



Consumer brand relationships research: A bibliometric citation meta-analysis[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study examines how scholarly research on consumer brand relationships has evolved over the last decades by conducting a bibliometric citation meta-analysis. The bibliography was compiled using the *ISI Web of Science* database. The literature review includes 392 papers by 685 authors in 101 journals. The area of consumer brand relationships research is notably interdisciplinary, with articles mainly published in journals for business and management, but also applied psychology and communication. We show the impact of universities, authors, journals, and key articles and outline possible future research avenues. The study explores seven sub-research streams and visualizes how articles on consumer brand relationships build on each other using co-citation mapping technique. Based on the results of this analysis we propose an agenda for future research that offers the potential to advance research on the relationships between consumers and brands.

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1. Introduction

In the last two decades the number of articles examining consumer brand relationships (CBR) has increased rapidly, thus reflecting the tremendous popularity of this research area in the literature. The beginning of this research area is marked in the mid 1990s. Blackstone's book chapter in 1993, "Beyond Brand Personality: Building Brand Relationships," and later Fajer and Schouten's (1995) paper, "Breakdown and Dissolution of Person–Brand Relationships," already discussed the relationships of consumers and brands, but it was not until Fournier's (1998) seminal article which provides a theoretical foundation and explanation for consumer brand relationships research. While there were very few papers written prior 1998, they either did not specifically focus on consumer brand relationships (e.g., Fournier & Yao, 1997) or were book chapters similar to the one by Blackstone (1993) or Heilbrunn (1998), and therefore did not get as frequently distributed and thus attention in academia compared to journal articles. Moreover, and equally important, a bibliometric analysis is based on citations and thus any uncovered but important paper published prior 1998 would still be considered and

identified in our analysis. For these reasons we chose Fournier's (1998) work as a starting point for a meta analytic review.

Since 1998 a variety of different perspectives, concepts, models and various theories have been developed and introduced to understand consumers' relationships to their brands, including research on self-brand connections (Escalas & Bettman, 2005), brands in the self-concept (Hamilton & Hassan, 2010; Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009), brand attachment (Belaid & Behi, 2011; Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisengerich, & Iacobucci, 2010; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005), brand passion (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2012; Bauer, Heinrich, & Martin, 2007), brand romance (Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2011), brand relationship orientation (Aurier & Lanauze, 2012), brand commitment (Walsh, Winterich, & Mittal, 2010), or brand love (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Fetscherin, Boulanger, Filho, & Souki, 2014; Heinrich, Albrecht, & Bauer, 2012) to name just a few. The published articles distinguish various intensities and types of emotions and hence relationships consumers can have with brands (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). However, a clear understanding of how all these different concepts relate to or built on each other is still missing in academic literature.

While frequently new concepts and constructs are introduced to literature to explore and explain consumer brand relationships (e.g., brand authenticity, brand evangelism, brand extreme desire, or brand fanaticism among others) surprisingly little attention has been spent so far on examining the whole existing work and reflecting how research has evolved and shaped the research area of consumer brand relationships so far. "Since research can be cyclical (Daniels, 1991),

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one needs to take an occasional step back" (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012, p. 733) and analyze existing consumer brand relationships literature. Our work seeks to fill this gap by conducting a literature review by means of a bibliometric author co-citation meta-analysis of articles related to consumer brand relationship research.

This longitudinal approach is valuable as consumer brand relationships are based on a wide range of theories and concepts from multiple disciplines. Due to the complex nature of this research area, we conducted an interdisciplinary review of the literature that addresses three main research questions. (1) How has consumer brand relationship research evolved in the past, what are the underlying research streams, and which need further attention? (2) Which journals, articles, and authors are the most cited ones and therefore worth reading for future research in this field? (3) Which institutions (as defined by universities) are the most influential ones, and thus contribute most to the area of consumer brand relationships?

In that respect, our analysis makes an important contribution for scholars interested in consumer brand relationships because we outline, structure, and identify the key universities, journals, articles and authors to be taken into consideration when conducting future research on consumer brand relationships. We also provide a valuable overview of the research history, and synthesize and identify established and also emerging research streams. In that respect, we provide a quick reference guide for interdisciplinary researchers, business consultants, and marketers who want to become familiar with the topic of consumers and their relationships to brands. The later of this paper is structured as followed: next we introduce the concept and method of bibliometric citation meta-analysis. Then we present detailed results of the empirical analysis. Following that, we describe structure and streams of consumer brand relationship research and finally conclude with limitations and implications for future research.

2. Bibliometric citation meta-analysis

Bibliometric citation analysis is a well-established form of meta-analytical research or a so called "meta-review" of literature (Cote, Leong, & Cote, 1991; Garfield, 1983; Harsanyi, 1993; Kim & McMillan, 2008). It was initially used in different disciplines in science and the humanities (Price, 1976; White & McCain, 1989; Wiberley, 2003). Later it has also been applied in the social science disciplines (Glanzel, 1996) such as international business (Fetscherin, Voss, & Gugler, 2010), international management (Acedo & Casillas, 2005), marketing (Arnott, 2007), advertising (Kim & McMillan, 2008) and communications (Pasadeos, Renfro, & Hanily, 1999). Bibliometric analysis unveils pivotal articles and objectively illustrates the linkages between and among articles about a certain research topic or filed by analyzing how many times they have been co-cited by other published articles (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012). Data from these analyses are useful not only to measure popularity but also the impact of specific authors and their publications. Consequently, bibliometric citation analysis allows evaluating meta-analytically the development of a given research area or discipline as well as it helps to identify key research streams and their underlying theoretical frameworks (Borgman, 2000; Vassinen, 2006).

"Bibliometric analysis is based on the assumption that researchers publish their most important findings in scholarly journals and predominantly base their research on articles previously published in similar journals (Van Raan, 2003), a reasonable assumption" (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012, p. 735) which is also applicable for branding research (Chabowski, Samiee, & Hult, 2013). "Citation analysis considers a citation to be the basic unit of analysis (Kim & McMillan, 2008) and therefore goes beyond a simple counting of publications to include centers of influence" (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012, p. 735) and maps out the linkages between and among articles of a research field (Kim & McMillan, 2008). Consequently, an analysis of citations reflects the usefulness of

research to other researchers conducting related work (Garfield, 1983). As the focus of our study is to shed light on the research stream of consumer brand relationships, bibliometric citation analysis is an appropriate meta-analytic approach to reach the three outlined goals.

3. Method

Citation data are available for a wide range of publications. For this study we collected data from the most well-known academic database *ISI Web of Knowledge* called also *Web of Science* which includes the *Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI)*. "The *ISI Web of Knowledge* was suitable for this as one of the main objectives is to conduct an interdisciplinary literature review and many notable bibliometric studies have used this database before" (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012, p. 735). We searched for publications that appeared from January 1998 to October 2010. The year 1998 was chosen as the cut-off year as it was the year Fournier (1998) wrote the seminal work, "Consumers and their brands: developing relationship theory in consumer research" which we choose as the jump start for the consumer brand relationship research field as discussed earlier. October 2010 marked the most recent date for which we got complete citation data from the *ISI Web of Knowledge*.

To collect comprehensive data, we used a two-step approach. First, we identified articles that had referenced Fournier's (1998) work. Second, for each relevant article we recorded author name(s), the journal it is published in, "title, volume, number, pages, publication date, abstracts, and cited references. Inspired by the work of Roper and Parker (2006), we used bibliometric software to facilitate the process of identifying the citation and co-citation relationships of articles. We chose to use *HistCite™* software which is a specific bibliometric software tool for analyzing and visualizing citation linkages between scientific papers" (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012, p. 736). Direct citation linkages are articles that are cited by a paper in their reference. Indirect citation linkages are those citations which are not in the original paper cited, but are citations of citations. In other words, publication A cites publication B and publication B cites publication C but publication A does not cite publication C. In this case we have a direct citation link between A and B as well as B and C and an indirect citation link between A and C. The software's "inputs are bibliographic records (with cited references) from *ISI Web of Knowledge* and outputs are various tables and graphs with indicators about the knowledge domain under study" (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012, p. 736).

4. Results

This section presents the results of the bibliometric citation analysis including an evaluation of which institutions (as defined by universities) are leading with regard to articles published in the field of consumer brand relationships. Moreover it provides an evaluation of highly cited published articles and journals, and thus allows us to introduce a research agenda in the following section. To start with, we identified 392 articles in total which referred to Fournier's (1998) work on consumer brand relationships. On closer examination the key disciplines of those 392 articles are business (61%), management (16%), applied psychology (9%), communications (4%) and hospitality, as well as leisure, sports, and tourism (3%) research. This finding reflects the interdisciplinarity of the research area on a first glance. However, with regard to our main research questions we compute a set of statistics, rankings, and tables we are outlining in the following.

4.1. Centers of excellence

In order to identify centers of excellence in research on consumer brand relationships, we measure the importance and academic weight of different institutions (on the aggregate level of universities) by their output measured by the total number of published articles related

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