Loving a Brand: Empirical Investigation of Consumer-Brand Love Relationship

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ABSTRACT

Researchers postulate that an individual consumer can fall in love with a brand. They also suggest that the nature of this brand love is conceptually analogous to interpersonal love. This article analyzes how the brand love concept can be derived from interpersonal love. Brand love is related to hedonic shopping motive, rather than utilitarian shopping motive and dominant in case of few hedonic products. However, marketers can develop a lovable brand in a utilitarian product category also by carrying out emotional advertisements. This article empirically shows that perceived product category hedonism has significant positive impact on brand love, where, perceived product utilitarianism has no significant impact on brand love.

Keywords: Brand Love, Brand Loyalty, Consumers, Hedonism, Marketing, Utilitarianism

INTRODUCTION

A group of marketing scholars has conceptualized a kind of relationship existing between a consumer and a brand similar to interpersonal love relationship (Shimp & Madden, 1988; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Keh, Pang, & Peng, 2007; Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008). According to these theorists, a consumer can love a consumption object or a brand and the nature this love is very similar to the nature of interpersonal love. This stream of research has a great contribution to the field of consumer psychology or buyer behavior school of thought. These researches are reinforcing the notion of Ernest Dichter (1947, 1964) who once commented that the individual buyers consumed because of some emotional factors deeply rooted in their psychologies and they are so deeply rooted that sometime individual is not conscious about the presence of those factors. Dichter pioneered a new stream of research called motivation research. The goal of the motivation researchers was to identify complex individual psychological variables that influenced individual buying behavior. Present research is an endeavor to contribute to this research stream by investigating the emerging concept of brand love and its relations with individual shopping motives.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Prior literature postulates that a consumer can get emotionally connected with a brand, same as he/she can get emotionally involved...
with another person (Shimp & Madden, 1988; Thomson et al., 2005; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Keh et al., 2007; Albert et al., 2008; Whang et al., 2004). It is of prime importance to investigate this aspect of consumer psychology, as an individual who is emotionally attached with a brand tends to exhibit behaviors which are of great interest to the marketers. For instance, an individual having emotional attachment with a brand tends to maintain proximity with the brand in order to avoid separation distress (Thomson et al., 2005). This implies that the emotional connection with a brand is likely to increase the brand purchase intention. For example, a teenage girl having deep emotional attachment with the cosmetics of Revlon brand is likely to exhibit strong intention to buy the cosmetics of Revlon. Probability is high that she will feel mental distress if she does not find the particular brand in a store. This mental distress is the direct outcome of the girl’s intimate emotional involvement with the brand (Thomson et al., 2005). If the marketer is able to develop this kind of emotional bonding with its target consumers, then the consumers will continue to purchase that particular brand ignoring other competitor brands.

Consumer’s emotional connection with a brand can be so strong that they can form different subcultural groups surrounding the usage of a brand. By conducting an ethnographic study Schouten and McAlexander (1995) showed how the Harley-Davidson bikers formed subcultural groups having unique structures, values and symbolic behaviors. In order to create such a strong emotional connection with the consumers, the marketers must know the structure of this emotional bonding. Based on this knowledge of the structure of the emotional relationship the marketers can develop appropriate marketing strategies to create such type of bonding. This practical usefulness of such consumer-brand emotional relationship concept was the motivation for reinvestigating this field.

Literature says that the love relationship existing between two individuals has a lot of similarities with the emotional relationship existing between a consumer and consumption object or brand (Shimp & Madden, 1988; Keh et al., 2007; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Whang et al., 2004; Albert et al., 2008). It is therefore necessary to review the literature on interpersonal love relationship in order to conceptualize the structure of the emotional relationships existing between consumer and consumption object. This section will review the existing literature on interpersonal love relationships and conceptualize consumer-brand relationship structure based on that.

Theories of Interpersonal Love

Few earlier researches stated that love is unidimensional. Later, a group of scholars criticized this unidimensional view of love and postulated that love was multidimensional. Spearman’s (1927) theory of general intelligence states that love is a highly positive feeling and it is unidimensional. To experience love, it is required to experience that positive feeling. However, this view was criticized by many researchers later who postulated that love was a multidimensional construct. From the practical point of view also it seems to be more realistic to assume that love is multidimensional, as we encounter different dimensions of love in our daily lives.

Thurstone’s (1938) theory of primary factors challenges the unidimensional view of love and conceptualizes love as a collection of correlated bonds of feelings. It postulates that love consists of several primary factors that are correlated and simultaneously contribute to the overall feeling of love. There is no general factor and all the primary factors of love are equally important. Thomson’s (1939) theory of the bonds of intelligence offers little contrasting view of love. This theory also challenges the unidimensional Spearmanian concept of love. According to this theory, love consists of a strong general factor and few weaker specific factors. The general factor can be decomposed into several overlapping bonds of emotional, motivational and cognitive feelings that when co-occur in certain close relationships in combination give rise to the overall feeling of love.
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