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Not the love at first sight: Exploration of consumers' sceptical brand love

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1. Introduction

Brand Love is defined as consumer's passionate emotional attachment for a brand or its associated dimensions (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), leading to desirable organizational outcomes (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Batra, Ahuvia & Bagozzi, 2012 and Batra et al., 2012). Previous studies have explored different dimensions of how brand love is developed, measured and its managerial implications (Kang & Amanpreet, 2015; Batra et al., 2012; Albert et al., 2008; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Fisher, 2006). While the studies have explored the nature of brand love (Batra et. al., 2012; Ahuvia, Batra & Bagozzi, 2009), their associations are largely based on positive manifestation of consumers' emotions towards a brand (Batra et al., 2012; Bauer et al., 2009, Albert, Merunka, and Valette-Florence, 2008), ignoring the negative valence attitude that consumer applies while evaluating a brand and its attributes. Thus, the role of consumer scepticism in the process of developing brand love have been largely unexplored.

We propose that scepticism, which erupts from a negatively valenced attitude (Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998), is not to be completely seen in negative sense but as a method of critically reviewing by the consumer to ensure optimum achievement and gain satisfaction of internal needs and from the claims made by the brands. In this study, we synthesize the literature on brand love and consumer scepticism to bridge the nomological link between the two constructs.

Keywords: Consumer Scepticism, Brand Love and Consumer Cooperation

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Consumer Scepticism and Brand Love

People attribute specific causes to events, which thereby directs their attitude and behaviour (patronage intention: WOM, repeat purchase intention and merchandise consumption) towards a brand (Ellen et al., 2000; Vlachos et al., 2009). While making such attributions, consumers tend to be in a state of indecisiveness. This temporary state of indecisiveness may erupt during the decision phase, while consumer evaluates to accept or reject the claims of a brand (Koslow, 2000; Morel & Pruyn, 2003). This temporary state involves both positive and negative set of emotions (Mohr et al., 1998; Obermiller & Spangenberg 1998). Studies have defined this phenomenon as consumer scepticism (CS) (Mangleburg & Bristol 1998; Boush, et al. 1994), a state of mistrustful predisposition (Boush, et al. 1994), a negatively valenced attitude (Mangleburg & Bristol 1998) towards brands or as a tendency to question the truth (Koslow 2000). Scepticism is largely explored in context of efficacy of information communicated to consumers (Elving, 2013). The influence of consumer scepticism on product experience, product evaluation and purchase intention varies for different product categories (Fenko et. al, 2016). In relation to consumer-brand relationship, previous studies have largely explored the nature of CS as negatively valenced attitude (Mangleburg & Bristol 1998) of consumers that brands try to minimize through appropriate communications and exposure of supporting evidences (Hardesty et al. 2002; Forehand & Grier 2002; Koslow, 2000). This dual nature of CS is therefore both curse and blessing for the marketers (Obermiller & Spangenberg 1998). If companies are successfully able to overcome this sceptic trait in consumers by reducing the mistrustful

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predisposition (Boush, et al. 1994), the brand inevitably changes the consumer's perception in to a positive affect and a post-consumption evaluative judgment of the brand leads to consumer's satisfaction (Mano & Oliver, 1993). This unexpectable persuasion translates into positive affect, building of emotional attachment and leads to consumer's satisfaction and delight (Mano & Oliver, 1993; Kumar, 1996). As both satisfaction and customer delight encourage positive evaluation of the brand, passionate emotional attachment and long-term relationship with the brand, they positively influence brand love (Albert et. al., 2008; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

We propose that sceptics could still be convinced and persuaded to accept the truth (Morel & Pruyn, 2003) and such conversions, whose intensity of scepticism is higher initially and then reduced, neutralized or converted into positive affect have high possibility of converting into brand liking and in a longer period into brand love.

3. Proposed Methodology

Respondents will be drawn from a set of consumers who have shown sceptical behaviour towards a brand and currently fulfilling the criterion on brand love towards the same set of brand(s). Data will be collected through in-depth interviews (Legard et al., 2003). The respondents will be selected based on the purposive sampling. Purposive sampling will be used at two levels. First, in selecting the appropriate list of brands which have either introduced new products or brands involving new technology, with which, the customers are not fully adaptive. Second, in selecting the respondents who were sceptical during their initial interaction with brand and show positive brand affection currently. Interviews will be analysed and themes to be generated using thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Work in Progress

Based on initial pilot interviews, the authors are currently exploring the brands, segments, and sectors where respondents are sceptical about the brand and its attributes and have devolved likeliness eventually. Based on our initial exploration of synthesizing the two literatures, we propose that consumer scepticism is congruent to the validation of affinity towards a brand, especially in the cases when consumer has limited reference points to compare the brand, technologically evolving products and services (E.g.: *Tik-Tok, PUBG* etc.) and brands with mixed WOM reviews. We also found that brand love, where consumers show initial scepticism and a positive affinity later, have a stronger tie with those brands, resulting in consumer cooperation and pro-active corrective feedbacks for improving the brand in future.

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