Relationship between Community Attachment, Brand Identity and Brand Love: Based on the Experience of Consumer's Emotional Value Perspective

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Abstract

To foster consumers' emotional attachment to a brand is becoming a vital task for brand managers in the highly competitive market nowadays. And the study of brand love is a hot spot in the marketing management research. Prior research mainly focus on the antecedents and outcomes of brand love. Based on the identity theory and attachment theory, this study exams the impact of emotional experience value on brand love, and clarifies the role of brand identity and community attachment to brand love and confirms the mediate role of emotional attachment. This study concludes with a discussion of theoretical and managerial implications.

Keywords：Sense of Community Belonging；Brand Identity；Brand Love；Emotion experience

1、Introduction

With the development of our society, humans have stepped into the age of experience economy after going through article economy, commodity economy and service economy(Pine and Gilmore, 2002). To embrace the coming of new consumption era and acquire the competitive advantage in the marketplace, establishing good emotional bond between consumers and brands is a crucial task for brand managers(Yang et al., 2010). Accompanied with the deep-seated emotional interaction between a brand and a consumer, the brand would be a "beloved brand" which can maintain consumers' loyalty and can help bring persistent profits(Yang et al., 2010). Adapted to the need in solving the actual problem in brand management work, brand love is becoming the focus point by researchers and practitioners. Albert et al. (2008) gave a clear description about the affection of brand love which distinguish from interpersonal love (Sternberg, 1986). Without referring explicitly to interpersonal love, Caroll and Ahuvia (2008) put forward an integrated model of brand love and elaborated the unified construct. Pang et al. (2009) argued that the interaction between advertisement style and products types will influence the feeling of brand love.

Based on theory of emotional attachment, we learned that the intense affective feeling can not only come from sensory awareness such as hearing, sight, taste, smell and touch, but also from a sense of belonging and identity (Yang et al., 2010). Transcendent consumption experience can promote the emotion of brand love. Recognition and mutual assistance exist in a same brand community can help them share the value of emotional experience which can help consumers receive more warmth and pleasure or even fascinated (Xue and Wang, 2009). Due to the significance of research on brand love, plenty of scholars have focused on the relevant exploratory work . Previous studies have given much attention to the investigation on measurement or the outcome variables of brand love, but not the concrete analysis of deeper psychological mechanism(Yang et al., 2010).

2、Literature Review

2.1 Brand Love

Consumers' attachment to a brand may consist of warmness, closeness and commitment (Shimp and Madden, 1988). Carroll and Aviva(2006) propose that brand love is a enthusiastic emotional attachment accompanied with satisfied consumption experience. They also argue that consumers with a more hedonism tendency may prefer self-enhancement products. Yang et al. (2010) confirm that remarkable brand experience can promote the generation of brand love. On the basis of previous research, Wei and Luo (2012) use hermeneutic to analyzed brand love from brand passion, brand appeal and brand promise three dimensions. Batra et al.(2012)put forward a seven dimensions' model of brand love, which contains self-brand integration, passion-driven behaviors, positive emotional connection, long-term relationship, positive overall attitude valence, attitude certainty and confidence (strength), and anticipated separation distress. Albert and Merunka (2013) examine the role of brand love in the relationship between consumers and the beloved brand.

2.2 Brand Identity

Ahearne et al. (2005) propose that brand identity cater to the need of people's social status identity and self-status identity. Carlson(2008)define brand identity as the degree of perceived fitness between the individual self and the characteristics of the brand. Belk(1988)point out that consumers often create brand identity by products possession

and consumption experience, so that brand can be a means to express self-value and personal trait. When there is a consistent match between brand character and consumer's personal trait, consumers may generate much more resonance in emotion and show more identity because of more close psychological distance in perception (Schouten,1991). Zhang and Hou (2013) posit that brand identity is an identity of value essentially which can be divided into individual identity and social identity. Individual identity focus more on the fitness between brand personality and consumers self image, while social identity emphasizes the extent consumers belong to a certain desired group. Zhang et al. (2007) find that consumers prefer brands with more symbolic meaning and expressive value. Zhou and Zheng (2011) confirm brand identity plays a complete mediate role between brand community identity and brand loyalty.

2.3 Sense of Community belonging

According to Maslow's hierarchy theory of needs, humans have the need of belonging. Consumers want to be embedded in the social network which can reinforce personal relationship and emotion need. Consumers are not only concerned about material consumption but also the sense of belonging along with the consumption activity (Bagozzi,& Dholakia, 2006). By the brand consumption and relevant service experience and products possession, consumers perceive more relevant to the certain desired consumption group. As we can see, sports brand as one kind of favorable brand could strengthen the social relationship and receive a relax sentiment (White and Dahl,2007). During the process, consumers can show the others their self image which meet with their inner desire. In our daily life, the need of belonging and uniqueness can coexist in the consumer's same consumption choice at the same time. Connection between the brand members could foster belonging (Muniz, 2001), which can enhance consumers'brand love (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen,2010). Brand community members have much similar information and experiences and get to know each other. The sense of community belonging can have a positive effect on brand loyalty and maintain similar lifestyle (Muniz, 2001; McAlexander,2002). They share a similar social norms and generate the social identity and cohesiveness (Banerjee & Banerjee,2015).

2.4 Brand Experience

On the basis of empirical research, Diehm and Armatas(2004)define brand love as individual expertise and feeling receive from the certain brand. Possessions and brand experience may have an impact on brand affection via different influence paths by consumers (Ponder and Bames,2004). Consumption experience can not only create pleasure and enjoyment (Holbrook, 2000), but also cultivate warmth and memorable affection (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Studies have shown that brand experience have a positive impact on brand love (Xue et al., 2009). Xue et al. (2009) confirm that transcendent consumer experiences have a direct positive influence on brand loyalty. Consumers create emotional connections through a fascinating activity which can further facilitate the loyal behavior. Studies indicate that wonderful brand experience have a positive effect on consumers' materials preference and emotional attachment which come from the pursuit of pleasure (Wu et al.,2009). Schmitt and Martínez (1999) divide consumers'experience into five categories which include sensory experience, emotional experience, creative thinking experience, physical experience and action experience. Bowlby(1979) put forward the concept of "attachment" and defined brand love as a particular emotion dependence . Thomson et al. (2005) defined the concept of emotional attachment as having a series of positive affection feelings for a certain brand. It is a strong emotional connection between personal self and specific brand. Consumers' well experience in the consumption progress contain positive emotion experience and the sense of identity and their emotional attachment may be a vital element to enhance brand loyalty. Xue and Wang(2009) confirm brand attachment as a full mediation effect between transcendent consumption experience and brand loyalty. Consumers' attachment to a certain brand is a highly cognitive and affective connection between self-concept and brand personality.

3、Research Framework and Hypothesis Proposal
3.1 Research Framework
Based on the previous theory background and discussions, we propose conceptual model as Figure1 shown below:
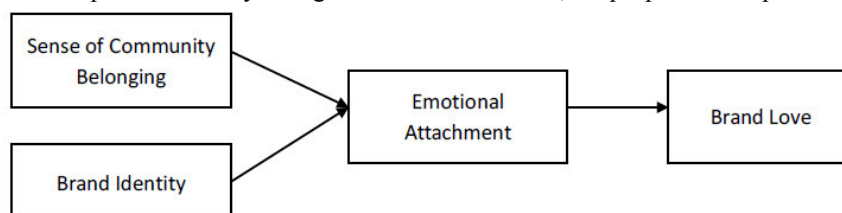

Figure 1. Theoretical Model

3.2 Hypotheses Proposal

Brand identity not only emphasize the degree of fit between brand personality and self image, but also express the extent self identity belong to a certain group. The need of belonging and uniqueness could be both existed in the same choice. Community attachment focus on the close relationship established among consumers who engage in the similar brand consumption. Yang et al. (2010) suggested that favorable brand experience can promote the formation of brand love, and the interaction among the group members and self-expression may have a positive impact on brand love at the same time. As the sense of belonging becoming more intense, consumers' emotional attachment would be stronger and develop the affect of brand love(Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen,2010). Compared with others not engaged in the brand community, consumers involved in the brand community are more likely to gain transcendent consumer experience and a close relationships with other consumers of the brand which will facilitate brand love (Schouten et al., 2007) . Along with utility value of products replaced by link value gradually, there are more and more brand communities with brand members sharing mutual interests and hobbies appearing in our modern society, meanwhile, consumers could gain the personal identity through the communal activities about the brand. Together, we put forward hypothesis as follow:

Hypothesis 1: The strength of community belonging has a positive impact on brand love.

Hypothesis 2: The effect of a sense of community belonging on brand love is mediated by emotional attachment.

Simultaneously, humans who live in the society both have the need to express individual and pursue group sense of belonging. Brakus et al. (2009) have confirmed emotion experience could be an important dimension of brand experience and it would have a significant positive impact on brand loyalty. Community attachment could enhance positive well-being and pleasure which may nourish brand love. Research showed that brand identity could create brand love because a certain brand or relevant products consumers consumed would be a signal to distinguish from others because the expression of their preference and individual values (Ahuvia, 2005). And the formation of consumers emotional attachment mainly depend on symbolic and hedonic values (Ponder and Bames,2004). A specific brand can shape consumers' personal image through its communication. The more fit between brand personality and consumers' personality fit, the more emotion resonance will be triggered (Schouten, 1991). The psychological distance consumers perceived may be much more close because of the sense of identity. Together, brand identity can create emotional attachment and further foster brand love (Brakus et al., 2009). Based on these analysis, we can conclude the hypothesis as below:

Hypothesis 3: The strength of brand identity will have a positive impact on brand love.

Hypothesis 4: The effect of brand identity on brand love would be mediated by emotional attachment.

4、Methodology

4.1 Survey Design and Sample describe

The measured variables tested in this paper mainly adopted from verified scales including Carroll (2006)'s Brand Love Scale, Zhang et al.(2013)'s Brand Identity Scale, Zhou & Wu (2013)'s Sense of Community Belonging Scale, Keller(2003)'s Brand Community Scale, Park et al. (2010)' Emotional Attachment Scale and Brakus (2009)' s Brand Experience Scale. Most of these referential scales we adopt from were stated in English originally, so we tried to adapt our questionnaires for our localization study. As the adjusted surveys worked better in the semantic description and validity recognition, a temporally experts group composed of researchers selected from the same major was established. All the items measured are presented in 7-point Likert scales, from "strongly disagree"to "strongly agree" represented by "1" and "7" relatively, while the score is higher, the degree of favor will be stronger. The items of emotional attachment contained "The brand is more attracted to me than others similarly", "In the similar category of the product or service consumption, I will give priority to the brand","If the brand disappears from my daily life for a very long time , I will be be upset and grieved"。The items of brand love contained "The brand is more attractive to me than the others similar","The brand would be a priority in my purchase choice sets if need","If the brand disappear from my life, I will be grieved and lost". The items of brand identity contained " I have the similar personality as the brand convey", "The brand suits me in many aspects", " target consumers group of the brand have much in common with me". The items of the sense of community belonging contained"I feel a deep connection with others who use this brand", "I feel like I almost belong to a club with others who use the brand","Interactive with other consumers in this community make me feel well".

325 questionnaires were distributed in South China Agriculture University and South China University of Technology in total. We kicked out incomplete or invalid data and finally 308 samples records were used in study analysis. Participants in our study ranging in age from 21 to 30 years old completed the questionnaires. Table 1 gives a detailed description about samples characteristics.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

	n	%		n	%
Sex			Monthly Expense		
Male	142	46	Under 600yuan	72	23
Female	166	54	600-1200yuan	165	54
Age			1200-1800yuan	50	16
18-22	86	28	1800yuan or more	21	7
23-26	173	56	Marital		
27-30	49	16	Single	237	77
Education			Married	71	23
Undergraduate	92	30	Ethnicity		
Postgraduate	157	51	Han	269	88
Doctoral	40	13	Chinese Minority Ethnic	35	11
Post-Doctoral	19	6	Other	4	1

This study examines the reliability of every variable with Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and factor analysis data. The internal consistency was measured by Amos 16.0 as Table.2 shows. Reliability analysis of the whole questionnaire reveals that Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is 0.876, and Cronbach's Alpha of every variable is more than 0.7, in an acceptable range. Most of the items of variables reveal a high internal consistency. All the values of average variance extracted (AVE) are higher than 0.5,and the values of composite reliability(CR)are higher than 0.7. These results show that the tested model is in a good internal consistency level. At the meanwhile, results show that root-mean-square AVE of the measured variables are bigger than the correlation between all of the variables, which indicate that there is a good differential validity between the variables.

Table 2 Internal Consistency Test

	Metrics	Factor Loadings	Average Variance	Composite Reliability
Emotion Attachment	The brand can evoke my positive feeling.	0.742	0.654	0.793
	The brand is gracious and familiar.	0.786		
	Thinking about the brand come to my mind from time to time.	0.636		
Brand Identity	Some of my personality is similar to the brand conveys.	0.639	0.629	0.827
	I really identify with people who use this brand.	0.613		
	The brand suits me in many ways.	0.628		
	I appreciate the brand from my heart.	0.691		
The Sense of Community Belonging	Target consumers of the brand have much in common with me.	0.713	0.695	0.712
	I feel a deep connection with others who use this brand.	0.654		
	I feel like I almost belong to a club with others who use the brand.	0.714		
	Interactive with other consumers in this community make me feel well.	0.683		
Brand Love	The brand is more attractive to me than others in the same category.	0.832	0.538	0.816
	I will consider this brand at first when purchasing relevant products or service.	0.794		
	Imagine the brand disappear in my life for a very long time, I will be grieved.	0.764		

5、Results and Discussion

The results run with Amos 16.0 showed that the absolute fit index was 392.578, df = 204, GFI (0.825) was more than 0.80, CFI (0.874) was more than 0.80, RMR (0.057) was less than 0.08, RMSEA (0.073) was less than 0.08, all these indicator data results fall in acceptable range. Figure 2 shows the structural model with its standardized coefficients.
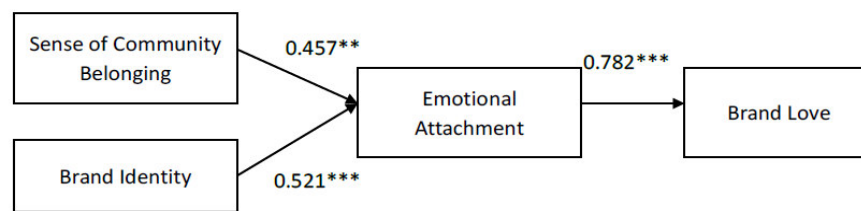
Figure 2 Path Coefficients

The results of hypotheses testing can be seen from Figure 2, which indicate all the hypotheses get support from path coefficients and significance analyses data. From the data analysis, we can come to the conclusion that: the stronger the sense of community belonging is, the higher the affect of brand love it will be; the stronger the sense of community belonging is, the more intense emotional attachment it will be; the stronger the brand identity is, the better the emotional attachment will be induced.

6、Conclusion and Implication

This study investigates the formation mechanism of brand love in the perspective of consumers' emotional experience. As the data indicate, emotional effect can be a mediator in the effect of sense of community belonging and brand identity on brand love. Emotional experience perspective gives us a novel sightseeing to explore the internal mechanism of band love. Consumers live in the society both have the need of assimilation and dissimilation, and they can both exist in a same choice. Our findings are a good supplement for pre-existing research in this area.

6.1 Theoretical Significance

Conventional literature on brand love put more attention on outcome variables such as the willing of purchase intention, brand loyalty, forgiveness, positive WOM. This study explores the antecedent variables of brand love and takes the emotional experience as an important element to discuss. In the past, scholars have paid attention to the sensory experience of the sense of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste, they manifested that sense of comfort and pleasure will be a basis motivation to foster brand love. Further, our research place emphasis on deeper motivation of emotion path of brand love. This paper identifies two important motivations of brand love, one is the sense of community belonging, the other is brand identity. And we verify the mediation effect of emotional attachment. Our findings enrich the theoretical exploration of brand experience and brand love.

6.2 Practical Implication

Brand marketers should foster emotional attachment from psychological level instead of getting trapped into the vicious circle of "price war". To build up the core competitive advantage of the brand, strategies can be utilizing to strengthen the affective connection with our consumers and enhance the emotional resonance. Key branding issues need to be addressed, including clear positioning, spokesman, and expression the brand personality that are appropriate for the brand. All these should match with main personality and cognitive schema of target consumers. Both the sense of community belonging and the brand identity refer to the matching problem of individual value. Consumers themselves in the process of interacting with specific brand, consumers may perceive close psychological distance because of common similarity.

The sense of community built by brand can stimulate the consumers' connection to the eager brand. As we all know, online brand community as a place of maintaining affection of group members, such as Huawei EMUI Community, Xiao MI Community, Harley-Davidson Hazan Community. To some extent, members enjoy the same brand community will have much more common in their interests. Sense of target brand community belonging is also the reflection about the independent of other cognate brands. And brand identity is an emotional recognition and resonance when the expressions of brand personalities matching with consumers' individual personal characteristics. Marketers should fully understand target consumers' personal traits, cognitive thinking, social status and life style and so on, which can help design the products or provide philosophy meet clients needs. More specifically, during the business operation process, managers need to consider details at each joint related to brand image including service staff, logo and slogan design, packaging design, the selection of celebrity and promotion strategies etc. What we should pay more emphasis on the match degree. To create a high consistency match with arousal sympathy is a long-term task which calling for higher requirement to marketers and managers.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

Though we have put much effort in our work, there are still some limitations. First, in the empirical study, 308 students aged mainly under 30 years old were chosen to be the samples for this research. Future study can enlarge the samples to a broader source range to confirm the effect. Second, individual idiosyncratic diversity such as power state or sensibility tendency would have an influence on the psychology mechanism, which could be further

discussed in the follow-up research. Moreover, this study has emphasized the importance of emotional experience in the consumption process. Anthropomorphic products may play a vivid role in the emotion communication between the brand and consumers. Anthropomorphism may help convey better emotional feelings in a more convenient interaction. Ongoing study may give an insight into it. In the meanwhile, exploring the emotional sense-feeling experience of consumers in the sensory marketing also will be a fruitful area.

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