
Editorial

Consumer brand relationships: A research landscape

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ABSTRACT This article sheds light on the current state of research on consumer brand relationships (CBR) and presents two distinct taxonomies, respectively, theoretical frameworks that help to classify CBR research. First, the 'brand connection matrix' that classifies brand relationships into functional-based (low versus high) and emotional-based (low versus high) connections to brands. This framework leads us with a 2×2 matrix consisting of four quadrants, each of which are discussed. Second, the 'brand feeling matrix' classifies consumer's relationships with brands by grouping them into the strengths of relationships (weak versus strong) and the consumers' feeling toward the brand (positive versus negative). The latter taxonomy leads to another 2×2 matrix where each of the four quadrants is discussed. Finally, this article discusses the papers in this special issue and applies the two frameworks by grouping the papers into the corresponding quadrants.

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INTRODUCTION

Blackston's (1993) book chapter *Beyond Brand Personality: Building Brand Relationships*, later Fajer and Schouten's (1995) article *Breakdown and Dissolution of Person-Brand Relationships* and finally Fournier's (1998) paper on *Consumers and their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research*

mark cornerstones of the research area on consumer brand relationships (CBR), which celebrated its 20th year anniversary in 2013. This showcases that CBR research has become an established but yet growing research area. We applaud the previously mentioned researchers for their contribution to this important and exciting research area.

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Since then, one has seen a significant number of conference papers, journal articles, book chapters and books (e.g. MacInnis *et al*, 2009; Fournier *et al*, 2012) published.

This special issue in the *Journal of Brand Management* is dedicated to the topic of CBR and marks the first ever published special issue in an academic journal. It contains a collection of the best papers presented at the *3rd International Consumer Brand Relationships Conference* (www.consumer-brand-relationships.org) held on 26–28 September 2013 at Rollins College, Winter Park, FL, USA. The increasing popularity of the conference is reflected by an ever growing number of submissions from all around the globe resulting in more than 30 presentations from at least 17 countries. The presentations of the 3rd International Consumer Brand Relationships Conference covered a variety of topics related to the main theme including research on brand love and anthropomorphism, brand authenticity, brand passion or brand relationship quality (BRQ), just to name a few. This special issue features five articles that were selected after several peer-review rounds. In the further course of this paper we present a taxonomy that helps to classify CBR research in terms of the functional and emotional focus of CBR and another taxonomy that classifies CBR research in terms of strength of brand relationships and valence of brand attitudes.

BACKGROUND AND TAXONOMY

CBR research is interdisciplinary and complex (Fetscherin *et al*, 2014). The editors performed a meta-analytic literature review and identified almost 400 journal articles published on this topic in the last decades (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2014). They found that the journals fall into the following disciplines (from most to least important): business (including marketing), management, applied psychology, communications and even hospitality, leisure, sports and tourism research. Since the original work by

Blackstone (1993), Fajer and Schouten (1995) and Fournier (1998), different streams of research have emerged focusing on aspects such as the assessment of the relationship between different brand constructs like brand loyalty, brand trust, brand personality and brand commitment; research about brand love; brand communities; brand cult and culture, research assessing consumers' self and brands; or brand relationships and storytelling. As one can see, CBR research is multidisciplinary, multidimensional and multi-conceptual with a variety of concepts, constructs and underlying theories borrowed from different fields such as marketing, psychology, sociology, anthropology or neuroscience (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2014). Each of the five papers in this special issue discusses and covers one or a combination of the above described research streams.

Brand connection matrix

Inspired by the *Hierarchy of Effects Model* (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961), the *Relationship Investment Model* (Rusbult, 1980), Keller's (2001) *Customer-Based Brand Equity Model* as well as drawing from theories of interpersonal attraction and social exchange, one can classify the different brand relationship concepts into relationships based on functional connections, emotional connections or a combination of both. Function connections are achieved when only functional needs are met. Solely emotional connections result if only emotional needs of the consumers are met. This leads us with a 2×2 matrix consisting of four quadrants as illustrated in Figure 1.

Quadrant (1): High functional but low emotionally connected consumers are *functionally invested* to brands. Hence, they are satisfied with the brand in terms of performance (that is, functional connection) but shop around (that is, emotionally not connected). They are not as price sensitive as 'uninvested' consumers (as they appreciate the brand in a functional way) but if there is

| | Emotional Connection (Feeling/Affective) | |
|---|---|-----------------------------------|
| | Low | High |
| Functional Connection (Thinking/Cognitive) | High | (1) “functionally invested” |
| | Low | (2) “fully invested” |
| | | (3) “un-invested” |
| | | (4) “emotionally invested” |

Figure 1: Brand connection matrix.

a better deal in terms of value proposition (price versus functionality) they might switch. Using in this case the interpersonal relationship metaphor, consumers see the brand as a *colleague*.

Quadrant (2): Consumers with a high functional and high emotional connections to brands are those who are *fully invested* to brands. In this relationship, consumers ‘love’ their brand and positive outcomes can occur such as high brand loyalty, an extreme positive word of mouth, like brand evangelism or turning a blind eye after service failures. Consumers with such relationship investments to brands are more loyal, switch less likely to other brands, are willing to pay a price premium or are less price sensitive and have higher brand forgiveness (Donavan *et al*, 2012). Using again the interpersonal relationship metaphor, in this case, consumers see the brands as *family* and/or part of themselves.

Quadrant (3): Low functional and low emotional connected consumers are *uninvested* to brands and consumers see brands as *acquaintance*, if we would use an interpersonal relationship metaphor to describe this brand relationship. They exhibit no brand loyalty and they are mostly price sensitive and brands are subject to the competitive environment. Price premiums are hardly possible. Those brands have a high risk of brand switching from consumers and brands need to either fulfill consumers’ function or emotional needs to deepen their connection to consumers.

Quadrant (4): Consumers with a low functional but high emotional connection

to brands are those who are *emotionally invested* to brands. They like the brands mostly for affective reasons even if the brand does not perform compared with what consumers need or want or the brand performs less good than competitor brands (for example, a legendary motorbike but with ‘outdated’ technology). In this case, the brand does not have all the functions or features consumers are looking for or need. In some instances, the consumer can forgive these functional shortcomings or the consumer is willing to have less functionality. In this case, the emotional needs compensate functional limitations. However, this ‘emotionally invested’ relationship might last only for a while and brands need to address these shortcomings. Consumers see brands as a *friend* but this friendship can end up as either a committed relationship or *family* (top-right quadrant), or transit to a relationship with low emotional connection if frustrations of functional limitation occur over time, or the relationship will even be terminated or ‘divorce’ (Sussan *et al*, 2012).

As the *Hierarchy of Effects Model* (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961) suggests, only when the cognitive (thinking) and affective (feeling) connection exist, consumers buy the product (conative or behavior). One major criticism of Lavidge and Steiner’s (1961) model is the issue, that it is assumed to be ‘hierarchical’ and that consumers move from one to the other stage. Our framework addresses this gap as it allows a combination of both.

Brand feeling matrix

Our second model focuses on the emotional (affective/feeling) dimension of CBR. Inspired by Storbacka *et al* (1994), one way to classify the different concepts of CBR is to group them into the strengths of relationships (weak versus strong) and the consumers' feeling toward the brand (negative versus positive). This gives us a second 2×2 matrix. For illustrative purposes we provide for each quadrant example(s) with an appropriate brand construct. Please note that both dimensions represent a continuum from weak to strong and from negative (to neutral) to positive. The lines are for illustrative purposes only.

Quadrant (1): In Quadrant one, consumers have a weak or 'loose' but yet positive feeling toward a brand. Concepts such as brand satisfaction (Bloemer and Kasper, 1995) fall into this quadrant. Also brand satisfaction precedes brand trust and brand loyalty, it does not necessarily need to come along with these outcomes. Many consumers can be satisfied with a product or service brand but do not become loyal or love the brand.

Quadrant (2): Concepts discussed in Quadrant two are those where consumers have strong and positive emotional feelings for brands. Concepts such as brand love (Batra *et al*, 2012) or brand passion (Bauer *et al*, 2007) fall into this quadrant.

Quadrant (3): In Quadrant there are concepts that deal with negative but weak feelings consumers have for brands. Few studies assess those negative feelings. One such study is by Lee *et al* (2009) about anti-consumption and brand avoidance.

Quadrant (4): Concepts discussed in Quadrant four are those where consumers have a strong and negative feeling toward brands. Like the concepts discussed in Quadrant three, very few studies assess the negative feelings consumers have for brands. Aron and Muñiz's (2002) presentation about brand hating websites is one example, as well as more recently Krishnamurthy and

Kucuk's (2009) anti-branding paper or Sussan *et al* (2012) article on brand divorce.

ARTICLES IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Each of the five selected article in this special issue can be classified into quadrants of the previously presented taxonomies of *Brand Connection* and *Brand Feeling Matrix*.

The first article in the special issue is *You're so loveable: Anthropomorphism and brand love* is by Philipp Rauschnabel (Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg) and Aaron Ahuvia (University of Michigan-Dearborn). The authors argue brand love predicts brand loyalty better than conventional attitude models, which rely on the brand's perceived quality. Their study examines the role of anthropomorphism and brand love in defensive marketing strategies. They identify five theoretical mechanisms through which anthropomorphism influences brand love: cognitive fluency, self-extension, category level evaluation, cognitive consistency and self-congruence. Their results show a brand's perceived level of anthropomorphism is an important predecessor of brand love. This paper falls into Quadrant two in Figure 1 and Quadrant two in Figure 2, thus reflecting a high positive emotional CBR.

The second article *The added value of contextual motivations on consumer-brand relationships of self-gifts* is by Marina Carnevale (Fordham University), Ozge Yucel-Aybat (Pennsylvania State University-Harrisburg) and Lauren Block (City University of New York). Their work discusses consumers' engagement in self-gifting purchases, which can be defined as gifts for one's self. The authors argue consumers do so mostly to either reward themselves for an accomplishment or to cheer themselves up after a failure experienced. Therefore, 'reward' and 'compensation' motives underlie consumers' self-gift purchases. In their paper they examine how self-gifts influences CBR. Across two studies, the authors show

| | | Strengths of Brand Relationship | |
|--------------------------|----------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| | | Weak | Strong |
| Feeling Towards Brand | Positive | (1) Brand Satisfaction | (2) Brand Love Brand Passion |
| | Negative | (3) Brand Avoidance | (4) Brand Hate Brand Divorce |

Figure 2: Brand feeling matrix.

consumers have more positive brand evaluations when motives are present than when motives are absent, no matter if the brand is purchased for reward or compensation. This effect is significant specifically for consumers who do not feel connected to the brand. The study results are robust across different product categories (watches versus lollipops) and different respondents (student versus ‘non-student’ sample). Their results suggest companies can target consumers with low self-brand connection more effectively by emphasizing specific motivations to purchase indulgent self-gifts when they design their ad campaigns and brand positioning strategies. This paper falls into Quadrant one in Figure 1 and Quadrant two in Figure 2.

The third article by Don Schultz (Northwestern University), Martin Block (Northwestern University) and Vijay Viswanathan (Northwestern University) entitled *Brand preference being challenged* examines whether consumers’ preference for manufacturer national brands has changed over time. Their article merged the country of origin effect and CBR. Their findings from a large scale survey across multiple product categories indicate a decreasing preference among consumers for manufacturer-originated national brands. Most interestingly, the largest increase of consumers preferences is identified for ‘no preference’ as related to the country of origin effect. Similar results were found when the authors move deeper into three specific categories – cereals, cosmetics and OTC

allergy medications. The authors found consumers increasingly evaluate supposedly different brands in the category as being more and more similar. In other words, brands are operating in a smaller competitive space and consumers are finding it increasingly difficult to differentiate among and between them suggesting that the brands and categories studied show a risk of ‘commoditization’. This paper falls into Quadrant one in Figure 1 and Quadrant three in Figure 2.

The fourth article *How company responses and trusting relationships protect brand equity in times of crises* is by Sabrina Hegner (University of Twente), Ardion Beldad (University of Twente) and Sjarlot Kamphuis op Heghuis (University of Twente). Their article discusses brands are susceptible to various types of crises. Such crisis can have negative consequences for the brand’s reputational and company’s performance and thus the relationship brands can have with consumers. They conducted an experiment to determine whether or not crisis response strategies influence post-crisis brand equity and brand trust on the relationship between crisis response and post-crisis brand equity. Their finding shows that the ways company react to a crisis have an influence on brand equity and brand relationships. Non-response leads to the depreciation of brand equity, and brand trust can serve as a buffer for a brand during a crisis suggesting higher brand forgiveness. This paper falls between Quadrants one and three both, in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

The final article in this special issue is about *Construing loyalty through brand experience: the mediating role of brand relationship quality* by Eliane Cristine Francisco-Maffezzolli (Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Paraná), Elder Semprebom (Universidade Federal do Paraná) and Paulo Henrique Prado (Universidade Federal do Paraná). They investigate the mediating role of the concept of brand relationship quality (BRQ) between brand experience and brand loyalty by a survey-based quantitative approach. Their results reveal brand experience can foster BRQ positively. Hence, brand managers need to invest in CBR to transform brand experiences into loyalty. This paper falls into the link between Quadrants one and two in Figure 1 and Quadrants one and two in Figure 2.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we presented two taxonomies. The first helps to structure current CBR research into functional-based (low versus high) and emotional-based (low versus high) connections that consumers have with brands. The second taxonomy focuses on the emotional (feeling) part of brand relationships that can be grouped by strengths of the relationship (weak versus strong) and the consumers' feeling toward the brand (positive versus negative). By applying these taxonomies to the five papers presented in the special issue, we show their suitability and applicability. With this special issue we also want to inform both scholars and practitioners about recent work in CBR research by offering a number of fresh perspectives on the relevance and value of this research area.

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