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Anti-Consumption in the Context of Brand Relationships

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One Sentence Summary:

A conceptual model combining and unifying anti-consumption and brand relationships stream of research.

ABSTRACT

- This paper presents a conceptual model that outlines the various brand relationships consumers have with a special focus on negative brand relationships that relates to anti-brand behaviors.

- Based on the empathy map, the model consists of four main parts: how consumers think (share of mind) and feel (share of heart) about brands, which in turn effects what consumers say (share of voice) and do (share of wallet) with them.

- The model combines more than 40 branding concepts into one comprehensive, coherent, unified and easy-to-understand model where concepts are categorized by their degree of intensity.

JEL Classification Codes : M10, M30, M31

INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, the marketing literature has seen a profound advancement in how brand relationships are conceptualized, measured and studied. Alongside research on positive brand relationships 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) or brand loyalty (Amine, 1998), the literature has seen more recently a burgeoning interest in negative brand relationships and anti-brand behaviors. A great deal of the inquiries has focused notably on the concept of 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.*, 2018, Fetscherin, 2019). Understanding not only the positive but also the negative brand relationships and behaviors (or anti-brand behaviors) is critical for companies as they can lead to lower profits (Zhang *et al.*, 2010) and overall lower total shareholder return (Barker *et al.*, 2015).

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, the literature shows there are many reasons how and why consumers establish relationships with brands and the different degrees of outcomes. Further, some consumers might even transition from a positive to a negative brand relationship. In that respect, outlining both, positive and negative relationships allows to assess the full spectrum of possible behavioral outcomes. Second, based on the empathy map, this paper provides a systematic categorization of multiple concepts using its cognitive, affective and behavioral features while acknowledging the varying levels of intensity within the categorization.

Need for a Unified Model

One of the primary focus of the literature on anti-brand behavior has been on brand hate, the strongest of the negative emotional response a consumer has towards a brand. The concept of brand

hate was first introduced by Kucuk (2008). Since then, an increasing number of researchers have investigated various aspects of brand hate. This has provided an understanding of the antecedents and outcomes of brand hate (Bryson *et al.*, 2013; Hegner *et al.*, 2017) alongside its multidimensionality (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016), how brand hate evolves over time (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2017), how it is related to certain personality traits (Kucuk, 2019), and that there are different types of brand hate (Fetscherin, 2019). However, the literature also outlines milder emotional responses such as brand dislike (Romani *et al.*, 2012; Alba and Lutz, 2013; Demirbag-Kaplan *et al.*, 2015), brand avoidance, brand switching (Hogg *et al.*, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2009; Gelbrich, 2010; Kavaliauskė and Simanavičiūtė, 2015), or complaining (Halstead and Page, 1992).

Not all underlying emotions as well as anti-brand behaviors are created and expressed equally. Within these concepts lie a variety of intensities or degrees of responses. As mentioned, brand hate is the strongest and most intense negative emotion a consumer can have, whereas brand disliked is a milder variation thereof. The same can be observed with behavioral outcomes or anti-brand behaviors where brand avoidance and brand switching are weaker forms of behavior compared to brand retaliation, brand revenge or brand sabotage (Huefner and Hunt, 2000; Grégoire and Fisher, 2006; Zourrig *et al.*, 2009; Grégoire *et al.*, 2010; Johnson *et al.*, 2011; Kähr *et al.*, 2016) which are stronger emotional expressions. While brand avoidance is a comparatively weaker anti-brand behavior, often referred to as 'take a flight' response, brand retaliation or revenge represents a more intense form of behavior, often referred to a 'fighting' response (Grégoire *et al.*, 2009; Hegner *et al.*, 2017; Fetscherin, 2019). Given the importance of brand relationships, developing and presenting a much-needed unifying model of how all these concepts relate to each other, will not only help academics to provide a robust structure to the academic endeavor but also aid practitioners in preparing for, identifying and mitigating consumers' emotions and behaviors.

Need for a Broader Conversation in Anti-Branding Research

So far, research on anti-branding and brand relationships have not had much overlap. This paper argues the fragmented approach on both diminishes the importance of recognizing the dual (positive and negative) nature of consumer brand relationships and the noteworthy overlap between these streams of research. Brand identity and brand image represent a core component of any brand and they impact as well as are impacted by both, positive and negative emotions and behaviors. In turn, brand awareness, brand familiarity and brand experience also affect either positively or negatively the brand's equity. Therefore, it is essential to discuss the anti-consumer concepts and negative behaviors alongside their positive counterparts. This will aid in initiating research directions that investigates brand relationships as part of a continuous spectrum with positive and negative emotions as well as positive and negative attitudes and behaviors. This will also contribute to a broad understanding of the brand relationship landscape (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2014). Responding effectively to consumers' responses to amplify positive emotions and behaviors while mitigating negative ones can be a central reason for a brand's success or failure.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL: THE BRAND RELATIONSHIP WHEEL

As stated earlier, the objective of this paper is to present a unified model by combining the anti-brand and brand relationship literature. The model below attempts to conceptualize and visualize the most discussed concepts and underlying theoretical relationships into categories of cognitive (share of mind), affective (share of heart) and behavioral responses (share of voice and share of wallet) while integrating the nature of increasing intensities of these concepts. Figure 1 illustrates the Brand Relationship Wheel grounded on Fetscherin's original model (2020).

----- (Insert Figure 1 around here) -----

Theoretical Context: The Empathy Map

Before describing the Brand Relationship Wheel (BRW), it is essential to understand its central domains. In line with Gray (2017)'s updated empathy map, Fetscherin (2020, p.50) states, "the empathy map helps to understand consumers' needs by developing a deeper understanding of their persona. It consists of four main domains or parts one should focus on when studying consumer behavior, namely what they think and feel about a product or service and then what they say and do with it".

The BRW argues that a consumer's response to a brand's message or actions can be of these four domains: including a cognitive component, an affective or emotional component, and a behavioral component consisting of two aspects. This categorization draws inspiration from the Rosenberg and Hovland (1960) tripartite model of attitudes. In particular, the four domains are an improvement upon the combination of reflective-measurement and behavioral-explanation versions of the tripartite model (Kaiser and Wilson, 2019). Cognitive responses are essentially consumers' thoughts with respect to the brand whereas the affective or emotional component considers how the consumer feels about the brand. Beyond these, a consumer can have various behavioral responses to the brand which consists on one hand the communication response, such as expressing positive or negative opinions about the brand, and on the other hand a transactional response, such as buying a product or service of a brand. These four domains – the cognitive, affective, communication and transactional – provide the overall underlying structure for the BRW.

----- (Insert Figure 2 around here) -----

The Cognitive Domain

The first is the cognitive or rational domain incorporating branding concepts related to what the consumer knows and thinks about a brand. In the model, it is referred to as 'share of mind' that the brand occupies in the mind of consumers. This includes concepts of brand awareness, brand familiarity and brand experience. Intensities within these concepts vary and serve as a precursor to how a consumer feels and then ultimately behaves. For instance, if a consumer is barely aware of a brand or just has heard about it without knowing more about it or ever experienced it, the consumer might not have any particular feeling (positive or negative) about the brand and might not engage in discussions or buy the brand. However, if the consumer is very familiar with the brand and has a positive (or negative) perception towards it, the response might well be stronger and it is likely the consumer will talk positively (or negatively) about the brand and might engage in buying (or avoiding) it (Fetscherin, 2020).

The Affective Domain

The affective or emotional domain incorporates branding concepts related to how consumers feel about a particular brand. Unlike the cognitive domain, the emotional domain distinguishes its integral concepts between the positive and the negative feelings a consumer has. Within the positive ones, concepts of brand satisfaction, brand trust and brand love are the most researched and established ones. The mildest of the positive feelings is brand satisfaction, which asserts that a consumer is content with the product or service. It is only after a consumer is satisfied with the

brand that he or she might trust the brand for future purchases. This antecedent nature of brand satisfaction on brand trust has been established (Ganesan, 1994; Selnes, 1998). In fact, brand trust represents an emotional state where a consumer has no reservation towards a brand. Finally, the strongest intensity of the positive emotions is that of brand love. Brand love is linked to behaviors such as a significant increase in brand loyalty (transactional response) and a positive word-of-mouth (communication response) (Caroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Batra *et al*., 2012). Although not highlighted as part of Figure 1, the literature also refers to concepts such as brand commitment, brand intimacy and brand passion which are, according to Sternberg's triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986), variation of love. Similar concepts to brand love are also brand admiration, brand romance, brand devotion and brand engagement (Amine, 1998; Sung and Campbell, 2009; Patwardhan and Balasubramanian, 2011; Park *et al.*, 2016; Sarkar, 2016).

On the other hand, among the negative emotions are concepts such as brand indifference, brand dislike and brand hate. Albeit not strictly a negative response, brand indifference is "the absence of compulsion toward a brand or the lack of interest in a brand" (Fetscherin 2020, p.80). This is considered as the least intense negative emotion because to a brand this remains an occurrence worth avoiding. Brand dislike is a more intense negative feeling towards a brand than brand indifference and it considers a darker side of the consumer preference (Dalli *et al.*, 2006). This feeling of aversion towards the brand, when intensified to its fullest, becomes brand hate (Fetscherin, 2019). Brand hate is the strongest negative feeling towards a brand and has become an increasingly researched concept. Brand hate also serves as an antecedent to many behaviors such as complaining (communication response), brand retaliation or brand sabotage (transactional response) (Fetscherin, 2020).

The Communication Domain

The communication domain relates to where and what consumers say or write about a brand. It can take many different forms such as online, off-line, in more private situations or publicly. Although particular concepts within the communication domain has multiple antecedents, concepts from cognitive and emotional domain seem to be frequently occurring precursors.

Within the positive responses, the communication domain includes concepts such as positive word of mouth (WoM), brand advocacy, brand defense, and brand evangelism. Even with the least intensity among the concepts, positive WoM still requires an individual to express satisfaction with a brand. At a higher level of intensity, this can transform into an active advocacy or even brand defense when faced with an opposing view. Finally, at the highest intensity, a consumer becomes a brand evangelist who simultaneously shares positive opinions about the preferred brand while sharing negative opinions about the rival ones (Matzler *et al.*, 2007; Fetscherin, 2020).

On the other hand, within the negative responses, varying degree of negative WoM are included. These include concepts of private complaining (to friends and family), public complaining (to the company or consumer organizations) or anti-brand activism (complaining to the mass via social media, forums or petition websites). As the intensity of the emotional response increases from brand dislike to brand hate, so does in most cases the communication response increase from private complaining to public complaining all the way to anti-brand activism. This anti-brand activism could also actualize into membership within brand hate groups (Kucuk, 2008; Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016).

The Transactional Domain

The transactional domain includes concepts that are within the behavioral response but focus on what consumers do or do not do with brands. Within the positive responses, it includes at least the concepts of brand attachment, brand loyalty and brand's lifetime value. Brand attachment describes the strength of the bond consumers have with brands they interact (Park *et al.*, 2010). In certain situations, consumers bond with among like-minded consumers about their preferred brand which relates to brand communities. Often these consumers are very loyal and engage in repeated purchases of particular products and services. Finally, this all leads to the brand's lifetime value which refers to "the total value of profits during a consumer's lifetime relationship with a brand" (Fetscherin 2020, p. 120).

Within the negative responses, transactional domain includes concepts such as brand avoidance and switching, brand revenge and retaliation, and finally brand sabotage. The weakest negative form is brand avoidance or switching. Explored in depth by Lee *et al.* (2009), brand avoidance or switching occurs when consumers actively avoid purchasing a brand even when financial circumstances allow for the option to purchase. Concepts that are similar to brand switching and avoidance are brand rejection, brand detachment or brand divorce (Perrin-Martinenq, 2004; Sandicki and Ekici, 2008; Sussan *et al.*, 2012). A more intense form is brand revenge or brand retaliation which is characterized by an active negative behavior towards the brand. Finally, the most extreme of negative behavioral responses is brand sabotage where consumers as well as non-consumers actively seek to harm the brand. This form of anti-brand activism can be detrimental and firms should actively seek to avoid such a scenario (Thomson *et al.*, 2012; Romani *et al.*, 2015).

The BRW Core

In addition to the four domains, the Brand Relationship Wheel lays its foundation in four core branding concepts – brand identity, brand personality, brand image and brand equity. Figure 3 visualizes the relationship of these four core concepts.

----- (Insert Figure 3 around here) -----

First, with an internal view of the brand, its identity and personality represent the attributes and associations the company wishes to be perceived by consumers (Fetscherin, 2020). Within the anti-brand literature, research has shown that an individual's incongruence or incompatibility with the brand's identity or personality can be central to the positive or negative emotions and behavior (Bryson *et al.*, 2013; Hegner *et al.*, 2017).

While brand identity and brand personality represent the attributes and associations a firm wishes to be perceived by consumers, it is the brand's image what matters and how and what consumers actually perceived the brand to be. A brand's image influences consumer's actual response in cognitive, affective and behavioral domains. This in turn has a direct impact on the brand's equity. The "brand equity takes into account all the assets and liabilities of a brand" (Fetscherin 2020, p. 152).

CONCLUSION

In addition to aforementioned features of the Brand Relationship Wheel, the BRW delineates a critical relationship between the core components and the four domains. Within the core components, brand identity and brand personality influence the brand's image and ultimately the brand's equity in the market place. In the cognitive domain, brand awareness, brand familiarity and brand experience provide interaction that aids in creating an affective response towards the brand. A positive brand experience creates an affirmative emotional response, whereas a negative experience creates an undesirable emotional reaction of the consumer. Positive emotions lead to brand satisfaction, which could further lead to a consumer trusting the brand and ultimately loving it. These positive emotions, in turn, lead to positive transactional and communication behaviors. If the emotions are negative, brand indifference, dislike or hate create brand avoidance, complaining, brand retaliation, or even brand sabotage behaviors. This progression of intensity applies throughout the BRW. Finally, all these behaviors impact the brand's overall equity in the marketplace.

It is particularly important to note these variations in intensities and subsequently attitudes and behaviors. For instance, at the lower end of the intensity, early assessments and marketing efforts could convert consumers who are indifferent towards the brand. With the increasing intensity, it is crucial for a brand manager to assess and understand the level of anti-consumption intensity a consumer possesses. A consumer's low to moderate negative feeling towards the brand can be addressed by improving the negative experience for example. However, heightened anti-consumption sentiment and behavior resulting from image incongruence or corporate wrongdoing could require significant amount of resources to change, which might not be possible in the short term. In instances where the return on marketing investment is not substantial, brand managers

may assess some consumers with a heightened anti-consumption sentiment to be best left without intervention.

To conclude, the Brand Relationship Wheel provides a comprehensive categorical model which unifies various concepts from the anti-consumer and brand relationships literature. It provides academics and practitioners alike, a full spectrum and wealth of information available within the existing literature. Furthermore, it aids brand managers to critically assess the brand's relationships with consumers in order to identify, assess and prevent anti-brand sentiments, attitudes and behavior while fostering positive emotions and behaviors.

Biographical Notes:

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Figures for: Anti-Consumption in the context of Brand Relationships: A Conceptual Model

Figure 1: Brand Relationship Wheel (Fetscherin, 2020, p. 59)
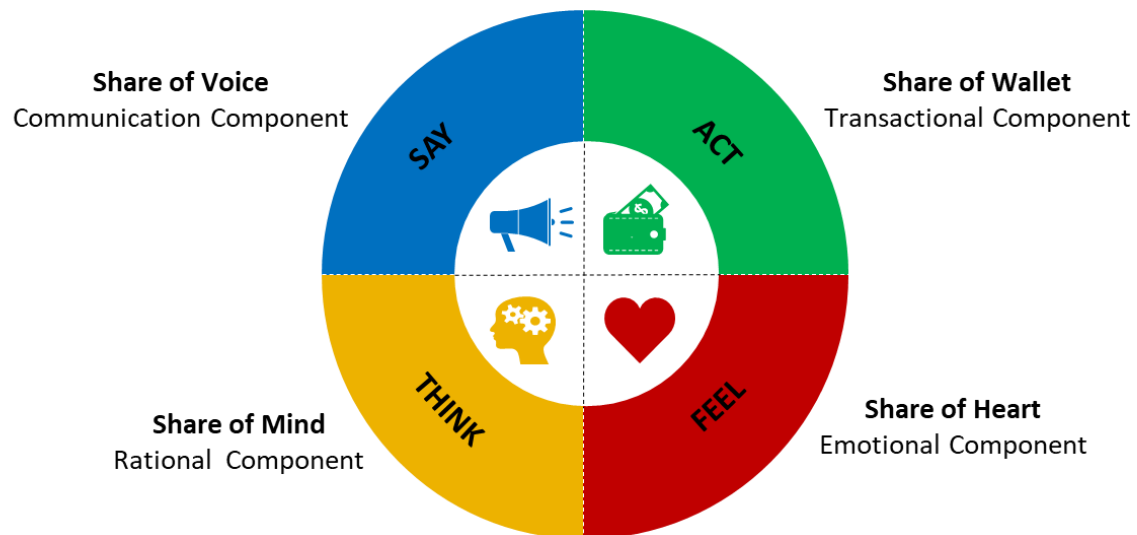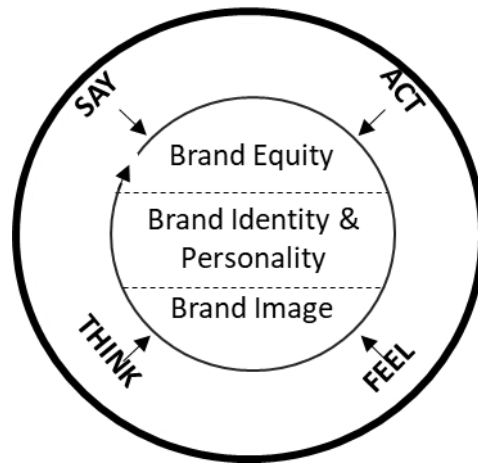

Figure 2: The Empathy Map (Fetscherin, 2020, p. 51)

Figure 3: The Brand Relationship Wheel Core (Fetscherin, 2020)