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Models for Brand Relationships

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Models for Brand Relationships

Introduction

Brands have evolved over time and today are seen not only as facilitators of transactions, but as human-like entities that consumers, engage, interact, experience, and co-create meaning and value (Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017). In principle, brands underpin the development of two different types of brand-centric relationships – individual and collective (Veloutsou, 2009). Consumers and brands may engage as independent entities and form a relationship that connects them, commonly called consumer brand relationships or, simply, brand relationships (Fournier, 1998; Veloutsou, 2007). In brand relationships, consumers often develop deep bonds with brands (Alvarez and Fournier, 2016), even in cases that they do not own the brand (Kumar and Nayak, 2019). Consumers may also try to identify other like-minded individuals, with similar brand related views and feelings, with whom they develop brand-centric collectives, sub-cultural groups, tribes, or brand communities (Kozinets, 2001; Muñoz and O’Guinn, 2001; Cova and Pace, 2006; Badrinarayanan and Sierra, 2018). Members of brand-centric collectives spend time engaging around a brand, sharing information, enjoying, and expressing themselves and their strong views of the brand (Cova and Pace, 2006; Wallace *et al.*, 2014).

The concept of brand relationships evolved from a research idea, to a research stream, into an entire research field within marketing. The conceptual work started over three decades ago when Shimp and Madden (1988) introduced the concept of consumer object relationship that was further conceptually developed by contributors such as Blackstone (1993) and Fajer and Schouten (1995). As in all evolving fields, the original conceptual work led first to an exploratory investigation of the phenomenon (Fournier, 1998; Ji, 2002), then its measurement (Aaker *et al.*, 2004; Veloutsou, 2007), to a very rapid and sharp growth of the papers and the scope of the academic engagement. To date, thousands of academic articles have been published in the area (see Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015; Albert and Thomson, 2018; Fetscherin *et al.*, 2019, Veloutsou and Ruiz-Mafe, 2020), and many concepts have been identified as, and associated to, descriptors of various forms of brand relationships (Albert and Thomson, 2018). In recent years, the concept also spanned to practitioners who developed and published measurement instruments related to brand relationships such as the Edelman’s *Trust Barometer*¹, the *Brand Index* by YouGov², the *Experience Brand Index*³ by Jack Morton, the *Brand Affinity Report* by Rakuten, the *Brand Intimacy Study*⁴ by MBLM, the *Loyalty Report*⁵ by Bond Brand Loyalty, Prophet’s *Brand Relevance Index*⁶, or the *Brand Passion Report*⁷ by NetBase, just to mention a few.

¹ <https://www.edelman.com/research/brand-trust-2020>

² https://business.yougov.com/product/brandindex?campaign=mkt_brand-product&gclid=CjwKCAiAudD_BRBXEiwAudakX-9eVTd_Nz04M6RoVCPuQYT1EosaxjlxU4h655G9_pDrsUXEweIVkRoCONEQAvD_BwE

³ <http://www.jackmorton.com>

⁴ <https://mblm.com>

⁵ <https://www.bondinsights.com>

⁶ <https://www.prophet.com/ourfirm/relevantbrands/>

⁷ <https://netbasequid.com/blog/brand-passion-report/>

The exploratory work on the nature of collective or group brand relationships started about the same time as the exploratory work on individual consumer brand relationships (Kozinets, 2001; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002), and since then both have attracted a lot of academic interest. The literature on brand-centric communities is quickly expanding, focuses primarily on brand communities, and can be organised into two interrelated clusters: a cluster concentrating on the role of participation in brand communities in the creation of brand-related outcomes, and a cluster concentrating on the social interaction and drivers to participation in these brand-centric groups (Veloutsou and Ruiz-Mafe, 2020). Because brand-centric relationships require consumers to be active and highly involved participants for the formation and development of brand-centric groups, often brands actively try to help these relationships flourish with the likely or desired outcome of achieving brand-related benefits. Therefore, although brand communities may be created and managed by the companies behind the brands or by passionate consumers with specific views about the brand (Dholakia and Vianello, 2011; Pedeliento *et al.*, 2020), most of the current research primarily focuses on company facilitated brand communities.

The brand-centric relationships research started about 20 years ago looking at concepts related to positive relationships. Individual brand relationships research started over 20 years ago by looking at various degrees of positive relationship concepts such as brand satisfaction (Keiningham *et al.*, 2014), brand attachment (Japutra *et al.*, 2014), positive word of mouth (Keller, 2007), brand love (Batra *et al.*, 2012), brand evangelism (Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013), and brand loyalty (Amine, 1998). Collective brand relationships research examines supportive brand communities and the positive brand outcomes they generate (Veloutsou and Ruiz-Mafe, 2020), non-supportive anti-brand communities and their possible negative brand outcomes, and considers that collective and individual brand relationships are concurrent (Coelho *et al.*, 2019; Dessart *et al.*, 2019). Although the focus of brand-centric research is still mostly on positive relationships and outcomes (Albert and Thomson, 2018; Veloutsou and Ruiz-Mafe, 2020), recent research also explores concepts related to negative brand relationships or feelings such as complaining (Huefner *et al.*, 2002), brand avoidance (Lee *et al.*, 2009; Knittel *et al.*, 2016), brand retaliation (Thomson *et al.*, 2012) or brand hate (Kucuk 2010; Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016, 2018; Hegner *et al.*, 2017, Fetscherin, 2019). Recent research also explores the drivers and outcomes of participating in anti-brand communities (Popp *et al.*, 2016; Dessart *et al.*, 2020; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020), how the nature of brand-centric relationships may change over time (Jain and Sharma, 2019; Sakulsinlapakorn and Zhang, 2019; Kennedy and Guzmán, 2020), and how different consumers develop relationships of different strength and valence with a same brand (Osuna-Ramirez *et al.*, 2019). Studying both negative and positive brand-centric relationships is crucial to understand the wide range of relationships consumers have with and around brands and the dynamics of these relationships.

Among the marketing academic journals, the *Journal of Product & Brand Management* has been the leading journal publishing articles related to brand relationships (Veloutsou and Ruiz-Mafe, 2020). The journal has also dedicated two special issues to the topic (Fetscherin *et al.*, 2016; Fetscherin *et al.*, 2019), with papers that were either originally presented at International Consumer Brand Relationship Conferences (www.consumerbrandrelationship.com) as well as regular submissions to the journal. This

editorial aims to discuss the state of the current thinking and research on brands as relationship builders. To achieve this aim, the editorial presents a consumer brand relationship model, Fetscherin's (2020) Brand Relationship Wheel, and introduces a comprehensive framework that explains the role of brand relationships in the brand building process. It also provides a short summary of the nine papers included in this special issue.

Brand relationships and the consumer mindset

This introduction to the special issue presents the Brand Relationship Wheel (Fetscherin, 2020), a new unified model which allows to categorize various brand relationship concepts by their degree of intensity, and use it as a basis to suggest a framework that aims to explain in more detail how branding and brand relationships guide consumers' mindsets. The Brand Relationship Wheel (Fetscherin, 2020) is an easy-to-understand model, based on the empathy map, which helps to comprehend consumers' needs by developing a deeper understanding of their persona (Figure 1). It consists of four main domains or parts one should focus on when studying consumer behaviour and brand relationships. Namely what consumers think and feel about a product or service brand and then what they say and do with it (Fetscherin, 2020, p. 50). The model visualizes and conceptualizes the most widely discussed brand relationship concepts and underlying theoretical relationships into categories of affective (share of heart), cognitive (share of mind), and behavioural responses (share of voice & share of wallet), while integrating the nature of increasing intensities of these concepts. Cognitive or rational responses relate to what consumers think about brands, whereas affective or emotional responses relate to how consumers feel about them. Next to that, a consumer can behave in different ways and have various behavioural responses, consisting of communicating or expressing positive or negative opinions about a brand, as well as engaging with it. These four components—cognitive, affective, communication, and transactional—provide the overall underlying structure of the Brand Relationship Wheel.

According to the Brand Relationship Wheel (BRW), the rational component considers what consumers know and think about brands, has three levels—brand awareness, brand familiarity and brand experience—, and each level can be positive or negative. The wheel includes some of the most notable positive and negative manifestations. The emotional component relates to how consumers feel about a brand; their "share of heart". These positive or negative feelings have many antecedents. The precondition for any feeling is that consumers need to at least be aware, familiar, or have experienced the brand. Positive feelings include brand satisfaction, brand trust, and brand love, and negative feelings include among others brand indifference, brand dislike, and brand hate. The communication component relates to what and where consumers say about a brand. In the model it is referred to as "share of voice", which can be either talking or writing about the brand online or off-line and in a private or in a more public way. Affirmative communication manifestations are positive word of mouth (WoM), brand advocacy & brand defense as well as brand evangelism. Negative communication manifestations are private complaining, public complaining, and social media complaining. Finally, the transactional component of the Brand Relationship Wheel deals with what consumers actively do or not do with the brand; it relates to their "share of wallet". Positive behaviours may be brand attachment, brand loyalty & brand

community, and brand's lifetime value, while negative behaviours may involve brand avoidance & brand switching, brand revenge & brand retaliation as well as brand sabotage.

The Brand Relationship Wheel allows for categorizing and classifying research as to where it belongs and how it contributes to the brand relationship literature. It also allows researchers to pinpoint possible future research avenues or identify important concepts missing from their research design. For practitioners, it provides a "road map" to help them navigate and understand the various brand relationship concepts and how they interrelate.

Insert figure 1 about here

The brand relationship wheel (Fetscherin, 2020) can be used in combination with other theories to develop a framework that elucidates how branding works in a consumer's mind and how brand relationships guide consumers' mindsets (Figure 2). The brand relationship wheel (Fetscherin, 2020) sees thinking, feeling, and communication- and transaction-based actions as elements related to relationships that can lead to the development of brand equity and brand meaning in the form of brand identity and brand image, but does not aim to conceptualise how relationships may lead to specific actions. Some theories help understand how attitudes lead to behaviours within human action. For example, the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) links beliefs, attitude, behavioural intention, and behaviour and recognises the importance of pre-existing attitudes in the decision-making process, considering individuals as rational actors who choose to act in their best interests.

The suggested framework in Figure 2 aims to explain how brand building contributes to the development of relationships and guides consumer action. Brands have meanings, that are formed from the combination of all the brand related connotations in the minds of individuals that are not necessarily the same for all individuals (Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester, 2018). In other words, brands are a portfolio of meanings (Guzmán *et al.*, 2006; Iglesias and Bonet, 2012). The brand meaning building process starts with what members of the team that support, develop, and design the symbols and associations that they aspire to represent the brand, communicate. Brand strength should be the outcome of the brand meaning building process. A strength expressed via the understanding and assessment of the brand and its characteristics, the development of brand feelings, and the intended and actual brand-related behaviours (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2013). Consumers process intentionally and unintentionally brand images and develop an overall brand evaluation (reputation) which leads to the development of attitudes towards the brand, mental states involving beliefs and feelings that have some stability in time, and in turn inform brand-related desires and actual actions. This process, presented here in brief, is further detailed in the following paragraphs.

The brand meaning building process involves the identification of the components of the brand identity and the signalling to external audiences to create images (Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester, 2018). The brand support team uses this internally shared set of symbols and associations (brand identity) as a basis of all decisions about the brand, using primarily marketing tactics, signalling to the market what the brand

ideally means to its producer (Chung and Byrom, 2021). Signals originating from the brand team, but also from other uncontrolled sources that refer to or are associated with the brand, are received and processed by consumers who form specific views about the brand (brand image) related with a particular encounter or mention of the brand.

The brand meaning conscious and unconscious processing mechanism of the brand strength indicators are expressed via a rational and an emotional component. The brand meaning is constantly adjusted and updated in consumers' minds. Beliefs are the rational component; the consumers' degree of understanding of, and the mental engagement with, the brand meaning. The mental engagement with the brand meaning may range from low—recognizing or recalling a brand name (brand awareness)—to medium—having some degree of knowledge in relation to the brand and its characteristics (brand familiarity)—to high—possessing deep information and wisdom in relation to the brand (brand knowledgeableness). The emotional component expresses how consumers feel about a brand, is based on affection and logic, and is the root of brand relationships. Using reason and feelings, consumers evaluate their brand knowledge (rational component) and form judgments and beliefs of the utilitarian and symbolic brand value, which are the foundation of functional or emotional brand relationships (Fernandes and Moreira, 2019). Brand relationships vary in strength, as indicated by the level of passion (share of heart), and valence (Fetscherin *et al.*, 2019). Depending on whether the level of passion is moderate or intense, relationships can be characterized as “love” and “like” when positive, and “hate” and “dislike” when negative. When consumers feel that they do not get any value from a brand, there is no passion, interest, or compulsion for it. This results in brand indifference, an unwanted state for brands that indicates the absence of a brand relationship.

The readiness to perform the behaviour and the actual behaviour depend on the way that the brand meaning is processed, and is also a part of a brand's strength. In principle, there are three main components for the intended and actual behaviour: the communication, the transactional, and the reaction components. All components may be expressed positively or negatively. When a consumer positively assesses a brand and is satisfied with it and what it stands for, this is expressed through various behaviours that aim to support the brand. If a consumer is unsatisfied, dislikes, or even hates a brand, this is expressed by an active direct negative behaviour toward it, such as seeking retaliation impulsively or more long-term harm to the brand or revenge.

The communication component relates to what and where consumers say about a brand in private settings to family and friends, or in more public settings that involve more than two parties, such as the company and other consumers, stakeholders, or organizations. When positive, the communication component can be in the form of writing or saying positive things about a brand (positive word of mouth - WoM), to the extent that consumers may be willing to help the brand by convincing other consumers to purchase the brand or even talking negatively about rival brands. When negative, the communication component is typically in the form of complaining or engaging in negative WoM. The transactional component focuses on whether consumers are willing to and actually make transactions with the brand. Positive manifestations of the transactional component include the development of weak or strong purchase intention or usage demonstrated via brand preference, brand attachment, and brand loyalty,

which possibly lead to consumer retention, the ability to charge price premiums, higher overall revenue per consumer, and profitability. All of these manifestations are important drivers of a consumer's lifetime value for the brand. Negative manifestations of the transactional component include brand avoidance, brand switching, and boycotting. The reaction component incorporates all the other possible positive or negative behaviours which demonstrate additional devotion to the brand. Positive actions include consumers' willingness to sacrifice, engaging with the brand to co-create its meaning, and joining brand-related groups (brand communities). Negative actions include sabotaging the brand and engaging with opposing brand-related groups (anti-brand communities).

In sum, consumers' attitudes and relationships together with their actions lead to brand transactions and experiences that create brand meaning. Consecutively, the brand meaning as perceived by the brand managing team (brand identity) changes over time, as a reflection of the brand's reputation, the external groups' brand relationships, and the brand-related actions. Brand identity updates are informed by the changes in brand meaning that various audiences have as a result of controlled company's signalling. This dynamic process suggests that even when a clearly designed, intentional, or prompted brand meaning co-creation procedure does not exist, unintentional or non-prompted brand meaning co-creation takes place (Kennedy and Guzmán, 2017). Consumers are active contributors to a brand's meaning both externally, to other company stakeholders, and internally, to the brand support team in charge of defining a brand's identity.

Insert figure 2 about here

Articles in this issue

It is notable that from a total of nine papers in this special issue some focus on individual and some in collective brand-centric relationships, and that over half of them focus on negative brand relationships or outcomes. This is consistent with the current research trend which focuses not only on positive but also increasingly on negative brand relationships (Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017). Four of the papers in this issue were originally presented at the 6th International Consumer Brand Relationship Conference, held in Cancun, Mexico in May, 2019. The conference received 63 papers submission by 115 authors from 24 countries. The best conference papers were then invited to submit for consideration in the *Journal of Product & Brand Management* and went through the journal's rigorous and regular review process. The other five papers were regular paper submissions to the *Journal of Product & Brand Management*.

Matute, Palau-Saumell, and Occhiocupo explore customer brand engagement in user-initiated online brand communities. They provide a better understanding of customer brand engagement (CBE) by proposing and empirically testing a model of antecedents and consequences of CBE for user-initiated online brand communities (OBCs). Based on a sample of 584 participants, they find that community and brand identification positively and significantly influence CBE. Regarding the outcomes of CBE, their

results show that higher levels of engagement are positively, directly, and significantly associated with favourable intentions towards the brand and the community.

Saavedra Torres, Rawal, and Bagherzadeh assess the role of brand attachment in customers' evaluation of service Failure. They examine the role of brand attachment as a relevant construct in customers' evaluation after they face a service failure. Their findings suggest that brand attachment prior the service failure can regulate customer's negative emotions especially when consumer attribute service failure to a controllable cause. This process minimizes the effect of service failure in customer's satisfaction and consequently increases customer behaviours like word of mouth and loyalty intentions.

Zhang and Laroche present a multidimensional construct of brand hate. They examine the emotional components of brand hate and the variation of emotions across different levels of brand hate. Based on five studies with mixed approaches, the authors confirm brand hate is a multidimensional construct comprised of anger-, sadness-, and fear-related emotions. They develop a three-factor brand hate scale consisting of nine items. The scale is then tested and validated among different samples and compared to other available brand hate scales.

Zhang, Zhang, and Sakulsinlapakorn study how love becomes hate and assess the moderating effects of brand love upon consumers' retaliation towards brand failure. The authors examine how failure severity correlates with negative emotions leading to brand retaliation. It also assesses the moderation effects of brand love and contingent factors, including perceived fairness, inferred goodwill, aggressive personality, and brand trust, which may moderate the "love is blind" or "love becomes hate" effects. Based on a sample of 293 Thai and 239 Chinese respondents, the study finds that consumers facing brand failure suffer negative emotions and then generate retaliation intention. Brand love positively moderates the link between failure severity and negative emotions, which is called the "love becomes hate" effect. Meanwhile, brand love negatively moderates the link between negative emotions and retaliation intention, which is called the "love is blind" effect.

Amaro, Barroco, and Antunes explore the antecedents and outcomes of destination brand love. Based on an online survey of over 5,500 respondents (consisting of former international students from the Erasmus program of the European Union), the study finds that destination brand love has a significant impact on electronic word of mouth (eWOM), WOM, WOM intensity, recommendation, and revisit intention.

Haverila, McLaughlin, Haverila, and Arora assess the segmentation of brand community members based on engagement, attitudes, and identification. The authors segment brand communities based on their participation behaviour but also their identification with the brand community, loyalty, and benefits gained from membership. Based on a cross-sectional survey of members of various brand communities in the U.S., the authors identify two segments that can be served based on more than their posting behaviours.

Ahuvia, Rauschnabel, and Rindfleisch assess if brand love is materialistic. Based on two studies with over 1,000 participants, the authors find that materialism not only makes consumers more likely to love brands,

but also alters the way they relate to them. Brand love is associated with loving brands that one currently owns rather than wishing for brands that one cannot afford. Brand love is also more strongly related to the centrality and success dimensions of materialism than to its happiness dimension. In that respect, materialism is not just associated with loving brands but strongly associated with loving money.

Jung, Bhaduri, and Ha-Brookshire empirically examine the determinants of corporate hypocrisy and the potential negative impact on the consumer brand relationship, specifically on trust, switch, and resilience intentions. Based on 548 consumers in the U.S., their study shows that respondents who saw clear sustainability goals in the companies' mission statements perceived lower levels of corporate hypocrisy than those who did not. Further, when the mission statements and activities related to corporate sustainability were congruent, respondents were less likely to elicit corporate hypocrisy than when they were not. Moreover, consumers showed lower levels of trust when corporate hypocrisy was present, which negatively impacted their switch and resilience intentions.

Finally, Bayarassou, Becheur, and Valette-Florence discuss the fight or flight strategy of coping responses to brand hate. Their study investigates the interplay between brand and consumer personalities in shaping brand hate and its consequences. Furthermore, it explores the moderating impact of narcissism on the relationships between brand hate and its outcomes. Based on an online survey of French consumers, the study shows that active brand hate leads to a desire for revenge, whereas passive brand hate positively influences desire for avoidance. The study also suggests that consumer narcissism fuels desire for revenge on the brand.

The editors of this special issue, and authors of this opening piece, would like to thank the reviewers involved in this issue for helping the Journal to improve the quality of its content by providing their time and expertise. They also hope that readers find this issue inspiring and interesting.

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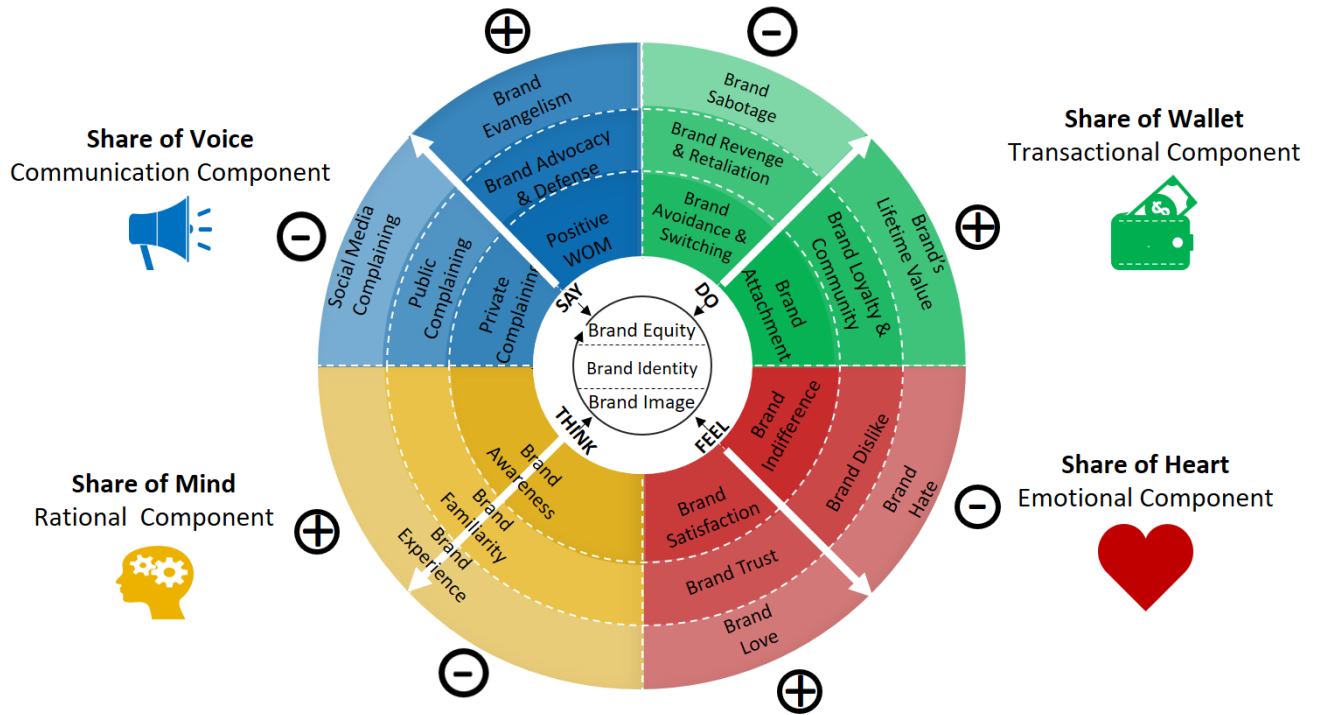
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Figure 1: Brand Relationship Wheel



(Fetscherin, 2020, p. 59)

Figure 2: Brand Building, Brand Relationships and Brand Related Actions

