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Abstract

This article discusses the current state of research on consumer brand relationships and then goes on and presents two distinct taxonomies or theoretical frameworks which help to classify consumer brand relationships research. First, the ‘brand connection matrix’ which classifies brand relationships into functional-based (low vs. high) and emotional-based (low vs. high) connections to brands. This leads us with a 2x2 matrix consisting of four quadrants which each are discussed. Second, the ‘brand feeling matrix’ classifies consumer’s relationships with brands by grouping them into the strengths of relationships (weak vs. strong) and the consumers’ feeling towards the brand (positive vs. negative). This leads to another 2x2 matrix where each of the four quadrants is discussed. Finally, this article discussed the papers in this special issue and applies the two frameworks by grouping them into the corresponding quadrants.

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1. Introduction

Blackston's book chapter in 1993 "*beyond brand personality: building brand relationships*", later Fajer and Schouten (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 showcase 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. Since then, one has seen a significant number of conference papers, journal articles, book chapters and books (MacInnis, Park and Priester, 2009; Fournier, Breazeale and Fetscherin, 2012) published.

This special issue in the *Journal of Brand Management (JBM)* is dedicated to the topic of consumer brand relationships 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 held on September 26-28, 2013 at Rollins College, Winter Park, FL, USA. The increase 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. These presentations 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 just to mention a few. This special issue features 5 articles that were selected after several review rounds. We first present two taxonomies which help to classify consumer brand relationships research in term of the functional and emotional focus of CBR and another one which classify CBR research in terms of strength of brand relationships and valence of brand attitudes.

2. Background and Taxonomy

Consumer brand relationships 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 find that the journals fall into the following discipline (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 such as 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 once can see, consumer brand relationships research is multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional and multi-conceptual with a varieties of concepts, constructs and underlying theories borrowed from different fields such as marketing, psychology, sociology, anthropology or neuroscience (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2014). The five papers in this special issue each discusses and covers one or a combination of the above described research streams.

2.1. 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 classified the different brand relationships 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 results if only emotional needs of the consumers are met. This leads us with a 2x2 matrix consisting of four quadrants as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

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

Figure 1: Brand Connection Matrix

Quadrant 1: High functional but low emotional connected consumers are “*functionally invested*” to brands. Hence, they are satisfied with the brand in terms of performance (i.e. functional connection) but shop around (i.e., emotionally not connected). They are not as price sensitive as “un-invested” consumers (as they appreciate the brand in a functional way) but if there is a better deal in terms of value proposition (price vs. functionality) they might switch. In this case, consumers see the brands 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 with 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). In this case, consumers see the brands as “*family*” and/or part of themselves.

Quadrant 3: Low functional and low emotional connected consumers are “*un-invested*” to brands and consumers see brands as “*acquaintance*”. 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 connections 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 to what consumers need or want or the brand performs less good than competitor brands (e.g. a Harley-Davidson motorbike with its 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 functional shortcomings. Consumers see the 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, Hall, and Meamber, 2012).

As the *Hierarchy of Effects Model* (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961) suggest, only when the cognitive (thinking) and affective (feeling) connection exist consumers buy the product (cognitive or behavior). One major criticism of Lavidge and Steiner’s (1961) model is it 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.

2.2. Brand Feeling Matrix

Our second taxonomy or model focuses on the emotional (affective/feeling) dimension of consumer brand relationships. Inspired by Storbacka, Strandvik, and Grönroos (1994), one way to classify the different concepts of consumer brand relationships is to group them into the strengths of relationships (weak vs. strong) and the consumers’ feeling towards the brand (negative vs. positive). This gives us a second 2x2 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.

Strengths of Brand Relationship

Feeling Towards Brand		<i>Weak</i>	<i>Strong</i>
	<i>Positive</i>	(1) Brand Satisfaction	(2) Brand Love Brand Passion
	<i>Negative</i>	(3) Brand Avoidance	(4) Brand Hate Brand Divorce

Figure 1: Brand Feeling Matrix

Quadrant 1: In quadrant one, consumers have a weak or ‘loose’ but yet positive feeling towards 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 necessary lead to brand commitment. Many consumers can be satisfied with a product or service brand but do not become committed to this brand emotionally.

Quadrant 2: Concepts discussed in quadrant two are those where consumers have a strong and positive emotional feeling for a brand. Concepts such as brand love (Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi, 2012) or brand passion (Bauer, Heinrich and Martin, 2007) fall into this quadrant.

Quadrant 3: In quadrant three there are concepts which deal with negative but weak feelings consumers have for brands. Few studies assess those negative feelings. One such study is by Lee, Motion and Conroy (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 Muniz (2002) presentation about brand hate websites is one example as well as more recently, Krishnamurthy and Kucuk (2009) anti-branding paper or Sussan, Hall, and Meamber (2012) brand divorce paper.

3. 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 *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 that 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 (2) in Figure 1 and quadrant (2) in Figure 2 thus reflecting a high positive emotional consumer brand relationships.

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 that 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 consumer brand relationships. Across two studies, the authors show consumers have more positive brand evaluations when motives are present than when they 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 vs. lollipops) and different respondents (student vs. '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 (2) in Figure 1 and quadrant (4) 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 consumer brand relationships. Their findings from a large scale survey across multiple product categories indicate a decreasing preference amongst consumers for manufacturer-originated national brands. Most interestingly, the largest increase of consumers preferences for "no preference" as related to the country of origin effect. Similar results were found when the authors 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 (1) in Figure 1 and quadrant (3) 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 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 quadrant (1) and (3) in Figure 1 and between quadrant (2) and (4) in 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-Maffezzoli (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 brand relationship quality positively. Hence, brand managers need to invest in consumer brand relationships to transform brand experiences into loyalty. This paper falls into the link between quadrant (1) and (2) in Figure 1 and quadrant (1) and (2) in Figure 2.

4. Conclusion

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

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