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# Should Cookie Monster Adopt a Healthy Lifestyle or Continue to Indulge? Insights into Brand Icons

## Abstract

Developing a brand icon has been a way for marketers to humanize and forge relationships with consumers. Icon development takes time. During this time, marketers have to face how much they stay true and consistent with their icons and how much they allow their icons to adapt to cultural changes in the marketplace. Little is known about how consumers respond to changing icons, and even less is known about whether there may be certain consumer groups that are more or less receptive to such changes. Four experiments and qualitative interviews were undertaken to gain insights into these issues. People who have a low need to belong were most impacted by changes in the icon, with effects most evident among consumers with a fearful attachment style. Feelings of rejection were found to amplify these effects. These findings have implications both for theory and practice.

## Keywords

anthropomorphism, attachment style, belongingness, charity appeals, nonprofits, nostalgia

## Disciplines

Hospitality Administration and Management | Marketing | Psychology

## Comments

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# Should Cookie Monster adopt a healthy lifestyle or continue to indulge? Insights into brand icons

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## Abstract

Developing a brand icon has been a way for marketers to humanize and forge relationships with consumers. Icon development takes time. During this time, marketers have to face how much they stay true and consistent with their icons and how much they allow their icons to adapt to cultural changes in the marketplace. Little is known about how consumers respond to changing icons, and even less is known about whether there may be certain consumer groups that are more or less receptive to such changes. Four experiments and qualitative interviews were undertaken to gain insights into these issues. People who have a low need to belong were most impacted by changes in the icon, with effects most evident among consumers with a fearful attachment style. Feelings of rejection were found to amplify these effects. These findings have implications both for theory and practice.

## KEYWORDS

anthropomorphism, attachment style, belongingness, charity appeals, nonprofits, nostalgia

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Do you remember Tony the Tiger? Who remembers Smokey the Bear? Garretson and Niedrich (2004) recently found that iconic characters positively impact feelings of trust and ultimately boost consumers' attitudes toward the brands they represent. In fact, so powerful is the effect of these iconic characters that they can even protect the brand from adverse publicity. Investigating the impact of negative information on consumer outcomes, Folse, Garretson, Burton, and Nete-meyer (2013) found that humanized brand characters play a stronger role in brand image protection as compared to non-personified logos. Childhood exposure to brand characters often have enduring consequences leading to resilient biased product evaluations that persist even into adulthood (Connell, Brucks, & Nielsen, 2014). The affective bond that people develop with media characters has been explained by the parasocial relationship theory. When people get to know a character and learn about its personality and behavior, the character may be perceived as a close friend. Because parasocial relationships resemble many of the characteristics of real relationships, people may develop deep emotions for media characters (Hoffner, 1996; McNeal, 2007).

But developing such a relationship takes time. This is counter to marketers' perception of needing their brands to maintain relevance in an ever-changing cultural environment. In order to stay current with cultural trends, marketers often feel the need to adjust their icons for the times, for instance, consider the "slimming down" of the Columbia Pictures lady (Reel Classics, 2001), and more recently Public

Broadcasting Service's (PBS) revision of Cookie Monster's eating habits as per Michelle Obama's cry for addressing childhood obesity (McMahon, 2015). Changes to these icons can alter the foundation of the consumer's relationship with the brand. However, it is not clear how alterations of this kind influence consumer behavior and whether there might be certain consumer groups more or less influenced by these kinds of changes. The research on need to belong and attachment theory are helpful with getting into the consumer type that might be most likely to be offended and disengage from a brand when change occurs. This research is placed within the context of nonprofits so the measure of interest—intentions to donate—gets at the degree to which a consumer trusts or wants to extend a monetary relationship with a company beyond attitudinal expressions. These findings indicate that people who have a low need to belong (highly avoidant individuals) were most impacted by changes in the icon, with effects most evident among consumers with a fearful attachment style. Feelings of rejection were found to amplify these effects. These findings are novel since previous work has not examined the differential effects that icon changes may have on consumers with varying belongingness needs. This is especially vital since consumers are known to maintain parasocial relationships with media and brand icons.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The literature review in this not-for-profit context begins by highlighting not only the use but also the longevity of highly regarded icons. Theories are then presented on need to belong and attachment to develop hypotheses that are tested in the subsequent qualitative and experimental studies. It

should be noted that while the context for this study is charitable organizations, the study and its findings have broader applications to the for-profit sector as well.

## 2 | CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 | Icon usage and familiarity within the not-for-profit context

Charitable appeals to donate are often designed to emotionally stir consumers, attempting to influence their donations (Basil, Ridgway, & Basil, 2008; Dillard & Peck, 2000; Ford & Merchant, 2010). Marketing literature on charitable giving has established that guilt (Basil et al., 2008), empathy (Bagozzi & Moore, 1994), nostalgia (Ford & Merchant, 2010), perception of a personal role in helping the cause (Robinson, Irmak, & Jayachandran, 2012), and the ability to identify with the victim (Small & Simonsohn, 2008) are emotions and cognitions that charities' fundraising campaigns could effectively induce to raise money.

The benefits of icon development have not been lost in the not-for-profit world. Smokey the Bear (Advertising Council), the Panda (World Wildlife Fund), and Cookie Monster (PBS) are all iconic figures associated with their companies. These were developed in 1944, 1961, and 1966, respectively, with several generations coming of age watching, interacting, and bonding with these icons on TV and other mass media. Hence, consumers are known to view these icons as caring, educating, responsible, and credible (Blair, 2008; Elliott, 2013). Nonprofits tug on consumer heartstrings by frequently leveraging these familiar icons in public service announcements, fundraising drives, promotional material and merchandise, and in business-to-business endorsement programs. Two theories may explain the effectiveness of familiar icons: processing fluency theory (Jacoby, Kelley, & Dywan, 1989; Weisbuch & Mackie, 2009) and parasocial relationship theory (Hoffner, 1996; McNeal, 2007). Processing fluency refers to the ease with which people recollect or perceive information. For example, images, icons, and ideas with which people are familiar, and have thus developed mental schemas for, are more fluently processed than new images and ideas (Jacoby et al., 1989; Weisbuch & Mackie, 2009). Parasocial relationship theory explains the bonds people develop with media characters. When people get to know a character, its personality and behaviors, the character may be seen as a friend. People may thereby develop deep emotional relationships with media characters (Hoffner, 1996; McNeal, 2007). Such relationship formation is typically motivated by the need for companionship, which emerges in early childhood (Hoffner, 2008).

Many nonprofits are cognizant of the deep emotional and psychological connection their icons share with their audience and donors and are therefore circumspect in modifying them; a case in point is the Panda icon of WWF, which has had a consistent look over several decades with only minor adaptations. Some nonprofits, like the Advertising Council, are in fact moving away from the recent computer generated image of Smokey to a more vintage visage in hopes to reconnect with audiences (Elliott, 2013). Other nonprofits, on the other hand, have adopted a more transformational path, for example,

PBS. Desirous of keeping up with the times and pursuing a healthy eating agenda, PBS recently altered the appetite of Cookie Monster (from *Sesame Street*) from gorging on cookies to a more balanced diet with fruits and vegetables along with cookies (Carter, 2005). There has been much discussion in the media about this transition. Some decry it as meddling "with our most basic appetites and desires" (Blair, 2008); while still others lament changing the core of what Cookie Monster does best—eating cookies, and thereby draw parallels to Oscar the Grouch being nice and clean (Carter, 2005).

Consistency is important but often overlooked in marketing, where trends often outweigh history. Recently, Brown (2010) proposed a life cycle schema for brand icons. He argues that the take-off and the fourth stage are especially prone to icon changes. For instance, he explains that in the take-off stage physical dimensions of the icon may be tweaked; whereas, the fourth stage may involve making the icon look younger, cuter, or cuddlier. In the present research it is posited that when a nonprofit (like PBS) appeals for donations, it is beneficial to employ familiar childhood icons actually associated with PBS to emotionally engage the consumer and enhance charitable donations. However, this also beckons the question, would a modification of the icon result in an adverse consumer response? Advertising consistency is known to help build brand schema by making associations and linkages stronger in the consumer's mind (Edell, 1993). Keeping this in mind, it is argued here that when the nonprofit icon is modified (e.g., Cookie Monster promoted as eating fruits and vegetables), it would negatively affect consumer familiarity with the icon. These modifications would be inconsistent with how the consumers remember the icon over the years and is thus likely to have adverse outcomes. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1:** There is a positive relationship between familiarity with a nonprofit icon utilized in an advertisement and intentions to donate to the focal charity.

### 2.2 | Individual difference to brand icons: Need to belong

Being socially connected and feeling a sense of belonging is a basic human drive (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2009). Baumeister and Leary (1995) were the first to formulate a need to belong theory that was built upon empirical research. Within their framework, they defined the belongingness hypothesis, assuming "that human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). Insights from the theory of anthropomorphism (perceiving humanlike characteristics in either real or imagined nonhuman agents, p. 144) suggest sociality motivation (the fundamental human need for social connection with other humans) as an important determinant of anthropomorphism (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008; Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo, 2008). In the context of pets, they found that when people are momentarily or chronically lonely they compensate for this by anthropomorphizing their pets, that is, perceiving them to be more humanlike, thereby creating agents of social support. In the context of marketing there is scant but emerging interest in the

study of anthropomorphic brand characters and their role in fulfilling consumers' social needs. Recently, Wan and Aggarwal (2015) contemplated that iconic characters, such as Mr. Clean, may fulfill consumer needs for social connections. The present research extends these conversations by examining how changes in these icons might affect consumer responses, especially keeping in mind the role they play in helping consumers feel a sense of connection with others.

Extant research indicates that individuals vary in their need to belong (Kelly, 1999, 2001; Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayashi, & Cummins, 2008). Recently, Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, and Schreindorfer (2013) found consumers' need to belong to correlate positively with affiliation motivation, extraversion, and sociability. Since high-need-to-belong individuals are known to be more extraverted, as compared to their low-need-to-belong counterparts, they are found to be friendlier, thereby enhancing their chances for social acceptance. Consistent with these assertions, Kelly (1999) found an inverse relation between the subject's need to belong and feelings of isolation, suggesting that people with a low need to belong are more isolated and introverted than high-need-to-belong individuals. Insights from the introversion literature reveal that introverts are known to enjoy solitude, to be lost in their thoughts, memories, fantasies, and contemplation (Kozak, 2013). Aron and Aron (1997) found that people who were more introverted were more emotional and sensitive. They found that such individuals often indulge in behaviors such as crying, being overwhelmed with feelings, remembering dreams, and even experiencing emotions linked to films watched previous days. Thus, Stelmack and Geen (1992) conclude, "Overall there is a good deal of evidence that introverts are more sensitive to physical stimulation than extraverts" (p. 227). Past research also suggests that people, who are ostracized by a person, tend to avoid that person (Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004) and seek connection with others (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007). Thus, those who are chronically isolated or disconnected from others may withdraw from attempts to connect with other humans in general, and may instead seek connections with non-human agents through anthropomorphism (Epley, Waytz et al., 2008).

A synthesis of various research streams discussed earlier suggests that low-need-to-belong consumers are more solitary, introverted, withdrawn from others, and emotional. Therefore, in the current context it would be reasonable to expect such individuals to respond better to charity appeals when they are more familiar with the icons employed in the advertisement, as these icons provide a source of social connection. Hence it is posited that:

**H2:** When need to belong is low there will be a positive relationship between familiarity with a nonprofit icon and donation intentions.

### 2.3 | Disentangling low need to belong by levels of attachment

Previous research explicates that peoples' desire to connect and relate with others is embedded in and influenced by their attachment styles (Ainsworth, Blehar, Walters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969). Attachment explains the emotional bond between an infant and its

caregiver (attachment object) (Bowlby, 1969). According to Ainsworth et al. (1978), attachment is defined as an affective bond, which is enduring and is distinguished by a tendency to seek and maintain proximity with the caregiver. Hazan and Shaver (1987) extended attachment theory to adults, and their findings confirmed that the relationship between romantic partners shares a similar motivational system which was developed in childhood. In recent years, attachment theory has been applied beyond close relationships to include peers (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 2000), strangers (Berlin & Cassidy, 1999), workmates (Hazan & Shaver, 1990), and social institutions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Based on the work of Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) demonstrated that individuals can be classified on the bases of attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance, which are orthogonal. These internal working models of self and others develop early in life in experience to attachment figures (Ainsworth et al., 1978) and are thought to remain stable across time (Scharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). Each of the components will now be examined in turn. *Anxiety dimension:* Individuals who are high in anxiety are highly dependent on reactions and behaviors of others because they feel unloved and unworthy. They have a strong tendency to criticize themselves and only feel loved and approved if they are able to meet the expectations of others (Collins & Read, 1990). Anxious people only experience personal happiness when they are able to satisfy others (Bartholomew, 1990). Their fear of abandonment causes them to develop a tendency of overemphasizing love and support from others (Collins & Feeney, 2004). Lack of self-esteem leads them to rely on external help to enhance self-worth and to deal with relational problems (Birnbaum, Reis, Mikulincer, Gillath, & Orpaz, 2006). Conversely, low-anxiety individuals are less reliant on others for validation and support. They are comfortable with autonomy and feel worthy of others' love (Collins & Read, 1994). As a result, these individuals' sense of self-worth helps them not to rely on external means to enhance their appeal in interpersonal relationships (Swaminathan, Stille, & Ahluwalia, 2009). *Avoidant dimension:* Avoidant individuals are negative about human nature, and, as a result, they distrust people and are less interested in being intimate in interpersonal relationships (Bowlby, 1988; Shaver & Hazan, 1988). Florian, Mikulincer, and Bucholtz (1995) found a negative relationship between high-avoidant attachment style and seeking social support. Independence and self-reliance are important as this enables them to distance themselves from others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003) and prevent others from relying on them (Fraley, Davis, & Shaver, 1998). Their interpersonal relationships often lack involvement and satisfaction (Shaver & Brennan, 1992). As a result, such relationships are short lived because they are shallow and unstable (Collins & Read, 1990). In a conflict situation, avoidant people tend to be defensive and blame others (Fraley et al., 1998). On the contrary, those who are less avoidant value relationships. Their relationships last longer because of the presence of trust. A sense of intimacy, closeness, and willingness to rely on others characterizes interpersonal relationships (Collins & Read, 1994).

On the bases of peoples' levels of anxiety and avoidance they can be grouped into four types of attachment styles (see Appendix A). The first group is comprised of individuals who are low on anxiety and avoidance. These kinds of individuals are labeled *secure* (Bartholomew

& Horovitz, 1991; Fraley & Shaver, 2000). They have a sense of worthiness (lovability) plus an expectation that other people are generally accepting and responsive. People securely attached rely on trustful interactions with others and respond effectively to displays of emotion, which is not the case with insecure people (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The next group is made up of those who have high levels of anxiety about others and low levels of avoidance, and have been termed as *preoccupied* (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). These are individuals highly anxious regarding attachment, who have a tendency to seek others' acceptance and closeness but at the same time fear rejection and abandonment (Silva et al., 2015). This combination of characteristics would lead the person to strive for self-acceptance by gaining the acceptance of valued others. Individuals who have high levels of both avoidance and anxiety have been termed *fearful* (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). They are anxious about what others think of them, but at the same time they distrust others and avoid them. These individuals are characterized by a conscious desire for social contact, which is inhibited by fears of its consequences (Bartholomew, 1990). They are known to have a sense of unworthiness (unlovability) combined with an expectation that others will be negatively disposed (untrustworthy and rejecting; Silva et al., 2015). By avoiding close involvement with others, this style enables people to protect themselves against anticipated rejection by others. By contrast, those with a *dismissive avoidant* style (highly avoidant and low anxiety) are strongly independent and emotionally distant from others, minimizing their attachment needs (Silva et al., 2015). They protect themselves against disappointment by avoiding close relationships and maintaining a sense of independence and invulnerability (Fraley et al., 1998). These people, however, possess a positive model of self and are distrusting of others and are not convinced of the availability of others for emotional support (Brennan & Bosson, 1998).

There is budding academic interest in consumer attachment styles with companies and brands. Mende, Bolton, and Bitner (2013) verified that anxiously-attached consumers prefer to have a close relationship with the company whereas avoidant consumers do not. Swaminathan et al. (2009) adopted attachment theory to explain how brand personalities impact brand outcomes. Their findings revealed that anxious consumers who were low in avoidance chose sincere brands over exciting brands; whereas, anxious consumers who were high in avoidance chose exciting brands. In the context of advertising, Jeong and Drolet (2010) found that anxious consumers have more favorable attitudes to couple-focused ads rather than self-focused ads. Employing a field study from the automotive services sector, Paulssen and Fournier (2007) found that secure attachment leads to stronger commercial relationships for the consumer as measured by dealer trust, satisfaction, and loyalty, thus extending attachment theory to marketing.

Integrating insights from attachment theory along with the contentions of Epley, Akalis, et al. (2008) from the anthropomorphism literature, it can be expected that individuals who avoid connections with other humans may satisfy their sociality motivation by deliberately seeking connections with non-human agents, such as nonprofit icons. Keeping in mind the high levels of avoidance accompanied by the desire to be accepted by others, that is, associated with fearful individuals, they are more likely to value their connections with

nonprofit icons in advertisements, and, hence, one can expect there to be a positive relationship between familiarity which they feel for the icon and their donation intentions. Whereas, though dismissive individuals avoid others, they are self-assured and do not feel the anxious need to connect with others. Hence, it is argued here that they will not connect and value their familiarity with icons used in advertising in the same way as fearful people. Hence, the following hypothesis is offered:

H3: Among high avoidance (low-need-to-belong) consumers, there will be a positive relationship between familiarity with a nonprofit icon and donation intentions only among fearful and non-dismissive consumers.

Avoidant individuals are known to have no confidence that others will help them when they seek care and therefore attempt to be emotionally self-sufficient, not depending on the support of others (Bartholomew, 1990; Feeney, 2006). Avoidance (refusing to express or feel the natural desire for a close relationship from another person) may help the individual avoid being rejected (Feeney, 2006). Bowlby (1988), in fact, explains that since these individuals may have had experiences of unresponsiveness from their caregivers as children, often they may hide their desires for love and support and even refuse to ask for help or even acknowledge a need for it. There is empirical evidence that supports the view that attachment-related avoidance influences the degree to which individuals rely on social bonds to regulate distress. Consistent with the idea that high-avoidance (compared with low-avoidance) individuals view others as unavailable or unresponsive, research shows that such people rely less heavily on social bonds to regulate distress (Feeney, 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008).

In response to rejection, people are known to behave in different ways. They may enhance their relational value to others, behaving in ways that show them as desirable partners, and they may simply withdraw from social interactions altogether for the time being or they may seek alternative relationships (Leary, Koch, & Hechenbleikner, 2001). While testing the Social Surrogacy Hypothesis (i.e., humans can use technologies, such as television, to provide the experience of belonging), Derrick, Gabriel, and Hugenberg (2009) found that feelings of rejection were assuaged when respondents thought about a favorite television program. This suggests that in times of rejection people connect with TV characters for emotional support, demonstrating Leary and colleagues' third strategy of coping with rejection. Consistent with this argumentation, in the anthropomorphism literature, Epley, Akalis et al. (2008), Epley, Waytz et al. (2008), and Wan and Aggarwal (2015) posit that introverts or loners, not actively seeking social connections with other people, may in fact connect with media characters for social support. Synthesizing these various deliberations, we expect that for highly-avoidant individuals, the relationship between familiarity with a nonprofit icon and donation intentions will be stronger for people in whom rejection is evoked. Feelings of rejection would make these individuals value their relationships with these icons even more, thereby making them react aversely to changes that make these icons less familiar. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

**H4:**

- a. Rejection does (does not) moderate the relationship between familiarity with a nonprofit icon and donation intentions, among high (low) avoidance respondents;
- b. Such that, among high avoidance consumers, there will be a positive relationship between familiarity and donation intentions only when the feelings of rejection are *high*, rather than *low*.

**2.4 | Experimental overview**

In Study 1, the main effect—impact of nonprofit icon familiarity on donor intentions is introduced. Qualitative pretests were conducted for the advertising stimuli, followed by a quantitative test of manipulations and main effects (Hypothesis 1). In study 2 the moderating effects of need to belong were examined and Hypothesis 2 was tested. Since the consumers' need to belong is embedded in their attachment style, Study 3 builds on Study 2 findings by examining the main effects among highly avoidant consumers (low need to belong). Stronger effects are expected from those who demonstrate fearful, and non-dismissive, attachment styles (Hypothesis 3). Lastly, in Study 4, the three studies are built upon by evoking rejection among highly (and low) avoidant individuals. The narrative arc of the thesis is presented in Figure 1.

**3 | STUDY 1: ALTERATION OF CHILDHOOD ICON AND ROLE OF FAMILIARITY**

The objective of the qualitative study was to examine consumer responses to the modification of the icon used in a not-for-profit advertisement. The target company was the PBS, and the icon being modified was Cookie Monster. This icon is often employed in commercials for products and services. For example, Apple has starred Cookie Monster in their new iPhone TV commercial introducing hands-free Siri (Diaz, 2016).

**3.1 | Advertisement stimuli**

Three advertisements inviting donations for the PBS were developed. The number of words and pictures were the same across the three versions; however, the picture of the iconic character Cookie Monster was manipulated. Version 1 contained a picture of Cookie Monster eating cookies; Version 2 contained a picture of Cookie Monster eating fruits and vegetables, whereas in Version 3 Cookie Monster was green in color and was eating fruits and vegetables (see Exhibit 1 for complete storyboards).

**3.2 | Procedures**

Four focus groups were conducted, each consisting of 3–5 consumers and lasting between 1 and 2 hours. In total, participants included 17 respondents between 20 and 60 years old (half females; 33% were 50 years old and younger, 34% were between 20 and 30 years of age, and the rest were between the ages of 31 and 49). In order to get a

comprehensive perspective, respondents were selected from a variety of different ages, incomes, and educational backgrounds. The discussions were moderated by two researchers and were audio recorded. At first respondents were asked general questions about brand icons. They were then asked questions about nonprofit icons that they may be aware of. Subsequently, they were exposed to three advertisements inviting donations for PBS. The respondents were asked to talk about the thoughts, memories, and feelings evoked by the advertisements. This was done for each ad, one at a time, and the order of the ads was rotated across the groups. In-depth analysis of the transcripts, using two assessors, was completed in two stages. At first an independent review of the transcripts was conducted by each of the assessors. Each reviewer highlighted the transcripts to identify themes. The two assessors then discussed the themes and achieved consensus.

**3.3 | Findings**

Respondents were familiar with Cookie Monster (Version 1) and associated it with nostalgia, happiness, and a simple life. They remembered watching him on TV, and they were reminded of their childhood and their families. For example, Julie (59-year-old woman) talks about how the Cookie Monster brought back memories of her grandmother:

It does bring family memories, my grandma always had fresh homemade cookies. He (Cookie Monster) eats whatever he wants. Those were safe times. He (Cookie Monster) is crazy; everybody loves him. A time when you were free.

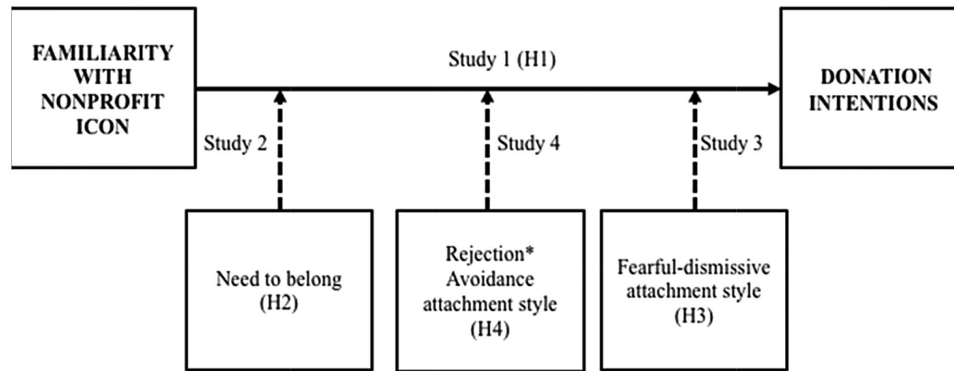
In response to Version 2, the respondents recognized that the character was Cookie Monster. However, they felt that he was being politically correct and not in keeping with his true character. They also felt that he was trying to eat healthy but was not a child anymore. For example, Felix (27-year-old male) said that he felt tricked by PBS:

Everything I knew about the Cookie Monster is gone. I feel like being tricked. It was important to see Cookie Monster as being a child, doing what he likes - that is eating cookies.

Some respondents were not able to recognize Cookie Monster in Version 3. Some felt that he could be a new character who is an addition to the show. Even when they recognized him, they felt that he was out of character and used words like “grass monster” and “moss monster” to describe him. This can be summarized by a quote from Teresa (52-year-old woman):

He looks like a Sesame street character, but I do not know him. It is not the real Cookie Monster, is it? Not sure who he is, since Cookie Monster does not eat fruit. If he does start eating fruit, it is educational but I am still not sure I know this character.

Similarly, Kelly (29-year-old man) felt that the green Cookie Monster was instructive and misleading:



**FIGURE 1** Narrative arc heuristic

I met him when he was blue, green color of his coat makes me uncomfortable. He is instructive, I feel like eating veggies is propaganda: 'cookies are bad, so eat veggies'. We are used to Cookie Monster, this is inconsistent to him, the true Cookie Monster is reckless, and now he changed and became responsible.

### 3.3.1 | Manipulation check and main effects

#### Method

Data were collected from 171 respondents participating in an on-line consumer panel administered by Qualtrics. The sample had a mean age of 49 years, 55% were female and 85% were Caucasians. First, 59 respondents were exposed to Version 1 of the PBS ad developed in the previous study (blue Cookie Monster eating cookies), 56 saw Version 2 (blue Cookie Monster eating fruits and vegetables), and 56 subjects saw Version 3 of the ad (green Cookie Monster eating fruits and vegetables); after which they answered questions related to familiarity with the character shown in the ad ("How familiar was the character shown in the ad"; "How recognizable was the character shown in the ad"; adapted from Simonin and Ruth (1998)). Lastly, they answered questions relating to intentions to donate to PBS. Donation intentions were measured using the four-item Ranganathan and Henley (2008) intention-to-donate measure (example of item, "I am likely to donate to the charity in question in the future").

#### Results

Scale reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for familiarity with the icon ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ) and donation intentions ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ). The scales for donation intentions and familiarity were summed and averaged for further analyses. One-way ANOVA was run using ad-version as the independent variable and donation intentions and familiarity as the dependent variables. The results of the ANOVA show that the manipulations worked as expected, that is, there was a significant difference across the three ads in familiarity with the character used in the ad ( $M_{Version1} = 5.15$ ,  $M_{Version2} = 4.00$ ,  $M_{Version3} = 3.39$ ,  $F[2, 168] = 26.38$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). A post-hoc Tukey's test reveals that, as expected, consumers were more familiar with the blue Cookie Monster eating cookies as compared to the other two versions of Cookie Monster (Version 1 vs. Version 2: mean difference = 1.14,  $SE = 0.24$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; Version 1 vs. Version 3: mean difference = 1.75,  $SE = 0.25$ ,

$p < 0.05$ ). Further, the blue Cookie Monster eating veggies was more familiar to the respondents as compared to the green one (Version 2 vs. Version 3: mean difference = 0.61,  $SE = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Further, as hypothesized in H1, there was a significant difference across the three ads in terms of the intentions to donate to PBS ( $M_{Version1} = 4.94$ ,  $M_{Version2} = 3.99$ ,  $M_{Version3} = 3.45$ ,  $F[2, 168] = 12.50$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The post-hoc test results show that the donation intentions were significantly higher when the respondent was most familiar with the icon (Version 1), followed by Versions 2 and 3 (Version 1 vs. Version 2: mean difference = 0.96,  $SE = 0.30$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; Version 1 vs. Version 3: mean difference = 1.49,  $SE = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; Version 2 vs. Version 3: mean difference = 0.54,  $SE = 0.31$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ). Next, the respondents' mean for familiarity with the ad character was calculated for the entire sample (mean = 4.20; median = 0.33). For analysis purposes, those with a familiarity score of 4.33 or higher (54%) were termed as "high" familiarity and the rest (46%) were termed as "low" familiarity. A one-way ANOVA was run with familiarity with the ad icon (high vs. low) as the independent variable and donation intentions as the outcome variable. The results of the ANOVA show that respondents who were more familiar with the ad icon had higher levels of donation intentions, as compared to the respondents with low familiarity with the ad icon employed ( $M_{low\ familiarity} = 3.00$ ,  $M_{high\ familiarity} = 5.12$ ,  $F[1, 169] = 101.80$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Taken together, the results support Hypothesis 1. In the next study individual differences were unraveled regarding response to the iconic character as a means to test Hypothesis 2, where it is proposed that those who have a lower need to belong (i.e., more introverted and isolated) are more influenced by the icon change than those with a higher need to belong (more extraverted and secure).

## 4 | STUDY 2: NEED TO BELONG

### 4.1 | Method

Versions 1 (blue Cookie Monster eating cookies) and 2 (blue Cookie Monster eating fruits and vegetables) of the advertisements developed in Study 1 were employed as treatments for Study 2. Data were collected from 93 respondents participating in an on-line consumer panel administered by Qualtrics. The sample had a mean age of 42 years, 53% were female and 75% were Caucasians. At first, subjects completed



**TABLE 1** STUDY 2: Means, SDs, and correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender <sup>a</sup>	1.53	0.50					
2. Age	41.82	3.30	0.14				
3. Race	2.20	1.14	-0.01	0.08			
4. Need to belong	4.23	1.31	0.02	0.16	-0.15		
5. Familiarity with icon	5.03	1.74	0.03	0.00	-0.04	0.30*	
6. Donation intentions	5.82	2.93	0.02	0.10	-0.12	0.00	0.30*

Note:  $N = 93$ ; <sup>a</sup>Gender was coded as male = 1, female = 2, \* $p < 0.05$ .

**TABLE 2** STUDY 2: Results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis

Predictor	$R^2$	B
Step 1	0.10	
Constant		4.03*
Familiarity with icon		0.56*
Need to belong		-0.24
Step 2	0.17	
Constant		0.58
Familiarity with icon		1.50*
Need to belong		0.83
Familiarity with icon $\times$ need to belong		-0.23*

Note: B = unstandardized regression coefficient. The dependent variable is the participant's intentions to donate to PBS. \* $p < 0.05$ .

the 10-item need to belong scale (Leary et al. 2009), and then half of the respondents were shown Version 1 while the other half were exposed to Version 2; after which they answered questions related to familiarity with the character shown in the ad and donation intentions, using measures employed in Study 1.

## 4.2 | Results

Scale reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for need to belong (NTB) ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ), familiarity with the icon ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ) and donation intentions ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ). Responses to the scale were summed and the measures were averaged for subsequent analysis. The means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables are displayed in Table 1. None of the potential covariates (age, race, and gender) significantly impacted respondents' intentions to donate to PBS.

To test Hypothesis 2, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was run, the results of which are presented in Table 2.

In the test of Hypothesis 2, a significant interaction effect was found between familiarity with the nonprofit icon and the need to belong (NTB),  $B = -0.23$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . The pattern of the interaction was consistent with the expectation for Hypothesis 2 (the relationship between familiarity with icon and need to belong was expected to be positive only when NTB for participants was low, as opposed to high). Conducting a simple slopes analysis of the regression results (cf., Aiken & West, 1991), it was found that under the condition of low NTB the higher an individual's familiarity with the nonprofit icon, the higher was his or her donation intention towards PBS,  $B = 0.83$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . However,

when the consumer's need to belong was high, familiarity with the icon employed in the advertisement was unrelated to the individual's intentions to donate to PBS,  $B = 0.24$ ,  $p > 0.10$ . Figure 2 illustrates this interaction. Hypothesis 2 was therefore supported.

## 4.3 | Discussion

These findings are novel and advance the work of Epley, Akalis, et al. (2008) and Wan and Aggarwal (2015) by corroborating the view that the relationships consumers share with nonprofit icons can be so powerful that subjects who may be introverts or loners (Aron & Aron, 1997; Kozak, 2013), who are not actively seeking social connections, may be successfully engaged by such communication methods. Past research suggests that the consumers' need to belong is embedded in the consumer's attachment style. Since Study 2 shows that these effects are prominent among low-need-to-belong consumers, in the next study this finding was expanded by examining how the attachment styles of consumers with a low need to belong (high attachment avoidant individuals) moderates the effect of familiarity with icons (used in charity appeals) on donation intentions.

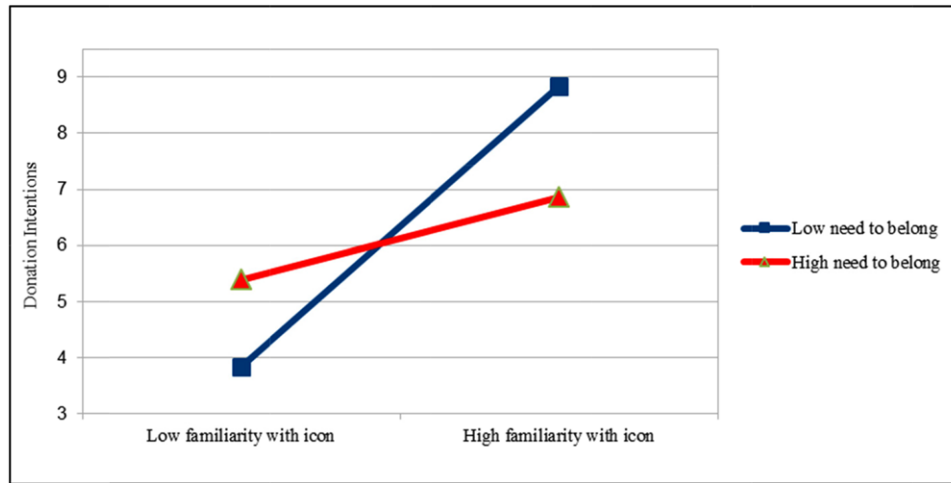
## 5 | STUDY 3: ATTACHMENT AND NEED TO BELONG

### 5.1 | Method

Data were collected from 213 subjects participating in an on-line consumer panel administered by Qualtrics. Each was exposed to one of the three versions of the ad for PBS developed in Study 1. The sample had a mean age of 48 years, 60% were female and 80% were Caucasians. At first, subjects completed the 10-item attachment anxiety and avoidance scale (Thompson, Whelan, & Johnson, 2012), and subjects were then exposed to one of three versions of the ads (Version 1 = 86; Version 2 = 63; Version 3 = 64); after which they answered questions related to familiarity with the character shown in the ad and donation intentions, with measures used in Study 1.

### 5.2 | Results

Scale reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for items related to anxiety ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ) and avoidance ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ) attachment styles, familiarity with the icon ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ), and donation intentions



**FIGURE 2** Need to belong as a moderator of the relationship between familiarity with icon and donation intentions [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

**TABLE 3** STUDY 3: Means, SDs, and correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender <sup>a</sup>	1.69	0.46					
2. Age	52.25	16.05	−0.05				
3. Race	2.26	0.89	0.00	−0.25*			
4. Fearful-dismissive attachment styles	4.13	1.43	−0.04	−0.16	0.37*		
5. Familiarity	4.93	1.49	−0.13	0.04	−0.04	0.17	
6. Donation intentions	3.88	1.68	−0.13	0.00	0.18	0.20	0.31*

Note:  $N = 97$ ; <sup>a</sup>Gender was coded as male = 1, female = 2, \* $p < 0.05$ .

( $\alpha = 0.95$ ). Responses to the scale were summed and the measures were averaged for subsequent analyses. The subjects were placed into one of the four attachment styles on the bases of their response to questions related to the two dimensions of attachment--anxiety and avoidance using the guidelines provided by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) and Fraley and Shaver (2000) (see Appendix). On the bases of their attachment scores the sample had 65 people with fearful attachment style, 32 were dismissive, 82 were secure, and 34 reflected a preoccupied attachment style. Since the focus was on studying the attachment styles related to high avoidant individuals (low need to belong), fearful and dismissive respondents ( $N = 97$ ) were the focus, that is, they have high attachment avoidance and may have high (*fearful*) or low attachment anxiety (*dismissive*). To test Hypothesis 3, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was undertaken with donation intentions as the dependent variable and familiarity with the icon and fearful-dismissive attachment style as the independent variables. The means, standard deviations, and correlations are displayed in Table 3, and the regression results are presented in Table 4. A significant interaction effect between familiarity and attachment style was found,  $B = 0.16$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . None of the potential covariates (age, race, and gender) significantly impacted respondents' intentions to donate to PBS.

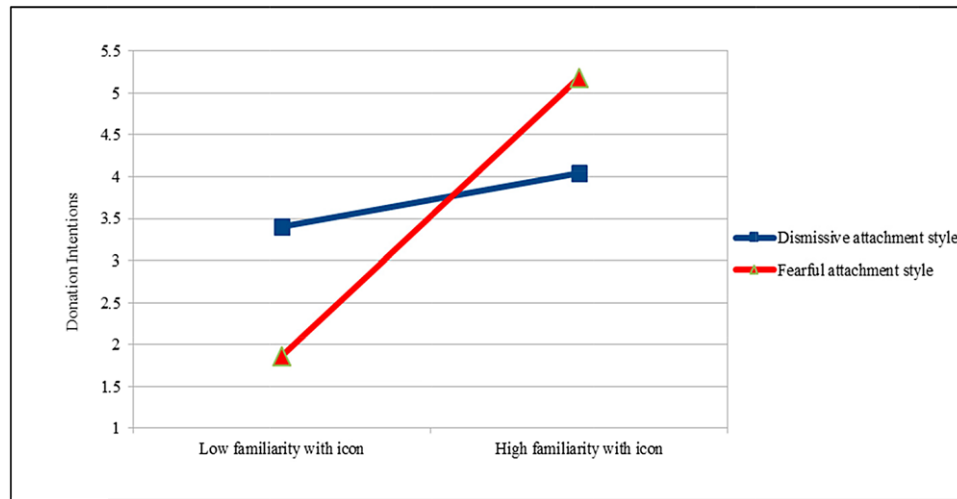
Conducting a simple slopes analysis of the regression results (*cf.*, Aiken & West, 1991), it was found that for fearful individuals, the higher an individual's familiarity with the icon, the higher was his or her donation intention towards PBS,  $B = 0.55$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . However,

**TABLE 4** STUDY 3: Results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis

Predictor	$R^2$	B
Step 1	0.12	
Constant		1.55*
Familiarity		0.33*
Fearful-dismissive attachment style		0.18
Step 2	0.14	
Constant		5.17*
Familiarity		−0.31
Fearful-dismissive attachment style		−0.69
Familiarity × attachment style		0.16*

Note: B = unstandardized regression coefficient. The dependent variable is the participant's intentions to donate to PBS. \* $p < 0.05$ .

for dismissive individuals, familiarity with the icon employed in the advertisement was unrelated to the individual's intentions to donate to PBS,  $B = 0.11$ ,  $p > 0.10$ . Figure 3 illustrates this interaction. Taken together, these findings support Hypothesis 3. For the sake of completeness, similar analyses were run for low-avoidant respondents (secure and preoccupied attachment styles) and found that the interaction between familiarity with childhood icon and attachment style was not significant ( $B = 0.10$ ,  $p > 0.10$ ).



**FIGURE 3** Attachment style as a moderator of the relationship between familiarity with icon and donation intentions [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

### 5.3 | Discussion

The findings indicate that even among highly avoidant (low need to belong) consumers, the positive impact of nonprofit icon familiarity on donor intentions is variable; with significant effects only among fearful and non-dismissive consumers. In the next study these explications are built upon by evoking rejection and then studying the effects of icon familiarity on intentions among consumers with high (vs. low) avoidant attachment styles.

## 6 | STUDY 4: REJECTION AS A MEANS TO AMPLIFY LOW NEED TO BELONG

### 6.1 | Pretest

Data were collected, using a pen and paper questionnaire, from 78 undergraduate students from a mid-sized university in the United States. About half the respondents were female and the average age was 24 years. Rejection was evoked using the procedures employed by previous research (see, Derrick et al., 2009; Troisi & Gabriel, 2011). Forty-four respondents were exposed to the rejection manipulation and the rest were exposed to the control. In the rejection manipulation respondents were asked to “think about and write a brief essay on a time you fought with a close friend or family member,” on the other hand respondents in the control group were asked to “please list as many items in your residence as you can remember.” They were then immediately asked to complete questions related to the 8-item manipulation check (See, Derrick et al., 2009; sample items include: Right now, I feel rejected; Right now, I don't feel close to others; I feel like I am no longer close to anyone right now) ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ). Findings revealed that the rejection evoked was higher for subjects in the rejection manipulation as compared to the control group, hence the manipulation worked as expected ( $M_{REJECTION} = 2.94$ ;  $M_{CONTROL} = 1.85$ ,  $F[1, 76] = 25.91$ ,  $p < 0.05$ )

### 6.2 | Main study

Data were then collected, using a pen and paper questionnaire, from 141 undergraduate students from a mid-sized university in the United States. Fifty-five percent of the respondents were female and the average age was 26 years. At first, respondents answered questions related to their attachment styles (anxiety and avoidance, Thompson et al., 2012;  $\alpha_{Anxiety} = 0.81$ ;  $\alpha_{Avoidance} = 0.82$ ). Seventy-four respondents were exposed to the rejection manipulation and the rest were exposed to the control as explained above in the pretest. As with the pretest, the rejection evoked was higher for subjects in the rejection manipulation as compared to the control group ( $M_{REJECTION} = 3.33$ ;  $M_{CONTROL} = 2.01$ ,  $F[1, 139] = 56.68$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Respondents in each group were exposed to one of the two PBS ads (Versions 1 and 3 developed in Study 1). Half of each group was exposed to Version 1 and the rest to Version 3. Respondents then answered questions related to familiarity ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ) and donation intentions ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ), as in the previous studies. The items related to anxiety and avoidance were summed and averaged separately for further analysis. In line with past research (Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2011), subjects with a mean avoidance score of 2.96 or higher were grouped as high attachment avoidant respondents and the rest were termed respondents low in attachment avoidance.

To test Hypothesis 4, the effects of rejection were examined among high avoidant individuals ( $N = 77$ ; low need to belong). A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was undertaken with donation intentions as the dependent variable and with familiarity and rejection as the independent variables. None of the covariates (age and gender) significantly impacted respondents' intentions to donate to PBS. The means, standard deviations, and correlations are displayed in Table 5, and the regression results are presented in Table 6.

A significant interaction effect was found between familiarity with the icon and rejection,  $B = 0.164$ ,  $p < 0.10$ . Conducting a simple slopes analysis of the regression results (cf., Aiken & West, 1991), it was found that the higher the rejection experienced, the higher an individual's familiarity with the childhood icon, and the higher was his or her donation intention towards PBS,  $B = 0.47$ ,  $p < .05$ . However, when rejec-

**TABLE 5** STUDY 4: Means, SDs, and correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Gender <sup>a</sup>	1.54	0.49				
2. Age	25.55	6.42	-0.12			
3. Rejection	2.71	1.23	-0.07	0.02		
4. Familiarity	5.42	1.27	-0.13	0.04	0.08	
5. Donation intentions	5.13	1.23	-0.08	-0.04	0.12	0.33*

Note:  $N = 97$ ; <sup>a</sup>Gender was coded as male = 1, female = 2, \* $p < 0.05$ .

**TABLE 6** STUDY 4: Results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis

Predictor	R <sup>2</sup>	B
Step 1	0.14	
Constant		3.33*
Familiarity		0.27*
Rejection		0.16
Step 2	0.17	
Constant		5.24*
Familiarity		-0.09
Rejection		-0.76
Familiarity × rejection		0.16**

Note: B = unstandardized regression coefficient. The dependent variable is the participant's intentions to donate to PBS. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.10$ .

tion was low, familiarity with the icon employed in the advertisement was unrelated to the individual's intentions to donate to PBS,  $B = 0.12$ ,  $p > 0.10$ . Figure 4 illustrates this interaction.

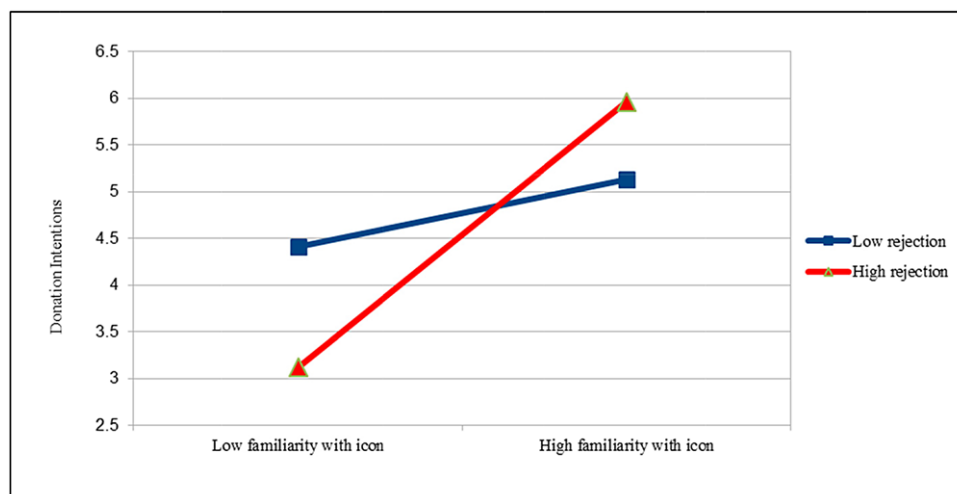
A similar analysis was subsequently conducted for low avoidant individuals ( $N = 64$ ) (high need to belong). The interaction effect between familiarity and rejection was not significant ( $B = 0.07$ ,  $p > 0.10$ ) indicating that for individuals with a low attachment avoidance (high need to belong), the levels of rejection experienced did

not moderate the effects of familiarity on donation intentions. Taken together, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

## 7 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

This research elucidates the complex and nuanced role of the consumer's need for social connections and its influence on their response to marketing communications within this important not-for-profit context. Study 1 qualitatively explored the relationships consumers share with icons used in advertising, finding that the more familiar the icon, the greater the donation intent. Study 2 found that people who have a low need to belong (high attachment avoidant individuals) were most impacted by changes in the icon. Study 3 built on the findings of Study 2 by revealing that within low need to belong consumers this effect is most evident among consumers with a fearful attachment style. The last study manipulated evoked feelings of rejection. These results indicate that rejection moderates this relationship among high avoidance respondents. Further, the higher the feelings of rejection experienced by the subject, the stronger the impact of familiarity on intentions.

There is increasing interest in the marketing literature on relationships that consumers share with advertising and brand characters (Brown, 2010; Connell et al., 2014; Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocerto, 2009; Wan & Aggarwal, 2015). This research builds on (and contributes) to this ongoing discourse. Whereas, Puzakova et al. (2009) and, more



**FIGURE 4** Rejection as a moderator of the relationship between familiarity with icon and donation intentions [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

recently, Wan and Aggarwal (2015) conceptualized belongingness and social motivation as vital variables in consumer connections with iconic brand characters, their treatise is extended here by investigating how changing these icons affects consumer familiarity and relationships which can have adverse outcomes. By unwrapping the need to belong through the lens of attachment theory, these findings also shed new light on the work of Wildschut, Sedikides, Routledge, Arndt, and Corrado (2010), who found that low-avoidance individuals derived more social connectedness from nostalgia as compared to high avoidance individuals. These contributions are complementary to the discoveries of Wildschut et al. (2010), by demonstrating that brand characters play a social role for avoidant consumers, especially consumers with a fearful attachment style. These results also augment the anthropomorphism literature (e.g., Epley, Waytz et al., 2008) by delineating the nuanced relationships consumers share with brand characters. From a managerial perspective these findings caution brand managers about modifying brand icons as this may adversely affect the potency of such icons in generating consumer patronage.

As with any studies of this kind, there are limitations that should be mentioned. First of all, these studies involved nonprofit television offerings via PBS. Obviously other types of nonprofit settings should also be tested. Future research may also look at for-profit brands as well. For instance, what would happen if Disney were to modify the iconic Disney characters? It may also be fruitful to study the effects of a change in the character of Snoopy on how consumers process the MetLife ad campaign. It would also be prudent to test for longitudinal effects especially since these studies did not track changes over time. Can the effects found be attenuated for modified icons over time? One might assume that once the change occurs, repeated exposure might improve the reaction to the modified icon over a longer period of time. Finally, this study was done in one cultural setting, and additional studies are warranted in other cultural settings. Are there a series of foreign icons that will apply in other country/cultural settings? Even more importantly, are there any global brand icons that might stand the test of time with regard to nostalgia-inducement power? Obviously, larger and more diverse population samples would improve generalizability of these findings.

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**APPENDIX A**

Attachment styles (Bartholomew &amp; Horowitz, 1991; Fraley &amp; Shaver, 2000)

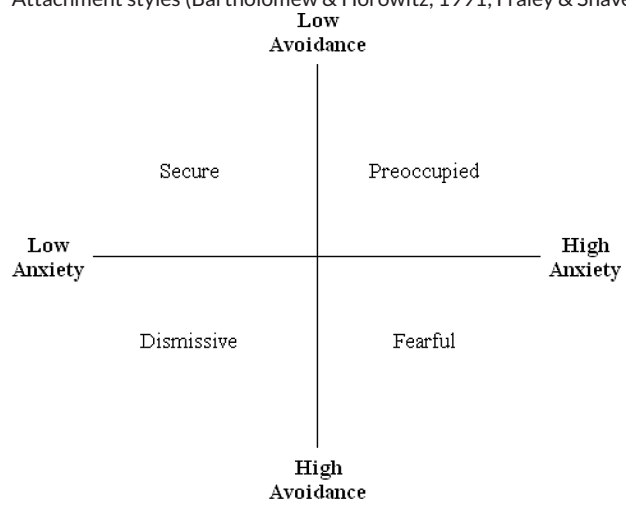




EXHIBIT 1

Advertising stimuli

Version 1

**Donate to the Public Broadcasting Services.**



Your donation will ensure we continue to provide quality entertainment.



Version 2

**Donate to the Public Broadcasting Services.**



Your donation will ensure we continue to provide quality entertainment.



Version 3

**Donate to the Public Broadcasting Services.**



Your donation will ensure we continue to provide quality entertainment.

