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Fostering international brand loyalty through committed and attached relationships

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ABSTRACT

The relationship-building approach, focused on the building of brand-to-consumer relationships conducive to brand loyalty formation, has become an extensively investigated topic in international brand management studies. However, the theoretical development of this approach manifests obvious diversities, causing managerial uncertainty about how to take appropriate strategic actions to put the relationship-building approach to best use. The current study, orchestrating the main concepts derived from three relationship-building paradigms with necessary adaptations and modifications, develops and validates the Relationship-Building for Strategic Brand Management Model. Its most noteworthy contribution lies in the coalescence of pragmatic utilitarianism, emotionalism and social symbolism, orienting the relationship-building approach to correspond to the principle of holistic consumer experience management. As explicated by the model, committed and attached relationships built upon the relationship foundation mirroring the holistic essentiality of holistic consumer experience are convertible into powerful driver of international brand loyalty. The model structure and causal path pattern prove to be applicable to different international product brand categories in different regions. Strategic implications are deduced from the research findings, which the international brand manager may take into consideration to maximize the effectiveness of relationship-building strategies for fostering brand loyalty in the international market.

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1. Introduction

Due to the fierceness of competition in the international market, fostering brand loyalty in order to augment regular patronage and uphold revenue growth becomes a strategic priority in the international brand's pursuit of sustainable competitive advantages (e.g. Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Punniyamoorthy & Mohan Raj, 2007). In earlier years, research on fostering brand loyalty revolved mainly around transactional exchanges between the brand and the consumer (e.g. Johnson, Herrmann, & Huber, 2006; Tsai, 2005, 2006). More recently, the research focus has shifted to the impact of lasting relationships on the formation of long-term brand loyalty, making the relationship-building approach an extensively investigated topic in international brand management studies (e.g. Breivik & Thorbjørnsen, 2008; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Fruchter & Sigue, 2004; Park, Kim, & Kim, 2002; Park, Macinnis, & Priester, 2009; Park, Macinnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010; Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009; Sung & Campbell, 2007; Verhoef, 2003). Basically, the relationship-building approach gears brand management strategies towards cultivating psychological bonds through the functional and

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emotional values of brand attributes, the gratifying experience in brand contacts and the personal relevancy gleaned from brand meaning. Such bonds are believed to be the crucial constituents of lasting relationships between the brand and the consumer, conducive to the formation of long-term brand loyalty.

Relationship-building researchers generally highlight the important role that brand-to-consumer relationships play in eliciting favorable consumer behavior. However, the notion of relationship-building is conceptualized from diversified theoretical perspectives. Therefore, different operational definitions and frameworks are adopted for examining the process of building brand-to-consumer relationships. There have emerged three theoretical paradigms of relationship-building in relevant studies. The first paradigm, known as brand relationship quality (BRQ), conceptualizes various relationship components (brand partner quality, interdependence, intimacy, personal commitment, self-connection, and love/passion) correlating with each other to build the entirety of relationships between the brand and the consumer. The second paradigm is brand attachment (BA), which designates emotional attachment as the key factor in nurturing brand-to-consumer relationships. Brand commitment (BC), the third paradigm, emphasizes brand commitment that comprises the two dimensionalities of calculative and affective commitment exercises the main mediation effect between various relationship components and brand loyalty formation.

The diversities in the three relationship-building paradigms reflect vigorousness of theoretical construction but, in the meantime, cause managerial uncertainty about how to take appropriate strategic actions to put the notion of relationship-building to best use for fostering international brand loyalty. Another issue arises from the validity and reliability of research results. Most of relevant studies examine relationship-building by data obtained from single product brand category. Without testing the research framework on different brand categories and consumers of different cultural backgrounds, the research findings can be less applicable to broad range of product brand categories and cultural contexts. To address these issues, the current study conducted two stages of investigation to develop an integrative model of relationship-building that orchestrates the main concepts of the diversified paradigms in the stream of relationship-building research. Collected data reflect different international brand categories in different markets. Consequently, the Relationship-Building for Strategic Brand Management (RB-SBM) Model is proposed and empirically verified. According to the model, seven relationship components (*performance satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, brand-switching cost, trust, aesthetic attractiveness, delight, and self-concept connection*) are exogenous constructs that lay the relationship foundation. The two constructs of *brand commitment* and *brand attachment* mediate the impact of the seven relationship components on *brand loyalty*. Amid the seven relationship components, *performance satisfaction, trust* and *self-concept connection* also exercise direct effect on *brand loyalty*.

The RB-SBM Model, established on the integrative reconfiguration of the BRQ, BA and BC paradigms with necessary adaptations and modifications, contributes to relationship-building studies in several aspects. The most noteworthy contribution lies in the coalescence of pragmatic utilitarianism, emotionalism and social symbolism, orienting the relationship-building approach to correspond to the principle of holistic consumer experience management. As explicated by the model, committed and attached relationships built upon the relationship foundation mirroring the holistic essentiality of holistic consumer experience are convertible into powerful driver of international brand loyalty. The model structure and causal path pattern of the RB-SBM Model, validated by a multi-phase methodology, prove to be applicable to three international product brand categories (the automobile, the cell phone, and the sportswear) in the markets of North America, Europe, and Asia. Strategic implications are deduced from the research findings, which the international brand manager may take into consideration to maximize the effectiveness of relationship-building strategies for fostering brand loyalty in the international market.

2. Three theoretical paradigms

2.1. Brand relationship quality

The brand relationship quality (BRQ) paradigm features an encompassing conceptualization of relationship-building for brand management. Initially proposed by Fournier (1998), the original BRQ framework is qualitative in nature. Through in-depth interviews, Fournier (1998) comes up with six components of brand relationship quality: partner quality (cognitive belief), interdependence (behavioral tie), intimacy (supportive belief), commitment (attitudinal tie), self-connection (socio-affective bond), and passion/love (emotional bond). In essence, this framework treats the concept of brand relationship quality as a second-order construct that accounts for all of the relationship dimensions. The relationship components in cognitive, emotional, socio-affective and behavioral dimensions function as indicators of total relationship quality. They correlate to be an entity stemming from a common source, which in aggregate constitute the higher-order substantive construct of BRQ.

However, there lack clear guidelines for empirical model specification, leaving undefined particular linkages between BRQ facets and outcome variables. Much research effort has revolved around the structural delineation of the relationship components in various dimensions since the BRQ framework emerged. Quite a few scholars put this framework to further empirical examination, but the findings in one way or another are divergent from this framework's compositional dimensionality and model structure. Most noteworthy, brand relationship quality is found not necessarily in a second-order factor hierarchy (e.g. Breivik & Thorbjørnsen, 2008; Chang & Chieng, 2006; Ekinci, Yoon, & Oppewal, 2004; Kressmann et al., 2006; Park et al., 2002; Smit, Bronner, & Tolboom, 2007). In an investigation on the impact of brand relationship quality on

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