



# Do relational norms matter in consumer-brand relationships? ☆

Katharina S. Valta

Otto-Friedrich University, Chair of Marketing, Feldkirchenstrasse 21, 96052 Bamberg, Germany

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 1 June 2010

Received in revised form 1 November 2010

Accepted 1 February 2011

Available online 15 August 2011

### Keywords:

Consumer-brand relationship

Relational norm

Brand-relationship quality

Mediation

## ABSTRACT

Researchers criticize current research of consumer-brand relationships (CBR) and research of relational norms because they draw on the interpersonal relationship literature. This paper responds to such remarks in two ways. First, the paper develops a conceptual framework that highlights the mediating role of relational norms in CBR, their effect on brand-relationship quality (BRQ) and their linkage between the characteristics of the dyad and consumer behavior. Second, this article offers an alternative conceptualization and operationalization of BRQ and relational norms. Contrary to prior work, this work draws on the business-to-business relationship literature instead of the interpersonal relationship metaphor. The research findings provide evidence for a second-order structure of relational norms and BRQ. The results suggest that relational norms and BRQ significantly mediate brand relationships.

© 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Consumer-brand relationships (CBR) are important for the profitability of companies (Reichheld, Markey, & Hopton, 2000) and enhancing the understanding of CBR is of great interest to researchers (e.g. Fournier, 1994). Despite the relevance of CBR in practice and theory, academics often criticize that CBR research originates from the interpersonal relationship literature. Nevertheless, several findings support the notion that brand relationship quality (BRQ) is a significant indicator for the strength and depth of consumers' relational behavior towards consumer goods brands (e.g. Fournier, 1994; Smit, Bronner, & Tolboom, 2007).

Despite this interest in CBR, research which assesses mediating variables when investigating the relationship between consumers and consumer goods brands is scarce. One study (Kressmann, Sirgy, Herrmann, Huber, Huber, and Lee, 2006) finds that BRQ mediates CBR. However, no previous work examines the mediating role of relational norms even though several authors support the idea of norms intervening in brand relationships. Using a longitudinal experiment, Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004) argue that relationship-specific expectations influence a service brand and brand perception. Aggarwal (2004) applies a social relationship framework (Clark & Mills, 1993) to examine whether distinct motivations – referred to as norms – exist in brand relationships. He finds support for the theory that an action which violates a relationship norm leads to a less favorable evaluation by the consumer than of an action that conforms with the relationship norm.

Although both studies analyze the impact of certain elements on service brands, the role of norms in the context of consumer goods brands is still unclear. Moreover, Aggarwal's study could not verify whether Clark and Mills' interpersonal relationship framework is applicable to the brand context. An even more important conceptual issue arises from the fact that Aggarwal does not measure actual brand relationships but confronts participants with hypothetical descriptions of relationships in an experimental setting. Therefore, Johar's key question "Is there a norm attached to brand behavior" (Johar, 2005, p. 26) remains open. Responding to this question is especially important for brand managers as the answer provides information on the key drivers of successful brand relationship management. This insight represents a departure from traditional CBR research.

This research addresses the gaps in two ways. First, this paper provides an operationalization of BRQ and relational norms that stems from business rather than interpersonal relationships. The alternative operationalization neither stretches the interpersonal relationship metaphor too far nor changes the original understanding of the relationship metaphor. Second, the present framework explores the link between brand loyalty and brand characteristics, consumer characteristics as well as brand relationship characteristics. This paper emphasizes the mediating role of relational norms and BRQ. If a link exists, measures of relational norms and BRQ provide enriching insight into CBR for both researchers and brand managers.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the extant literature on CBR and evaluates different approaches to operationalize relationship quality. The subsequent section summarizes the current knowledge on relational norms. Section 4 develops a multidimensional conceptualization of brand relationship quality and relational norms and identifies relevant antecedents and outcomes of brand relationships. Section 5 presents the empirical study, and Section 6

☆ The author thanks Bjoern Ivens, her dissertation advisor, for his constructive and valuable comments. The author also thanks the reviewers of the 6th Thought Leaders Conference and the three anonymous reviewers of this special issue for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this article.

E-mail address: Katharina.Valta@uni-bamberg.de.

reports the findings. The concluding section discusses implications and suggests avenues for future research.

## 2. Relationship quality research

The relationship metaphor goes back to the concept of relational exchange (see Berry, 1983). This understanding represents a paradigm shift from a purely transaction-oriented to a relationship-oriented marketing perspective (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995).

In business-to-business marketing, researchers disagree about the constructs that best mediate relationships. Analyzing key indicators for successful relationships still constitutes a widespread challenge. While Morgan and Hunt (1994) propose that trust and commitment are relevant for predicting exchange performance, Crosby and his colleagues are the first who introduce the notion of relationship quality (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990). They define relationship quality as an overall assessment of the strength and depth of a relationship that provides insight into the exchange performance (Crosby et al., 1990; Johnson, 1999; Kumar, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 1995). Relationship quality is generally a multidimensional construct that comprises commitment, trust and satisfaction (Crosby et al., 1990; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001; Kumar et al., 1995).

On the other hand, in business-to-consumer marketing, a variety of theoretical approaches, such as the concept of animism, the increasing tendency to personify brands (e.g. Belk, 1988; Levy, 1985) and the theory of love applied to consumer-object relations (Shimp & Madden, 1988), inspire CBR research. Fournier (1994, 1998) introduces the CBR and BRQ concepts in 1994. According to her, BRQ is a multi-faceted construct that comprises seven dimensions. Six subsequent quantitative studies successfully utilize Fournier's BRQ scale (e.g. Hayes, Alford, Silver, & York, 2006; Park & Kim, 2001; Park, Kim, & Kim, 2002; Smit et al., 2007). Reviewing these works reveals that even though all researchers adjust the original scale, Fournier's facet 'partner quality' attracts the most interest among scientists. Two studies detect additional CBR dimensions. Park and Kim (2001) discover the satisfaction and brand knowledge dimensions. A later study identifies the new dimensions labelled 'nostalgia' and 'trust' (Park et al., 2002). Also inspired by the interpersonal relationship literature, Veloutsou (2007, p. 15) argues that "relationships could be described by two broad dimensions, the communication and emotional content". Based on the relationship marketing literature, she mainly derives scale items from Harker (1999) and finds support for this assumption.

In summary, much discrepancy exists in the literature regarding the operationalization of BRQ. While drawing on interpersonal theories enriches the knowledge of CBR, several researchers criticize this approach for overstressing the interpersonal relationship metaphor (Bengtsson, 2003; Patterson & O'Malley, 2006). In order to avoid the complex issues of operationalization that extant works encounter, this paper applies an alternative conceptualization.

Relying on knowledge from the business-to-business context, this study conceptualizes BRQ as a higher-order construct that consists of the dimensions relationship commitment, brand trust and relationship satisfaction (Crosby et al., 1990). This BRQ conceptualization is consistent with Blackston (1992) who states that customers' trust in and satisfaction with the brand are key components of a successful positive brand relationship. Moreover, this conceptualization addresses the criticism mentioned by Bengtsson (2003) because the approach avoids terms such as love that make associations with interpersonal relationships.

## 3. Relational norms research

### 3.1. Relational exchange theory

The extensive body of research on norms in business relationships demonstrates the pivotal role that norms play in exchange relationships.

Relational norms lie at the core of relational exchange theory (Macneil, 1980) that gains strong interest among researchers of business-to-business relationships. For Macneil, including the content of exchange transactions and ensuring compliance with them by writing explicit contracts is nearly impossible (Macneil, 1974). Rather, soft governance mechanisms, so-called implicit agreements or relational norms, guide exchange relationships. Researchers define relational norms as expectations about behavior that at least the exchange partners share (Artz & Brush, 2000; Heide & John, 1992; Joshi & Arnold, 1997; Macneil, 1980; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Even though relational norms evolve over the interaction episodes (see e.g. Ivens & Blois, 2004), they are relatively stable over time (Opp, 1979). In addition to their ex ante role as expectations (Heide & John, 1992) or guidelines for appropriate behavior (Macneil, 1980), norms serve ex post as reference points to evaluate the behavior an individual actually displays in a given situation. Hence, they permit to judge the conformity of a party's actions with the established standards.

Several reasons exist to argue for the applicability of relational exchange theory to the brand context. First, unlike business relationships, CBR signify repeated exchanges between two parties known to each other (Fournier, 1998). Innovative relationship marketing tools such as direct mailings, customer clubs, and blogs facilitate these repeated interactions between brands and their customers. Brands communicate individualized offers to their customers, customers can provide feedback and brands, in turn, can respond to that input. Second, brands resemble virtual contracts. Through their existence on the market over time, they become a quasi contract that binds both parties (Kapferer, 2007). The brand must keep its identity and stay loyal to itself and its values to retain its market position. Consumers automatically expect a certain degree of reliability and consistency from an established brand. For instance, a strong brand transmits a sign of quality. Even though no written contract explicitly states that each product must be of high quality, consumers develop rather implicit expectations that the brand has to meet in order to prevent the brand relationship from being dissolved. Against this background, brand relationships are more similar to business relationships than to interpersonal relationships. From the brand managers' perspective, a successful relationship means receiving money in exchange for goods. That is why the relational exchange theory introduced by Macneil (1980) provides an appropriate framework to gain deeper insight into CBR.

### 3.2. Norms that govern consumer-brand relationships

Macneil develops a set of nine to ten relational norms or "principles of right action binding upon the members of a group and serving to guide, control, or regulate proper and acceptable behavior" (Macneil, 1980, p. 38). As the literature provides evidence for limited discriminant validity among all relational norms (e.g. Heide & John, 1992; Ivens, 2006), this study applies a limited set of four norms that are particularly relevant for CBR: solidarity, reciprocity, flexibility, and information exchange.

#### 3.2.1. Solidarity

The relational norm of solidarity determines as how important the involved parties perceive the relationship (Kaufmann & Stern, 1988). Solidarity manifests in behaviors which contribute directly to relationship maintenance (Heide & John, 1992; Macneil, 1980). When one partner is in a predicament, solidarity plays a decisive role in preserving the relationship (Achrol, 1996; Dant & Schul, 1992; Kaufmann & Stern, 1988). For instance, a customer may express solidarity towards a brand when the desired brand is temporarily not available. He would then search for the brand in another shop or wait until the desired brand becomes available again instead of buying an alternative brand or product. The brand can express solidarity as well by providing special payment options for customers with limited liquidity or by assisting product users when problems arise.

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات