The Effects of Intimacy on Consumer-Brand Relationships

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Within the last two decades, the existence of consumer-brand relationships has become a controversial issue in the brand management literature. The degree of intimacy was evaluated in the context of an experiment to provide deeper insight into this field of research as intimacy is one facet of the brand relationship construct. A scenario-based 2 (intimate/ non intimate) x 2 (anthropomorphized/ non anthropomorphized) ANCOVA was conducted. First, the results show that marketers can establish an intimate brand relationship. Secondly, the findings underline the important role of intimacy in consumer-brand relationships and reveal its effect on consumer brand perception.

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Interest in consumer-brand relationships (CBR) has emerged among scientists over the last decade (e.g., Fournier 1998). Nevertheless, no study investigated the effects of intimate CBR within an experiment. Subsequently, we examine the effects of intimacy and anthropomorphization on consumer brand perception. Moreover, this paper investigates whether a consumer feels more intimate with an anthropomorphized brand.

In the marketing literature, the assumption predominates that consumers attribute human characteristics to brands (e.g., Aaker 1997). For instance, given that brands are received as a gift or that they are utilized by a close friend or a family member, people are encouraged to humanize them (Rajagopal 2006). Anthropomorphization can be defined as viewing human characteristics in non human forms or events (Guthrie, 1993). Extending this line of thought, Fournier (1998) suggests that brands, like humans, serve as a legitimate relationship partner. One of the characteristics of human relationships (Miller and Lefcourt 1982) as well as of CBR (Fournier 1994; Fournier 1998) is intimacy. Intimacy can be described as “feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships” (Sternberg 1986, p. 119). According to researchers in the field of interpersonal relationships, intimacy is an essential component of relationships among adults (Gaia 2002). In marketing research, Fournier (1994; 1998) assesses that intimacy is characterized by a detailed knowledge of the brand and a special brand meaning for the customer.

Following the perspective that life is given to a brand in the consumer’s mind (Aggarwal 2004; Ouwersloot and Tudorica 2001), we can assume that customers tend to build relationships with brands as with human beings. This in turn leads to the proposition that consumers tend to elaborate relationships with brands. The first overall prediction is that individuals who established an intimate relationship with a brand feel more trust towards this brand and a higher level of brand partner quality than if they do not sense this intimacy. Secondly, it is assumed that people tend to feel more trust towards the brand and a higher level of brand partner quality if it is perceived as having human characteristics.

To analyze these hypotheses, we conducted a scenario-based 2 (intimate/ non intimate) x 2 (anthropomorphized/ non anthropomorphized) ANCOVA with a final number of 63 participants. A fashionable fashion brand served as stimulus. The wording of the non intimate condition was mainly copied from an existing marketing text utilized by a famous brand. As defined by Hook et al. (2003), the brand description of the intimate condition included the components of intimacy: elements of love and affection, personal validation, self-disclosure and trust. The manipulation check was performed on the basis of a 9-item intimacy scale (Cronbach’s Alpha=.926) by Nyssen and his colleagues (2001), which was modified from Fournier (1994). While the non anthropomorphized scenario was written in an impersonal style, in the anthropomorphized scenario, the brand expressed itself as a person. A single item represented the brand and his colleagues (2001), which was modified from Fournier (1994). While the non anthropomorphized scenario was written in an impersonal style, in the anthropomorphized scenario, the brand expressed itself as a person. A single item represented the brand’s anthropomorphization. As regards the dependent variables, the partner quality scale by Fournier (1994) was first utilized to measure to what extent the respondent perceives the brand as a good partner. Five items reflected the brand as a good partner. Five items reflected this variable (Cronbach’s Alpha=.926). Secondly, participants completed the 10-item scale by Hess (1995) to indicate their trust level towards the brand (Cronbach’s Alpha=.761). Respondents fashion involvement served as covariate (Tigert et al. (1976); Cronbach’s Alpha=.769).

The main purpose of the experiment reported here was to examine the effects of intimacy and anthropomorphization on brand trust and brand partner quality. First, we successfully manipulated intimacy in the case where the brand was not anthropomorphized by the use of brand descriptions. Participants who received the intimate and non anthropomorphized text presented higher levels of intimacy than participants in the non intimate and non anthropomorphized condition F(1,27)=8.89, p<.01. In terms of our first hypothesis, we found that the use of intimate components in creating a CBR results in significantly higher levels of trust; F(1,27)=5.05, p<.05 and partner quality; F(1,27)=6.36, p<.05, compared to the use of traditional non intimate cues. Therefore, we propose that intimacy increases brand trust and brand partner quality. Analyses to test the second hypothesis, could not be completed because the manipulation did not present the expected results.

The first contribution of this work consists in its being the first study to successfully manipulate the perceived intimacy of a customer in the course of an experiment and, subsequently, to assess its effects on brand trust and brand partner quality. Therefore, the research question suggesting that marketers can establish an intimate relationship with a brand is affirmed. This result is even more significant, as intimacy is known to increase over time (Shimp and Madden 1988) and as it has never been manipulated in an experiment to analyze the CBR. Secondly, this work provides further insight into the performance aspects of brand management because the study proposes and empirically supports the idea that intimacy plays a pivotal role in a CBR. Additionally, this enlarged understanding of intimate relationships is crucial for marketers as it lays emphasis on the necessity to elaborate intimate feelings in CBRs because they represent a competitive advantage compared to competitor brands.

Notwithstanding these contributions, there are some limitations which suggest interesting opportunities for future research. First, the limited number of observations per experimental condition lowers the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, the external validity is limited due to the overrepresentation of women in the sample. Future research may replicate our study by using a larger counterbalanced sample. Secondly, given that a well-established multidimensional measurement of brand anthropomorphization does not exist in the literature, our unidimensional measurement limits the internal validity of the results. It is possible that the absence of a main effect on anthropomorphization stems from this lack of internal validity and that a replication of the study using a multidimensional scale could increase this validity. Therefore, future research should elaborate an appropriate scale and may replicate our study.

References