



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Australasian Marketing Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ausmj

Consumer advocacy for luxury brands

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 May 2018

Accepted 22 May 2018

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Consumer advocacy
 Luxury brand attachment
 Brand satisfaction
 Brand loyalty
 Luxury brand

ABSTRACT

This paper explores consumer advocacy for luxury brands in relation to brand satisfaction, brand loyalty and luxury brand attachment. Data were collected from an online consumer panel ($n = 393$) in Australia and were analysed through structural equation modelling. Luxury brand attachment has been found to have a stronger effect on consumer advocacy than that of brand satisfaction and brand loyalty. In addition to the moderating role of brand loyalty, luxury consumers' dilemma with consumer advocacy has been discussed in this paper. These findings provide insight into the consumer advocacy for luxury branding academics and practitioners.

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1. Introduction

Luxury brands have received considerable research interest in marketing literature over the last two decades (Kapferer and Laurent, 2016; Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). In addition to conceptualising dimensions of luxury brand, studies have emphasised on building and maintaining a long-term consumer–brand relationship (e.g., Kim and Ko, 2012). In this regard, extant studies on luxury branding mostly focus on the traditional company-level communications and strategies (e.g., Baek et al., 2010; Hwang and Kandampully, 2012). Extant research has examined the luxury consumer–brand interaction within the context of brand trust, commitment, satisfaction and loyalty (Shukla et al., 2016; Song et al., 2012). However, the nature of luxury brands as well as the niche market segment requires consumer level interaction and sharing of market information for a strong consumer–brand relationship. In particular, while consumers consider buying expensive, exclusive, and conspicuous brands, they rely more on opinion leaders, reference groups and peer recommendations (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Such peer recommendations activate over positive word-of-mouth, brand advocacy, brand evangelism, and brand community engagement (e.g., Algesheimer et al., 2005). Academics and industry experts have noted that luxury brands require strong consumer to consumer engagement to be successful in the increasingly competitive and interconnected market (Chiou and Droge, 2006; Gomelsky, 2016)

Theoretically, consumer advocacy differentiates itself from other similar constructs with the notion that it encompasses the con-

sumers' willingness to assist others in having a positive brand experience (Chelminski and Coulter, 2011; Jayasimha and Billore, 2016). Consumer advocacy is more relevant to luxury brands for several reasons. First, luxury consumers seek information about the craftsmanship, artisan, and other consumers' memorable experience while evaluating a luxury brand (Phau and Prendergast, 2000). At this point, consumer advocacy plays an important role in luxury consumers' purchase decision. Second, personal source of information has been considered more reliable than the company generated messages in marketing (e.g., Klein et al., 2016). This conception is expected to be more relevant for luxury consumers. Third, the affluent consumers tend to switch the brands frequently and cannot be attracted with typical loyalty card or cashback opportunities (Schneider, 2017). To address this, luxury brands can initiate consumer advocacy to and generate trust and credibility from consumers by providing organic and reliable information about the brand.

Call for advocacy research has been evident in marketing literature (Fournier et al., 2012), but most of the follow up research in luxury branding have focused on online and offline brand advocacy (Parrott et al., 2015). The limitation with brand advocacy is that it focuses on proactively recruiting new customers and defending the brand against detractors (Wilder, 2015). In line with previous research, this research argues that consumer advocacy is relevant to consumers' altruistic tendency to 'promote positive marketplace experiences' (Chelminski and Coulter, 2011). An investigation into relevant literature suggests that consumer's emotional bond to the brand is a key pre-requisite for advocacy (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Wilder, 2015). Furthermore, brand satisfaction is essential to develop the emotional bond (i.e., luxury brand attachment) which in turn results brand loyalty (Chiou and Droge, 2006). Therefore,

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this study aims to examine the effects of brand satisfaction, luxury brand attachment and brand loyalty on consumer advocacy within a luxury branding context.

The following sections of this paper consist of relevant literature and hypothesis development, the research method, result, discussion, implications and future research directions.

2. Relevant literature and hypothesis development

2.1. Consumer advocacy

Consumer advocacy refers to exchanging market information and counselling other consumers so that they have a positive brand experience (Chelminski and Coulter, 2011). Jayasimha and Billore (2016) conceptually differentiate consumer advocacy from customer advocacy with the notion that customer advocacy is a firm-level construct whereas consumer advocacy is the sharing of market information amongst consumers. To some extent, consumer advocacy is similar to the helping behaviour (market mavenism and altruistic helping behaviour) that benefits others in their purchases and consumption (Price et al., 1995; Price et al., 1995). Past empirical studies on consumer advocacy have mostly focused within the context of dissatisfactory service, service failure, and complaining behaviour (Chelminski and Coulter, 2011; Jayasimha and Srivastava, 2017). However, this study expects consumer advocacy to be related to brand satisfaction, luxury brand attachment and brand loyalty as Anderson et al. (1994) show that when a consumer becomes connected to a brand, this connection can lead to advocacy for the brand. In other field of study, advocacy has been found to be an outcome of consumers' brand commitment (Harrison-Walker, 2001).

2.2. Brand satisfaction

Brand satisfaction results from the consumers' post-purchase emotional response through which the expected and actual performance of a brand is compared (Oliver, 1980). The disconfirmation paradigm of brand satisfaction highlights that the consumers must have the ability and motivation to evaluate the brand and predetermined reference point (Bloemer and Kasper, 1995). Such cognitive appraisal of disconfirmation also refers to the subjective evaluation that a particular brand meets or exceeds consumers' expectations (Yüksel and Yüksel, 2001). Studies suggest that consumers' knowledge on and experience with the brand are essential to generate expectations and assess the actual performance (Kamins and Asael, 1987). Extant literature largely supports that consumers' satisfaction with a particular brand strengthen the consumer–brand relationship. Consumers' desire to prolong the relationship with the satisfactory brand generates behavioural intentions including brand loyalty, positive word-of-mouth and consumer advocacy (Bloemer and Kasper, 1995; Cronin et al., 2000). Moreover, the satisfied consumers develop a strong cognitive and affective bond with the brand through which they consider the brand to be an integral part of their life (Belaid and Behi, 2011).

2.3. Luxury brand attachment

Luxury brand attachment is “the emotional bond that connects a consumer to the luxury brand and develops deep feelings within the consumer towards the luxury brand” (Shimul et al., 2016, p. 517). Based on Bowlby's (1979) attachment theory, brand attachment has been conceptualised as the tie between a brand and the consumer. Marketing scholars utilise Sirgy's (1982) self-congruence theory to explain the matching between the personality of a brand and that of the consumers. Early research on brand attachment identify brand-self connection and brand prominence as the two

key drivers of brand attachment (Park et al., 2006; Thomson et al., 2005). Later studies on the area have argued that consumers' perceived self-congruence results emotional attachment to the brand (e.g. Malär et al., 2011). The emotional aspect of attachment has been emphasised in more recent studies on consumers' luxury brand attachment (Jung Choo et al., 2012; Shimul et al., 2016). Luxury consumers need for exclusivity, exquisiteness as well as the joy and pleasure derived from the luxury brands reinforce a strong emotional tie between the consumer and a brand (Kim and Joung, 2016).

2.4. Brand loyalty

Psychological theories consider loyalty an important driver of strengthening interpersonal relationship (Rusbult, 1987). Numerous marketing studies have identified brand loyalty as a key outcome of strong consumer–brand relationship (Aksoy et al., 2015; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Dick and Basu, 1994). The widely accepted conceptualisation of brand loyalty primarily focuses on the repeat purchase of a particular brand and the consumers' resistance to accept any other alternative of the brand (Oliver, 1980). A stream of research has identified the cognitive, affective and conative components of brand loyalty that lead to consumers' positive attitude and repeat patronage intention (For a review, see – Dick and Basu, 1994). The emotional state of being satisfied and attached to a brand elicits ‘happiness’, as a result the consumers aspire to maintain the relationship for a longer period of time and become loyal to the brand (Amine, 1998; Ben-Shahar, 2010). Furthermore, brand loyal consumers spread positive word-of-mouth and are willing to pay more for the brand (e.g. Reichheld, 2003).

2.5. Brand satisfaction and luxury brand attachment

The positive post-consumption evaluation of a brand generates a strong emotion which in turn leads the consumers toward an affectionate bond with the brand (Belaid and Behi, 2011). A consistent and ongoing satisfactory performance of the brand motivates the consumers to stick to the relationship (Esch et al., 2006). As the relationship matures and the intimacy becomes enduring, the consumers develop a strong attachment to the brand. Satisfaction has been found to be a key factor for the luxury customer relationship quality (e.g. Stuart-Menteth et al., 2006). Therefore, in line with the theoretical connection and previous findings, the following is hypothesised:

H₁: Brand satisfaction has significant positive effect on luxury brand attachment.

2.6. Brand satisfaction and brand loyalty

The positive relationship between brand satisfaction and brand loyalty has widely been tested in the marketing literature. Past studies suggest that consumers become loyal to if they are satisfied with that particular brand (Christodoulides and Michaelidou, 2011; Reichheld, 2003). Although, the positive relationship between brand satisfaction and brand loyalty does not hold in every cases (Mittal, 2016), this study considers the conspicuous nature of the luxury brands and the consumers' high level of financial and psychological investment for attaining the brand. Moreover, the perceived symbolic value and social status through luxury consumption motivate the satisfied consumers to patronage the brand (Kim and Joung, 2016). Thus, the following is hypothesised:

H₂: Brand satisfaction has significant positive effect on brand loyalty.

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