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Research Dialogue

Broadening (and narrowing) the scope of brand relationships

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Abstract

The Attachment–Aversion Relationship Model proposed by Park, Eisingerich, and Park represents the latest in a series of attempts to expand, refine, and validate the increasingly popular concept of brand relationships. We find much value in the effort. We suggest, however, that researchers should avoid indiscriminate use of the term and focus on identifying the unique contribution that the notion of brand relationships can make to theory and practice. We also note how the present model could be expanded to achieve this objective.

Keywords: Brand; Brand relationship; Brand attachment; Brand loyalty; Brand aversion

Introduction

The view that consumers can develop relationships with brands has drawn considerable attention and acclaim since initially advanced by Fournier (1998). Recent research has been accentuated by ambitious attempts to understand the structure of these relationships (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). In this comment we first offer some observations pertinent to the enterprise as a whole and then follow with specific reactions to the latest refinement contained in Park, Eisingerich, & Park [PEP].

Leaving aside traditional treatments of brand loyalty, which has long been a staple of consumer research (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978), contemporary research on brand relationships has been equally concerned with understanding what attachment is and what it is not. In the consumer realm, the natural foil for attachment is brand attitude and, in particular, the strength of an attitude toward a brand. A major contribution of relationship research has been to differentiate attitude from attachment, not only in the relative abilities of each to predict important consumer responses but also in identifying the factors that differentiate one from the other.

The two primary differentiating factors that have emerged from the work by Park et al. (2010) consist of the emotional and personal-relevance dimensions, the general importance of which requires little elaboration at this point. Decision researchers are now prone to incorporate feelings and emotions into many aspects of decision making (Alba & Williams, 2013; Kahneman, 2011; Loewenstein, 1996; Pham, 1998), and researchers from very different perspectives tout the role of the self (e.g., Belk, 1988; Sujan, Bettman, & Baumgartner, 1993). Whereas extending the scope of decision processes beyond the purely cognitive increases similarity in judgment and choice across species, the "self" is uniquely human—unless considered in its most pedestrian sense. That is, other species make associations between external stimuli and "personal" welfare, and it is not beyond the ability of a rodent to exhibit brand awareness, brand discrimination, and brand approach/avoidance to a conditioned brand logo. If the self is to enhance understanding in the world of brands, it is most likely to do so in a social context, which fortunately is another easy case to make. Nonetheless, a primary task for relationship research is to distill out the unique influence of the differentiating features of brand relationships from the accepted wisdom that predated Fournier. To achieve maximal impact, a second task is to demonstrate that insights unique to the relationship view are valuable to scholars and practitioners alike.

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Uniqueness

Incorporation of both emotions and the self into brand–consumer relationships surely provides a much richer conceptualization than does traditional brand attitude, with this latest effort taking pains to examine a side of the affective scale that has received little attention. Scholars explore the depths of brand relationships, attachment, and love in part due to a natural disposition to understand a construct for its own sake. However, richness is not without its tradeoffs.

It would be difficult to assess the prevalence of deep and spontaneous affection for brands, but we concur with the speculation of Batra et al. (2012) that relatively few consumer–brand interactions reach such heights. Studies that prompt statements of affection or selectively choose stimuli known to be objects of adoration are especially vulnerable to overestimation. Nonetheless, the accumulated evidence suggests that, in some sense, consumers do become "attached" to brands. Within this narrower set, the question concerns the nature and determinants of attachment—and research has uncovered no shortage thereof.

However, inspection suggests that attachment to brands is determined to no small degree by non-emotional factors that have little connection to the self, except in its prosaic sense. The qualitative reports of Fournier (1998) contain frequent reference to utilitarian benefits, and Batra et al. (2012) further note that the starting point for brand love "invariably began with a list of the perceptions about the brand's many attractive qualities, such as its exceptional performance, trustworthiness, good-looking design, and so on" (p. 4). Of love's core components, several are closely connected to the self, whereas others appear to overlap with conventional views of affective and attitudinal response. Thus, even for loved brands, the basis for love cannot be divorced from traditional determinants of brand preference. Far from being a criticism, this observation is simply an acknowledgment that deep affection consists of strong positive affect and its associated properties.

A related point can be made regarding the numerous relationship types identified by Fournier. That is, many of the relationships correspond to widely appreciated brand-related interactions, some of which lack elements of emotion and some of which even operate in opposition to affection. Indeed, a majority might arguably be characterized as non-voluntary, fleeting, superficial, reactive, or negative. As before, this observation hardly constitutes a criticism, inasmuch as a comprehensive treatment must incorporate all manners of relationship.

Nonetheless, such an approach is not without risks. In particular, a characterization, even when used in an analogical sense, can reify a construct or imbue a relationship with more content than can be justified. Some of the relationships people have with brands appear to be based on long-established determinants of loyalty, including switching costs, risk aversion, social pressure, ignorance, inertia, and market constraints. Batra et al. (2012) make this point compellingly with the construct of love. For whatever attributes brand love may possess, it corresponds weakly to the interpersonal love that serves as its inspiration. The terms relationship, attachment, and love (or hate) are seductive because of their very richness. One needs also to be wary of their boundaries.

Application

Relationship boundaries are especially relevant in an applied context. Of the many domains explored by consumer psychologists, the realm of branding offers the opportunity to examine ecologically frequent effects of pertinence to both consumers and managers. Practitioners are particularly occupied with the objective of brand loyalty. Extending the point made by Batra et al., love for others and love for brands differ in terms of conditionality. Even if the universe of brand relationships is restricted to only those characterized by a high degree of intensity, the question of fragility still looms large. Whereas "flings" and "casual friendships" with brands can easily be terminated upon an unfortunate interaction, the same might hold for "committed" brand relationships in ways that would never hold for personal relationships. How well a brand relationship endures a failure to deliver—a question that has previously drawn interest from consumer psychologists who adopt a more cognitive approach to brand evaluation (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Jain & Maheswaran, 2000)—should be posed specifically within the paradigm of brand relationships (e.g., Donovan, Priester, MacInnis, & Park, 2012). In so doing, the resilience conferred by emotional determinants of loyalty should be compared to the resilience conferred by cognitive determinants to inform the practitioner of the returns to be had by pursuing competing routes to loyalty.

Finally, regardless of whether one adopts an applied versus theoretical perspective or focuses on the emotional versus utilitarian determinants of a relationship, one more source of variance must be squeezed out before the role of the brand can be assessed: the product itself. There surely will be instances in which the brand, per se, is the object of devotion, such as when a brand is purchased for what it communicates about the user. In other instances, however, consumers may truly be valuing the object but appear to be valuing the brand because the researcher asked only about the brand. The frequently invoked iPod/iPhone/iPad would likely reveal mixed results. Among consumers who love these products, some are clearly Apple aficionados whereas others appreciate the brand as a guarantor of "quality" but are truly enraptured by the good. It seems reasonable that the balance will shift in the direction of the brand when the consumer's objectives include self-image and self-esteem, but managers and designers understand that these objectives can be achieved in the absence of a brand name (e.g., diamonds) and in cases in which brand identity is opaque to most consumers (e.g., Lamborghinis).

The Attachment–Aversion Relationship Model

Against the backdrop of our general observations about the state of the art in the customer–brand relationship domain, we now turn to some more specific observations with regard to PEP's ambitious Attachment–Aversion Relationship (AAR) model. The AAR model is impressive in its comprehensive