

Consumers' attitudinal and behavioural ties with brands: an integrative approach to build a consumer-brand relationship model

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Consumer researchers have shown significant interest in identifying the drivers of strong consumer-brand relationships. In the past, researchers have uncovered various drivers of consumer brand relationships, namely socio-motive and affective attachments (e.g. self-connection and love/passion), behavioural ties (e.g., brand commitment and interdependence), and cognitive beliefs (e.g., satisfaction and brand partner quality), which impact profitability, price insensitivity and referrals. However, to sustain long term and durable consumer-brand relationships, there is a need for a comprehensive understanding of the antecedents and consequences, both from the attitudinal and behavioural perspectives. In particular, Blackston (1992), Nabel and Blattberg (2000) were very precise in suggesting that attitude should be included along with behaviour to define consumer-brand relationships. Despite this understanding, limited research has been conducted to identify and integrate the attitudinal and behavioural components of consumer-brand relationships in their conceptualization and subsequent operationalization. After a review of the past literature, gaps are identified and the objectives of the study are formulated. The objectives are:

1. To modify and broaden earlier conceptualization of consumer-brand relationships by integrating attitudinal and behavioral perspectives for each consumer-brand relationship phase into the original framework of the theory to better comprehend consumers' brand relationship formation.
2. To propose a conceptually clear and operationally meaningful model of consumer-brand relationships through the exploration and integration of attitudinal and behavioral aspects of consumer-brand relationships, and
3. To test the proposed conceptual model empirically and to examine how attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of consumer-brand relationships work as an integrative mechanism to build consumer-brand relationships.

Followed by a mixed research design approach two studies were conducted. In the first study, through a series of in-depth interviews (N = 20) and subsequent textual analysis of the transcripts backed by grounded theory approach the consumer-brand relationship constructs were explored, refined, and integrated into a conceptual model. The qualitative analysis supports that customers first form cognitive form of consumer-brand relationship through attitude strength and brand satisfaction, then affective form through trusted and attached relationships, followed by conative consumer-brand relationships with deeply held brand commitment, which finally results in a behavioural/action relationship through brand equity and brand loyalty.

In the second study, to further demonstrate this conceptual model's value for marketing practice, following a survey method (N = 475) and consequent analysis of the data

through SEM, the conceptual model was tested and validated empirically. The results of the SEM supported empirical validity and predictability of the conceptual model and the interdependency among the relationship dimensions identified during the qualitative phase of this study. This further validates Study 1 findings.

Overall, from the results of analyses, it is concluded that consumers' attitudinal and behavioural perspectives play a vital role, and it works as an integrative mechanism to develop, augment and maintain strong and deep rooted consumer-brand relationships. Furthermore, the consumer-brand relationship is an integration of attitudinal and behavioral components that is an aggregation of four dimensions: (a) cognitive component, (b) affective component, (c) conative component, and (d) action or behavioral component. These four components were generated and integrated during the qualitative phase of this study. The empirical interdependency among these components were confirmed during the grounded theory phase and SEM. The grounded theory phase of the study suggested that the emergence of these four attitudinal components happens at different stages of consumer-brand relationships. Thus, the results of the grounded theory support that the relationship between brand and consumer is sequential in which relationship starts through the establishment of cognitive aspects, augmented through affective aspects, maintained through conative, and finally it would create an outcome during behavioral phase. This conclusion is highly contentious in consumer-brand relationship literature and is a topic for further study. In addition, the interdependency of the four attitudinal and behavioral components was proposed to represent consumer-brand relationships become apparent

during the quantitative phase of this study. In fact, this interdependency created significant path coefficients, which in turn evident from overall goodness-of-fit indices of the model.

During the grounded theory phase of the study it found that there were seven dimensions of consumer-brand relationships, such as brand attitude strength, brand satisfaction, brand trust, brand attachment, brand commitment, brand equity, and brand loyalty. Consumer brand attitude strength and brand satisfaction were the two major cognitive aspects which would emerge during the relationship establishment stage. Brand trust and attachment were the major source of affective dimensionality which would augment consumer-brand relationships. Brand commitment was the sole source of relationship maintenance, which is considered to be the conative aspect of the relationship. Finally, the study found support for two major outcomes of the consumer-brand relationship, brand equity and brand loyalty. These two outcomes are considered to be the behavioral aspect of the consumer-brand relationships. The empirical testing and validation of the model supported the fact that the behavioral dimensions are really influenced by attitudinal dimensions.

The findings of the study truly advance the knowledge of the existing body of brand management literature, particularly the brand relationship to literature. This study highlights the role of the strong relationship between all the four attitudinal and behavioral components of consumer-brand relationships. In fact, the consumer-brand relationship is an integration of attitudinal and behavioral components, in which the relationship starts with the development of attitude strength and brand satisfaction, getting augmented

through brand trust and attachment, maintained through brand commitment. This brand commitment would lead to two behavioral outcomes, such as brand equity and brand loyalty. Hence, the current study advances in the knowledge through its finding that the consumer-brand relationship is an integration of attitudinal and behavioral components, consist of cognitive, affective and conative components, which will lead to behavioral outcomes.

The contribution of the current study lies on three focal areas of brand management and operations that could benefit by employing the insights from this research, such as (1) *to analyse brand's relationship strength*: The study offers managers potentially important information for analysing the brand's strength in terms of its competitors in the product category; (2) *customer welfare management*: the companies intend to manage their brands with focused customer welfare and strong customer brand relationships can consider the model for greater understanding about when, where and how to invest in the establishment of customer welfare and thereby strong bond with the brand. For example, they may consider the process through which the development of bond with a brand could be executed. The identification of attitudinal and behavioural constructs and its integration proposed by this study would also more directly answer the call from the marketing practitioner community for more precision in terms of relationship establishment and decision making; and (3) *customer benefit assessment and strategic brand relationship management*: from the model developed in this study, the consumer brand marketers may clearly manage the benefits the customers seek during the brand relationship building process.