



“Regretting your brand-self?” The moderating role of consumer-brand identification on consumer responses to purchase regret

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Consumer-brand identification
Regret
Satisfaction
Consumer-brand relationships

ABSTRACT

Extending the study of consumer-brand relationships in the post-purchase stages of consumer decision making and in situations involving unfavorable comparisons with foregone brands, this research investigates the role of consumer-brand identification on consumer responses to purchase regret. Drawing on regret theory and consumer-brand relationship literature, the authors argue that consumer-brand identification immunizes the brand from the negative consequences of purchase regret through the amplification of consumers' cognitive regret regulation and the attenuation of consumers' behavioral regret coping. An empirical study using scenario manipulation of regret for participants' favorite brands provides support to the protective role of consumer-brand identification. The results indicate that consumer-brand identification attenuates the negative effects of regret on satisfaction and behavioral intentions and strengthens the positive impact of satisfaction on brand repurchase/recommendation intent. The findings enrich regret and consumer-brand relationship theories and provide managerial insights for effective branding strategy development under conditions of intense competitive pressure.

“Never regret anything you have done with a sincere affection; nothing is lost that is born of the heart.”

Basil Rathbone

1. Introduction

Contrary to the traditional economic view of products as mere instruments for satisfying functional needs, consumer culture theory highlights the role of brands as central agents of cultural marketplace phenomena (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Under this perspective, consumers view brands as extensions of their self-concepts and self-image transmission symbols (Belk, 1988). Brands operate as key drivers of consumers' identity construction, verification and signaling endeavors and increasingly serve consumers more as relational entities than as mere material possessions (Fournier, 1998).

The augmented function of brands as relationship partners has given rise to the study of consumer-brand relationships. Relevant research has introduced multiple concepts to capture the nature, form and intensity of these relationships including brand attachment (Park, Eisingerich, & Park, 2013), brand passion (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2013) or even brand love (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). One of the most prominent constructs used to capture the consumer-brand bond is consumer-brand identification (CBI), described as “consumer's perceived state of oneness

with a brand” (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012, p. 407). CBI has been found to generate a series of favorable brand responses, including brand commitment, loyalty, and advocacy and its development has been proposed as a key strategic goal in branding strategies (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013).

Unlike the abundance of research on the positive, brand-building influences of consumer-brand identification, little is known about its role in the post-purchase stages of consumer decision making during which pre-purchase expectations are (dis)confirmed, emotional responses to purchases are aroused, and satisfaction assessments are formed. Despite a few notable exceptions (e.g. Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins, 2006) investigating the role of consumer-brand relationships in the presence of negative brand information (e.g. negative publicity, brand rumors, product-harm crises, etc.), there has been limited attention to whether and how these relationships operate when the brand is threatened by unfavorable post-purchase comparisons with competitors.

Such situations represent a special case of negative brand information which is managerially and conceptually distinct from other sources of brand adversity in several ways. First, information about the presence of superior competitors is encountered very frequently, is often actively searched by consumers, and tends to weigh heavily in brand evaluations due to consumers' loss aversion (Tversky & Kahneman, 1991) and nega-

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tivity biases (Fiske, 1980). Second, unfavorable comparisons with foregone brands represent direct threats to the consumer's self because they impinge on consumer's psychological state, they associate with increased self-blame and responsibility, and speak negatively to the consumer's decision making efficacy (Simonson, 1989). Finally, such situations contribute decisively into shaping future purchasing behavior because post-purchase brand assessments tend to be more diagnostic predictors of future brand preference than pre-purchase expectations (Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988). Thus, investigating the role of consumer-brand relationships in the presence of superior foregone brands warrants distinct research attention in light of this condition's post-purchase, comparative, and self-threatening nature, which differentiates it from other forms of adverse brand information (e.g. negatively-valenced word-of-mouth – Baker, Donthu, & Kumar, 2016).

Against this background, the present study is the first to explicitly investigate the role of CBI in situations involving the experience of post-purchase regret. Frequently, consumers receive post-purchase information regarding the brands they rejected or forewent (e.g. through comparative advertising, feedback from friends, online brand comparisons, etc.). If such information suggests that a foregone brand was a better choice, consumers feel regret, notably “the negative cognitively based emotion that we experience when realizing or imagining that our present situation would have been better had we decided differently” (Zeelenberg, 1999, p. 94). Regret puts the selected brand into peril by making consumers dissatisfied with their choice, more willing to engage in costly product returns, less likely to remain loyal to the brand, and more likely to switch to competitive brands (Keaveney, Huber, & Herrmann, 2007; Tsiros & Mittal, 2000; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004, 2007). Additionally, regret hurts the consumer's self-esteem and questions his/her perceived decision making competence (Simonson, 1989). Given that regret is the most intense and frequently felt emotion people experience about their decisions (Saffrey, Summerville, & Roese, 2008) and in light of the severe consequences it has for the brand and the consumer, there is an apparent need to (a) identify managerial strategies which immunize brands against regret and protect them from the consequences of unfavorable competitive comparisons, and (b) provide decision advice that consumers could follow to minimize the psychological impact of their suboptimal purchase choices.

Drawing from regret theory and consumer-brand relationship theory, we propose that consumers' experience of regret is less threatening for the brand when the latter has a strong connection with the consumer. We argue that this “immunizing” role of CBI is manifested through three complementary mechanisms: (a) the containment of the negative impact of regret on post-choice satisfaction with the consumer's chosen brand, (b) the amplification of the positive effects of satisfaction on brand loyalty and advocacy intentions, and (c) the restriction of regret-driven direct behavioral tendencies. We find support for these propositions in an empirical study which exposes consumers to hypothetical regrettable purchases of their favorite brands through scenario manipulation and analyzes their responses using structural equation modeling.

From a theoretical perspective, our research contributes to consumer-brand relationship literature by (a) extending the consequences of CBI in post-purchase contexts, (b) identifying CBI's emotion regulation capacity, and (c) documenting the value of building strong relationships with consumers when things go wrong for the brand or when highly competitive brands threaten the brand's position. Additionally, our research enriches regret theory in a marketing context by identifying brand-specific characteristics that determine consumers' regret-regulation strategies. From a managerial point of view, our findings provide insights to practitioners on how developing strong consumer-brand connections protects the brand in markets where consumers (a) actively seek feedback for their product purchases, (b) engage in extensive post-purchase comparisons with foregone brands, and (c) get extensively exposed to competitive advertising. Finally, our

findings advocate the purchase of brands one is strongly identified with as a purchase heuristic which attenuates the severity of a potentially regrettable purchase experience.

2. Conceptual background and research hypotheses

2.1. Consumer-brand relationship theory and consumer-brand identification

Consumer-brand relationship theorists have proposed several constructs to conceptualize how consumers form connections with brands. Some focus on the emotional attachment to the brand (e.g. Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011); others include the favorable consequences of the consumer-brand bond as part of the relationship concept (e.g. Batra et al., 2012); and still others opt for a more cognitive representation of the consumer-brand identity overlap (e.g. Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). In line with the latter conceptualization, we approach CBI as the extent to which the consumer cognitively perceives a connection between his/her own identity and the brand's identity.

The concept of CBI draws from social identity theory which posits that individuals identify with social entities in their efforts to construct, validate and signal their social identities; this identification reflects individuals' willingness to self-categorize in such social entities in order to strengthen their sense of self and associate with/dissociate from groups of their social environment (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Due to the emerging use of products as identity currency, brands increasingly represent the social entities which consumers use for identity construction purposes (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, 1988), leading to the development of strong consumer-brand ties and extensive self-brand schema overlaps (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008).

However, not all brands are able to achieve strong identification with consumers. Consumers identify with brands whose core values are congruent with the consumers' self (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Tuškej et al., 2013). Consumers select brand partners that help them construct an enhanced self-identity which they subsequently signal to their reference groups through brand consumption (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Finally, CBI is achieved by brands which elicit feelings of warmth to consumers because of their central role in consumers' autobiographic memories and self-relevant experiences (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012).

CBI is a driver of several important brand benefits. Consumers tend to spread positive word of mouth for and be themselves more loyal to the brands with which they strongly identify (Elbedweihy, Jayawardhena, Elsharnouby, & Elsharnouby, 2016; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Tuškej et al., 2013). Similarly, brands having strong relationships with consumers enjoy stronger emotional commitment, bigger heart and mind shares, as well as increased consumer spending and higher willingness to pay (Haumann, Quaier, Wieseke, & Rese, 2014; Park et al., 2013).

2.2. Regret theory

Regret theory proposes that decision makers evaluate their choices among alternatives not only by assessing the inherent performance of the selected alternative but also by considering the lost utility of the alternatives they did not choose (Bell, 1982; Loomes & Sugden, 1982). Within purchase contexts, regret theory implies that consumers' post-purchase brand evaluation is comprised by two components: a satisfaction component that reflects the assessment of the chosen brand performance in relation to consumer's pre-purchase performance expectations, and (b) a regret component which is a function of the chosen brand's performance relative to the performance of the brand(s) the consumer forewent (Tsiros, 1998). If the latter comparison is unfavorable, consumers experience regret which detracts from the chosen brand's post-purchase evaluation, while if it is favorable, consumers experience rejoicing which adds to satisfaction to form

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