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Brand passion: Antecedents and consequences

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the antecedents and consequences of brand passion. Consumer–brand relationship constructs (brand identification and brand trust) may influence consumers' passion for a brand. Brand passion in turn may influence brand commitment, willingness to pay a higher price for the brand, and positive word of mouth. A partial least squares structural equation model applied to data collected from a representative sample of 1505 study participants demonstrates that brand passion depends on brand identification and brand trust. Consumer's passion for a brand has great managerial relevance and a direct effect on word of mouth and commitment, as well as an indirect effect on willingness to pay a higher price, as mediated by commitment.

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1. Introduction

Brands help define consumers' lives and play a central role in people's consumption behavior (Ahuvia, 2005a; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). Strong relationships bind consumers and their preferred brands (Fournier, 1998), such that some consumers may develop into a true cult for some brands (Belk & Tumbat, 2005). Consumer brand relationship constructs such as brand trust (Hess, 1995), brand identification (Escalas & Bettman, 2003), and brand commitment (Fullerton, 2005) appear central to many branding studies. Affective constructs such as brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) or brand attachment (Park, MacInnis, & Priester, 2006) also influence consumer behavior. The recently proposed concept of brand passion (i.e., a strong positive feeling toward a brand) features examples and evidence of consumer enthusiasm (Bauer, Heinrich, & Marin, 2007; Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003; Matzler, Pichler, & Hemetsberger, 2007) and activities such as belonging to a brand community (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). However, the relationship of brand passion to other consumer–brand relationship constructs remains unclear, as does the position of this concept in a nomological network that includes managerial outcomes such as positive word of mouth (WOM) or willingness to pay a price premium for the brand.

Two studies explicitly explore the concept of brand passion and demonstrate that brand passion relates to brand characteristics (Bauer et al., 2007) or consumer characteristics (Matzler et al., 2007). Studies in social psychology show that the relationship between two individual entities also can be a source of passion (Driscoll, Davies, & Lipetz, 1972). The influence of the relationships between consumers and their brands on the development of passion for a brand remains an open question though. Passion is a relational construct, and therefore, the consumer–brand relational constructs that branding literature establishes as important also may influence brand passion. This study explores brand passion according to the influence of consumer brand relationship constructs, adding a new dimension to the understanding of passion for a brand. This investigation also aims to measure the impact of brand passion on end-effect relational constructs (e.g., brand commitment). The overall objective is therefore to build a model that establishes the nomological relationships between brand passion and other well-known consumer brand relationship constructs. Demonstrating the existence of such relationships may confirm the importance of brand passion, from both academic and managerial perspectives.

2. Consumer brand relationships

This section defines the main concept of brand passion and introduces the relational constructs in the model.

2.1. Brand passion

Hatfield and Walster (1978, p. 9) define passion as “a state of intense longing for union with another. Reciprocated love (union with other) is associated with fulfillment and ecstasy ..., a state of

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profound physiological arousal.” Baumeister and Bratslavsky (1999, p. 52) provide another definition and indicate that passion involves “strong feeling for the other person. These feeling are typically characterized by physiological arousal and the desire to be united with the other person in multiple senses.” Therefore, interpersonal passion implies the partner’s presence in the person’s thoughts, the idealization of both the partner and the relationship, sexual attraction, and a desire for reciprocity (Hatfield, 1988). Some of these characteristics are irrelevant in a consumption context; consumers probably do not expect full reciprocity from the brand (Ahuvia, 2005b) though loyal and committed customers might anticipate better rewards from their brand partner (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006).

In a consumption context, brand passion is “a primarily affective, extremely positive attitude toward a specific brand that leads to emotional attachment and influences relevant behavioral factors” (Bauer et al., 2007, p. 2190), which “describes the zeal and enthusiasm features of consumer–brand relationships” (Keh, Pang, & Peng, 2007, p. 84) and “reflects intense and aroused positive feelings toward a brand” (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005, p. 80). A passionate consumer engages in an emotional relationship with the brand and misses the brand when unavailable (Matzler et al., 2007).

Therefore brand passion appears to be an intense feeling of consumers toward the brand (Bauer et al., 2007; Hatfield & Walster, 1978; Keh et al., 2007; Thomson et al., 2005). This feeling implies the consumer’s willingness to form a close relationship with the partner (brand) and his or her physiological arousal from possessing or consuming that brand (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999; Hatfield & Walster, 1978). Brand passion encompasses two components: the presence of the brand in the consumer’s mind and the idealization of the brand (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008). Building on these developments, this study defines brand passion as a psychological construct comprised of excitement, infatuation, and obsession for a brand.

Bauer et al. (2007) study the determinants of brand passion and find influences of four brand characteristics: uniqueness, self-expression ability, prestige, and hedonic features. Brand uniqueness is an antecedent of brand passion, though conceptually this element is considered as a dimension of consumer’s affect (Ahuvia, 1993; Albert et al., 2008; Vincent, 2004). Brand passion also reflects individual factors, such as extraversion (Matzler et al., 2007). Yet other determinants, such as brand identification or brand trust, remain ignored, despite their influences on consumers’ feeling of affect toward the brand (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2010).

2.2. Relational concepts

Previous developments indicate that a limitation of brand passion models is the lack of integration into the consumer–brand relationship paradigm (Fournier, 1998). Following Fournier’s (1994, 1998) relationship quality theory, this study proposes that brand passion derives from other components (trust, self-connection, brand identification) and can influence brand commitment. In contrast with prior models that decompose consumer brand relationships to identify these components, the present investigation seeks to establish relationships between these components. The focus centers on brand trust and brand identification as determinants of brand passion; both concepts empirically determine brand affect. Brand commitment also appears in the proposed model, because this component is a consequence of brand affect (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Brand identification is central to consumption (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Fournier, 1998), as research into the importance of special possessions and consumers’ self-concept already details (Belk, 1988; Kleine, Kleine, & Allen, 1995). Brand identification refers to the brand’s ability to deliver information (e.g., values, personality) about the consumer (Fournier, 1998) or the degree of integration of

the brand into the consumer’s self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Because a brand has a symbolic value (Belk, 1988; Keller, 1993), the brand can help consumers define themselves as persons. Several studies demonstrate the importance of brand and product identification (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Kleine et al., 1995), in that consumers buy brands with an image or personality congruent with their self-concepts (Sirgy, 1982).

Brand trust is critical to relational marketing (Hess, 1995; Kennedy, Ferrel, & LeClair, 2000) as a determinant of brand commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and affect (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). This trust refers to consumers’ expectations about the brand’s reliability in a risky situation (Delgado-Ballester, Munuera-Aleman, & Yaguë-Guillén, 2001) or willingness to rely on the brand to perform stated functions (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Trust can be unidimensional (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), bidimensional (Ganesan, 1994; Kumar, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 1995), or tridimensional (Hess, 1995). If multidimensional, brand trust comprises ability, honesty, and altruism.

Finally, *brand commitment* represents the strength of the relationship between a consumer and a brand or organization (Fullerton, 2005; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Defined as “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship” (Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992, p. 316), commitment usually comprises two components, affective and cognitive (Fullerton, 2005; Harrison-Walker, 2001). Affective brand commitment rests at the heart of brand–consumer relationships, grounded in identification, attachment, and shared values. This construct stems from a holistic judgment and does not depend directly on brand evaluations.

Affective commitment may explain brand loyalty (Belk & Tumbat, 2005) and encourages customers to join brand communities (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). Other studies investigate cognitive brand commitment (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Harrison-Walker, 2001) and note that consumers prefer relationships with brands when they confront a lack of credible alternatives or develop positive brand personality judgments (Fullerton, 2005). Because brands have important meaning for consumers (Ahuvia, 2005a; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988), switching brands implies a loss of associated meaning. For the present study, commitment represents a global construct that includes both components (Fullerton, 2005).

3. Research hypotheses

Consumer brand relationship literature provides a foundation for the proposed model, which includes major brand relationship constructs (brand trust, brand identification, and brand commitment), as well as major behavioral outcomes: WOM and willingness to pay a higher price for the brand. Fig. 1 depicts the proposed model.

When a consumer identifies with a brand, she or he develops positive feelings (Harrison-Walker, 2001). Passion for a brand then should develop if the brand plays an important role in the consumers’ identity construction. Ahuvia (1993) demonstrates that an object or brand must appear to be part of the consumer to induce love. A loved object expresses the consumer’s deeply held values and

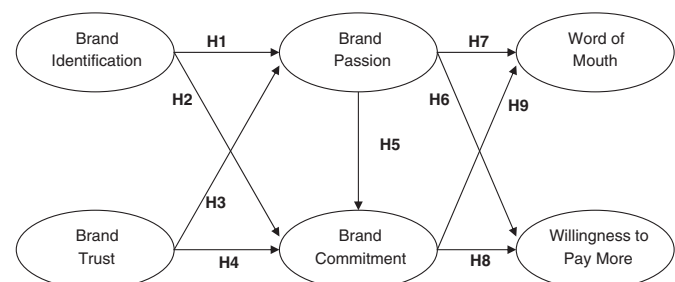


Fig. 1. Research model.

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