want a fiesta so bad! I can't wait till I save enough money for one... I desperately need any car right now because mine is not very good but I just want this one so bad I'm willing to suffer with this one just so I can have my fiesta. I will have one one day. They are my most favorite car in the entire world!!!

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Many of the posts like this were reciprocated, so there was a sense of intimacy and belonging between these Facebook users. The people who posted were afforded the opportunity to show support or affirmation for the others' view of themselves.

Another Fiesta enthusiast responded:

I was the same way. For 6 months that all I talked about, I had constant dreams about it. It feels so amazing when you actually get to go to the dealer and drive one. I don't think I could love anything more ☐ Just be patient- the day will come.

[Research shows](#) that these sorts of factual and emotional disclosures about someone can lead to experiences of intimacy online.

Disclosing this sort of information is intrinsically rewarding and in fact people have even been [shown](#) to want to forgo even money to talk about themselves. Brands like the ones we studied and their social media sites serve to facilitate this desire.

Social networking sites and virtual worlds are forms of social media whose model relies on people making lots of disclosures about themselves. Indeed [researchers](#) observe that social networking sites encourage people to disclosure information about themselves and ask more personal questions, much more than face-to-face conversations.

We originally thought we'd find more [citizenship type behaviours](#) among the Facebook users like word-of-mouth information and product advice, however, more often or not there were these emotive posts. Things like reassuring other customers, day dreaming and reminiscing about the brand, even defending the brand, were evident.

The researchers found people reminisced about the brand online. author provided

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Facebook in particular has a unique advantage here over other social networking sites because it tends to draw people that met offline, for example, friends and family in existing networks, into communicating within the online [environment](#) . What's more, the brand itself provides a safe haven for someone to express his or herself.

For example this Volvo Facebook member even gives his car a name and persona:

This was Fred. I bought him brand new in 2007 (member posted a picture of the vehicle). He made it to the top of the Gotthard Pass in Switzerland last September (which is where he is here), but sadly got stolen on 5 December. After Fred got stolen, I replaced him with the lovely Axl on 20 December. Here he is the day after I drove him home in the snow from the showroom. He did very well in the bad weather. Love him to bits, but do still miss little Fred.

This sort of talk about a brand is surely good for companies who can harness positive conversation about their products on social media. From a consumer or public policy perspective, brand based social networking sites like Facebook are actually fostering interaction between two or more people, which seems like an improvement on the increasingly non-interactive nature of the internet.

Reciprocity in communication like what we've seen in our study is linked to [stability](#) and satisfaction in life. It's also not surprising that any feelings of intimacy are strongly linked to our sense of [well-being](#) [W](#)



A fan holds a smaller replica of a Honda Fit, next to the original car.

Our study shows that people are using the brand to gain intimacy with other people, not necessarily with the brand itself. So it's hard to tell if it implies an unconditional (and non-reciprocal) [love of the brand](#) .

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The idea is intoxicating, for marketers at least. For example advertising agency Saatchi and Saatchi is heralding it as the next level in emotional connectivity with a brand.

Saatchi and Saatchi has even set up [Lovemarks](#) - a place for consumers to express “loyalty beyond reason” for their favourite products. Academia is a bit slow to examine this type of expression about brands but unsurprisingly has stalled at the point of [defining it as love](#)

Seeking an emotional connection between a customer and a brand is not a new idea. Nor is the use of a brand to signal something emotional to someone else. However, this signal is to people that matter to us; our friends, our family, our colleagues. And we found that brands is just one way we do this online.

Simon Pervan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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