Social media activism for resurrecting deleted brands: the role of consumers' psychological reactance

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Abstract

When companies delete brands, devoted, yet unhappy consumers experience psychological reactance and initiate brand resurrection movements (BRMs) to bring their beloved brand back into their lives. In this Web 2.0 era, numerous consumer-led activism initiatives have been launched via social media to resurrect dead brands. On the other hand, relaunching a deleted brand is a crucial decision for a company and involves various financial and strategic implications. Therefore, it becomes imperative for brand managers to understand the drivers of BRMs. This research investigates the role of nostalgic brand love, threat to freedom, and psychological reactance as drivers of social media activism for brand resurrection by surveying 499 participants of a real BRM who utilized social media to successfully bring their cherished brand back into the market. The findings show that psychological reactance partially mediates the relationship between threat to freedom and social media activism for brand resurrection, and fully mediates the relationship between nostalgic brand love and social media activism for brand resurrection. This research contributes to the brand management and marketing literature by (1) applying psychological reactance theory to BRMs, (2) introducing a new second-order construct (nostalgic brand love), and (3) expounding the mediating role of psychological reactance.

Keywords Brand deletion · Brand resurrection · Social media activism · Psychological reactance · Nostalgic brand love

Introduction

In the last few years, several news headlines have highlighted the power of consumer activism using various Internet and social media platforms to create brand communities with the aim of resurrecting their favorite dead brands. For example, "'Overwhelming consumer passion' brings Jif peanut butter back to Canada" (Harris 2017), "Panera bringing back French onion soup after national outcry" (Genovese 2020),

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and "Taco Bell's Mexican Pizza is officially back—here's how to get one" (Portée and Boscamp 2022). Similarly, Cadbury's discontinued Wispa in 2003 and brought it back in 2008 in response to a social media campaign by over 40,000 fans (Cadbury 2008; Wallop 2007). Pepsi re-introduced Crystal Pepsi (a beverage from the 1990s) for a limited time in 2015. Coca-Cola had to bring back Surge (a citrus soda discontinued in 2004) in 2014 (Popken 2014). All of this was driven by consumer activism movements through online brand communities. There are brand communities formed by brand fans or loyalists, and then, there are anti-brand communities formed around common antipathies toward brands (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2006). However, fan communities fighting for resurrecting dead brands are at the intersection of these two types of communities because they come together due to a love for a common product brand (e.g., Surge), but they are fighting against the firm/corporate brand (e.g., Coca-Cola) that discontinued their beloved brand.

Firms delete brands to augment the value of their brand portfolios and boost profits (Kumar 2003; Shah et al. 2017; Varadarajan et al. 2006). However, if the brand deletion strategy is not executed well and if the deleted brand has

a loyal fan base, it has the potential to generate consumer retaliation (Shah 2017a, 2020) because they experience psychological reactance when their beloved brand is taken away from them limiting their freedom of choice to buy and consume their favorite brand (Brehm 1966; Gilal et al. 2020).

Before the Internet age, consumer activism was challenging, whether it was the free produce movement or Boston tea party in the 1700s or the global boycott of Nike in the 1990s for its use of sweatshops (Lightfoot 2019). However, with the advent and advancement of Internet technologies, consumers now create, communicate, and deliver considerable volumes of information that influence other consumers (Almazyad et al. 2019; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Kozinets and Jenkins 2021; Shah and Loiacono 2016; Albinsson and Perera 2011, 2013). So, when a popular brand with a loyal consumer following is deleted, consumers can now mobilize an activist movement with relative ease and fewer resources (time, effort, money) using Internet platforms such as online petition websites, social networking sites, and brand/anti-brand communities (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2006; Kähr et al. 2016; Labrecque et al. 2013). They can recruit members for the movement, mobilize resources, strategize, raise funds, and campaign to bring back their beloved brand using online social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Albinsson and Perera 2012).

In this era of consumer empowerment, it is critical for brand managers to understand what motivates consumers to engage in consumer activism because brands "can become the target of activist consumers who yield a louder megaphone in a hyperconnected environment." (Swaminathan et al. 2020, 32). If the brand deletion strategy is implemented considering these drivers of consumer activism, consumer backlash can be mitigated, and the brand deletion process could become smooth-sailing and successful for the firm. And in case there is consumer activism to bring back the deleted brand, managers can use the findings of this research to understand consumers who feel nostalgic brand love and are experiencing psychological reactance as they perceive a threat to their freedom. Ingrained in this practical import, the purpose of this research is to investigate what drives or motivates consumers to participate in social media activism movements to bring back their beloved brand.

From a theoretical perspective, it is important to understand the role psychological reactance plays within social media activism for brand resurrection context and the interplay between brand love and brand nostalgia. This research offers these theoretical contributions through survey data collection from loyal Surge fans who compelled Coca-Cola to resurrect Surge through their consumer activism efforts on social media, by explicating the mediating role of psychological reactance in the context of social media activism for brand resurrection, and by introducing a second-order construct of nostalgic brand love.

This paper is structured as follows: The next section presents the theoretical background, the proposed conceptual framework, and hypotheses development. Thereafter, the methodology, sample, and data collection process are explained. Next, data analysis and findings are presented. Finally, the theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Literature review and hypotheses development

Brand deletion and resurrection

Brand deletion is defined as discontinuing a brand from a firm's brand portfolio (Shah et al. 2017). Companies discontinue or delete brands for a variety of reasons such as poor performance, brand failure to satisfy consumer needs, and/or the brand not fitting in the company's brand portfolio or with its corporate strategy (Shah 2017b). Eliminating the underperforming brands from the portfolio could lead to cost savings, resource optimization, and re-allocation of resources to the portfolio's strong brands (Bayus and Putsis Jr. 1999; Shah 2017b; Eckles 1971; Zhu et al. 2021). However, eliminating brands that have loyal and emotionally attached consumers could potentially have a detrimental influence on consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Mao et al. 2009; Shah 2020; Varadarajan et al. 2006). It may even cause a backlash from loyal consumers in the form of consumer activism movements against the company (Shah 2017a).

As companies delete brands, devoted, yet unhappy consumers initiate a counter act as an attempt to undo the deletion process. When consumers take the initiative to start a movement to bring back a discontinued brand, it is referred to as a brand resurrection movement (Davari et al. 2017). Brand resurrection is less risky and less expensive as compared to new brand introduction (Florea et al 2018). However, bringing a defunct brand back into the market is a complex decision and involves several demographic, socioeconomic, cultural, and organizational factors (Brown et al 2003a). Furthermore, a BRM could take any form of protest such as protesting by mail, telephone, in-person rallies/demonstrations, or online using Internet and social media platforms. In the next section, we discuss literature on such BRMs using social media.

Social media activism for brand resurrection

Social movements are defined as "collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization,

society, culture, or world order of which they are a part" (Snow et al. 2007, 11). People consider social movements tools that allow them to voice their opinions and grievances. Human history is rich with social movements ranging from peace movement, civil rights movements, student movements, animal rights movements, women rights movements, the me-too movement, and the occupy Wall Street movement (Kavada 2015; McKenna 2020).

In the consumption context, brand communities of active brand loyalists have created a consumer-brand-consumer triad and directly influence brand loyalty, brand awareness, and brand associations (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Consumer movements have played an important role in society's progressive evolution all the way from the Boston Tea Party in 1700s (Albinsson and Perera 2013) to recent years when organizations are regular targets for consumer activists, who attempt to influence company decision-makers (Briscoe and Gupta 2016). Consumer movement activities range from boycotts (Klein et al. 2004) to demanding social responsibility and challenging marketing practices (Friedman 1991; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Miller and Sturdivant 1977; Stole 2015) through anti-brand communities (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2006) such as the National Consumer League (Stole 2015). Such activism has historically involved activists meeting and protesting in person as they did not have a medium to efficiently connect with other individuals with common interests and passion (McCaughey and Ayers 2003). To the authors' knowledge based on popular press review, prior to the internet era, there were strategic brand resurrections through company initiatives [for e.g., Volkswagen relaunched Bugatti in 1999 (Hall-Geisler 2013)] as well as few instigated by consumer activism [for e.g., revival of Star Trek for Season 3 after NBC received over 100,000 fan letters demanding its return (Jay 2018)].

However, the Internet has transformed activism. We now have easy access to efficient and effective communication channels through social media. Today, consumers are more tech savvy and understand how social media networks and their features can provide them with greater power and a stronger voice (Labrecque et al. 2013). Since the emergence of the Internet and the popularity of social media, online activism has seen various transformations. Throughout the development process, customers took advantage of every development stage, from static websites where consumers formed anti-brand webpages to petitiononline.org to interactive social media sites (Albinsson and Perera 2011, 2013). In a connected digital world, one consumer can cost a company millions of dollars in lost sales and potential customers (Kähr et al. 2016), and could rapidly harm a company's reputation with a simple message, tweet, or post (Kietzmann et al. 2011). Consumers can damage a company's image, reputation, and valuation with ease, efficiency, and fewer resources with the help of social media.

Recently, numerous consumer-led activism efforts have been launched via social media to resurrect a beloved brand. Participant displays of activism or engagement in a BRM on social networking sites is defined as social media activism for brand resurrection (Yankah et al. 2017). An example of how customers used social media to bring a beloved brand back to life is the Bring Back Crystal Pepsi campaign. Pepsi discontinued Crystal Pepsi in 1994, but after customer agitation on social media, the firm ultimately acknowledged the demand by relaunching the brand for a limited time in 2015 (CNBC 2016). Another example is of Cadbury discontinuing a chocolate bar called Wispa from the market in 2003. But, after intense consumer protest via social media, Cadbury relaunched it in 2008. Wispa enthusiasts collectively worked for the reintroduction of the brand to the market via social media platforms such as Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter (Wallop 2007; Cadbury 2008). Recently, in 2021, Kellogg brought back cereal straws after discontinuing them in 2009. A spokesperson from Kellogg stated, "Kellogg is answering superfans' petition and social media pleas to bring back its iconic Kellogg's Cereal Straws" (Hines 2021).

The Surge Movement, which is the focus of survey data collection in this research, is another excellent example of how a BRM was successfully conducted through social media. In 1997, Coca-Cola introduced Surge, a citrus soda, to compete with Mountain Dew from PepsiCo. However, the battle did not last long, and Coca-Cola deleted the brand in 2004 from its portfolio (Feloni 2014). Since the removal of the brand, there have been several attempts to protest Coca-Cola's decision through websites (e.g., www.savesurge. org, www.surgemovement.org) and online petitions. When these attempts were not successful in resurrecting Surge, a Facebook Surge Movement page was created by Surge fans—Evan Carr, Sean Sheridan, and Matt Winans. The movement's mission was to bring Surge back to the market. They achieved their mission in 2014 when Coca-Cola finally decided to relaunch Surge.

This is a relatively new phenomenon and demands research attention because (1) relaunching a deleted brand is a crucial decision for a company and involves various financial and strategic implications and (2) from our literature review, we found only four empirical research studies on this topic ranging from 2017 to 2020 (Davari et al. 2017; Florea et al. 2018; Gilal et al 2020, 2021). Using Folk Conceptual Theory, Davari et al. (2017) surveyed students by asking them to recollect deleted brands and answer questions about the role of utilities, nostalgia, and brand superiority as motivators to participate in a BRM. Gilal et al. (2020) surveyed students about the role of nostalgic ads as drivers to participate in a BRM by asking them to think of deleted brands they would like to bring back. They mention psychological reactance as a guiding theory. Using source credibility theory, Gilal et al. (2021) conducted a survey experiment with

students and shoppers to explain the influence of endorsers and product types on consumers' engagement in BRM. Finally, Florea et al. (2018) surveyed fans of five resurrected football clubs to understand conditions that trigger or block favorable fan reactions to brand resurrections. Overall, these studies discuss the role of various utilities, brand superiority, nostalgic brand ads, endorsers, and loyal fans and heritage as drivers of participation in BRMs. Davari et al. (2017) and Gilal et al. (2020, 2021) asked their survey respondents to think of a deleted brand and answer the questions in that context whereas Florea et al. (2018) surveyed fans who may or may not have participated in a BRM.

Based on this literature review, we can clearly see that brand nostalgia plays an important role in brand resurrection. However, one feels nostalgia about an object that one feels an emotional bond or connection with (Filieri et al. 2021; Li et al. 2019). This has not been studied in the context of brand resurrection and deserves research attention. We posit this emotional bond to be love for the deleted brand. Brand love is a crucial link in understanding the participation in BRMs. Furthermore, psychological reactance has been mentioned in the past BRM literature; however, the constructs and conceptual frameworks are not grounded in this theory specifically. In this research, we fill these research gaps by (1) examining the role of brand nostalgia, brand love, threat to freedom, and psychological reactance as drivers of social media activism to revive a deleted brand, (2) grounding the conceptual framework in Psychological Reactance Theory and presenting threat to freedom and psychological reactance as key variables in the framework., and (3) collecting data to achieve the research objective, by surveying actual participants of the Surge movement who utilized social media platforms to express their dissatisfaction with Coca-Cola's decision to delete Surge and who, in reality, not only experienced a brand deletion, but also participation in a BRM, and the final resurrection of their beloved brand. The constructs, the theory, and the sample differentiate this research from the past research work done in this field and add value to the marketing literature. In the next two sections, we present a conceptual framework explicating the drivers of social media activism in the context of

BRMs (see Fig. 1) as well as hypothesize the relationships between the constructs in this framework.

Psychological reactance

According to the Psychological Reactance Theory (PRT), psychological reactance is "the motivational state that is hypothesized to occur when a freedom is eliminated or threatened with elimination" (Brehm and Brehm 2013, 37). Freedom is defined as "a belief that one can engage in a particular behavior" (Brehm and Brehm 2013, 35), whereas threat to freedom is defined as "Given that a person believes he or she has a specific freedom, any force on the individual that makes it more difficult for him or her to exercise the freedom constitutes a threat to it." (Brehm and Brehm 2013, 30). When individuals perceive a threat of losing their freedom of action or choice, they are motivated to restore that eliminated freedom (Brehm and Brehm 2013; Dillard and Shen 2005). Some examples of threat to freedom include pressure to comply, punishment for noncompliance, enforcing restrictive laws, and shortage of products (Algesheimer et al. 2005; Brehm and Brehm 2013; Martin 2002; Mazis et al. 1973). In essence, there are four elements involved in PRT which are modeled based on an order of occurrence (Rosenberg and Siegel 2018): (1) freedom, (2) threat to freedom, (3) psychological reactance, and (4) restoration of freedom (Dillard and Shen 2005). In the context of brand deletion, (1) freedom represents consumers' freedom of choice to buy the brand they love whereas a (2) threat to this freedom is experienced when that brand is deleted. So, when consumers' freedom to buy and consume their favorite brand is threatened due to brand deletion, they experience (3) psychological reactance to this decision made by the company, i.e., a motivational state to (4) do something to restore the lost freedom or bring back the deleted brand.

Assuming that an individual has freedom, the most proximal cause of reactance presented in past literature is a perceived threat to that individual's freedom (Brehm 1966; Dillard and Shen 2005; Mazis et al. 1973; Rosenberg and Siegel 2018). The more the number of freedoms threatened, the more important the freedom to the individual, and the higher the severity of the threat to an individual's freedom,

Fig. 1 Conceptual framework of drivers to engage in social media activism for brand resurrection
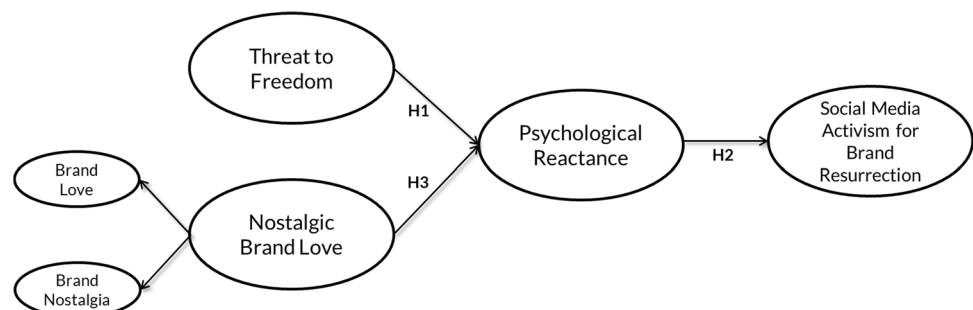
the higher is the arousal of psychological reactance (Rosenberg and Siegel 2018). Thus,

H1 Threat to freedom (caused by brand deletion) is positively associated with psychological reactance.

According to the PRT, this psychological reactance enables consumers to restore the threatened freedom directly by performing the restricted act or indirectly by (a) an increase in the liking for the threatened action or choice, (b) disparagement of the source of the threat, (c) social implication, (d) exercising a different freedom, and/or denial of the existence of the threat (Brehm and Brehm 2013; Dillard and Shen 2005; Rains 2013). Thus, in the case of brand deletion, when consumers' freedom of buying and consuming the brand is threatened, psychological reactance motivates these consumers to engage in activism (BRMs) to (a) directly restore that lost freedom by inducing the company to bring the brand back in the market and (b) indirectly restore the lost freedom by using activism as a means to disparage or criticize the company (source of the threat) for the brand deletion decision. And today, with the help of Internet technologies and Web 2.0 tools, consumers have resorted to online activism due to the benefits of speed, convenience, spontaneity, participation without geographic boundaries, ease of mobilization, efficiency in real-time communications, and information sharing (Albinsson and Perera 2013). Many consumers have utilized social media for facilitating their brand resurrection activism movements as seen in examples discussed above. Thereby,

H2 Psychological reactance is positively associated with participation in social media activism for brand resurrection.

Brand love and brand nostalgia

Brand love is defined as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006, 81). Brand love is an important element of consumer-brand relationships and influences satisfaction and brand loyalty (Fournier 1998; Rauschnabel and Ahuvia 2014; Roy et al. 2013). When consumers love a brand, they feel passion and attachment for the brand, evaluate the brand positively, express their love for the brand, are willing to pay a price premium, engage positively with the brand, integrate the brand with their self-identity, forgive the brand's mistakes, as well as feel pain from separation with their beloved brand (Batra et al. 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Bagozzi et al 2017; Junaid et al. 2020; Rahman et al. 2021). When a brand is deleted and not available to consumers anymore (brand-self separation), they feel angry and distressed, as their freedom of choice to buy and consume their beloved brand is threatened, thus causing

psychological reactance, a motivational state to restore that threatened freedom.

In addition to brand love, brand nostalgia also plays an important role in consumer-brand relationships (Holak et al. 2007). Holbrook and Schindler (1991, 330) defined nostalgia as "a preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favorable affect) toward objects (people, places, or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable, or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood, or even before birth)". Brand nostalgia comprises emotions that creates a bond between an individual and a brand because of the brand's association with past fond memories (Shields and Johnson 2016). Nostalgia can influence emotions (Wildschut et al. 2014; Hwang and Hyun 2013), brand choices and purchase intentions (Chou and Singhal 2017; Holak et al. 2007; Muehling et al. 2014; Sierra and McQuitty 2007), brand extension evaluation (Jun et al. 2022), engagement in online brand communities (Davari et al. 2017; Koetz and Tankersley 2016; Gilal et al. 2020), materialism (Rindfleisch et al. 2000), revival and relaunch of old brands also known as retromarketing (Brown et al. 2003a, b; Cattaneo and Guerini 2012; Närvänen and Goulding 2016), and consumer identities and beliefs (Davari et al. 2017). Additionally, the use of nostalgic ads and endorsers has been shown to impact participation in BRMs (Gilal et al. 2020, 2021). When a nostalgic brand is deleted, consumers cherish the brand even more, feel separation distress (Vredeveld and Kara 2022), and experience anger toward the entity that took the brand away from them (Davari et al. 2017). Similarly, we propose that when consumers feel nostalgic about a deleted brand, it stirs up psychological reactance because they miss the brand that was once an important part of their lives.

On further deep diving into the brand love and brand nostalgia research, we realized that the constructs are intermingled with one another and not completely distinct. On searching further, we found literature supporting the relationship between nostalgia and brand attachment (e.g., Li et al. 2019; Vredeveld and Kara 2022) and nostalgia and brand loyalty (Demirbag-Kaplan et al. 2015). Furthermore, Filieri et al. 2021 propounded that tourists use nostalgic feelings to express their love for a destination.

To study the relationship between these two constructs in more detail, in addition to marketing literature, we cast a wider net into understanding the general constructs of love and nostalgia. In this process, we found a construct called "saudade" (Neto 2019; Silva 2012). Saudade is an emotion that does not have an equivalent term in English (Feldman 2001). Saudade (pronounced as **soh**-dah-j*uh*) is a "*nostalgic longing to be near again to something or someone that is distant, or that has been loved and then lost; "the love that remains"*. Grounded in this literature, we introduce a new second-order reflective construct called Nostalgic Brand

Love that is reflected in brand love and brand nostalgia. This new construct adds value to the marketing literature where there is hardly any research explaining the relationship between brand love and brand nostalgia. We define nostalgic brand love as a nostalgic longing to buy and consume a beloved brand that is not available anymore.

H3 Nostalgic Brand Love is positively associated with psychological reactance.

These hypotheses and relationships between constructs are illustrated in Fig. 1 which represents a conceptual framework of drivers to engage in social media activism for brand resurrection.

Method

Data collection

Data were collected using an online survey administered using Qualtrics to the members of the Surge movement, a Facebook brand community engaged in a BRM. The Surge movement members were ideal respondents for this survey because they had participated in a real BRM to bring back their beloved Surge back to life. Surge was a popular citrus soda launched by Coca-Cola in 1997. Surge fans were outraged when Coca-Cola discontinued the brand in 2003. They attempted to convince Coca-Cola to bring it back using a Save Surge website and online petitions. Later, the Facebook fan page feature gave Surge fans an apt opportunity and medium to communicate with Coca-Cola. In 2011, the Surge Movement Facebook community was established to fight for Surge's resurrection. Over 352,000 members participated in a variety of social media activism efforts such as posting, commenting, uploading, sharing, and re-sharing the "Bring Back Surge" message on Facebook as well as inviting friends to join the movement and using other online avenues to propagate the message. Ultimately, Coca-Cola was compelled to bring Surge back into the market due to the social media activism initiatives of these Surge activists.

The online survey link was shared by the administrators and founders of the movement on the community's Facebook page. The respondents were offered an incentive to participate in the survey in the form of a drawing of ten gift cards of $30 each. The survey introduction also stated the participation criteria as follows: *"By clicking on the ">>" button below, you acknowledge that you are eligible to participate in this study (i.e., you are a surge movement member, and you are at least 18 years of age) as well as agree to participate in it.*

A total of 815 responses were received of which 499 usable responses were retained after data cleaning. Responses that were incomplete, straight-lined, or completed in an unrealistically short time were removed from further analysis. These 499 respondents had an average age of 32 years, 56.6% were males, 79.75% were White/Caucasian, 73.8% were educated with at least some college degree, 68.3% were employed full-time, and 47.4% earned a household income in the range of $30,000–$69,999.

Measures

The respondents were asked questions about brand love for Surge using an 11-item measurement scale adapted from Bagozzi et al. (2017). Thereafter, they answered questions related to how nostalgic they feel about Surge. This was measured using a six-item Likert scale adapted from Pascal et al. (2002). Further, they were asked to think of the time when Surge was discontinued, and answer questions related to the threat they felt to their freedom of choice and the resulting psychological reactance. These were measured using a four-item scale and an eight-item scale adapted from Dillard and Shen (2005) and Lindsey (2005). Next, they answered questions about their participation in the Surge Movement. This *social media activism for brand resurrection* (SMA-BR) construct was measured using a ten-item scale adapted from Yankah et al. (2017) and based on the actual activism efforts undertaken by these Surge fans. For example, (1) Post on the Surge Movement Facebook page, (2) Invite friends on social media to join the Surge Movement on Facebook, and (3) Post on Coca-Cola's Facebook page demanding to bring back Surge. Finally, they answered demographic questions related to age, sex, education, occupation, and so on.

Findings

The data were analyzed in several stages using SPSS 27 and Structural Equation Modeling in AMOS 28. Descriptive statistics and correlations between the constructs are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Measurement model

First, the measurement model was analyzed to ensure the reliability and validity of the measures used. While conducting the first round of measurement model validity analysis, with brand love and brand nostalgia as two separate constructs, it became clear that there were discriminant validity issues between brand love and brand nostalgia. Despite measuring the two constructs with established scales, they did not show independence from each other, as we suspected

Table 1 Estimated coefficients from CFA (measurement model)

Construct and items	Mean	SD	Loadings
Brand love (Bagozzi et al. 2017)			
5-point Likert Scale (1 → not at all and 5 → very much)			
To what extent do you feel that…			
You find yourself thinking about Surge	3.53	1.20	0.73
Surge keeps popping into my head	3.77	1.03	0.69
You desire to drink Surge	4.05	1.05	0.81
Surge seems to fit your own tastes perfectly	4.07	1.03	0.78
Surge is fun	4.01	1.07	0.78
Surge is exciting	3.98	1.06	0.78
You will be drinking Surge for a long time	3.94	1.06	0.75
Surge will be part of your life for a long time to come	3.87	1.05	0.74
Brand Nostalgia (Pascal et al. 2002)			
5-point Likert Scale (1 → not at all and 5 → very much)			
To what extent do you feel that…			
Surge reminds you of the past	4.10	1.03	0.83
Surge is a happy reminder of the past	4.11	1.04	0.84
Surge takes you to the times when you were younger	4.11	0.99	0.85
Surge helps you recall pleasant memories	4.04	1.02	0.83
Surge makes you want to go back to those good old days again	4.03	1.07	0.75
Surge makes you feel nostalgic	4.11	1.02	0.86
Threat to Freedom (Dillard and Shen 2005)			
5-point Likert Scale (1 → Strongly disagree and 5 → Strongly agree)			
When Surge was discontinued in 2003, you felt that …			
Coca-Cola tried to make a decision for you	3.63	1.23	0.76
Coca-Cola threatened your freedom to choose	3.40	1.28	0.77
Coca-Cola pressured you to buy Surge alternatives, which you did not want to buy	3.58	1.19	0.73
Coca-Cola restricted your freedom of choice	3.60	1.25	0.85
Psychological Reactance (Dillard & Shen 2005; Massi Lindsey 2005)			
5-point Likert Scale (1 → Strongly disagree and 5 → Strongly agree)			
When Surge was discontinued in 2003…			
You felt sad	3.91	1.10	0.81
You felt angry	3.79	1.12	0.77
You felt annoyed	3.95	1.10	0.82
You did not like that Surge will not be available anymore	4.09	1.08	0.76
You felt irritated	3.88	1.12	0.82
You felt aggravated	3.81	1.23	0.80
You dislike Coca-Cola's decision	4.10	1.07	0.78
Social media activism for brand resurrection (Yankah et al. 2017)			
5-point Likert Scale (1 → Never and 5 → Daily)			
After Surge was discontinued in 2002 and later you joined the Surge Movement, how often (on an average) did you do the following?			
Post on the Surge Movement Facebook page	2.91	1.18	0.82
Comment on the Surge Movement Facebook page	3.06	1.11	0.77
Reply to other people's posts on the Surge Movement Facebook page	3.09	1.11	0.78
Repost or re-shared other people's posts on the Surge Movement Facebook page	3.07	1.14	0.77
Encourage others to participate in the Surge Movement	3.20	1.10	0.73
Encourage others on the Surge Movement Facebook page to boycott Coca-Cola	2.72	1.31	0.74
Invite friends on social media to join the Surge Movement on Facebook	3.03	1.34	0.78
Post on Coca-Cola's Facebook page demanding to bring back Surge	2.83	1.21	0.81
Call Coca-Cola's customer call center demanding to bring back Surge	2.80	1.22	0.74

Table 2 Reliability and validity tests

	CR	AVE	MSV	TF	PR	SMA-BR	NBL
TF	0.860	0.606	0.486	**0.779**			
PR	0.923	0.631	0.607	0.697	**0.794**		
SMA-BR	0.929	0.569	0.183	0.428	0.128	**0.754**	
NBL	0.937	0.881	0.607	0.559	0.779	0.106	**0.939**

Square root of the AVEs are in bold on the diagonal.

CR composite reliability, *AVE* average variance extracted, *MSV* maximum shared variance, *TF* threat to freedom, *PR* psychological reactance, *SMA-BR* social media activism for brand resurrection, *NBL* nostalgic brand love

while developing the hypotheses and conceptualizing a second-order construct of nostalgic brand love.

Then, we tested nostalgic brand love as a second-order construct, with brand love and brand nostalgia as contributing first-order factors, for validity and reliability. This included removing items that loaded under 0.70 on their theorized latent factor (Hair et al. 2010). Composite reliabilities were reviewed for all model constructs. All were above the recommended 0.70 (Hair et al. 2010) and ranged from 0.86 (threat to freedom) to 0.94 (nostalgic brand love). All Average Variances Extracted (AVEs) were above 0.50 (ranging from 0.569 to 0.881), and the square roots of all AVEs were greater than the inter-construct correlations (Fornell and Larcker 1981) (see Table 2). Confirmatory factor analysis indicated a good fit for the measurement model ($c2 = 1493.290$, $p < 0.000$, $df = 552$; $c2/df = 2.71$; CFI $= 0.93$; TLI $= 0.92$; RMSEA $= 0.059$; and SRMR $= 0.083$). Next, common method bias was tested using a one-factor test (Harman 1976; Podsakoff 2003; Fuller et al. 2016) and no common method bias was found. The measurement model supported the conceptualization of this second-order construct of nostalgic brand love.

Structural model

After the measurement model was evaluated, the structural model was tested while controlling for several factors (participant age, gender, income, employment, and education). The global fit statistics ($c2 = 1683.892$, $p < 0.000$, $df = 708$; $c2/df = 2.38$; CFI $= 0.92$; TLI $= 0.92$; RMSEA $= 0.053$; and SRMR $= 0.075$) indicate a good fit of the overall model (Browne and Cudeck 1993; Kline 2011). The model's chi-square value showed poor model fit; however, it is

susceptible to large sample sizes. Thus, the chi-square divided by degrees of freedom ($c2/df$) is a more appropriate test for this large sample size study. In this study, $c2/df = 2.38$, which is below 3 and considered to be a good fit (Hu and Bentler 1999). Of all the control variables, only age was significant. In general, younger social media activists possess a greater orientation of engaging in social media activism behaviors as compared to older social media activists (Yankah et al. 2017). This explains why the control variable, age, is significant in this study as the younger Surge fans participated more frequently and actively in the Surge movement activities as compared to the older Surge fans.

Hypothesis testing

Overall, the model and all hypotheses are well supported (see Fig. 1 and Table 3). Path analyses show that psychological reactance has a significant positive impact on social media activism for brand resurrection (H2, $\beta = 0.27$, $p = 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.09$). We also found support for the positive relationship between threat to freedom and psychological reactance (H1, $\beta = 0.41$, $p = 0.000$). Additionally, H3 is supported with nostalgic brand love also positively influencing psychological reactance (H3, $\beta = 0.50$, $p = 0.000$). Furthermore, nostalgic brand love and threat to freedom explain 73% of the variance in psychological reactance ($R^2 = 0.73$).

Post hoc mediation analysis

A post hoc mediation test was conducted to determine whether psychological reactance fully mediated the relationship between nostalgic brand love and social media activism for brand resurrection as well as threat to freedom

Table 3 Hypotheses results

Hypotheses		Supported	Strength, *p* value
H1	Threat to freedom (caused by brand deletion) is positively associated with psychological reactance	Yes	0.41, $p < 0.001$
H2	Psychological reactance is positively associated with social media activism for brand resurrection	Yes	0.27, $p < 0.001$
H3	Nostalgic Brand Love is positively associated with psychological reactance	Yes	0.50, $p < 0.001$

and social media activism for brand resurrection. Two models were run for each pair; one included only a fully mediated path from nostalgic brand love (and threat to freedom) to social media activism for brand resurrection through psychological reactance, while the other contained a direct path from nostalgic brand love (and threat to freedom) to social media activism for brand resurrection. For nostalgic brand love, the direct path was not significant ($\beta = 0.05$, $p = 0.530$); thus, psychological reactance fully mediates the relationship between nostalgic brand love and social medial activism. However, for threat to freedom, both the direct ($\beta = 0.62$, $p = 0.000$) and mediated ($\beta = 0.098$ $p = 0.000$) paths were significant, thus indicating a partial mediation.

Discussion

Nostalgic brand love

Both brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006) and nostalgia (Holbrook and Schindler 1991) have been shown to have strong effects on consumer attitudes and behaviors. Researchers have investigated the influence of different types of nostalgia on self-identity, brand loyalty, and brand attachment (Demirbag-Kaplan et al. 2015; Li et al. 2019; Vredeveld and Kara 2022). There is research explaining the role of brand love in consumer-brand relationships (Albert and Merunka 2013; Fetscherin and Heinrich 2014), brand communities (Coelho et al. 2019; Lee and Hsieh 2022), and word-of-mouth (Karjaluoto et al. 2016; Rahman et al. 2021). However, little research (e.g., Filieri et al. 2021 has explored the impact both constructs have when considered together. An important contribution of this research is the investigation of both these variables within the context of social media led BRMs. In this process, a new higher-level construct of nostalgic brand love is uncovered and conceptualized.

Consumers feel love for certain brands, but when that brand is discontinued, this love intertwines with their memories. The love remains, but it is highly correlated with the nostalgia they start to feel for the brand and its significance in their lives. When Surge was introduced into the market many Surge fans were teens, a time in one's life when lifelong memories are established. Surge played a significant role during this crucial developmental time in their lives. Many remember the "good times" when they had a Surge in hand while playing video games, eating pizza with friends, or bonding over a shared love of a cool green soft drink. When Coca-Cola deleted Surge, these fans missed their much-loved soda. This longing for a lost beloved brand is what we define as nostalgic brand love.

The impact of nostalgic brand love and threat to freedom on psychological reactance

Past research (Davari et al 2017; Gilal et al. 2020) on brand resurrection has investigated the role of different utilities, brand superiority, and nostalgic brand ads in motivating participation in BRMs. Gilal et al. (2020) also ground their study in psychological reactance theory. However, the theory and related constructs are not included in the model they propose and test. In this research, we not only ground the conceptual framework in psychological reactance theory but also hypothesize and test the impact of both nostalgic brand love and threat to freedom on a consumer's psychological reactance when their favorite brand is deleted. Given that the love of the brand is intertwined with a consumer's fond memories of youth, such an impact is understandable. By taking away Surge, Coca-Cola threatened the freedom of Surge fans of buying and consuming their cherished beverage as well as triggered their nostalgic brand love such that it further led to psychological reactance.

Psychological reactance and social media activism for brand resurrection

This research explicates the mediating role of psychological reactance in the context of social media activism for brand resurrection. We found that psychological reactance fully mediates the relationship between nostalgic brand love and social media activism as well as partially mediates the relationship between threat to freedom and social media activism. This explains that consumers engage in social media activism not just due to their nostalgic love for that brand but because of the psychological reactance they experience (due to nostalgic brand love) when their preferred brand is taken away from them. The threat they experience to their freedom of choice due to brand deletion influences their participation in social media activism efforts directly as well as indirectly due to psychological reactance.

In summary, this research highlights the factors that motivate consumers to engage in social media activism endeavors when a beloved brand is taken away from them. When Surge fans felt that they would no longer be able to purchase their favorite drink (threat to freedom), felt a yearning to consume that beloved beverage (nostalgic brand love), and were sad and angry (psychological reactance), they were compelled to act and participate in a social media led BRM (social media activism). As psychological reactance theory asserts (Dillard and Shen 2005; Rains 2013), freedom threatened Surge fans leapt into action by increasing and vocalizing their support of Surge and eventually succeeded in getting Surge back into their lives.

Implications

Theoretical implications

This research investigates the role of nostalgic brand love, threat to freedom, and psychological reactance in participation in social media activism movements to resurrect deleted brands. It contributes to the brand management and marketing literature in the following four ways: (1) applying psychological reactance theory to social media BRMs, (2) engaging participants of an actual BRM, (3) introducing nostalgic brand love, and (4) demonstrating the mediating role of psychological reactance.

First, it makes a theoretical contribution to the literature on brand deletion, brand resurrection, and social media activism by applying the psychological reactance theory to explain the drivers of participation in social media led BRMs. Psychological reactance has been considered as a guiding theory in the context of BRMs using nostalgic ads (Gilal et al 2020); however, the four elements of the PRT were not investigated and the mediation effect of psychological reactance was not studied either. This study highlights psychological reactance and its mediating role between social media activism for brand resurrection and two of its key antecedents (threat to freedom and nostalgic brand love).

Second, a strength of this research is the data used to investigate the relationships proposed in the conceptual framework. Earlier studies (Davari et al 2017; Gilal et al 2020, 2021) collected survey data as a part of a student class project and respondents were asked to think of their favorite brands that are no longer available in the market. The survey data in this research, however, were collected from participants of an actual BRM called the Surge movement. These Surge fans were an apt sample for this research because they had experienced the loss of their beloved brand, felt the nostalgic brand love and the psychological reactance, and engaged in a social media activism movement to bring Surge back in the market.

Third, this research conceptualizes a new second-order reflective construct called nostalgic brand love, i.e., a nostalgic longing to buy and consume a beloved brand that is not available anymore. Previous research has investigated brand love (Batra et al. 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Bagozzi et al 2017; Junaid et al. 2020; Rahman et al. 2021) and brand nostalgia (Shields and Johnson 2016; Wildschut et al. 2014; Hwang and Hyun 2013; Chou and Singhal 2017; Holak et al. 2007; Muehling et al. 2014; Sierra and McQuitty 2007; Davari et al. 2017; Koetz and Tankersley 2016; Gilal et al. 2020) separately. This research investigates both constructs in the same theoretical model and also integrates them to introduce a second-order construct

of nostalgic brand love. Thus, this study is one of the first to identify this higher order construct reflected in the established constructs of brand love and brand nostalgia. It is a value-add to the marketing literature where there is little research investigating the relationship between these two important but highly correlated constructs (e.g., Filieri et al. 2021). The novel construct of nostalgic brand love lays the foundation for numerous future research studies involving nostalgia and love for brands, products, ads, memories, and places.

Fourth, this research extends the existing literature on brand resurrection by uncovering the mediating role of psychological reactance in the context of participation in social media activism initiatives related to brand resurrection. Psychological reactance fully mediates the relationship between nostalgic brand love and social media activism while partially mediates the relationship between threat to freedom and social media activism. Previous studies (Dillard and Shen 2005; Shoenberger et al. 2021) highlight the mediating effect psychological reactance has on people's attitudes. This study, however, takes it a step further by considering the mediation effect of psychological reactance on two key antecedents (threat to freedom and nostalgic brand love) and their relationship with social media activism for brand resurrection.

Practical implications

The findings of this research hold practical implications for brand and marketing managers. Brand deletions have now become commonplace as firms realize the importance and benefits of a portfolio comprising strong brands as well as the value of a brand deletion strategy for optimum utilization of resources invested in brand management (Kumar 2003; Shah 2015; Varadarajan et al. 2006). Findings from this research can facilitate a brand deletion decision. Though deleting brands have strategic and financial gains for a firm, if the deletion process is not implemented well, it has the potential to bring consumer retaliation and backlash (Shah 2017a). So, when brand managers are deciding to delete a brand for which consumers could feel nostalgic brand love, they need to be prepared for psychological reactance from these consumers. Moreover, these consumers could also participate in a BRM on social media, putting pressure on the firm to relaunch the brand. Thus, using the findings of this research could help brand managers decide whether deletion is the best strategy for such brands, or they should work toward reviving the brand. This could help prevent disruption arising from the deletion decision. If they decide to delete such brands, they would be prepared to expect reactance and activism from consumers.

Once the brand is deleted and managers find themselves facing waves of angry consumers demanding their brand

back, managers could alleviate the situation by relaunching the brand temporarily (e.g., Crystal Pepsi). However, if the retaliation by loyal consumers is strong and persistent, managers may have to respond to consumers' activism efforts by resurrecting the brand, (e.g., Surge). This research confirms that the stronger the consumers feel nostalgic love for the defunct brand, the greater their psychological reactance and the more active their participation in social media activism initiatives. This tells brand managers to consider these drivers in their decision of whether to resurrect the brand temporarily, permanently, or not relaunch it at all.

Another aspect that managers should consider while deleting a brand is whether the deletion comes across to consumers as a threat to their freedom of buying and consuming their beloved brand. If it does, the deletion decision could trigger psychological reactance and thereby consumer backlash through a BRM. However, if managers planned the brand deletion such that they can offer a replacement or a better alternative to the brand being deleted, the consumers may not perceive a threat to their freedom and thus not experience psychological reactance. This could help prevent retaliation and a BRM.

Finally, comprehending and considering these consumer-centric variables will help brand managers make a sound decision about relaunching a deleted brand in the market such that the relaunch not only brings back the nostalgic consumer and fan base but also a boost in sales and profits of the resurrected brand.

Limitations and future research

One of the strengths of this research is the sample. We collected data from participants of a real BRM who had experienced the loss of a beloved brand, had missed it, and then fought to bring it back. However, this also meant meticulously considering the length of the survey and time to complete it to ensure that Surge fans would be willing to participate and complete the survey once started. Some potential moderators that may influence participation in social media activism in the context of brand resurrection that were not studied in this research could be investigated in the future. For example, future research could study the impact of activism orientation (Yankah et al. 2017) in social media led BRMs where activism behaviors range from low-risk to high-risk, passive to active, institutionalized to unconventional (Corning and Myers 2002). Further, a drive to participate in social media activism for brand resurrection could also be influenced by personality traits, culture, and demographic variables such as age, sex, family life stage, and socio-economic status. This research signaled toward the control variable, age, influencing social media activism for brand resurrection. Thus, future research may study

differences across these demographic, cultural, and psychographic group differences from a diverse sample.

It is also important to note that the data were collected using self-reported measures in a cross-sectional survey. Future research studies could use longitudinal studies, netnography, or social listening methods. Also, Surge Movement was conducted primarily on Facebook. It would be interesting to study activism movements that use multiple social networking platforms and the role played by their features in facilitating social media activism efforts.

In conclusion, this research, grounded in the Psychological Reactance Theory, proposed and tested a conceptual framework elucidating the factors that drive an individual to participate in a social media led BRM. Findings suggest that when a much-loved brand is deleted, nostalgic brand love and threat to freedom felt by the loyal consumers of that brand trigger psychological reactance which in turn urges them to engage in social media activism to compel the company to resurrect the deleted brand. Psychological reactance plays a mediating role. Brand managers can use these findings to facilitate the brand deletion and resurrection decision-making and implementation process so that the company does not lose its valued customer base.

Declarations

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