

# EVOLUTION OF CONSUMER BRAND RELATIONSHIP RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

*The main objective of this paper is to find out the evolution of the consumer brand researches which have passed couple of decades. For this the researchers evaluate the paper published from 1980s to 2010s. The research finds that consumer brand relationship researches have passed different evolution stage. The first decade is considered as emerging period of the concept as metaphor analogous from interpersonal relationship research. The second stage is considered as deeply enrooting the concept through various research findings. The third decade is considering as spreading its branches in different facets. Lastly, in recent time it is found that the concept is generalized from different country and product categories associated with exploring its sources and consequences. The research is unique in its kind as there is lack of research in consumer brand relationship finding out evolutionary trends. The research is significant for the present and future researchers as they will get the overall scenario of consumer brand relationship research, its present status and research trends which will give them future research directions.*

**Keywords:** Brand, Consumer Brand Relationship, Relationship Partner, Evolution of Brand Relationship.

## INTRODUCTION

Consumer brand relationship emerged as a new research field (Fournier, 1998; Keller & Lehmann, 2006) in marketing literature. Refer to the works of Shimp & Maden (1988) idea of the concept consumer brand relationship emerged as a metaphoric concept analogous to person to person relationships. Interpersonal relationship dynamics are drawn to the concept consumer brand relationship e.g. brand as an active relationship partner like human in interpersonal relationship (Aggarwal, 2004; Fournier, 1998; Ghani & Tuhin, 2016), brand possess distinctive personality like human (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998). These relational foundations on which the concept consumer brand relationship stands on is back by different interpersonal relationship theories e.g. interdependency theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), investment model (Rusbult, 1980), social exchange theory Homan (1961), resource theory (Foa & Foa, 1974). Consumer brand relationship, therefore, becomes as a distinct area of research in marketing literature from theoretical and conceptual ground.

Since the beginning of consumer brand relationship research various concepts, theories, models and perspectives have been introduced to better explanation and understanding how consumers form relationship with their brands (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015). Various concepts like self-brand connection (Cheng, White & Chaplin, 2012; Escalas & Bettman, 2005), brand attachment (Lourerio, Ruediger & Demetris, 2012; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisengerich & Iacobucci, 2010; Belaid & Behi, 2011), brand love (Albert & Merunka, 2013), brand passion

(Albert, Merunka & Valette Florence, 2013), brand commitment (Kang, Tang & Fiore, 2014; Lourerio, Ruediger & Demetris, 2012; Walsh, Winterch & Mittal, 2010; Shaari, Salleh & Hussin, 2012), brand trust (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Lourerio, Ruediger & Demetris, 2012; Ong, Salleh & Yusoff, 2016) are commonly research in consumer brand relationship context. These researches not only enrich the concept of consumer brand relationship research but also urge the importance of further research that will unfold different facets of the concept.

Besides the above widely used constructs, literatures also introduced different new constructs to explore and explain consumer brand relationship (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015). Different new concepts e.g. brand reliability (Hess, Story & Danes, 2011), brand fidelity (Hess, Story & Danes, 2011), brand authenticity (Ilicic & Webster, 2014), brand evangelism (Pichler & Hemetsberger, 2007) were also been tested from consumer brand relationship concept. Consumer brand relationship research, therefore, continuously growing and extending in different facets. However, little attention is given to existing researches to examine and analyze how the consumer brand relationship research has evolved and shaped (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015).

This paper aims to fill the gap reviewing the previous literature on consumer brand relationship. The study will find the evolution of consumer brand relationship based on different decades since its beginning to recent time. From consumer brand relationship perspective, longitudinal research approach is essential as various concepts and theories have been applied from different discipline (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015). From this ground, this will give a precise understanding of the concept how it has been emerged and developed over the period and its major research trends.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This is a literature review paper for which the researchers reviewed the paper from 1988 to 2017 related to the concept of consumer brand relationship. The researchers selected the papers from the renowned and high indexed journal like Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Management, Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Psychology and Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Brand Management, Journal of Product and Brand Management and others. These journals play the major role of consumer brand relationship research. The researchers considered the research paper for this study that highlight the relationship aspect of brand with their consumers.

## **THE 1980S-EMERGING PERIOD OF THE CONCEPT CONSUMER BRAND RELATIONSHIP**

The start of the concept consumer brand relationship is a matter of debate. Fetscherin & Heinrich (2014) opined that the 1990s is the decade the concept consumer brand relationship was introduced in academic world. They considered “Brand Personality: Building Brand Relationships” by Blackston (1993) as the first piece of work of consumer brand relationship. However, they overlooked the work of Shimp & Maden (1988) “Consumer-Object Relations: A Conceptual Framework Based Analogously on Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love”. Though critics may raise question whether the concept consumer-object relationship analogous to consumer brand relationship. Brand is an in-animate entity. In this consideration, these two concepts are similar. Moreover, Shimp & Maden (1988) in the definition of consumer object

relationship clearly stated that by object they referred brands as well. It is therefore clear that the concept originated in 1980s by Shimp & Maden (1988).

Earlier different relational concepts (e.g. brand attitude, brand loyalty) were used in branding research (Shimp & Maden, 1988). (Park & Young, 1986; Gardner, 1985; Lutz, MacKenzie & Belch, 1983; Cox & Locander, 1987) studied about brand attitude where (Raj, 1985; Wernerfelt, 1985; Tranberg & Hansen, 1986; Rothschild, 1987; Moschis, Moore & Stanley, 1984) studied brand loyalty. Researchers used these concepts from consumers' relationship perspective. However, these concepts failed to form common link and unified framework of consumer brand relationship (Shimp & Maden, 1988).

Shimp & Maden (1988) first proposed consumer brand relationship under consumer object relations as distinct concept. They drew the theme of the concept as metaphor of person to person relationship. They attempted to establish the concept from human psychological process. For this they combined human motivation, cognition and emotion and proposed eight types of relationships (e.g. nonliking, liking, infatuation, functionalism, inhibited desire, utilitarianism, succumbed desire and loyalty) existing between consumers and their consumption objects that was absent in the early literatures of branding studies from relationship perspectives. However, there is a scope of criticism as it is a metaphoric concept which has been lacking empirical evidences. They did not identify and measure the components of consumer brand relationships. They only identified the relationship of consumers with their brand or consumption objects. Therefore, validity of the concepts became challenge.

The subsequent development of the concept in next couple of decades, though the only piece of work in the 1980s, Shimp & Maden work is the genuine genesis of the concept of consumer brand relationship as it is based on "The Triangular Theory of Love" by Sternberg (1986). It is, therefore, logical to say the 1980s is the emerging period of the concept of consumer brand relationship.

### **THE 1990S-DEEPLY ROOTED THE CONCEPT OF CONSUMER BRAND RELATIONSHIP**

Only two pieces of works, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the decade, were found in this decade. The first contribution came from Blackston (1993) titled as "Beyond Brand Personality: Building Brand Relationships". Though he had not enough literature support, his mix-method study assumed a brand as a human which having distinctive brand image. He challenged this brand image which only considered consumer attitudinal aspect towards brand. He proposed to replace this one-dimensional brand image with brand relationship since it is essential for marketers to know not only what consumer's attitude toward a brand is and what consumers thinking about the brand but also what a brand think about consumers. This is logical because relationship depends on each person perception to other in a relationship dyad. In his study, he identified credit card brand relationship with customers. His study explored that people have different view about the attitude of credit card brand toward them since credit card users recognized that the brand respected the user's status, authority, own worth where non-users felt that the brand intimidated and putdown them. Later he extended the brand relationship concept to corporate brand where he showed that consumers felt automotive brand's attitude towards their consumers were deficient.

"Consumer and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in consumer Research" by Susan Fournier in 1998 is the second study in consumer brand relationship field in this decade. Fournier (1998) deeply analyzed consumer brand relationship and explored twenty

different types of relationships consumers form with a brand (e.g. average marriage, causal/friendship/buddies, committed partnership, marriage of convenience, compartmentalized friendship, best friendships, kinships, childhood friendship, courtships, rebound/avoidance-driven relationships, flings, enmities, dependences, enslavements and secret affairs. Each relationship types yield particular benefits (Weiss, 1974) and relationships vary in their maintenance requirement (Rose & Serafica, 1986). She also identified six dimensions (e.g. love/passion, self-connection, interdependence, commitment, intimacy, brand partner quality) of relationship strength. Continuing relationship stability is a challenge in interpersonal and business. Fournier (1998) further proposed a model of relationship quality how it effect on relationship stability. The model is grounded on the reciprocity principle of meaningful actions of both brand and consumer. This implies that actions from both consumer and brand can strengthen or dilute a relationship formed between them.

These two studies have given a solid foundation of the concept of consumer brand relationship. Going beyond the metaphoric view of earlier decade, in this decade, both the studies showed how a brand act like a person and solved the debate brand as an active relationship partner. Though Blackston (1993) study lacks in what matters in the construction of the concept of consumer brand relationship. Here, seminal works of Fournier (1998) embody the concept in detail. This study not only established brand relationship theory building goal but also provided frameworks for execution, extension and refinement of this task. It is, therefore, evident that the trend of consumer brand relationship research in this decade was deeply rooted the concept of consumer brand relationship.

### **THE 2000S-SPREADING CONSUMER BRAND RELATIONSHIP RESEARCH IN DIFFERENT AREAS**

This decade should be considered as a vital era in the development of the concept of consumer brand relationship. In this period, the concept consumer brand relationship started to spread its branches from different areas that help it to bloom gradually. The remarkable developments in this decade are expansion of quantitative and qualitative research, testing the concept from different country perspectives, development of measurement items, testing from different theoretical perspective.

From theoretical consideration, The Triangular Theory of Love and interpersonal relationship theory were the basis for developing the concept of consumer brand relationship in 1980s and 1990s. In this decade, different theoretical development came from the works of (Sung & Choi, 2010; Sung & Campbell, 2007; Woodside, 2004). Inspired by the interdependency theory of (Kelley, 1979; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Sung & Choi, 2010) theorized the predictors and criterion variables of consumer brand relationship. Consumers commitment towards brand relationship was predicted from satisfaction, investment and quality of alternatives. Similar study was also conducted by Sung & Campbell (2007) for different brand. These studies established that predictors theoretical investment model of interpersonal relationship can predict the consumer brand relationship. Further, Woodside (2004) summarized the balance theory of Heider (1958) and related extensions to means-end chain laddering in consumer brand relationship research. He found out the means-end chain relevance to Fournier (1998) alternative types of relationship such as casual friendships, marriages and enmities.

Further, to measure the concept consumer brand relationship, researchers gave their efforts on developing valid measures of consumer brand relationship. For successful management of consumer brand relationship needs valid measures of consumer brand

relationship (Kim, Lee & Lee, 2005). Kim, Lee & Lee (2005) developed consumer brand relationship measures under five dimensions (e.g. self-connective attachment, satisfaction, behavioral commitment, trust, emotional intimacy). Their empirical test found that these brand relationship dimensions vary in their significance to product and service brands. Similarly, Veloutsou (2007) develop and empirically test consumer brand relationship measures under two dimensions such as two-way communication and emotional exchange. He asserted that these dimensions assess the strength of relationship consumer's form with a specific brand that could be an indicator of consumer based brand equity.

Besides these theoretical and scale development various quantitative and qualitative studies (Aggarwal, 2004; Aaker, Fournier & Brasel, 2004; Swaminathan, Page & Gurhan-Chnli, 2007; Sung & Choi, 2010; Sung & Campbell, 2007; Smit, Bronner & Tolboom, 2006; Huber, Vollhardt, Matthes & Vogel, 2010; Kressmann, Sirgy, Herrmann, Huber, Huber & Lee, 2006) had been conducted during this decade. Among these, the study of Aggarwal (2004) is one of the remarkable piece of work. His works added important contribution to the concept and affirm brand as an active relationship partner which was developed in the earlier two decades. He has identified brand relationship norms that guide the relationship between consumer and brand similar to interpersonal relationships in society. He also empirically proved that consumer reacted negatively when violation of these relationship norms. Aaker, Fournier & Brasel (2004) called the violation of relationship norms as brand transgression. They proved that strong relationship between consumer and brand, analogous to close friend, continue if there was no transgression. Transgression particularly damage sincere brand relationship with consumers.

It is evident that significant contributions have been made in this decade in consumer brand relationship research. These contributions came from theoretical development to better conceptualization of the concept, exploring valid measures of the concept; validate the concept from different research stream. Therefore, this era can be considered as spreading consumer brand relationship research in different areas.

### **THE 2010S-CONCEPT GENERALIZATION, FINDING ITS SOURCES AND CONSEQUENCES**

This decade is very crucial for the consumer brand development research though it has yet to end. Compared to other three decades, during this period large number of quantitative research has been conducted with few qualitative researches in comparison. The focuses of these quantitative exploration have been to generalize the concept from different perspective, finding the sources of consumer brand relationship that strengthen the concept and its consequences that is the resulting outcomes.

The studies in this decade mainly generalized from different country, brand or product categories. Most of the studies conducted in developed country perspectives e.g. USA (Hudson, Hung, Roth & Madden, 2015; Kang, Tang & Fiore, 2014; Nober, 2011; Hess, Story & Danes, 2011), French (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Hudson et al., 2015), Canada (Kim, Park & Kim, 2013), UK (Hudson et al., 2015), South Korean (Kim, Park & Kim, 2013; Lee & Kang, 2013), Portugal (Lourerio, Ruediger & Demetris, 2012) perspective. These studies were conducted in wide range of product and brand categories. These are mainly athletic shoes brands, notebook computer brands, personal computer brands, automobiles brands, smartphone brands, restaurant brands, fast-food brands, cosmetic brands and brands of other product categories.

Researchers have incorporated various relational concepts (Albert & Merunka, 2013) as dimensions of consumer brand relationship concept. These relational dimensions enrich the

concepts and extend the concept greater depth. The most common dimensions used are brand love (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Kim, Park & Kim, 2013; Lourerio, Ruediger & Demetris, 2012; Hudson et al., 2015), interdependency (Hudson et al., 2015), partner quality (Hudson et al., 2015; Kim, Park & Kim, 2013), self-connection (Cheng, White & Chaplin, 2012; Hudson et al., 2015; Kim, Park & Kim, 2013), nostalgia (Hudson et al., 2015; Kim, Park & Kim, 2013), intimacy (Hudson et al., 2015; Kim, Park & Kim, 2013), commitment (Kim, Park & Kim, 2013; Kang, Tang & Fiore, 2014; Lee & Kang, 2013; Volta, 2013), satisfaction (Volta, 2013), trust (Kim, Park & Kim, 2013; Kang, Tang & Fiore, 2014; Lee & Kang, 2013; Volta, 2013). All these dimensions were empirically tested and validated by the researchers.

Companies are giving their efforts and distribute resources to build long term consumer brand relationship (Johnson & Selnes, 2004). Researchers during this time have attempted to find the sources of consumer brand relationship that will strengthen the concept. Widely used antecedents of consumer brand relationship include brand personality (Lee & Kang, 2013; Volta, 2013), brand identity (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Lee & Kang, 2013), brand reliability (Hess, Story & Danes, 2011), brand fidelity (Hess, Story & Danes, 2011), social media interaction (Hudson et al., 2015), brand trust (Albert & Merunka, 2013;), brand uniqueness (Volta, 2013), relationship norms (Volta, 2013), brand attachment (Lourerio, Ruediger & Demetris, 2012), brand self-expression (Lourerio, Ruediger & Demetris, 2012). These constructs strengthen consumer brand relationship which ultimately produces better consequences.

Further, researchers also investigated the effect of consumer brand relationships on the quality of the bonds developed between consumers and their brands (Nober, 2011). Researchers found positive outcome of strong consumer brand relationship (Cheng, White & Chaplin, 2012) e, g. brand commitment (Albert & Merunka, 2013), positive word of mouth (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Fetscherin et al., 2014; Hudson et al., 2015), brand forgiveness (Cheng, White & Chaplin, 2012), purchase intention (Fetscherin et al., 2014; Lee & Kang, 2013), brand loyalty (Fetscherin et al., 2014; Lourerio, Ruediger & Demetris, 2012; Volta, 2013), brand extension (Kim, Park & Kim, 2013), brand evaluation (Kim, Park & Kim, 2013). All these consequences produce better value for the company.

Though couple of years to rich to the end of this decade, major portion of the decade has been passed in consumer brand relationship research. Acceptable time span has been passed to come to a general conclusion about consumer brand relationship. During this period, the concept consumer brand relationship become mature a widely accepted research topic. In the earlier decade, extensive amount of research came from qualitative perspective where in this era research focuses on quantitative aspect of brand relationship research. These quantitative researches established and generalized consumer brand relationship dimensions, its sources and consequences from different country and brand category context.

## CONCLUSION

Over the year it has been appeared that consumer brand relationship research is dynamic, complex and multi-disciplinary (Fournier, 2009). This complex concept consumer brand relationship has gradually unfolded over the period. This paper not only to view consumer brand relationship research but also dig out to find where the academic root lies in the literature. Further, since its start from 1988 to 2017, different research streams have emerged. From the concept development to recent development of this area has been identified in this study. Likewise, different concept, measures have been developed over the period which has been highlighted in this study. Moreover, consumer brand relationship dimensions, sources and its

consequences are from different research stream has been explored this will help future researcher better understand the concept, its steps of development and major research trends evolved in different period. Though different concepts have been drawn from interpersonal relationship literature and its interdisciplinary nature, ample scope for future researchers still left to contribute for the further development of the concept consumer brand relationship. Most of consumer brand relationship researches were conducted from developed country perspective; future researchers therefore, should conduct more research on developing country perspectives.

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