

EVALUATING THE ROLE OF CONSUMER BRAND RELATIONSHIPS IN BRAND EQUITY FORMATION

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Abstract: Brand equity has been central to branding research for decades. Companies direct their efforts towards the development of brand equity. Therefore, researchers have focused on a deep examination of the brand equity construct. This paper examines the role of consumer brand relationships in the creation of brand equity by focusing on the effect of brand trust, brand attachment and brand commitment on brand equity. Moreover, this study offers a model depicting the relationship among these variables. For this purpose, data were collected from a survey of 210 respondents. Structural equation modeling was used to test the proposed model. The result of the study confirms the indirect effect of brand trust on brand equity through brand attachment and brand commitment. The paper concludes with managerial implications and directions for future research.

Keywords: Brands, Brand Equity, Trust, Attachment, Commitment, Consumer-Brand Relationships

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of brands is changing within companies day by day. A firm's success depends on the successful management of brands. However, the changed market conditions and function of consumption have made the task of effective brand management arduous. In response to the cut throat competition, researchers have directed their efforts towards building strong brands. A strong brand yields a number of benefits for a firm, such as higher profit margins, greater customer loyalty, Customer's positive response to price change, opportunities for brand extension and higher resiliency in times of product failure (Kim *et al.*, 2008). With a view to meet the challenges faced by the brands, the construct of brand equity has been extensively discussed by both researchers and practitioners (Atligan *et al.*, 2005). Brand equity represents the added value endowed by the brand to the product (Farquhar, 1989). According to Pappu *et al.* (2005), high brand equity levels are known to lead to higher consumer preferences and purchase intentions. Thus, the role of brand equity becomes important in positive brand development and

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management. Previous research suggests that a strong consumer- brand relationship inhibits the switching of customer to a competitor brand. Therefore, consumer- brand relationships are positively linked to brand equity (Blackston, 1992). Several studies have identified the role of trust, attachment and commitment in the relationship that exists between the brand and the consumer (Sirieix & Dubois, 1999; Anderson & Narus, 1990). In this context, the role of brand trust, brand attachment and brand commitment in the formation of brand equity can be examined. Till now, Most of the studies have focused on the measurement of brand equity (e.g., Park & Srinivasan, 1994; Yoo & Donthu, 2001; Keller, 2003). Few empirical researches try to examine the constructs that influence brand equity (Barwise, 1993). This study aims to understand the role of consumer brand relationships in the formation of brand equity. For this we have focused on the effect of brand trust, brand attachment and brand commitment on brand equity. Moreover, this study offers a model depicting the hierarchy of consumer brand relationship factors (trust, attachment and commitment) in the formation of brand equity.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

The Impact of Brand Trust on Brand Attachment

In the field of relational marketing, trust is the key concept necessary for a stable and enduring relationship (Guibert, 1999; Gurviez & Korchia, 2002). Gurviez & Korchia (2002) define brand trust as “a psychological variable that reflects a set of aggregated presumptions relating to the credibility, integrity and benevolence that the consumer ascribes to the brand”. Based on this definition a brand is termed as credible if it performs according to expectations of customer, brand has integrity if it maintains its promises pertaining to terms of exchange and finally the brand is termed as benevolent if it takes care of consumer’s interest. According to Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001), brand trust is the “willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function”. The trust plays a pivotal role in consumer- brand relationship (Bowen & Shoemaker, 1998; Fournier *et al.*, 1998). It helps in the reduction of perceived risk which in turn increases confidence in relationship of consumer and brand. Trust is used as a tool to develop a strong bond between the consumer and the brand which is the ultimate objective of marketing (McKnight *et al.*, 2002).

The attachment represents an emotional bond between a consumer and a brand (Bozzo *et al.*, 2003). According to Lacoeyllhe (2000), “attachment to the brand is a psychological variable that reveals a lasting and inalterable affective relationship (separation is painful) to the brand and expresses a relation of psychological closeness to it”. The attachment of consumer to a brand is not dependent on context of purchase (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987) as well as instrumental value of the brand (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995).

According to Lacoeyllhe and Belaïd (2007), integrity and benevolence dimensions of brand trust influences brand attachment. The link between brand trust and brand attachment is also suggested by Gouteron (2008). Moreover, certain number of behaviors like trust, commitment and loyalty can be predicted through attachment (Traylor, 1981). Aurier *et al.* (2001) put forward a relational chain of perceived quality, perceived value, satisfaction, trust, and attachment; thereby they suggest a positive relation among these variables. Thus we propose the following hypothesis:

H₁: Brand Trust has a Direct Positive Effect on Brand Attachment

The Impact of Brand Trust on Brand Commitment

Commitment is a desire to maintain a long term relationship (Bettencourt, 1997). Fournier, Fournier *et al.* (1998) define commitment as an enduring desire to continue a valued relationship. A committed consumer is always ready to make short term sacrifices with a view to maintain his long term consumption (Bozzo *et al.*, 2003). Brand commitment refers to how much a brand is accepted by consumers as the only choice within its product class. Companies can strengthen their relationship with committed customers so as to avoid threat of customer switch to other brands.

Trust is repeatedly considered as a determinant of commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Gilliland and Bello, 2002). Hiscock (2001) suggests that there is a positive relationship between trust and commitment. Consumer's desire to maintain a long term relationship with a brand is strengthened if the consumer has firm trust on the brand. Trust has a central value in the relationship between consumer and brand making it a valued relationship generating consumer's commitment to the brand (Hosmer, 1995). Thus we propose the following hypothesis:

H₂: Brand Trust has a Direct Positive effect on Brand Commitment

The Impact of Brand Attachment on Brand Commitment

The desire to make financial sacrifices and commitment towards a brand is an outcome of consumer's emotional attachment to a brand (Thomson *et al.*, 2005). The attachment proves to be a determinant of brand commitment (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987; Zainuddin *et al.*, 2007; Wetzels *et al.*, 1998; Fullerton, 2003). According to Lacoeyllhe (2000), Lacoeyllhe and Belaïd (2007), and Gouteron (2008), brand attachment influences brand commitment. Thus we propose the following hypothesis:

H₃: Brand Attachment has a Direct Positive effect on Brand Commitment

The Impact of Brand Commitment on Brand Equity

Brand Equity is a complex concept which results into diversified conceptualizations in the literature. Different studies describing different aspects

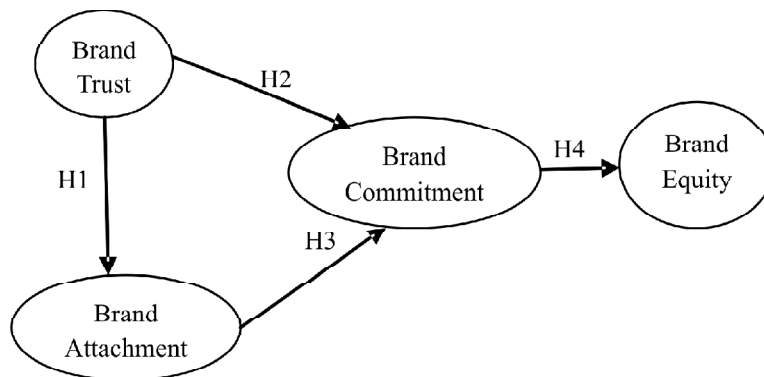
of this intangible asset. It is because of the lack of an agreed definition of Brand Equity, various methods have been used to measure this construct. Despite the absence of a universally accepted definition of brand equity, there is at least some agreeableness in that brand equity represents the added value endowed by the brand to the product (Farquhar 1989, p. RC7). This value can work as a bridge link connecting what happened to the brand in the past and what should happen to the brand in the future (Keller 2003); hence Ambler (2003) characterized brand equity as a repository of future benefits or cash flows that accrue from past marketing investment. According to literature, Firm is not the only recipient of brand value, in fact the two main recipients of brand value are either firms or customers, and this view is explicitly mentioned in Aaker's (1991) definition of brand equity as 'a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or that firm's customers' (p. 15). Till now, the brand equity construct has been viewed from two major perspectives in the literature. Some researchers emphasized on the financial perspective of brand equity (Farquhar *et al.* 1991; Simon & Sullivan 1993;) and others on the consumer-based perspective (Aaker 1991; Keller 1993; Yoo & Donthu 2001; Vazquez *et al.* 2002; Pappu *et al.* 2005; Christodoulides *et al.* 2006).

The level of commitment in consumer-brand relationship creates favorable strong and unique associations in the mind of consumer (Keller, 1993); hence commitment has an impact on brand equity. According to winters (1991) commitment has been used as a parameter of brand equity by marketing research firms regularly. The empirical studies conducted by Fournier (1998) and Rego *et al.* (2009) also suggest a positive relationship between commitment and brand equity. Thus we propose the following hypothesis:

H₄: Brand Commitment has a Direct Positive effect on Brand Equity

Conceptual Model

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model



3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section presents the details of data collection and selection of scales to measure three constructs of consumer-brand relationship namely, brand trust, brand attachment and brand commitment and finally brand equity.

Data Collection

This study uses the questionnaire survey to verify the hypotheses and conceptual framework Primary data was collected from a convenience sample of 210 students (48 per cent females and 52 per cent males aged 19-25) doing their graduation or post graduation in a major university in Jharkhand, India. All the respondents were using a mobile phone. The respondents were asked about their brand of mobile phone which they were using. The responses for the survey questions were collected for the brand of mobile phone mentioned individually by each respondent.

Measurements

The respondent evaluated the constructs of brand trust, brand attachment, brand commitment and brand equity on the five point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree).

Table 1 summarizes survey measures and scale sources of all the constructs used in the proposed model.

Table 1
Model Constructs, Survey Measures and Scale Source

<i>Construct</i>	<i>Survey measures</i>	<i>Scale adopted from</i>
Brand Trust	BT01:The products of my mobile phone brand are safe to use BT02:I trust the quality of the products of my mobile phone brand BT03:Purchasing products of this mobile phone brand is a guarantee to me BT04:Mobile phone brand that I use is sincere towards its consumers BT05:Mobile phone brand that I use is honest towards its customers BT06:This mobile phone brand shows interest to its customers BT07: I find my mobile phone brand renews its products which show research progress. BT08: I think my mobile phone brand tries to improve its response to consumer needs on a regular basis.	Gurviez and Korchia (2002)

contd. table 1

Construct	Survey measures	Scale adopted from
Brand Attachment	BA01:I have a lot of affection for my brand of mobile phone BA02:I am attached to my brand of mobile phone BA03:I am attracted to my brand of mobile phone BA04:Thinking about my brand of mobile phone brings me a lot of joy, pleasure	Lacoeuilhe (2000)
Brand Commitment	BC01:I am strongly bonded with my brand of mobile phone BC02:I stick with my usual brand of mobile phone because I know it is best for me BC03: I am committed to my mobile phone brand	Coulter <i>et al.</i> (2003)
Brand Equity	BE01: It makes sense to buy my brand of mobile phone instead of any other brand, even if they are the same. BE02: Even if another brand has the same features as my brand, I would prefer to buy my brand of mobile phone. BE03: If there is another brand as good as my brand, I prefer to buy my brand of mobile phone. BE04: If another brand is not different from my brand of mobile phone in any way, it seems smarter to purchase my brand.	Yoo and Donthu (2001)

4. RESEARCH RESULT

Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Reliability

A total of 19 items were used in the study. With a view to assess the reliability and validity of measurement model, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Cronbach's α were used.

The reliability and validity of the constructs was tested subject to the suggestions given by Fornell & Lacker (1981). All the constructs showed a standardized factor loading above 0.5 (ranging from 0.56 to 0.73) thus indicating adequate convergent validity among all the latent variables. Cronbach's α was used to measure the internal consistency among items which ranged from 0.740 to 0.804 indicating a good consistency (Nunnally, 1978). Moreover, Square Multiple Correlation (SMC) was also used to ensure discriminant validity of each item. SMC value of each item was found less than its standardized factor loading (Fornell & Lacker, 1981) and the value was also above the minimum criteria of 0.3 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Table 2 lists all of these values.

Table 2
Result of Confirmatory factor Analysis and Reliability Test

Constructs	Items	Standardized Factor Loading	Squared Multiple Correlation (SMC)	Cronbach's α
Brand Trust	BT01	0.56	0.31	0.804
	BT02	0.56	0.31	
	BT03	0.70	0.48	
	BT04	0.65	0.42	
	BT05	0.69	0.47	
	BT06	0.65	0.45	
	BT07	0.57	0.33	
Brand Attachment	BA01	0.61	0.36	0.789
	BA02	0.72	0.52	
	BA03	0.56	0.31	
	BA04	0.60	0.36	
Brand Commitment	BC01	0.73	0.53	0.778
	BC02	0.62	0.38	
	BC03	0.57	0.33	
Brand Equity	BE01	0.64	0.41	0.740
	BE02	0.62	0.38	
	BE03	0.72	0.52	
	BE04	0.71	0.50	

*Note: One item BT08 from brand trust was removed subject to low factor loading.

Analysis of Structural Model & Hypothesis Testing

The goodness of fit statistics of the measurement model was tested using measures of model fit namely: Goodness of Fit index (GFI), Normative Fit Index (NFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI) and Root Mean Square Approximation Method (RMSEA). Table 3 shows the summary of statistical results.

Table 3
Chi-square Result and Goodness of Fit Indices of the Proposed Model

Fit Indices	Obtained Value	Norm*
χ^2	206.326	N/A
Scaled χ^2/df	1.599	>1 & <5
Goodness of Fit index (GFI)	0.901	>0.90
Normative Fit Index (NFI)	0.842	>0.90 (Ideal fit), 0.8-0.9(Acceptable)
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	0.921	>0.90
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.933	>0.90
Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	0.934	>0.90
Root Mean Square Approximation Method (RMSEA)	0.055	<0.08

*Norm: Sources (Bowersox *et al.* 1995; Xu & Wang 2012)

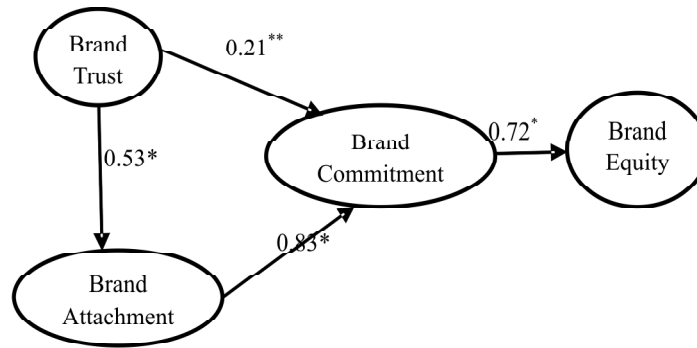
On the basis of these measurements, the result of the study shows that our proposed model reasonably fit the data ($\chi^2 = 206.326$ ($p = .000$), $\chi^2/df = 1.599$, GFI=0.901, NFI= 0.842, TLI=0.921, CFI=0.933, IFI=0.934, RMSEA= 0.055).

Table 4
Path Analysis of Structural Model

Path	Standardized Estimates	t-statistics	p-value	Relationship
BT → BA	0.53	4.172	0.000	Significant
BT → BC	0.21	2.220	0.026	Significant
BA → BC	0.83	5.631	0.000	Significant
BC → BE	0.72	5.792	0.000	Significant

The finding shows that brand trust significantly influenced brand attachment ($\beta = .53$, $p = .000$) as well as brand commitment ($\beta = .21$, $p = .026$) which supported the hypothesis H1 and H2. Further, brand attachment was found having significant influence on brand commitment ($\beta = .83$, $p = .000$) which in turn positively influences brand equity ($\beta = .72$, $p = .000$), hence H3 and H4 are also supported. (Refer, Figure 2).

Figure 2: Result of Structural Equation Modeling Analysis



Note: * $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$

-----> Statistically not significant, —————> Statistically significant

5. CONCLUSION

The objective of this research was to understand the role of consumer brand relationships in the formation of brand equity. For this the effect of brand trust, brand attachment and brand commitment on brand equity was examined. Moreover, a model depicting relationship among these variables has been offered. The result of the study confirms that brand trust has a significant positive influence

on brand attachment and brand commitment. Brand attachment also positively influences brand commitment which further positively influences brand equity. These influences exhibit a definite hierarchy of consumer brand relationship factors in the formation of brand equity. Consumer's trust in the brand forms their strong attachments to the brand which results in their commitment to the brand. Brand trust also directly invokes brand commitment which results in a deeply committed relationship between the brand and the consumer. Thus the indirect effect of brand trust on brand equity is mediated through brand attachment and brand commitment. This implies that a strong consumer-brand relationship is immensely helpful in the formation of brand equity.

6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of the study have profound implications for brand managers as well as firms. In their pursuit of brand equity, brand managers should focus on the trust, attachment and commitment components of consumer brand relationships. Consumer perceptions of trust and attachment towards the brand facilitate relationship commitment with the brand. The firms can gain through a committed relationship between the brand and the consumer. For this, Firms have to consider the interdependence amongst brand trust, brand attachment and brand commitment. The more the Consumer trusts the brand; the more he is attached with it which in turn generates his commitment to the brand. Similarly, Consumer's positive perception of trust can directly establish a committed consumer brand relationship. This underlines the importance of the transitions (trust-attachment-commitment) of consumer-brand relationships. In view of these inferences, the brand managers should work on building brand trust. The companies should also focus on various trust building components such as delivery of what has been promised by the brand, quality, safety, competence and technology. The conscious efforts of firms and brand managers in the direction of trust building will earn the attachment and commitment of the consumers, hence forming a robust consumer brand relationship which is vital for enhancing brand equity.

7. LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The use of only one product in this study limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could replicate this study using more product categories. The sample was drawn from the university students; Future research could use a diversified sample of consumers. Finally future research could examine the applicability of findings in other countries.

This study is a step towards the understanding of the role of consumer brand relationships in the formation of brand equity. The findings of this study contribute to the existing body of knowledge despite limitations.

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