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Brand Love – Moving Beyond Loyalty

An Empirical Investigation of Perceived Brand Love of Indian Consumer

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ABSTRACT

Each passing day brings new brands to India each vying for a share of wallet in the prospering market. By 2020, the median age of Indian population will be 29 years and owing to the absolute population of India, the presence in Indian market will be rewarding for the multinationals. But the twenty-something targets, because of their ‘variety seeking’ disposition, are a challenge, even for the most experienced marketers. The marketers create brands with a vision to create sustained loyalty, which however gets diluted by consumers coveting for ‘something new’ and ‘something different’. As a defensive, the marketers are now attempting to create an emotional bond with the customers. This phenomenon is termed as brand love and it is likely to influence desirable marketing outcomes such as commitment, positive word of mouth by customers, etc. This research attempts to explore the perceived ‘brand love’ of young Indians. A structured, non-disguised questionnaire was used, data was collected through personal interviews and a total of 160 complete questionnaires were obtained. The findings describe the comparative status of brands loved by the Indian consumers and will help marketers to understand their perceived brand image, customer engagement and attitude of customers towards their brands.

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1. Introduction

“A brand is the personification of a product, service or even entire company. Also, like a person, a brand has a name, a personality, character and a reputation. Like a person, you can respect, like and even love a brand. You can think of it as a deep personal friend, or merely an acquaintance. You can view it as dependable or undependable; principled or opportunistic; caring or capricious. Just as you like to be around certain people and not others, so also do you like to be with certain brands and not others...”

(Robert T. Blanchard, Procter & Gamble)

The involvement that consumers express towards brands is best described in the quote above by one of the most successful marketers (Blanchard in ‘Parting Essay’, 1999). The consumers’ emotional attachment with brands has eternally magnetized the interest of the marketers who create brands with a vision to create persistent loyalty. This proposition is challenged by consumers coveting for ‘something new’ and ‘something different’ and the presence of numerous products and abundant brands. The complexity deepens as the consumers are assisted by technology educating them about comparable

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products with absolute ease. Nevertheless, businesses endeavour to develop and maintain a loyal customer base, even though loyalty seems to be declining among the customers and consumers alike. The marketers resolutely probe the dynamic 'consumer choice' behaviour and thus a significant proportion of research on consumer behaviour is focused towards analyzing how consumers emotionally bond with the consumption objects.

As a defensive strategy, the marketers are now 'proactively' attempting to create an emotional bond with the customers, so that they get attached to the brand. One such concept is 'Brand Love' which may be described as the degree of emotional attachment a satisfied customer has for a particular brand. Theoretically, it is defined as the level of passionate, emotional attachment a satisfied consumer may have for a particular trade name and its associated dimensions. It is one of the most recent paradigms being studied by marketers. Consumers' love towards specific brands influences desirable marketing outcomes such as passion and attachment with the brand, positive word of mouth about the brand and true love for the brand (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). The relationship between the customers and products brands has been explored using concepts such as satisfaction and loyalty to the brand as well as brand love, the various types being distinguished basis the intensities of relationships. Love is a typical consumer-related emotion and often has a strong connection to the individual's self-concept and identity (Richins, 1997). Brand Love is a response, a feeling experienced by only few very satisfied customers. Though customer satisfaction is usually transaction specific outcome, brand love is the effect of customer's long term relationship with the brand. Customers who tend to love particular brands often quote 'I just don't buy other brands', 'this is truly delightful brand', etc. The customers' attachments are based on familiarity, trust, dependability and consistency of response, the primary motive for attachment being security and safety (Patwardhan and Balasubramanian, 2011). Another type of attachment is based on the 'need for stimulation' where consumers seek brands that provide novelty, excitement and arousal.

The brands vie for a loyal customer base and the customers would want a significant reason as to why they should confine themselves to one particular brand. Each brand can boast of a few customers that love it, but not all satisfied customers tend to love a brand. What specific reasons lead to the establishment of brand love as well as the specific outcomes due to customers love for a brand? These are the areas which marketers and researchers alike should examine. The present research is an attempt to understand the impact of brand love i.e. the resulting outcomes.

1.1. The importance of investigating brand love in India

The Indian retail market is estimated to be Rs. 47 trillion (US\$ 738.71 billion) by 2016-17 as it is expanding at CAGR (Compounded Annual Growth Rate) of 15 per cent (Yes Bank-Assocham study, 2014). This will be supported by growth in online retail market, which is projected to grow at a CAGR of 40-45 per cent during 2014-18 (IBEF, 2014). The main drivers fuelling this growth are - favourable demographics, increasing urbanization, nuclearization of families, rising affluence amid consumers, growing preference for branded products and higher aspirations, etc. (IBEF, 2014). These growth opportunities are attracting multiple brands – both domestic and of foreign origin – to be present in the Indian market and charm Indian customers. Furthermore, among all different customer segments in India 'millennials' is an important one. Millennials is also one of the most important segments being studied by the marketers across the world as it includes people belonging to the age group of 18 to 29 years. With India's median age expected to be 29 years by 2020, this will be a crucial fragment for marketers interested in the Indian market. The millennials are the most important targets for the technological firms and fashion industry. The extensive use of technology by this segment makes them distinctive than others. The millennials are liberal, open minded, highly dynamic individuals and constantly change their habit of buying products and do the same with their product preferences (Pew Research Center, 2010). However, the capricious nature of millennials creates a challenge for the firms across the world. The present research focuses on analyzing the behaviour of millennials. It is important to understand the buying behaviour of these young consumers and cater them with the products suited to satisfy them.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

The attachment of the consumers with the brands they use can be described as satisfaction, loyalty or love depending on the degree of affection exhibited towards the brands. A consumer can get emotionally connected with a brand in the same manner in which he/ she can get emotionally involved with another person (Shimp and Madden, 1988; Thomson et al., 2005; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Keh et al., 2007; Albert et al., 2008; Whang et al., 2004). Love relationship existing between two individuals has a lot of similarities with the emotional relationship existing between a consumer and consumption object or brand (Shimp and Madden, 1988; Keh et al., 2007; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Whang et al., 2004; Albert et al., 2008).

Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) label brand love as the level of passionate, emotional attachment a satisfied consumer may have for a particular trade name and its associated dimensions. Brand love may be evident in many forms i.e. brand passion, attachment, positive evaluation and emotion in response to brands and declarations to validate brand love. Brand love differs from the satisfaction because it is more affective. Brand love is not transaction-specific but the outcome of a nurtured consumer-brand relationship. Rubin (1970) and Sternberg (1986) define 'love' as a superior status of friendship. Sternberg (1986, 1997) proposed a triangular theory of love, with three main constructs - intimacy, passion and decision/commitment.

Thomson et al. (2005) also studied the brand love phenomenon and proposed three dimensions - passion, affection, and connection. Recently, Albert et al. (2008a, 2008b) proposed two main components of brand love that are also to be found in interpersonal love literature - six first order dimensions (idealization, intimacy, pleasure, dream, memories, and uniqueness) and two second order dimensions (passion and affection). On the other hand, Roy et al. (2012) suggest that the concept of brand love predominantly distinguishes itself through the notion of emotion/ passion and lack of commitment, when weighted against brand loyalty. Though consumer commitment is fundamental for loyalty to sustain, brand love may or may not lead to loyalty (Oliver, 1999).

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