

Latest research on brand relationships: introduction to the special issue

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to outline the role of brands as relationship builders and to offer a better understanding of the recent developments and key literature in the area of consumer–brand relationships.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is an editorial based mainly on a literature review on consumer–brand relationships. It uses the sentiment range and passion intensity to position various brand relationship constructs. This work follows the same bibliometric-analysis approach used by Fetscherin and Heinrich (2014) and looked for publications in the Web of Science on brand relationships, with reference to Fournier's (1998) seminal work and data collected for the period between January 2010 and November 2018.

Findings – First, this work presents the key consumer–brand relationship terms and positions the work on brand love, brand like, brand hate, brand dislike and brand indifference. In addition, the bibliometric analysis offers a number of insights into the current state of the academic research in the area of consumer–brand relationships, including a clear indication that the research on consumer–brand relationships is increasing.

Originality/value – This work and the whole special issue together help in the understanding of brands as relationship builders, clearly explaining the continuum from strong positive or negative relationships with brands to no relationship with brands and the current state of research in the area.

Keyword Consumer–brand relationships

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Since the original work by Blackstone (1993), Fajer and Schouten (1995) and Fournier (1998), research about consumers' relationships with brands – with brands being considered active contributors in these relationships – has gained attention from academics and practitioners alike. In recent years, companies have come up with several measures related to brand relationships, such as the *Earned Brand Report*[1] by Edelman, the *Experience Brand Index*[2] by Jack Morton, the *Brand Intimacy Study*[3] by MBLM, the *Brand Affinity Report* by Rakuten, the *Loyalty Report*[4] by Bond Brand Loyalty and the *Brand Passion Report*[5] by NetBase, to mention a few.

This special issue of the *Journal of Product & Brand Management* adds to the ongoing intense academic and practical discussion dedicated to the topic of brands as relationship builders in the consumer market. Given the high level of academic and practical engagement with the topic, it is not surprising that this is the third special issue in the past five years in a journal publishing on consumer–brand relationships. The two previous special issues were published in the *Journal of Brand Management* (2014, Vol. 21, Issue 5) and the *Journal of Product & Brand Management* (2016, Vol. 25, Issue 6). This issue contains 12 papers – half of them stem from the journal's regular submissions and the other half from work originally presented at the 5th International Consumer Brand Relationships Conference (www.consumerbrandrelationship.com), held at the Porto Business School in Portugal in May 2017. At this high-quality international conference, fueled by the increasing popularity of the topic, a growing number of submissions were received from all around the world, and close to 50 papers from about 60 participants from 20 different

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available on Emerald Insight at: www.emeraldinsight.com/1061-0421.htm



Journal of Product & Brand Management
28/2 (2019) 133–139
© Emerald Publishing Limited [ISSN 1061-0421]
[DOI 10.1108/JPBM-12-2018-2167]

Received 16 December 2018

Accepted 17 January 2019

countries were presented. Papers presented at the conference were invited for submission to the *Journal of Product & Brand Management* and went through the journal’s regular review process for inclusion in this special issue.

The contributions in this particular issue further expand our understanding of consumers’ relationships with brands by approaching brands as relationship builders and as relationship facilitators at both the individual and collective levels (Veloutsou, 2009). The overall aim of this editorial is to discuss the state of the current research on brands as relationship builders and to update previous research that covered the development of the literature on brand relationships between 1998 and 2010 (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2014, 2015). The remainder of this editorial presents a brief discussion of the papers included in this special issue.

Brands as relationship builders

Relationships have a valence and are governed by different emotions such as commitment, passion and intimacy, among others (Sternberg, 1986; Alvarez and Fournier, 2016). Consumer–brand relationships are not any different and can be either positive or negative. The sentiments consumers have about brands indicate their opinion, attitude, feelings and the overall likelihood to either support or avoid them. However, having positive or negative views about, or feelings towards, a brand does not mean that consumers will be willing to engage with it and form a relationship. Strong positive or negative brand relationships are governed by passion (Sternberg, 1986). The level of passion that consumers feel for a brand determines the strength of this relationship. Therefore, consumers may form strong or weak relationships with some brands, while they can totally ignore other brands to which they are indifferent. Figure 1 outlines these various types of relationships.

Consumers with passionate feelings towards a brand are expected to engage more actively in relationships with both the brand and with other likeminded individuals around the brand (Veloutsou, 2009; Wallace et al., 2014). At an individual level, consumers will have both strong emotions and willingness to communicate and actively interact with the brand (Veloutsou, 2007). At a collective level, the brand acts as the glue that brings people together in an attempt to either share their brand passion (Wallace et al., 2014) or to join forces to help (Kaufmann et al., 2016) or damage (Hegner et al., 2017b; Zarantonello et al., 2016; Kristal et al., 2018) the brand depending on their sentiment towards it. This happens through the formation of ad-hoc or more organized brand communities.

Figure 1 Consumer–brand relationship on the individual level on the basis of the passion intensity and sentiment range

Sentiment Range	Positive	Brand Love	Brand Liking	Brand Indifference
	Negative	Brand Hate	Brand Disliking	
		Strong	Weak	None
		Passion Intensity		

Positive relationships are the kind of relationships that researchers have primarily focused on. A passionate positive relationship is generally described as brand love (Batra et al., 2012), while a weaker positive relationship as brand like. A positive relationship will lead to a number of positive outcomes at an individual level, such as satisfaction, brand acceptance (Wallace et al., 2014), willingness to co-create (Kaufmann et al., 2016; Kennedy and Guzmán, 2016) and loyalty (Kaufmann et al., 2016). However, strong positive brand relationships can also involve other consumers in the form of spreading positive word of mouth (WoM) (Wallace et al., 2014) to multiple audiences and via various communication channels (Karjaluoto et al., 2016), developing feelings in social groups such as in a family (Iyer et al., 2016) and the willingness to join and contribute in brand communities (Wallace et al., 2014). The potential contribution of these outcomes to the strength of the brand, the willingness to forgive the brand (Hegner et al., 2017a) and a brand’s financial performance are the main reasons that managers are interested in developing and maintaining positive brand relationships and are increasingly engaging in relationship management practices (Dessart et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, the sentiment towards a brand can also be negative, and research on negative relationships needs a lot more attention (Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017). A passionate negative relationship is commonly presented as brand hate (Hegner et al., 2017b; Zarantonello et al., 2016; Zarantonello et al., 2018). Brand hate will make individuals repel the brand and lead to brand divorce (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2014). Weaker negative relationships take the form of brand dislike (Hegner et al., 2017b) and make individuals avoid the brand and lead to brand switching. Negative relationships are expected to lead to negative behavior at an individual level as they increase complaints and reduce patronizing (Zarantonello et al., 2016) and at a public and collective level as they increase negative WoM (Hegner et al., 2017b, Zarantonello et al., 2016), protests (Zarantonello et al., 2016) and incentives to join anti-brand communities (Kristal et al., 2018).

Lack of passion towards a brand (positive or negative) leads to brand indifference. If consumers find a brand to be indifferent, they may decide to avoid developing any kind of relationship with it (Park et al., 2013). Brands that consumers find indifferent are not of their interest; consumers are completely uninterested in interacting with or learning anything about them. These brands have lost the scope of their existence as consumers do not relate to them and see them as commodities. Being unable to develop meaningful connections and relationships with consumers is, next to a negative brand relationship, the most disadvantageous position that a brand may be in (Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester, 2018). Given that, in practical terms, this means the brand has no position whatsoever.

Current state of the research on brand relationships

The importance of the examination of consumer–brand relationships is evidenced by the increasing amount of academic research on this topic. The number of papers

published in various outlets on this topic has significantly increased over the past few years.

The following brief bibliometric analysis supports the claim that researchers have increased their engagement on this topic. Using the same methodology followed by Fetscherin and Heinrich (2014), searching for publications in the Web of Science (WoS) on brand relationships with reference to Fournier's (1998) seminal work provides a number of very interesting insights into the current state of research. Data was collected for the period between January 2010 and November 2018, when this editorial was written. The year 2010 was chosen given that this was the year Fetscherin and Heinrich's (2014) analysis concluded.

Comparing the results for the years 2010-2018 to the results obtained by Fetscherin and Heinrich (2014) for the years 1998-2010 (see Table I), a total of 1129 articles are mentioned in the WoS for 2010-2018 compared to a total of 392 for 1998-2010. The total number of articles in the past 8 years, compared to the first 12 years, has quadrupled. The data also shows that the topic is becoming of interest to other disciplines. Whereas until 2010 86 per cent of the publications were in three disciplines – business, management and psychology – today these three disciplines account for 73 per cent of the publications.

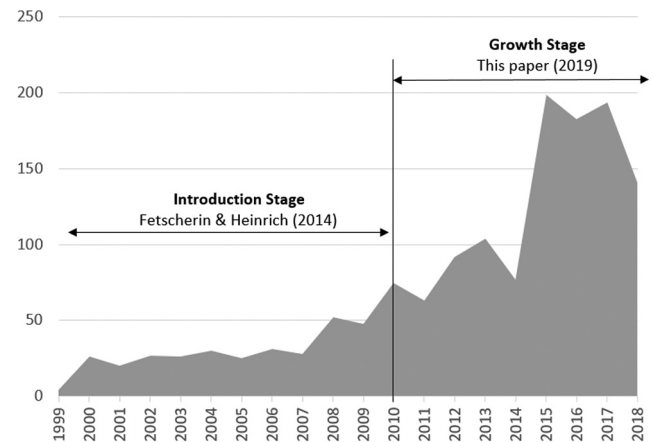
Since 2010 there has been a significant increase in research on the topic (see Figure 2). Compared to when the previous literature review was conducted (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2014), it looks as if this important and relevant topic has evolved from an introduction or early growth stage to a consolidated growth stage. In fact, the average number of articles per year published from 1998 to 2010 was 33, compared to 125 articles per year from 2010 to 2018. The “dip” in 2018 is probably because the search was conducted in November 2018, when not all issues and papers had been published yet for that year.

Table II shows the top 10 journals that have published articles on the topic, as well as their impact measured by the average number of citations received within the 1129 articles from WoS per year (TLC/t), as well as the average number of total citations received from all publications (Wos and others) per year (TGC/t). Of the previous top 10 most productive journals, only 7 remain in the top 10. The 3 journals not previously part of the top 10 are the *Journal of Product & Brand*

Table I Comparison Fetscherin and Heinrich (2014) and JPBM (2019)

	This article (2019)	Fetscherin and Heinrich (2014)
Timeframe	2010-2018	1998-2010
Total number of articles	1,129	392
Average published articles/year	125	33
Total number of authors	2,309	685
Total number of journals	311	101
Main disciplines:		
Business (%)	52	61
Management (%)	14	16
Psychology Applied (%)	7	9
Hospitality (%)	6	3
Communication (%)	3	4

Figure 2 Number of publications per year



Management (# 4), the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* (# 7) and the *Journal of Brand Management* (# 9).

Table III provides a list of the top 10 most cited articles published since 2010 (sorted by the total number of citations mentioned seminal pieces, as the recent publications that have continued defining and shaping the topic.

Finally, when the origin of the 2309 authors that contributed to these publications is examined (Figure 3), additional relevant information is uncovered. In spite of the fact that there are some authors who have published numerous papers, and therefore are counted multiple times, this analysis reveals that the research topic on consumer-brand relationships is becoming increasingly global. While US researchers still represent the largest percentage of authorship (41 per cent), they are followed by researchers from the UK (12 per cent), Australia (8 per cent), Germany (7 per cent) and South Korea, China, Canada and France (6 per cent). The international appeal of the topic further supports its importance and relevance to multiple disciplines.

Current articles in this issue

From the 12 papers of this special issue seven focus on brands as relationship builders at an individual level, while the other five focus on the contribution of brands in the development of relationships at a collective level. From the seven papers focusing on consumer-brand relationships at an individual level, five were originally presented at the 5th International Consumer Brand Relationships Conference, while the other two were regular submissions.

Erifili Papista and Sergios Dimitriadis develop and test a relationship-building model for green brands. With data collected from 848 consumers of three brands of natural cosmetic products they test their hypothesized relationships across the three brands with structural equation modeling. Their results show that confidence benefit has the strongest influence on relationship quality, followed by self-expression and altruism. Relationship quality and satisfaction with the green brand have a significant impact on all three behavioral outcomes. Both environmental consciousness and length of the relationship moderate the hypothesized interrelationships.

Table II Most productive journals since 2010

Journal	Rank	This article (2019)			Fetscherin and Heinrich (2014)			
		P _{CBR}	TLCs/t	TGCs/t	Rank	P _{CBR}	TLCs/t	TGCs/t
<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	1	87	42.27	251.96	4	28	3.29	20.03
<i>Psychology & Marketing</i>	2	57	22.67	105.88	3	34	8.53	29.69
<i>European Journal of Marketing</i>	3	45	7.95	87.58	8	11	0.60	4.10
<i>Journal of Product and Brand Management</i>	4	43	14.57	63.30	n/a			
<i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i>	5	38	34.17	131.66	6	13	4.03	32.91
<i>Journal of Consumer Research</i>	6	36	20.61	118.76	1	46	41.71	219.25
<i>Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services</i>	7	25	3.40	31.62	n/a			
<i>Journal of Brand Management</i>	8	24	2.63	16.68	n/a			
<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	9	21	52.15	215.15	5	25	22.14	161.71
<i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</i>	10	17	10.00	76.43	9	10	2.38	17.17

Notes: P_{CBR} – number of articles published related to consumer–brand relationships; TLC/t – average local citations received per year; TGC/t – average global citations received per year

Table III Most cited articles since 2010

#	Date/Author/Journal	TLC	TLC/t	TGC	TGC/t
1	Batra et al. (2012) Brand Love	120	15.0	304	38.0
2	Park et al. (2010) Brand Attachment and Brand Attitude Strength: Conceptual and Empirical Differentiation of Two Critical Brand Equity Drivers	147	14.7	423	42.3
3	Malär et al. (2011) Emotional Brand Attachment and Brand Personality: The Relative Importance of the Actual and the Ideal Self	74	8.2	226	25.1
4	Fournier and Alvarez (2012) Brands as relationship partners: Warmth, competence, and in-between	37	4.6	62	7.8
5	Tuškej et al. (2013) The role of consumer-brand identification in building brand relationships	32	4.6	105	15.0
6	Park et al. (2013) Attachment-aversion (AA) model of customer-brand relationships	30	4.3	67	9.6
7	Dessart et al. (2015) Consumer engagement in online brand communities: a social media perspective	21	4.2	100	20.0
8	Hollebeek et al. (2014) Consumer Brand Engagement in Social Media: Conceptualization, Scale Development and Validation	25	4.2	260	43.3
9	Kervyn et al. (2012) Brands as intentional agents framework: How perceived intentions and ability can map brand perception	30	3.8	92	11.5
10	Sung and Kim (2010) Effects of Brand Personality on Brand Trust and Brand Affect	37	3.7	97	9.7

Notes: TLC – total local citations received; TGC – total global citations received; TLC/t – average local citations received per year; TGC/t – average global citations received per year

Figure 3 Map of authors



Their work studies in an integrated way relationship benefits and mediators to model the consumer–green brand relationship and provides a better understanding of the antecedents of consumer loyalty towards green brands.

Teresa Fernandes and Mariana Moreira explore the differences in consumer–brand engagement (CBE) according to the functional or emotional nature of consumer-brand relationships and its direct and/or indirect impact on brand loyalty (BL). Additionally, they compare CBE and satisfaction as predictors of BL, considering the two types of consumer-brand relationships. Applying a cross-sectional survey to two independent samples, one set of respondents were asked to recall a brand with which they had a functional relationship, while the other set of respondents were asked to consider a brand with which they had an emotional relationship. To test their research hypotheses, they developed a causal model using structural equation modeling. Their results validate CBE as a three-dimensional construct, stronger for emotional than functional brand relationships, and show its significant direct and indirect impact on BL. They also prove that the effects of CBE on BL, directly or indirectly through satisfaction, are stronger for emotional relationships, while satisfaction is a stronger direct predictor of BL for functional brand relationships. An earlier version of this paper was presented at

the 5th International Consumer Brand Relationships Conference.

Fujun Hou, Muhammad Junaid, Khalid Hussain and Ali Kirmani determine the impact on brand love of consumption experience at the dimensional level and analyze whether brand love mediates consumption experience and customer engagement in the context of Generation M. Through structural equation modeling using MPlus, they analyzed data from 265 Muslim smart phone users that responded to a structured questionnaire. Their findings indicate that hedonic pleasure and escapism, directly, while flow, challenge and learning, indirectly, affect brand love, and that brand love mediates the relationship between consumption experience and customer engagement. Their study provides insights into Generation M's consumption experience and suggests ways to supplement their love for the brand and engage them in gainful relationships.

Francielle Frizzo, Hyunjo Ho, Paulo Prado and Jose Korelo explore the impact of brand authenticity on forming self-reinforcing assets (enticing-the-self, enriching-the-self and enabling-the-self), which subsequently influence the brand-self connectedness and consumers' behavioral intentions. With data from 347 consumers surveyed in the US and Brazil, they test the relationship among brand authenticity, self-reinforcing assets, brand-self connectedness and behavioral intentions using structural equation modeling. Their results show that brand authenticity influences the self-reinforcing assets. In turn, the self-reinforcing assets promote closeness towards the brand, thereby increasing the behavioral intentions of consumers to buy a product, visit a store/website in the future and recommend the brand to other people. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 5th International Consumer Brand Relationships Conference.

Roseann Hassey uses a 2×2 between-subjects factorial design and three on-line surveys to explore the impact of brand personality on brand forgiveness and recovery following brand failures. Her results reveal that, independent from the consumer-brand relationship, consumers more readily forgive brands with a warm personality than brands with a competent personality. The link between brand personality type and failure type is mediated by brand credibility and moderated by the consumers' desire to re-evaluate the brand served. An earlier version of this paper was presented in the 5th International Consumer Brand Relationships Conference.

Antonio Azevedo, Ana Santos and Filipa Barros investigate the antecedents of celebrity-product degree of fit and willingness to pay/make a donation in different scenarios, which aim to capture the role of celebrity attributes, perceived personality profiles, product involvement and acceptance of social causes. 335 respondents answered an online questionnaire with a factorial plan corresponding to 20 different matching scenarios: five celebrities/perceived personalities (Emma Watson, Jennifer Lawrence, Kim Kardashian, Natalie Portman and Scarlet Johansson) \times four types of branding scenarios (a lipstick for low involvement; a watch for high involvement; an eco-foundation for "high social acceptance"; and vodka for "low social acceptance/controversial"). Significant predictors of willingness to pay/make a donation were assessed by multiple linear regression for each type of

product. An earlier version of this paper was presented in the 5th International Consumer Brand Relationships Conference.

Luisa Agante and Ana Pascoal analyze the magnitude of the impact advergaming has on children's preferences and choices for unhealthy products and brands, in terms of time of exposure (immediate vs delayed) and number of exposures (single vs repeated exposure). A sample of 104 children aged 6–9 years old was used, divided into three groups (no exposure/single exposure/repeated exposure) in an experimental between-subjects design setting. Their results confirm the existence of all the expected effects: exposure to advergaming has immediate and longer effects on a child's preferences and choices of the brand depicted in the advergaming and in that product category. Repeated exposure to the advergaming enhances all the effects on the brand, but not on the product category. The findings of their study highlight the extent of these effects with children and discuss the ethicality of using advergaming with children for products high in fat, salt and/or sugar. An earlier version of this paper was presented in the 5th International Consumer Brand Relationships Conference.

From the five papers that acknowledge brands as relationship builders at a collective level, one was originally presented in the 5th International Consumer Brand Relationships Conference, while the other four were regular submissions.

Aronté Marie Bennett, Chris Malone, Kenyn Cheatham and Naina Saligram analyze the impact of evaluations of politician brands on voter intentions through the lens of social cognition and group dynamics. Through three studies that use the social cognition constructs of warmth and competence from the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) and Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF) to evaluate the impact of brand perceptions on voting intentions, they compare the fit between the models. The first study establishes the impact of these perceptions on existing politicians. The second study replicates these effects while controlling for party affiliation and extraneous factors and explicitly studies politicians as brands. The third study examines the formation of perceptions and assumptions when full information is unavailable. Their findings provide evidence of how perceptions of candidates impact voting intent, establishing politicians' unique position as both brands and people. An earlier version of this paper was presented in the 5th International Consumer Brand Relationships Conference.

Cristela Bairrada, Arnaldo Coelho and Filipa Peres identify the impact of brand communities on relational outcomes such as WoM, advocacy and loyalty through the mediating effects of brand love. With data from 510 questionnaires collected from Portuguese consumers, they test their proposed hypotheses with structural equation modeling. Their findings demonstrate how brand communities may contribute to reinforce the bonds between brands and customers by introducing love in these relationships. Their results specifically show that the identification dimension of brand communities has an important effect on brand love, WoM, advocacy and brand loyalty.

Jitender Kumar and Jogendra Nayak propose a conceptual model portraying brand engagement as a function of members' brand psychological ownership and value-congruity and investigate the effect of brand engagement on brand attachment and brand purchase intentions. With data collected

from 275 brand community members they test their hypothesized relationships using structural equation modeling. Their results indicate that brand psychological ownership and value-congruity positively influence the brand engagement of the members, which further influences their brand attachment and brand purchase intentions. They also observe that brand attachment mediates the effect of brand engagement on brand purchase intention.

James Loveland, Scott Thompson and Katherine Loveland investigate the competing effects of brand community participation against switching costs. Using the participation and weekly adoption data from 7,411 members in two brand communities and one product category forum over a six-month period, they compute the switching costs for each member using 10 years of product release and pricing data. Consistent with prior research, their findings show that switching costs have a significant effect on reducing product adoption and brand community participation has a significant effect on overcoming switching costs. Furthermore, they find that the most active participants are more likely to buy the new product when switching costs are higher. Their research provides unique insights into financial switching costs and demonstrates manners in which brand community participation provides a way to mitigate switching costs for consumers who would most be affected by them.

Laurence Dessart and Maureen Duclou determine the impact of online community participation on attitudes and product-related behavior in the health and fitness sector. They analyze data collected from 221 Instagram users and members of a self-proclaimed health and fitness community (#fitfam) with structural equation modeling and find that online community identification and engagement significantly increase health environment sensitivity, resulting in heightened engagement in physical fitness and healthy product choices. Their study advances the knowledge on the role of social media and online communities in promoting health and fitness product behaviors and attitudes.

For this issue, in addition to the reviewers for the conference papers, the *Journal of Product and Brand Management* relied on the help of 35 reviewers based in 17 different countries and four continents. They are listed below in alphabetical order:

Ulf Aagerup, Halmstad University, Sweden.
 Aaron Ahuvia, University of Michigan, USA.
 Anahit Armenakyan, Nipissing University, Canada.
 Camiel Beukeboom, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
 Michael Beverland, University of Sussex, UK.
 Cristoph Burmann, University of Bremen, Germany.
 Arezoo Davari, Eastern Washington University, USA.
 Elena Delgado-Ballester, Universidad de Murcia, Spain.
 Laurence Dessart, HEC-ULg Ecole de Gestion de l'Université de Liege, Belgium.
 Eliane Francisco-Maffezzoli, Pontifical Catholic University of Parana, Brazil.
 Bashar Gammoh, University of Toledo, USA.
 Tilo Halaszovich, University of Bremen, Germany.
 Jony Haryanto, President University, Indonesia.
 Sarah Kelly, University of Queensland, Australia.
 Christine Kowalczyk, East Carolina University, USA.

Youngbum Kwon, University of Michigan, USA.
 José Martí, Universida Europea de Valencia, Spain.
 Lee McGinnis, Stonehill College, USA.
 Robert McDonald, TX Tech University, USA.
 Laurent Muzellec, University of Dublin Trinity College, Ireland.
 John, Nadeau, Nipissing University, Canada.
 Jacques Nel, University of the Free State, South Africa.
 Giuseppe Pedeliento, Università degli Studi di Bergamo, Italy.
 Dennis Pitta, University of Baltimore, USA.
 Kate Pounders, University of Texas at Austin, USA.
 Parichehr Riahi Pour, University of Glasgow, UK.
 José Rojas-Méndez, Carleton University, Canada.
 Saeed Shobeiri, University of Sherbrooke, Canada.
 Jane Thomas, Winthrop University, USA.
 Robert Thomas, Cardiff Metropolitan University, UK.
 Eric VanSteenburg, MT State University, USA.
 Devika Vashisht, IBS Hyderabad, India.
 Sylvia von Wallpach, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark.
 Lia Zarantonello, University of Roehampton, UK.
 Anna Zarkada, Athens University of Economics and Business, Greece.

The authors would like to thank all these reviewers for helping the journal to improve the quality of its content by providing their time and expertise.

The authors also hope that readers find this issue interesting and enjoyable.

Notes

- 1 www.edelman.com
- 2 www.jackmorton.com
- 3 <https://mblm.com>
- 4 www.bondinsights.com
- 5 www.netbase.com/

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