A Framework For Exploring the Spectrum of Consumer-Brand Connections Using Utopian Theory

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This research presents a novel contribution to consumer-brand bonds by exploring brand connection motivated by utopian consumer desires. This research reveals utopian thought as motivating everyday consumption and consumer-brand connection. Furthermore, the spectrum of brand connections are influenced by utopian function processes and mixed emotion towards utopia.

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A Framework For Exploring Consumer Motivation Across The Spectrum of Consumer-Brand Connections Using Utopian Theory
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Existing brand management frameworks are misleading and incomplete without fully accounting for the spectrum of bonding types consumers may have with brands (Fournier & Alvarez, 2013). This research offers a framework for understanding consumer motivation to create connections to brands, using contemporary utopian theory.

Colloquially, utopia is generally understood as an unrealistic fantasy world. However, the contemporary definition of utopia is an expressive desire for a better way of living and an articulation of dissatisfaction with present reality (Levitas, 1990) that is believed as realizable (Žižek & Thompson, 2013). Utopia can be whole imagined worlds or an idealized life, such as a cozy nuclear family, dream homes, work / life balance, or obtaining the ideal body. The fundamental essence of utopia is desire for a more positive state – a primary motivating factor in contemporary consumption.

Utopian theory is applied as theoretically distinct from self-related constructs in brand connection studies such as possible and ideal selves and self-expansion (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011; Park, Eisingerich, & Park, 2013; Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009; Thomson, Maclnnis, & Park, 2005). Utopia is characterized as a mechanism of coping with life’s incompleteness (Maysen, Scheibe, & Riediger, 2008; Scheibe, Freund, & Baltes, 2007).

Approaching utopianism as a consumer process rather than a ‘place’, utopian function theory is used to explore utopianism as motivating brand connection, with a specific focus to understanding the full spectrum of brand connections (described as Attached (strongly positive, love type connection), Averse (strongly negative, adversarial connection), Ambivalent (weaker, conflicted love-hate connection) or Indifferent (weak not connected) (Park, Eisingerich, & Park, 2013).

Utopian function is conceptualized as a process that reveals how individuals respond to utopian thoughts. Utopian functions are Catalyst, Criticize and Compensate (Goodwin & Taylor, 1983; Levitas, 1990). Catalyst is holding a utopian vision to bring about positive change to the current reality. Criticize is holding a utopian vision to criticize current reality, that can be directed to the world or to the self. Compensate is holding a vision to escape from current reality. It seems likely that each utopian function could have a differing effect on why a consumer forms connections with a brand. For example, purposes of ‘running away’ from reality versus criticizing reality are fundamentally different objectives, presumably expressed in uniquely identifiable thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

To assess the conceptual association of brand connection and utopian theory, exploratory qualitative research was undertaken. Twenty-two structured in-depth interviews were conducted, including a projective sorting task (Keller, 2008) to associate the spectrum of brand connections to utopian visions. The data and accompanying notations made during interview were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded into themes using narrative analysis.

This research found that utopian thoughts are frequent, emotionally intense experiences for individuals. Utopian visions are used to orientate daily life tasks, goals and projects towards a desired utopian future. Motivation to achieve a utopian future influenced consumers to assess brands in relation to their utopian vision. Averse brand connections, where brands were interpreted as contra or ‘in the way’ of utopia, are identified in direct relation to utopian content.

Attached, Ambivalent and Indifferent connections were influenced not only in relation to utopian content, but also by utopian function identified and associated feeling that is either positive or mixed. This influenced brand connection in the following ways:

- **Catalyst with Positive Feeling** is associated with weaker Ambivalent and Indifferent connection(s). Participants exhibited greater self-regulation than individuals in other functions, which appeared to weaken brand connection.
- **Catalyst with Mixed Feeling** is associated with stronger Attached connection. Participants felt ‘overwhelmed’ and ‘scared’, and indicated an underlying fear of their ability to achieve utopia. Following recent literature exploring fear and brand connection (Dunn & Hoegg, 2014; Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Wong, 2009), this research also found that consumers fearful about their ability to achieve a desired utopia show stronger Attached brand connection.
- **Compensate with Mixed Feeling** is associated with Ambivalent connection. Participants actively attempt to escape from thinking about their utopia by engaging in activities that are inconsequential to tomorrow, such as shopping and watching television. Participants engage with brands that made them feel ‘Happy’, ‘Positive’ and ‘Healthy’. However, acknowledgement that actions associated with this function were inconsequential to achievement tomorrow appeared to weaken brand connection.
- **Criticize with Mixed Feeling** is associated with Ambivalent connection. Participants focused on creating ‘Peace’ and ‘Harmony’. An explicit acknowledgement that wider political and social change beyond the influence of brands needed to occur appeared to weaken connection.

This research presents a novel approach to understanding the spectrum of brand connections using utopian theory. It discusses an initial exploration of the nature of utopian thought; how consumers respond to utopian thoughts; and the influence of utopian function to brand connection.

REFERENCES


