



A new dualistic approach to brand passion: Harmonious and obsessive



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ABSTRACT

Brand passion is increasingly seen as the ultimate emotional connection between the consumer and a brand. Limited previous research relied exclusively on Sternberg's triangular interpersonal theory in developing the brand passion concept. This research paper integrates consumer brand identity theory, refines the definition of brand passion, and proposes a dualistic approach to brand passion which distinguishes between two different types of brand passion: harmonious and obsessive.

Four separate studies confirm the existence of harmonious and obsessive passion in a consumer–brand context and begin to develop a nomological network of both antecedent and outcome variables for each type of brand passion. This research demonstrates that the conceptualization of consumer passion for a brand is much more complex than previously suggested.

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1. Introduction

In an increasingly competitive global marketplace where countless brands can satisfy consumer wants and needs, marketing practitioners and academicians have argued that the creation of highly emotional consumer–brand relationships is the driving force in consumer marketing (Fournier, 1998). It is in this context that the focus increasingly lies on generating brand passion. Brand passion is seen as the ultimate emotional connection between a consumer and a brand. Consumers become personally invested in the brand, sometimes even more so than they do with their friends and loved ones (McEwen, 2004). Consensus exists among marketing academicians that passion is a “core element” of this emotional connection and may translate in consumer loyalty (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Bauer, Heinrich, & Marin, 2007; Sternberg, 1997). Yet, notwithstanding the importance of passion and in contrast with other disciplines such as philosophy and psychology, marketing scholars have just recently begun to examine the complex phenomenon of passion in a consumption context (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2013).

Despite the acknowledgement that brand passion is not homogeneous in nature but is rather comprised of “excitation, infatuation, and obsession” (Albert et al., 2013, p. 905), the existing research operationalizes brand passion as a unidimensional construct. Such operationalization leads to mixed findings. For example, positive

relationships between brand passion and consumers' acceptance for a higher price are shown to be significant in some (Bauer et al., 2007) but not in other studies (Albert et al., 2013). This evidence indicates that brand passion is not unidimensional, but is rather a complex phenomenon that may include interrelated, yet distinct components, resulting in different relationships with other variables.

The existing inconsistencies in brand passion research can be attributed to the lack of theoretical foundation which may explain the nuances and complexities of the passion construct. Previous research has consistently applied Sternberg's triangular interpersonal theory of love as the foundation for studying brand passion. Although Sternberg's theory advances a multi-dimensional structure of love, it fails to clearly distinguish between different types of love and, therefore, does not encourage analytical comparisons of different components and their combinations (Sternberg & Barnes, 1988). Furthermore, Sternberg's theory fails to discuss how a loved brand is integrated into the consumer's identity (Batra et al., 2012).

In order to understand the dimensionality of brand passion, it is essential to account for its psychological mechanisms which can be better understood through the framework of identity theory. Brands have been previously described as “a relationship partner that is important to (1) the private self, such that individual consumers use the brand to define who they are, and (2) the social self, such that these consumers consider themselves part of an in-group of consumers who identify with the same brand” (Lam, Ahearne, Hu, & Schillewaert, 2010, p. 129). The mechanisms that shape one's private or social self may be either autonomous or controlled, therefore, generating a *harmonious* or *obsessive* type of passion (Vallerand et al., 2003). While these types of passion have been established in psychology and management research (e.g., Vallerand et al., 2003), no studies have applied the duality of passion to the consumer

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brand context. However, such knowledge will allow for a more nuanced understanding of brand passion and its relations to other constructs.

While we do not suggest that researchers should abstain from using Sternberg's interpersonal love theory when examining brand passion, we do argue that it is critical to integrate consumer brand identity theory to the further development of the brand passion concept. The purpose of this study is therefore threefold. First, drawing from consumer brand identity theory, we expand the definition of brand passion. Second, we propose a new dualistic approach to brand passion. We suggest there are two types of brand passion, harmonious brand passion and obsessive brand passion, which can be distinguished based on *how* the brand is internalized into one's identity (Lam et al., 2010; Vallerand et al., 2003). Third, to further demonstrate the convergent and discriminant validity of harmonious and obsessive brand passion, we develop a nomological network of antecedent and outcome variables specific to each brand passion type.

2. The concept of passion

Passion has long been a topic of discussion among philosophers. In line with the etymology of the word *passion*, from the Latin word "passio" for suffering, one group of philosophers that includes Kant (1724–1804) and Hume (1711–1776) proposes that the will is inevitably determined by the passions. People are slaves to their passions, which is evil. Kant defined passion as "a desire that has become a habitual inclination, and since habituation destroys freedom, passions cause the loss of freedom." While Kant and Hume provide opposite answers to the question whether it is possible for reason to overcome the passions, they both subscribe to a conceptual dichotomy and view reason and passion to be exclusive categories. A different view is provided by Descartes (1596–1650) and Spinoza (1632–1677). They do not subscribe to the dichotomy between passion and reason. Men's emotional orientation has changed from passivity to activity with Spinoza recognizing "the possibility of passions themselves being transformed into a form of reason" (Dilman, 1984, p. 186); thus, arguing that passions are not inherently evil and can lead to positive behavioral tendencies "as long as reason underlies the behavior" (Vallerand et al., 2003, p. 756).

Based on the view supported by Spinoza and Descartes that passion and reason are not mutually exclusive, a recent advancement in psychology has proposed a dualistic approach to passion toward activities. Passion is defined by Vallerand et al. (2003) as "a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, that they find important, and in which they invest time and energy" (p.757). Furthermore, Vallerand et al. (2003) propose that there are two types of passion, harmonious and obsessive, which can be distinguished based on how an individual internalizes the passionate activity into one's self-identity. Most individuals who are passionate are able to keep their passion in harmony with other aspects of their lives, thus experiencing harmonious passion. Yet, other individuals are passionate to the extent that the object of their passion dominates their existence causing imbalance with other life domains.

3. Brand passion in the marketing literature

In the marketing literature, the construct of passion has been mainly discussed within the framework of Sternberg's triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986). The triangular theory of love posits that love includes three components: intimacy, decision/commitment, and passion. Sternberg defines passion as "the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation, and related phenomena in loving relationships" (Sternberg, 1997, p. 315).

Researchers applied Sternberg's triangular theory to explain passion in a consumption context. Initial qualitative research likened passionate feelings toward a product or brand to the passionate feelings toward

another person, as in the case of interpersonal love relationships (Shimp & Madden, 1988). Bauer et al. (2007) defined passion as "a primarily affective, extremely positive attitude toward a specific brand that leads to emotional attachment and influences relevant behavioral factors" (p. 2190). Recently brand passion has been defined as "a psychological construct comprised of excitation, infatuation, and obsession for a brand" and "a feeling which few consumers embrace" (Albert et al., 2013, p. 2 and p. 5). In general, the existing conceptualizations suggest that passion is at the core of strong and high quality consumer–brand relationships (Fournier, 1998). Passionate consumers are driven by desires that are overpowering and may dominate consumers' thoughts, feelings, and actions, and often come alive in a social context (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003).

Research has linked brand passion to a number of antecedents and outcomes such as brand uniqueness, the prestige of the brand, and self-expressive and hedonic features of the brand. Brand identification is the best predictor of brand passion, and is predicted to a lesser degree by brand trust (Albert et al., 2013). No consensus exists on whether consumers' characteristics help predict brand passion. While Bauer et al. (2007) did not find a relationship between extraversion and brand passion, another study did find a relationship between the two variables (Matzler, Pichler, & Hemetsberger, 2007). In regards to brand passion outcomes, previous research shows that consumer passion for a brand translates into consumer loyalty (Whang, Allen, Sahourny, & Zhang, 2004). Additionally, mixed findings have put into question whether brand passion leads to a consumer's willingness to pay a price premium for the brand (Albert et al., 2013).

Despite researchers' attempts to examine antecedents and outcomes of brand passion, the nomological framework of the construct lacks the desired consistency. This limitation, in part, stems from the narrow scope of Sternberg's triangular theory that fails to capture the duality of the passion construct. To this end, we propose a new dualistic model of brand passion. We ground our arguments in the customer–brand identification framework (CBI) (Lam et al., 2010) and the dualistic passion approach (Vallerand et al., 2003).

4. A new dualistic approach to brand passion

It is an accepted concept in the marketing literature that our possessions are a reflection of our identities (Belk, 1988). Recent research established that when a consumer loves a brand, the integration of the brand into the consumer's identity is a central aspect of the brand love. The sense of consumer identification toward the brand is critical for establishing a passionate feeling for the brand (Albert et al., 2013; Batra et al., 2012). Yet, Sternberg's triangular theory of love does not include the integration of the beloved into the self. Perhaps Sternberg's failure to integrate identity theory is because research elsewhere, especially early research in the organizational identification literature (for a review, see Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008), conceptualizes identification as purely cognitive. Hence, conceptualizations of brand passion based on Sternberg's theory are likely to omit the ways that brands are used by consumers to help create their identity.

Unlike Sternberg's theory, the customer–brand identification framework (Lam et al., 2010) embraces the multidimensionality of identification. CBI is defined as "a customer's psychological state of perceiving, feeling, and valuing his or her belongingness with a brand" (Lam et al., 2010, p. 130) and consists of three dimensions: a cognitive dimension, an emotional connection (i.e., the emotional consequences of brand usage), and an evaluative dimension (i.e., "whether the consumer thinks the psychological oneness with the brand is valuable to him or her individually and socially"; Lam et al., 2010, p. 137). Batra et al. (2012) defined passion-driven behavior as behavior reflecting a strong desire to use the brand, invest resources into the brand, and a history of having done so. We propose a new definition of brand passion that combines Batra's conceptualization and integrates a multidimensional identity perspective based on the CBI framework. We define brand

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