

Research Dialogue

Understanding the richness of brand relationships: Research dialogue on brands as intentional agents[☆]

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Abstract

This essay offers some perspectives on Kervyn et al.'s insightful research on brand relationships and the role of perceived intentions and ability. After briefly discussing the importance of brand knowledge and functionality in understanding the diversity of brand relationships, some other antecedents and consequences of brand relationships are reviewed. Three antecedents of corporate credibility — expertise, trust, and likability — are suggested as another means to differentiate how consumers view different brands. Brand resonance — an intense, active loyalty relationship — is also suggested as an important outcome of brand relationships. The essay concludes by noting that any concept as complex as brand relationships lends itself to multiple concepts, perspectives, and analysis.

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Introduction

Understanding how consumers form relationships with and become loyal to brands is a topic of great importance in marketing. From Fournier's seminal work (Fournier, 1998) to more recent compilations assembling diverse and provocative sets of research perspectives (e.g., Fournier, Breazeale, & Fetscherin, 2012; Macinnis, Park, & Priester, 2009), interest in consumer–brand relationships continues to grow from both academics and practitioners.

Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone's research (2012—this issue), introducing the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF), adds to our understanding in this area. This work adapts the Stereotype Content Model established in social psychology to a brand relationship setting. Specifically, the research redefines the two key factors make up the BIAF model — “warmth” and “competence” — in terms of “perceived intentions” and “ability,”

respectively, and shows how these two redefined factors combine to differentially drive consumer emotions and behaviors.

The main implication they draw from their research is that consumers can perceive brands in the same way that consumers perceive people. To provide some context and interpretation to their findings, I suggest several considerations. I begin by briefly discussing the role of brand knowledge and functionality in understanding the diversity of brand relationships. Next, I consider some other antecedents and consequences of brand relationships, focusing on the concepts of corporate credibility and brand resonance. I also review several important methodological issues related to the study of brands and brand relationships. I conclude by noting that the richness of brand relationships warrants multiple concepts, perspective, and analysis.

The diversity of brand relationships

Not surprisingly, just as we have a host of different types of relationships with all the different people that we interact with on a daily or perhaps less frequent basis, we also have a range of different types of relationships with brands of products and services that enter our lives one way or another.

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Consumers can literally encounter hundreds of brands in any one day. Obviously, it is impossible for consumers to develop deep, meaningful relationships with each of them. Fournier's (1998, 2009) comprehensive taxonomy of brand relationship types shows how relationships can vary from casual to intense, among other dimensions, and highlights the diversity of brand relationships that prevails in the marketplace.

Brand knowledge

There are certainly many different dimensions or perspectives that can be brought to bear to characterize the range of possible brand relationships, and there are pros and cons to any particular approach. Regardless of the exact perspective adopted, it is important to understand that what underlies brand relationships is an understanding by a consumer of what a brand is, what it does, what it represents, how it makes them think, feel, and act, and so on. Various dimensions of brand knowledge thus provide a very useful foundation to studying brand relationships.

Brand knowledge can be broadly defined as all the attributes, benefits, images, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and experiences that become associated to or evoked by the brand (Keller, 2003). Any aspect of knowledge may directly or indirectly influence consumer–brand relationships. Collectively, these different knowledge structures and a host of other consumer factors related to motivation, ability, and opportunity interact to determine the relationships that consumers form with brands over time.

Brand functionality

As Kervyn et al. demonstrate, various concepts and theories from psychology suggest how aspects of brand knowledge are related to brand relationships. To take another example, consider a classic functionalist theory of attitudes, which posits that attitudes are determined by the functions they serve people (Katz, 1960; Lutz, 1978). In particular, four different types of psychological functions performed by attitudes are:

- 1) Utilitarian — People develop attitudes towards things to reflect how useful or rewarding they are.
- 2) Knowledge — People develop attitudes to provide meaningful, structured environment and some degree of order, clarity, and stability in our view of the world
- 3) Value-expressive — People develop attitudes to express basic values, reinforce self-image.
- 4) Ego-defensive — People develop attitudes as a means of protection and a defense mechanism from anything threatening.

Each of these different types of attitudes that a person has towards a brand has implications for the kinds of relationship also formed with that brand.

In many cases, people will have primarily utilitarian-based attitudes towards a brand, as the brand is valued because it predictably provides a certain well-defined function, offers a certain well-defined benefit and satisfies a certain well-defined need. Certainly one important realization with a product or

service brand is the functional role it serves, as reflected by the ability component in the BIAF framework.

Many brands obviously go beyond these more utilitarian considerations — effectiveness, efficiency, reliability, durability, value, and so on — to create strong emotional connections, a sense of social desirability, and so on, tapping into knowledge, value-expressive, or ego defensive brand attitude functions in the process. It is tempting for marketers to look past functional brand considerations and focus on these perhaps more colorful aspects of a brand.

To do so, however, would be a big mistake. Functional performance considerations are often at the heart of what a brand has to offer and serve as the foundation which gives brands permission to engage with consumers in additional meaningful ways. Would Nike have the same consumer loyalty if it didn't have technological innovation at the very core of its being? Would Apple be lauded as one of the best examples of a strong brand if it didn't provide such ease-of-use and simple solutions to complex technological problems?

Functional performance and abstract imagery combine to influence consumers both rationally and emotionally. Successful brands ensure that their products and services are made, sold, advertised, and discussed in a way that profoundly affects consumers in the head and the heart. The strongest consumer loyalty relationships typically occur when brands blend functional and emotional considerations, or in terms of the BIAF framework, when favorable appraisals of perceived intentions and ability both prevail.

Brand credibility and other relationship antecedents

In addition to the perceived intentions and ability constructs posited by Kervyn et al., there are several other similar two-factor or three-factor models that can also provide useful conceptual perspectives on brand relationships. For example, the concept of credibility — with its roots in social psychology and its applications in many diverse areas — has much relevance and has been applied in marketing to explain consumer response to brands.

Corporate credibility

Corporate credibility measures the extent to which consumers believe a firm can design and deliver products and services that satisfy customer needs and wants (Brown, 1998; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Erdem, 1998). It contributes to and helps to establish the reputation a firm can achieve in the marketplace (Upshaw, 2007). In particular, corporate credibility has been defined in terms of three factors (Keller & Aaker, 1998):

1. *Corporate expertise*: The extent to which consumers see a company as able to competently make and sell products or conduct services to fully satisfy customer needs.
2. *Corporate trustworthiness*: The extent to which consumers believe a company is motivated to be honest, dependable, and sensitive to customer needs.

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