



Examining the role of consumer hope in explaining the impact of perceived brand value on customer–brand relationship outcomes in an online retailing environment

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the role of *consumer hope* in explaining the impact of *perceived brand value* on *customer–brand relationship* outcomes in the context of *online retailing*. We scrutinise the moderating impact of customer goal attainment on the relationship between consumer hope and customer–brand relationship outcomes. Data were collected from 418 online shoppers. The results indicate that three dimensions of brand value had a positive impact on consumer hope. Consumer hope was also positively related to customer–brand relationship outcome variables and the moderating role of customer goal attainment was supported. Theoretically, this model highlights the important role that hope can play in a customer–brand relationship in an online retail environment.

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, online purchasing has grown substantially, and technological advancements have made purchasing experiences considerably more time-efficient, transparent and easier (Rosqvist and Hiselius, 2016; Mortimer et al., 2016). Between 2007 and 2012, global online retail sales grew from US\$236 billion to US\$521 billion have been estimated to reach \$1248.7 billion in 2017 (Verma et al., 2016). With the growth and availability of e-commerce platforms worldwide, greater price transparency and faster delivery times, customers have become more conscious of the value of this channel (Denegri-Knott, 2006; Nedergaard and Gyrd-Jones, 2013). Accordingly, scholars and practitioners alike need to better understand the factors that improve the relationship between consumers and online retailers in order to enhance brand value and, accordingly, grow revenue and profit (Goswami, 2015; Kim et al., 2015). With multi-channel retail business models becoming more dependent upon online sales it is vital to understand the factors that impact online purchases and repurchase intentions (Chen et al., 2016; Darke et al., 2016; Stathopoulou and Balabanis, 2016; Kim et al., 2015; Malhotra et al., 2017).

Customer-perceived brand value has been identified as a significant

factor impacting consumer relations with the brands offered by online retailers (Li et al., 2012). To date, the majority of research has focused on the relationship between perceived brand value and loyalty outcomes, and various indices of brand performance (see for example, Giovanis and Athanasopoulou, 2018). Less studied are the putative mechanisms through which customer perceptions of brand value influence loyalty outcomes, such as satisfaction with, trust in and commitment to the brand. Addressing this gap is important; given the increasing proportion of time customers spend interacting with brands online in the hope that they will have positive relationship experiences.

A positive relationship between a brand and its customers in an online retailing context is important to drive long-term commitment; as such, retailers continue to make investments to enhance customers' perceptions of the value of the brands they sell (Kim et al., 2006). Yet, simply measuring customer perceptions of the value of the brand does not adequately predict affective customer outcomes, as these perceptions can be formed based on external stimuli, such as advertising, pricing, word-of-mouth (eWOM) or economic grounds. This focus on external stimuli may overlook the scope of positive emotions and does not offer a complete psychological explanation of the relationship between customers and brands (Uncles et al., 2003; Jang and Mattila,

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2005). It is critical to consider the role of customer positive emotions in an online setting given the fact different strategic branding directions may be required in cases where the customer is unable to touch, feel, and test the product (Liu et al., 2017). In contrast to in-store retailing, where the customer is able to physically engage with the product, they are likely to obtain a higher level of confidence in quality and product/brand evaluations (Grohmann et al., 2007), unlike found in an online context. This research responds to calls to explore other possible psychological mechanisms that better predict the value of the relationship between brand value and customer outcomes in an online retailing context, while setting the scene for further inquiry (Palmatier et al., 2007; Hajli, 2014; Hallak et al., 2017). We argue that *consumer hope* is worthy of attention because it provides insights into customers' perceptions of, and feelings toward, customer–brand relationship outcomes in an online retailing context (Raggio et al., 2014).

When a customer makes an online purchase the concept of hope is important; unlike in-store purchasing, online purchasing requires some level of hope that consumers' goals (e.g., the product will perform as indicated) will be attained (Raggio et al., 2014). Furthermore, a customer also needs to invest *energy* (e.g., information search, analysis, comparison) and seek *pathways* (secure transactions, installments, effective refund policy) to overcome the risk associated with purchase-related goals (Chiu et al., 2014). Hope allows customers to approach purchase-related problems with a mind set and action plan suitable for a successful transactional experience (Macinnis and De Mello, 2005), which is likely to increase the levels of satisfaction with, trust in and affective commitment to the brand purchased. The intensity of hope for an online purchase and the level of hope to attain purchase-related outcomes, such as satisfaction, trust, and commitment, are likely to depend on customers' *goal attainment*. Customers are likely to achieve their goals because goal attainment is characterised by a gain that is positively valenced and encourages customers to purchase the brand if the need arises to maximise the gain (Zaleski, 1988). Put simply, goal attainment enables customers to infer a positive outcome from further interactions with the brand offered by an online retailer, and therefore repurchase the brand again. Consumer psychology research has highlighted the moderating role of goal attainment on the relationship between emotional responses and well-being outcomes (Loock et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2017). This current study is the first to test the moderating role of goal attainment in the relationship between consumer hope and satisfaction, trust, and commitment.

Therefore, this research examines consumer hope in the context of online brand consumption. Specifically, this study develops and tests a model to examine the psychological mechanisms that help customers attain positive consumption experiences through the purchase of brands online. Although prior research has been undertaken on customer-perceived brand value, hope and satisfaction, trust and commitment separately (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Sweeney and Soutar, 2001; Macinnis and De Mello, 2005; Hallak et al., 2017), this is the first study to test the inter-relationships of the constructs mentioned above using theories from relationship marketing and the positive emotion literature. While the model developed and tested in this study could potentially be useful for offline settings with some cautious, the limited empirical evidence from online settings has influenced the choice of research context. The following section reviews the literature that guides the conceptual model.

2. Theoretical background

The basis of our conceptualisation is the Affect Theory of Social Exchange (Lawler, 2001), which explains how consumer hope can clarify the impact of customers' perceptions of the value of a brand on the relationship quality between the exchange partners (i.e., customer and brand). According to the theory, the attainment of implicit or explicit benefits by participating partners of joint social exchange activities determines the nature and intensity of the emotional experience

(Lawler, 2001). For instance, when exchange results are non-beneficial to either or both partners, partners experience negative emotions such as sadness, shame, and regret. When exchanges are successful, for example, the online purchase of a brand benefits the exchange partners – customer satisfied with brand, retailer paid on time – both exchange partners experience positive emotions and the quality of the mutual relationship is strengthened (Raggio and Folse, 2006).

2.1. Hope

Previous studies have proposed expectation, desire, and self-efficacy as those mechanisms that can provide justification for a customer's motivation to minimise the risk and uncertainty associated with an online purchase. Among others, hope is one of the key cognition-focused emotional mechanisms that involve both *will* (motivation) and *way* (action plans) components in explaining customers' online purchase and repurchase behaviours. Hope is a frequently experienced emotion in daily life. Research on the psychology of hope has shown that hope requires individuals to employ successful agency (i.e., goal-directed energy) and pathways (i.e., plans to meet the goals) (Snyder et al., 1991; Rego et al., 2014). The cognition-focused emotional status of hope is deemed appropriate for this study given the focus on participants' levels of hope for successful performance of a particular task (i.e., purchase of a brand) or goal (Snyder, 2000). Snyder et al. (1991) state that the agency component of hope provides the *will power* to achieve goals, whereas the pathway component promotes *way power*, which is necessary for the production of alternative paths.

Some practical approaches for developing hope include setting challenging goals or planning for contingencies (Luthans et al., 2006). For instance, consumers hope that their purchase of a brand online will result in overall satisfaction, which may then lead to trust and commitment. In contrast, evidence shows that when customers lack the emotion of hope in the goal-attainment process they are more likely to withdraw their efforts prematurely or fail to attain the given objective, despite their belief in their capabilities (Youssef and Luthan, 2007; Snyder et al., 1991). Literature in psychology has viewed hope and expectation as two distinct constructs. Expectation refers to a desire which can be fulfilled without setting any definitive goal and without any related action tendency (Stajkovic, 2006). Some studies (Youssef and Luthan, 2007) have labelled "expectation" as "passive hope", as opposed to "active hope", which is consistent with the view that has been promoted by Snyder et al. (2002), as well as by this current study. Hope implies that a person knows about their goal, agency and ways to achieve it (Locke and Latham, 2002). Likewise, optimism is similar to the agency component of hope (Magaletta and Oliver, 1999), but does not consider pathways by which desired outcomes may be achieved (Snyder, 1994).

Compared with studies on employee hope (Youssef and Luthan, 2007; Combs et al., 2010) in which the focus has been on hope's relationship with positive organisational behaviours and corporate social responsibility, there is limited research focusing on consumer hope. Previous studies have highlighted the role of hope in customer choices (Poels and Dewitte, 2008; Kim et al., 2012), or enhancing self-regulatory outcomes and ceasing maladaptive consumption practices (Macinnis and De Mello, 2005). Others have identified the positive relationship of hope with advertising and product evaluation and choice outcomes in medicines, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, healthcare and magazine brands (Macinnis and De Mello, 2005; Poels and Dewitte, 2008). Yet the role of hope in explaining the effects of the customer-perceived brand value on customer positive purchase experiences, such as satisfaction, trust, and commitment, have not been addressed (Poels and Dewitte, 2008; Kim et al., 2012). While studies show that customers' perceptions of the value of brands influence goal attainment (Oettingen et al., 2001), the understanding of which mechanism makes a brand successful in improving customer-brand relationship outcomes is limited especially in the online retailing context. The psychological

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