Chapter 5

We Have Faith in Apple: Brand Worship Among Apple Fans

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ABSTRACT

Research shows that some brands are like religions and have cult-like fans who perceive the brands as sacred. This chapter conceptualizes brand worship and explores its dimensions by using netnography to explore Apple’s online fan communities in China from the perspective of dimensions of religiosity. The findings demonstrate that the relationship between extremely devoted fans and their faithful brand exhibits nearly the same characteristics as the relationship between a religious person and a religion. The results emerged with three dimensions of brand worship: brand faith (value identification, paranoid, and hope), brand religiosity (wonder, awe, and ecstasy) and brand devotion (gratitude and allegiance). The chapter contributes to the field of consumer-brand relationships and offers some managerial implications for building brands through a religious approach to cultivate devoted fans.

INTRODUCTION

It is increasingly difficult for brands to maintain loyalty among consumers who frequently exhibit switching behaviour. However, there are some brands (such as Apple, Harley, MINI, Volkswagen Beetle, Disney, Star Trek, etc.) which always possess a group of loyal, extremely devoted fans who are true believers. For example, Apple fans idolize Steve Jobs and call him ‘Joe’, and they have stuck with the brand even as the company’s performance has declined in recent years. They buy and collect every series of Apple products and line up for newly launched products. They draw the brand logo on their arms to highlight their unique identity and are keen to evangelize. This phenomenon has been called the Cult of Apple in China by the Time magazine (Beech, 2012).

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In recent years, fanatical consumer behaviour (Holbrook, 1987; Pimentel & Reynolds, 2004), quasi-religious consumption, and brand sacralization (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Muniz & Schau, 2005; Wang et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2019) have attracted attention from marketing scholars. Many researchers found that extremely devoted fans have displayed near religious awe towards Apple and perceive the brand to be sacred. However, the definition and characteristics of brand worship have not been fully explored. In other words, what exactly is brand worship? What dimensions does it have? How does it differ from brand attachment and brand love? Thus, this chapter aims to conceptualize brand worship and explore its dimensions by using netnography to explore Apple’s online fan communities in China and drawing on the theory of Dimensions of Religiosity from Religious Psychology. The chapter contributes to the field of consumer-brand relationships and offers some managerial implications for building brands through a religious approach to cultivate devoted fans.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Definition and Typology of Fans

The extant literature reveals that scholars have not reached an agreement on the definition of fans, which can be interpreted both in a broad sense and a narrow sense. In a broad sense, in the field of media study, fans generally refer to the audience of many forms of sports or entertainment celebrities. In a narrow and strict sense, fans refer to those people who show excessive interest and enthusiasm for an object, including people, commodities, religions, teams, ideas, brands, etc. (Smith, Fisher & Cole, 2007). The behaviour of fans is often regarded as unusual and unconventional by society, but does not violate the common social ethical norms (Thorne & Bruner, 2006).

In addition, the term has different meanings in different specific contexts: first, fans of cultural products (such as movies, science fictions, music, comics, etc.) are those who have a strong or even excessive affective sensibility towards their favourite cultural products (Fiske, 1992). They obtain pleasure, satisfaction, and a sense of achievement, and even construct their life meaning through their attachment to those cultural products (Grossberg, 1992). Second, sports fans refer to the audience who show a great deal of enthusiasm towards certain sporting events and have a strong sense of belonging to certain sports team or clubs (Jacobson, 2003). Third, fans of a brand refer to those consumers who are behaviorally and emotionally loyal to a brand and engage in activities to support the brand. In general, fans in different contexts have an excessive investment in terms of expenditure, time, and emotion compared to ordinary consumers, and they construct their personal meanings and beliefs based on the objects they love (Jindra, 1994). For instance, Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw (1999) classified sport fans in terms of the emotional and behavioral intensity into three major categories: devoted fans, fanatical fans, and dysfunctional fans. Specifically, devoted fans are those who are able to frequently attend or watch sports events overcoming geographic, financial, and time constraints, and develop a strong sense of identity, attachment, and belonging to certain events and clubs. In addition to these characteristics, fanatical fans show their enthusiasm through more symbolic behaviour, such as wearing special clothes or body paint, waving flags, and shouting. However, dysfunctional fans are pathological to some degree, and exhibit irrational, destructive, and anti-social behaviour. This typology of sports fans can also be applied to fans of brands, cultural products, and celebrities.