SALIENCE OF NEGATIVE BRAND RELATIONSHIP AND ITS IMPACT ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

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ABSTRACT

Marketing theory and practice has long shifted focus from just customer satisfaction to building customer relationship. Though a resultant positive brand relationship is aimed at, sometimes negative brand relationships evolve. Brand relationship literature proposes that just as positive and negative relationship exist in the interpersonal domain, positive negative relationship also develops in the person-object domain. Also, the different types of negative relationships that exist in the interpersonal domain can be extended to the person-object/brand domain. So, brands too take up negative roles such as master-slave, adversary, fling, secret lover etc. In this study, we try to understand which of such negative brand roles are salient? How does it affect the customer’s tendency to persuade or dissuade others from purchasing the same brand? Are some negative relationships more salient than others? The study uses empirical data collected through structured questionnaire from 150 respondents. Such data is analysed using SPSS and it was found that some negative brand relationship based on consumer power are more salient than others and are likely to affect further consumer behaviour as influencers. The findings would contribute to the existing academic acumen by expanding the knowledge about those types of brand relationships which are more salient. For the brand managers it would throw light on the need to be wary of negative brand relationships that are more salient and needs immediate attention before it spirals into a tirade of negative word-of-mouth.

Key words: Brand management, Brand rejection, Consumer behaviour, Negative brand relationship, Salience


1. INTRODUCTION

Maslow’s (1968) [1] motivational theory implies that a human being’s basic motivation is to safeguard against hunger, deprivation, cold, and danger. It is only when the negative aspects that are in the primary level of motivational hierarchy have been handled that other factors in the higher level of the hierarchy such as esteem, love, belongingness, and self-actualization are sought. Thus the primary human focus is prevention. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) [2] attribute this to evolutionary adaptation where survival depends upon protecting oneself from danger or negative aspects. Hence, human beings begin
to be more on the lookout for negative things to avoid. For, positive things missed may just reduce pleasure or advancement but negative things missed may lead to imminent danger. This positive negative asymmetry is also apparent in impression formation, (Kellermann 1984) \[^3\]. A negative impression has a more immediate and lasting impression. Does this phenomenon carry over to brand perceptions also? And, if such negative brand attributes gain salience does the ensuing negative brand relationship also gain salience? This study intends to explore answers to such queries.

1.1. Objectives of the study
This paper intends to achieve the following objectives.
- To analyse if the positive-negative asymmetry can be applied to brands.
- To find the extent of salience of negative brand relationship.
- To examine the effect of the consumer’s existing brand relationship on their likelihood to persuade or dissuade others from the purchase decision.

1.2. Methodology
The study used empirical method to obtain data from 150 undergraduate students through the administration of structured questionnaire. Validation rendered 146 usable responses. The questionnaire consisted of items adapted from the works of Fournier, Breazeale, & Fetscherin,(2012) \[^{14}\], to probe the different types of relationship that consumers have with brands. For example, the existence of adversarial relationship is examined through an item, “a brand that you adamantly refuse to buy, support, or use”, master slave relationship is examined through, “a brand you use on a regular basis, but are somehow “stuck with,” trapped into using, or otherwise forced to use”, secret affair examined through “a brand whose usage you downplay or keep hidden from certain others for one reason or another”.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
A review of the existing literature on the two constructs of salience and brand relationship reveals that though the salience of negative aspects in various life aspects have been done there is a significant gap in applying such recall to the consumption environment.

2.1. Salience
Brand salience is the prominence of the brand in consumer’s memory (Alba and Chattopadhyay 1985) \[^5\]. The degree of salience is based on order or speed of recall (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980) \[^6\]. Salience has a big role in buying behaviour (Sharp & Romaniuk, 2002) \[^7\]. Normally a cue activates a concept in memory (Collins and Loftus, 1975) \[^8\]. The activation travels to other cues that are related to it. If such cues are strongly related to the concept then they are used for further processing. Generally though product category is the initial cue that is used, there are a variety of other cues that may be used for retrieving brand specific information (Holden 1993) \[^9\]. Since retrieval is competitive, salience should not be measured keeping only one brand as a focus but should be across all the competing brands.

2.2. Brand relationship
Interpersonal relationship is characterised by reciprocity, meaning provision, multiplicity and temporality. The same is extended to human object/brand relationship. Animism, anthropomorphization of the brand, marketing actions and tactics help to substantiate the concept of conceptualising the brand as partner in the human-object relationship (Fournier, 1998) \[^{10}\].
3. HYPOTHESIS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Hypothesis was framed based on the existing literature relating to the constructs and data analysis was carried out using Friedman test, Multidimensional scaling and correlation.

3.1. Extending Positive-Negative Asymmetry to Brands

Limited time, limited cognitive capacity and ready availability of factors in memory are some of the factors that prompt people to be selective in what type of information they attend to (Payne & Bettman 2004) [11]. This forms the central idea of bounded rationality (Simon,1955) [12] which states that heuristics or simplifying mechanisms are used to solve decision problems. Because of the usage of such heuristics the evoked set may become smaller. During such selective processing in human perception formation -what gains salience, the good or the bad? According to the negative positive asymmetry effect negative cues gain more weightage than the positive cues (Anderson, 1965[13]; Peeters & Czapinski, 1990[14]; Skowronski & Carlson, 1989) [15].

Applying the above research findings to the consumption environment it has been observed that, faced with a lot of choice alternatives, consumers also use various heuristics or selective processing techniques to arrive at a decision to buy or not to buy a commodity or service. Fiske and Linville (1980) [16] term such evaluative consumers as cognitive miser who form impressions based on a subset of certain cues juxtaposed against its context.

Just as negative cues gain salience in human perception, do the negative aspects of the brand also gain salience? The consumers buy into the better version of themselves. So, just as human characteristics can be extended to a brand in the form of brand personality (Aaker, 1997) [17] the human perception bias can be extended to brand perceptions too. Hence, the first hypothesis is that this negative-positive asymmetry is applicable to brand impression.

H1: The negative positive asymmetry is applicable to consumer brand relationship

The respondents were required to provide ranks based on the salience of their relationship with the brand.

Table 1: Friedman Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Chi-Square df</th>
<th>146</th>
<th>17.723</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive relation</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative relation</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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Applying the Friedman test (Refer TABLE 1) it was found that there is a statistically significant difference in the salience of brand negative and positive relationship (Chi square= 17.723, p<.005).

3.2. Salience of Brand Negative Relationship

Evidence exists to clarify that negative information generally gains more weight than positive information. (Hodges 1974[18], Hamilton and Huff 1971) [19].Their effects generally lasts longer (Sheldon, Ryan, and Reis, 1996) [20]. The sensory reactions to such negative things are also stronger (Gilbert, Fridlund and Sabini, 1987) [21]. The recall of such negative emotional events is more than the positive events (Finkenauer and Rime 1998) [22]. The source of any bad information is better recalled than the good ones (Robinson- Riegler and Winton 1996) [23]. And among the bad events, a single event is stronger than the strongest good events. Extending it to the consumer’s reaction, the negative brand beliefs are mentioned more than the positive ones (Winchester and Romaniuk 2003) [24]. Besides, past usage than non usage
Dr Usha S

has a significantly higher effect on the likeliness to highlight the negative brand beliefs (Winchester, 2005) [25]. Fournier (1998) [10] introduced the concept of brand negative relationship, wherein brands become a party to different types of unfavourable relationship with the consumer. Miller, Fournier and Allen, (2012) [26], drew parallel brand analogues for the abusive, adversarial, dependent, exchange, master-slave, secret affair, communal and committed relationships that exist in the interpersonal domain. Just as negative emotions, events and information have higher recall such negative relationship also are likely to be more salient. Besides, the perceived lack of control or power over the influencing agent is also likely to produce a more intense and hence more negative and salient recall.

H2: Negative brand relationships vary based on salience and the consumer power.

![Euclidean distance model of the salience of consumer’s negative brand relationship](image)

**Figure 1:** Euclidean distance model of the salience of consumer’s negative brand relationship

Applying the Multidimensional scaling (MDS) technique (Refer Fig 1) a map of the relative positions of the negative brand relationship was analysed which showed that abusive brand relationship in which the consumer perceives a lesser level of power has higher salience. The consumer is likely to feel that the brand exercises undue pressure and influence on them and hence harbours negative emotions and feelings of the brand which kindles top-of-mind recall.

### 3.3. Effect of Brand Relationship

There is a range of relationship status that a consumer may hold with a brand. As in the human relationship domain not all of them may have the same status, effect and reaction during and after a purchase decision. Some negative relationships are intense and strong that it instigates the consumer’s propensity to influence other consumer’s purchase decision. A positive, dedicated or committed relationship can influence the consumer’s likelihood to propagate and persuade others also to enter the relationship. On the other hand an intense negative relationship may instigate negative feelings and hence more chances of dissuading others from purchasing the brand.

A negative experience instigates a consumer to talk about it to others since it forms a channel to relieve strong and repressed emotions. Thus negative experiences are released as a form of catharsis (Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, (1998) [27], Alicke, Braun, Glor, Klotz,
Salience of Negative Brand Relationship and its Impact on Consumer Behaviour

Magee, Sederhoim, & Siegel, (1992) [28]. Similarly a committed brand relationship characterised by brand loyalty can make the consumers valuable influencers who can carry the positive image of the brand to others. Thus the positive or negative status of the brand relationship can make the consumers to be persuaders or dissuaders of further consumption by others.

H3: Nature of the brand relationship influences consumer’s propensity to be negative or positive influencers

Table 2: Correlation analysis between salience of communal brand relationship and likelihood of persuading others purchase decision

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communal</td>
<td>.275**</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
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Table 3: Correlation analysis between salience of adversarial and secret affair brand relationship and likelihood of dissuading others from purchase decision

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adversarial</td>
<td>.936**</td>
<td>.000</td>
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It can be observed from TABLES 2 and 3 that there is a significant positive correlation between the salience of brand relationship and the likelihood to influence others future purchase decision. The salience of communal relationship has a positive correlation with persuasion propensity and adversarial relationship has a positive correlation with dissuasion propensity at a significance of p<.005. It indicates that the marketing strategists can suitably take advantage of a communal brand relationship that the consumer holds. But at the same time they should be wary of adversarial relationship wherein the consumer is likely to prevent other consumers known to them from purchasing or using the brand.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Earlier most of the consumer behaviour studies had concentrated on the positive aspects that are used for brand evaluation. It is only in the 1990’s that the significance of the negative aspects of the brand in evaluation has been acknowledged. This study reiterates the significance of the negative consumer brand relationship. It was found that some negative brand relationships are more salient than positive brand relationship. The perceived brand or consumer power also plays a significant role in such salience. The nature of the relationship also influences the propensity of the consumer to persuade or dissuade others with respect to the purchase decision

4.1. Academic and Managerial Contribution

It would contribute to the existing research in terms of expanding the knowledge about those types of brand relationships which are more salient. For the brand managers it would throw light on the need to be wary of any brewing negative brand relationship.
4.2. Limitations and Future Research

The study can be extended towards building a comprehensive conceptual model of the salience of negative brand attributes, brand relationship and its effect on consumer reaction and purchase intention. The consumer response when there is a multi cue evaluation can be analysed. This study highlights the need for brand managers to pay heed to the following quotes by Benjamin Franklin -“It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation, and only one bad one to lose it.”

REFERENCES

Salience of Negative Brand Relationship and its Impact on Consumer Behaviour


