Investigating Brand Cheating in Consumer-Brand Relationships: Triadic and Dyadic Approaches

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We find compared to dyadic brand relationships, where the brand relationship is an ends rather than a means of propping up an interpersonal relationship, triadic brand relationships that implicate a third party protect against emotional and behavioral cheating by virtue of reinforcing expectations of exclusive behavior within the brand relationship.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers develop strong, committed and meaningful relationships with brands (Fournier, 1998) yet such consumers sometimes still buy or use options that compete directly with these ‘relationship partners’. Consistent with an interpersonal metaphorical view of consumer-brand relationships, this activity might be understood as a form of cheating or infidelity, a topic that has been reviewed at length in the interpersonal literature but is emergent in marketing. In the context of brand relationships, it remains to be explored how cheating operates. Do consumer-brand relationship partners adhere to rules of exclusivity? From a behavioral point of view, what does commitment to a particular cherished brand look like? In what ways might cheating manifest? Informed by extant social and consumer psychological research, we report the results of two studies that together examine this nascent area of brand cheating.

Relationship theorists have pointed out that brands may be either a means to maintaining other social interaction or an end unto itself (e.g. Fournier, 2009). This seems to be a consideration for many people who are so active in communities that revolve around brands (e.g. Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), even while brand relationships that involve only two parties also seem to exist (e.g. Thomson, MacInnis and Park, 2005). We theorize that in the context of cheating, if a brand implicates a preexisting interpersonal relationship, this ‘triad’ will protect against cheating behavior. In buying or using a competing brand in the same category, a person involved in such a brand relationship may feel as if she is betraying a person who is important to them. Conversely, when a brand relationship is dyadic, consumers may not think interaction with the brand is governed by norms of exclusivity, making emotional or behavioral ‘cheating’ more likely.

With little extant work on brand cheating, we first carried out a series of phenomenological interviews with non-student consumers on the topic. We identified recurrent themes, some of which seem to resonate with the interpersonal literature. For example, respondents distinguished between the idea of cheating (e.g. feeling tempted or longing for something new and exciting) versus the act of cheating (e.g. actually buying a different brand). This result parallels the emotional and behavioral infidelity reflected in past psychological research.

Four other major themes emerged. First, many consumers do not believe that cheating can occur in a branding context (e.g. “I don’t feel unfaithful. No. I don’t think an item deserves faithful-ness.”). Second, many respondents do behave ‘exclusively’ with a focal brand (e.g. “I don’t even look at other brands to be honest.”). Third, many respondents thought to remain committed to a focal brand, it was enough not to be exclusive but to give the focal brand the first chance to satisfy their needs (e.g. “I always look to Nike first before something else.”). Finally, many respondents who seemed to believe cheating was possible and that rules of exclusivity might apply also talked about the brand relationship facilitating an interpersonal relationship (e.g. “it’s actually a little thing I have with my sister”). This last theme underscores our main research question outlined above, that a possible reason some consumers feel like cheating is possible and that rules of consumer-brand exclusivity might apply is the involvement of a third party.

With these corroborating qualitative results and informed by additional theorizing, we conducted an online survey, analyzed with structural equation modeling, in which we assessed relationship strength (Thomson et al., 2005; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich and Iacobucci), the extent to which the brand relationship was characterized as dyadic vs. triadic, as well as measures of brand substitutability, monogamy/exclusivity, right of first refusal, emotional cheating and behavioral cheating.

Relationships that had higher scores on Interpersonal Connection (capturing this dyadic/triadic concept) were stronger (γ = .56, p< .05) and more closely linked with monogamous expectations (γ = .41, p< .05), which in turn helped to guard against emotional cheating (γ = -.16, p< .08). Thus, it seems that triadic relationships simultaneously bolster brand relationships and provide a protective mechanism against infidelity. Further, more monogamous relationships were tied to perceptions that the focal brand would be more difficult to replace (γ = .53, p< .01), which itself impacted the right of first refusal (γ = .20, p< .01). Those who gave a particular brand this right of first refusal were less likely to engage in emotional cheating (γ = -.38, p< .01) while more materialistic people were more likely to engage in emotional cheating (γ = .16, p< .01). Behavioral cheating was predicted only by emotional cheating (γ = .63, p< .01) and whether the brand was product (=0) or service (=1) oriented (γ = .24, p< .01).

We show that triadic brand relationships are different from dyadic ones. The involvement of a third party protects against both emotional cheating and behavioral cheating, and reinforces a focal brand’s special status as having the ‘right of first refusal’. For certain consumers, brands are a means to an end and help to prop up important interpersonal relationships. Such triadic consumer-brand relationships are guided by expectations of monogamy while dyadic relationships are ends to themselves. Consumers involved in such relationships do not feel it is ‘wrong’ to fantasize about or actually buy competing brands in the same category.

REFERENCES


