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Brand Avoidance: A Negative Promises Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Previous research lacks a unifying construct that is both parsimonious enough to account for the multiple reasons that motivate brand avoidance, and flexible enough to remain workable. We address this gap by providing a core construct that may aid in the understanding of brand avoidance. Specifically, we use grounded theory to analyse qualitative data from 23 in-depth interviews, and we introduce the negative brand promises idea as a powerful yet practical metaphor for understanding brand avoidance.

> *"The creation of meaning via consumption involves both positive and negative choices."* Professor Margaret Hogg (1998 p.133)

> *"Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning."* Bill Gates (Microsoft)

> *"Oh my God! Starbucks!!! I hate Starbucks… Oh there are many reasons; they make sh*t coffee. It's horrible! It's really bad tasting coffee, and you can never get a decent size, you can't just get your average normal cup of coffee you have to get a bucket, which then costs twice as much and tastes bad… and the whole multi-national thing… they're really slow… and they're wasteful! They have individual plastic spoons and there's extra packaging and stuff. So Starbucks I avoid, I'd rather not have a coffee than drink a Starbuck's coffee."* CI (First sensitization interview)

INTRODUCTION

The broad domain of anti-consumption, and the specific topic of brand avoidance, is becoming more interesting and important to scholars, managers, and consumers. The quotations above are evidence of this growing interest, as are the increasing number of academic and managerial articles, journal special issues, popular books, magazines, and websites dedicated to the subject area of anti-consumption (Banister and Hogg 2004; Englis and Soloman 1997; Gabriel and Lang 1995; Hogg and Banister 2001; Holt 2002; Klein 2000; Kozinets 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Lee, Fernandez, and Hyman 2008a; Rumbo 2002; Thompson and Arsel 2004; Thompson et al. 2006; Zavestoski 2002a). Yet, despite this growing interest, the extant literature still lacks a comprehensive, and parsimonious, understanding of anti-consumption and its related topics. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore, in depth, a specific type of anti-consumption, brand avoidance, and in doing so contribute a more complete, integrative, and elegant understanding of the area.

To date, the majority of marketing scholars and practitioners have espoused the many positive aspects of branding and brand equity, and have focused primarily on brands as market-based assets (Srivastava et al. 2001; Srivastava et al. 1998). Consequently, this perspective of brands has resulted in an emphasis on exploring the reasons behind why consumers select brands and how firms can increase brand loyalty. In consumer research, the notion that people express themselves and construct their identities/self-concepts through the brands and products they use has been well documented (Aaker 1999; Dolich 1969; Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Heath and Scott 1998; Hogg, Cox, and Keeling 2000; Levy 1959; McCracken 1989; Sirgy 1982; Solomon 1983).

However, equally valid is the idea that some people avoid certain products and brands because of negative associations/meanings (Banister and Hogg 2004; Englis and Soloman 1997; Levy 1959; Thompson and Arsel 2004). Yet, until recently (Banister and Hogg 2004; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Lee et al. 2008b; Thompson and Arsel 2004; Thompson et al. 2006), the notion of consumers rejecting specific *brands* to avoid adding undesired meaning to their lives has received little attention. As a consequence, the negative characteristics of brands, and their potential to become market-based liabilities for their firm, have not really been explored by marketing academia and practice. This paper directly addresses the issue of negative brand meaning by specifically exploring why consumers avoid certain brands.

When we look closely at the extant literature, it becomes apparent that most studies in the area of anti-consumption actually focus on dissatisfaction with products and services, or counter-cultural phenomenon such as voluntary simplification and consumer resistance (Banister and Hogg 2004; Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; Halstead 1989; Hogg 1998; Kozinets 2002; Oliver 1980; Penaloza and Price 1993; Zavestoski 2002b). Therefore, with the exception of a few researchers (Holt 2002; Lee et al. 2008b; Thompson and Arsel 2004; Thompson et al. 2006), the main unit of analysis in most anti-consumption studies has been general product or service categories, rather than specific brands. Since this research looks at the anti-consumption of *brands*, it is necessary to clarify this concept.

The notion of the brand as a multi-dimensional value constellation is a convincing idea that underlies most conceptualisations of brand (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1998 p. 436-437); and is the notion of brand that we use for this research. This holistic view of the brand is distinct from the traditional product-centric view of the brand (Ambler and Styles 1996) and posits that a brand's value constellation could mean many different things to a consumer, for example: a legal instrument, a logo, a promise/covenant, a risk reducer, an identity, a value system, an evolving entity, or a corporation (Ambler and Styles 1996; Balmer and Gray 2003; Berry 2000; Brodie, Glynn, and Little 2006; Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony 2000; de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1998; de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1997; Erdem and Swait 2004; Erdem, Swait, and Valenzuela 2006).

A brand is considered a market-based asset, or has positive equity, when it adds value to the company by helping to enhance and sustain cash flow for the company and its shareholders (Srivastava, Shervani and Fahey 1998). However, Keller (1993) states that a brand has customer-based equity when consumers act more, or *less*, favourably to the brand than an identical product or service that is un-named or fictitiously named. Berry (2000), also suggests that brand equity may be positive or *negative*. In considering the importance of brands within marketing, two points become evident. First, it is clear that brands are important to marketers and positive brand equity is a valuable component of a company's brand asset.

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Second, there is a negative component to brand equity, although this idea has not been sufficiently considered. In exploring the incidents where the association with a brand name actually reduces the worth of, and preference for, an object, this paper contributes to the notion of negative brand equity.

Brand avoidance is defined as a phenomenon whereby consumers deliberately choose to keep away from or reject a brand (Lee et al. 2008b). Two key concepts lie close to the study of brand avoidance. The first is the anti-constellation, which comprise products that are rejected by consumers (Hogg and Michell 1997). Unlike this study, there is less emphasis on brands in the study of anti-constellations. The second concept which closely resembles brand avoidance is the inept set (Narayana and Markin 1975), where the main reasons for negative evaluation have been attributed to a dislike of the advertisement and poor product performance. Another study using two surveys of 100 and 180 consumers concluded that 'extrinsic' factors such as price, availability, and salesperson's recommendations were most likely to influence rejection of a brand (Abougomaah, Schlater, and Gaidis 1987).

We argue that the previous classifications of brand anti-consumption are too simplistic, especially since the rejection of a brand owing to issues of price and availability may not constitute a deliberate act of brand avoidance. This paper demonstrates that there are a myriad of reasons contributing to brand avoidance, and offers a parsimonious, yet flexible, metaphor for understanding brand avoidance.

METHOD

As part of an ongoing project exploring brand avoidance, we used an existing data set gathered by Lee et al (2008). Details of the recruitment method are discussed in their article; therefore we provide more detail regarding our coding process. The lead author applied the grounded theory method of constant comparison to 23 in-depth interview transcripts, in an attempt to abstract from the raw data to a theory of brand avoidance. This technique is similar to other iterative and hermeneutical approaches used in previous studies of anti-consumption (Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Thompson and Arsel 2004; Thompson et al. 2006).

The coding and analysis of the qualitative data first involved the breaking down of the data into smaller units or open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Practically, this means that for every interview, the lead author read each line of transcription and highlighted all points of interest. At this early stage of analysis, the lead author created codes as frequently as necessary to capture all the possible reasons for avoidance.

The abundant number of codes generated at the end of open coding meant the next logical step in constant comparison was to compare the categories for similarities and differences. Axial coding was used (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Strauss and Corbin 1998), thus, categories that were very similar were collapsed into higher-order categories.

Analysis then progressed to a higher level of abstraction as theoretical coding, or Strauss and Corbin's 'selective' coding (1990), continued. The main emphasis of grounded theory is on how these relationships increase understanding of a particular phenomenon. Figure 1 displays the hierarchical relationships between the four main types of brand avoidance and their sub-themes. It also proposes some relationships between the central themes, revealed in this study, and other pertinent concepts in brand avoidance.

In hermeneutics, 'dialectical tacking' refers to the development of understanding by comparing and contrasting the findings of the present research with existing knowledge (Thompson 1997). Thus, one of this paper's main contributions is that it integrates the emergent themes into an original theoretical model. This comprehensive approach to understanding brand avoidance directly addresses the limits of previous knowledge, which has been based on studies focusing only on singular reasons for brand avoidance. These new insights into brand avoidance and the study's core category are discussed next.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Negative brand promises and the four types of brand avoidance.

Our analysis of the data reveal four types of brand avoidance: experiential, deficit-value, identity, and moral avoidance. Figure 1 displays the main reasons motivating each type of brand avoidance, in addition to their sub-themes. For example, unmet expectations motivates most instances of experiential avoidance; but it was poor performance, the extra hassle and inconvenience associated with failed consumption experiences, and an unpleasant store environment that comprised the emic incidents from which the category of experiential avoidance emerged (Lee et al. 2008b).

Experiential Avoidance: Undelivered Brand Promises

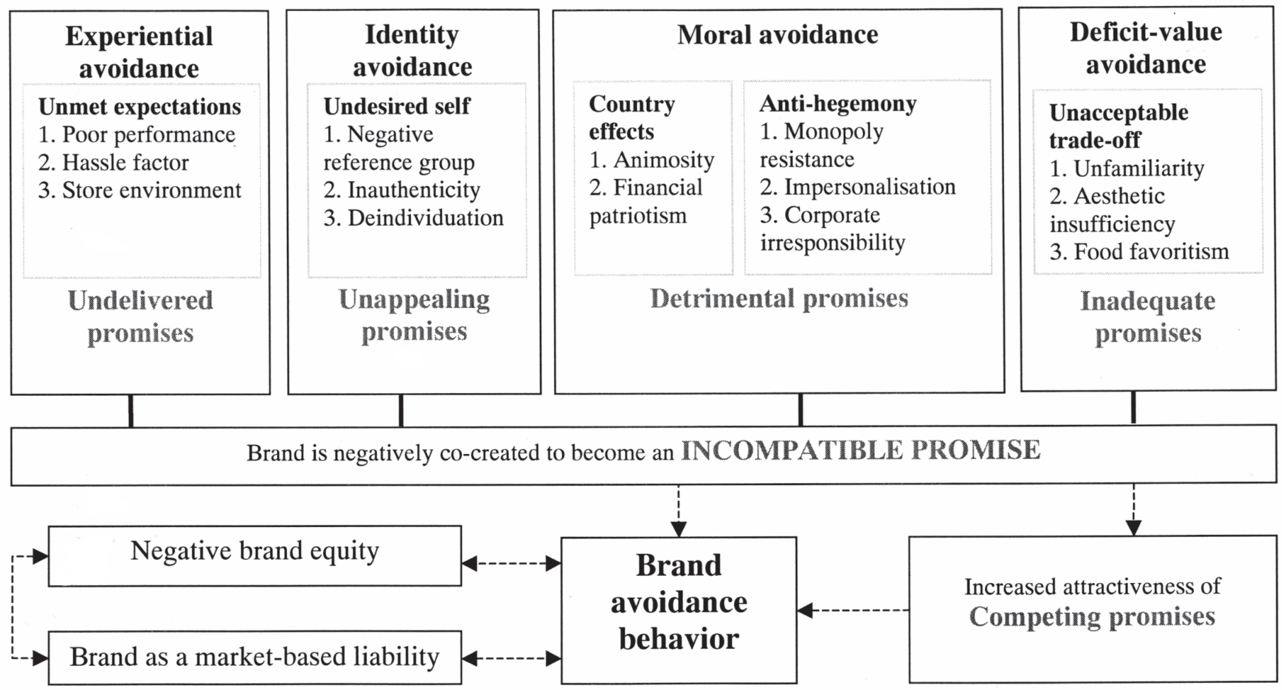
Whilst previous literature from the areas of: disconfirmation and dissatisfaction, (Halstead 1989; Hirschman 1970; Oliva, Oliver, and MacMillan 1992; Oliver 1980; Swan and Combs 1976); negative shopping experiences (Arnold, Reynolds, Ponder, and Lueg 2004; Keaveney 1995); and unpleasant store environments (d'Astous 2000; Turley and Milliman 2000) were used to inform the emergent themes, by further abstracting from the data we are able to provide a new metaphor for understanding these instances of experiential avoidance. We suggest that it is the participant's construction of the brand as an *undelivered brand promise*, which motivates him or her to avoid the brand.

Brands are a multifaceted construct (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1998) and, the brand promise is one important aspect of a brand's constellation of values. The promises framework suggests that the act of branding involves making promises to consumers (Balmer and Gray 2003; Berry 2000; Bitner 1995; Brodie et al. 2006; Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony 2000; Vallaster and De Chernatony 2005). A promise creates a reason to expect something; therefore it is undeniable that brand promises lead to expectations (Gronroos 2006). Indeed, within a consumer's mind, the meaning of a brand is partially made up of a set of expectations about what is supposed to happen when the consumer purchases a brand (Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony 2000). Promises may be explicit or implicit (Gronroos 2006), and when brand promises are delivered in a way that is consistent with consumer expectations, it encourages repurchase (Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony 2000). However, with regards to brand avoidance, if consumers' actual experiences do not match what they have been led to expect by the brand promise, dissatisfaction may result (Halstead 1989; Oliver 1980; Swan and Combs 1976), and brand avoidance may occur (Lee and Conroy 2005; Lee et al. 2008b; Oliva et al. 1992; Thompson et al. 2006).

Thus, one potential disadvantage of branding is that if the company is unable to deliver its promise, it risks disappointing the consumer. Therefore, by heightening consumer expectations, sometimes a brand may be a liability. The following participant clearly illustrates this potential:

> *I purchased a Sony walkman… maybe after a year, it started rolling [jamming] the tape… So I decided to discard the Sony*

FIGURE 1
EMERGENT THEORETICAL MODEL OF BRAND AVOIDANCE



and I didn't get a replacement… sometimes the brand name does not equate to the quality that you'd expect from the brand. RH Int 12 (Male, 26)

The expectations that RH had of his walkman were created by his interpretation of the Sony brand promise. However, it is clear that the implicit brand promise was not delivered, thereby resulting in future brand avoidance.

Identity Avoidance: Symbolically Unappealing Promises

Identity avoidance occurs when consumers perceive certain brands to be inauthentic, or associate certain brands with a negative reference group. Some consumers may also avoid mainstream brands, believing that the use of such brands detract from their own unique sense of individuality (Lee et al. 2008b). Literature in the area of undesired self (Hogg and Banister 2001; Ogilvie 1987; Sirgy 1982), self-image congruency (Dolich 1969; Graeff 1997; Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Heath and Scott 1998; Hogg et al. 2000; Sirgy 1982), and disidentification (Bhattacharya and Elsbach 2002; Elsbach and Bhattacharya 2001) helped to inform our understanding of this type of brand avoidance. However, we contribute to the literature by offering the notion of a *symbolically unappealing promise* as a new, and more managerially meaningful, way of understanding identity avoidance. Specifically, we suggest that it is possible for some consumers to perceive certain brand promises as symbolically unappealing, and that such brands have the potential to move them closer towards their undesired selves. Consequently, the consumer disidentifies with the brand's symbolically unappealing promises, and through the process of brand avoidance, the individual is able to manage his or her self-concept, as the following participant illustrates:

It's just not my style… [Amazon-surf/beach wear]… they don't suit what I wear, my image, cause it's not like I'm going to go walking around in little tank top… I don't have the body for it anymore… you know what I mean?... I'm married now I don't need to attract anyone anymore. VL Int 14 (Female, 28)

VL chooses to avoid this brand because its implicit promise, to provide a young and flirty style, is symbolically unappealing to the self concept she is currently attempting to maintain.

Moral Avoidance: Socially Detrimental Promises

The third type of brand avoidance is moral avoidance. Our analysis of the data suggests that moral avoidance consists of two main reasons for brand avoidance: country effects and anti-hegemony. In terms of country effects, some well known brands (such as Coke and McDonald's) are iconic representatives of the countries from which they originate. When consumers feel animosity towards a country, sometimes their dislike also transfers to the iconic brand of those countries. In other cases, participants who are financially patriotic may avoid brands that they believe will not contribute to the economic development and well being of their country.

Avoidance owing to anti-hegemony, or against domination, is informed by previous work in the area of consumer resistance (Fischer 2001; Holt 2002; Klein 2000; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Penaloza and Price 1993; Thompson and Arsel 2004). The data reveal that some consumers avoid dominant brands in order to prevent the development of monopolies, large companies who are suspected of corporate irresponsibility. Typically, only hegemonic and large multi-national companies are held accountable for their actions. The bias against multi-national organisations may be due to their higher visibility, which means they are often under higher scrutiny:

I think that when things are operating on a really big scale like that that they are often doing more damage to the environ-

ment… I'm not saying that all the little guys added up aren't doing damage as well, because probably every little coffee store is doing just as much damage as Starbucks in terms of pollution but I don't know, so that doesn't really make sense does it? But it seems worse when it's like McDonald's. KB Int 10 (Female, 27)

These findings are in line with previous research on consumer resistance, where large and successful companies are more likely to be targets of consumer criticism (Holt 2002; Klein 2000; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Thompson and Arsel 2004).

Other participants also avoid hegemonic brands because they perceive those brands as being impersonal and disagree with the way in which large brands dehumanize the agents of the brand. For instance, the following participant avoids McDonald's because he prefers to foster a personal connection with local businesses:

You walk into McDonald's… what's the chance that they know who you are… I can send my children down to the fish and chip shop knowing that the fish and chip shop guy knows who my kids are, so if they're not back in half an hour, I can ring him up and say did you see my kids down there? I cannot do that at McDonald's. MT Int 16 (Male, 42)

While the other types of brand avoidance are based on how brand promises impact on the individual's immediate well-being, moral avoidance, on the other hand, is based on the perception of the brand at an ideological level and how it negatively impacts on the wider society.

A further distinction of moral avoidance is the existence of a dominating or oppressive force that the participant resists; for our participants, that oppressive force was normally a hegemonic corporation/brand or another country. This characteristic of moral avoidance is supported by previous literature in the area of consumer resistance and other similar domains (Dobscha 1998; Gramsci 1971; Holt 2002; Klein 2000; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Moisio and Askegaard 2002; Penaloza and Price 1993; Rumbo 2002). It is this power imbalance, between the multi-national brand and the consumer that makes moral avoidance distinct from other types of brand avoidance.

The final distinguishing criterion of moral avoidance is that it is motivated by the participants' beliefs that they are doing the right thing. In other words, because certain brands are perceived to be oppressive and overly dominant, some participants believe that it is their moral duty to avoid such brands. This ethical component is another integral characteristic of moral avoidance that is not present in the other types of brand avoidance.

Although our findings are in line with previous literature, we suggest that it is the consumer's perception of a brand as a *socially detrimental promise* that drives moral avoidance of certain brands. The promise of fast and convenient food, cheaper prices on mass merchandise, and standardized consumption experiences are not appreciated by all consumers. In fact these brand promises are actually incompatible with some consumers' moral values, and as a consequence, some participants choose to avoid brands for ethical reasons.

Deficit-Value Avoidance: Functionally Inadequate Promises

We expand existing work on brand avoidance (Lee et al. 2008b) by introducing the concept deficit-value avoidance, which occurs when consumers perceive brands as representing an unacceptable cost to benefit trade-off. Previous literature on value and quality help to inform this type of brand avoidance (Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal 1991; Grewal, Monroe, and Krishnan 1998; Parasuraman and Grewal 2000; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985; Zeithaml 1988). Some participants avoid budget brands that they construe to be of low quality and, consequently, deficient in value:

I don't go for the real cheap stuff, so I suppose I do avoid them, like No Frills and Basics [budget brands]… if it's real cheap then I don't place much value on it because if it's real cheap then it means that it doesn't cost much to make and it's usually inferior. SP Int 18 (Male, 26)

In contrast, other participants feel that obtaining a product of adequate quality for low cost is a more acceptable trade-off than gaining a high quality product for high cost. Hence, for those participants, it is the premium brands that are unable to provide adequate value:

Sometimes I feel you pay that much just to get the status… 'Oh it's a Sony'… the quality will most likely be the same, but the money we've added doesn't really give you anything, it's just extra profit. KL Int 11 (Male, 20)

Since the symbolic benefit of 'status' appears to be of little value to KL, the extra cost he associates with a Sony product is not perceived to add any tangible benefits to the purchase. Instead, KL believes that the price premium only adds 'extra profit' to the company. Therefore, KL avoids Sony because he perceives the brand as being deficient in value.

From an emic perspective, some participants avoided unfamiliar brands, evaluating such brands to be lower in quality and higher in risk (Richardson, Jain, and Dick 1996), and therefore providing less value when compared to brands with which they were more familiar.

Another sub theme within deficit-value avoidance is aesthetic insufficiency. Some consumers use the appearance of a brand as an indicator of functional value and avoid aesthetically insufficient brands because ugly packaging or a lack of colours signify an inability to satisfy the individual's utilitarian requirements. Socio-culturally, much value is placed on aesthetic beauty in society and the halo-effect of attractiveness is well known. Marketers use attractive packaging and models in their promotional campaigns hoping the positive connotations that people have of beauty will be associated with the product (Belch and Belch 2004; Chitty et al. 2005; Soloman 2002). Simply put, from a functional perspective, beauty inspires confidence, while aesthetic insufficiency does the opposite.

However, the data also reveal that some participants will seek aesthetic value as an end in itself, rather than as an indicator of performance:

It's [Budget brands] something that's cheap and nasty it's not nice, I mean the packaging it's just not nice… I know it sounds hopeless, but it's because I know it just looks nicer, so I want it to look nice. SR Int 2 (Female, 40)

Throughout her transcript, SR was dubious that the appearance of a brand could be directly related to its quality; nonetheless she still prefers her things 'to look nice'.

The final sub-theme in deficit-value avoidance concerns a phenomenon whereby consumers avoid food associated with certain value-deficient brands, but are comfortable with purchasing other products bearing the same brand name. We term this phenomenon food favoritism, and research on perceptions of food and safety suggest that when it comes to decisions regarding food choice, people are more likely to be cautious and use 'better safe than sorry' cues, avoiding the unfamiliar, contaminated, cheap, or harmful (Green, Draper, and Dowler 2003; Occhipinti and Siegal 1994).

> *Low budget brands…I would buy like pet food and toilet rolls, but when it came to food I wouldn't buy cheap, I'd go for maybe the slightly higher price… probably down to health.* AR Int 4 (Male, 29)

In AR's mind, the No Frills brand promise (lower quality for a cheap price) is adequate for certain products, but inadequate for food.

Overall, the common defining property of the sub-themes in deficit-value avoidance is that they all involve an unfavourable perception of the brand's utility. Thus, from an etic perspective, at the core of deficit-value avoidance is the rejection of a brand because of the unacceptable trade-off that it represents to the participant. In keeping with the negative promises framework, we believe the concept of a *functionally inadequate promise* is a suitable metaphor for understanding deficit-value brand avoidance.

The incompatible brand promise.

As figure 1 indicates, the four negative brand promises that participants are motivated to avoid may be further abstracted into a core category termed an *incompatible promise*. This study employs a holistic definition of brand, whereby brands are considered bundles of meaning, or multi dimensional value systems (Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony 2000; de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1998). In line with this perspective, a number of marketing scholars have argued that one important aspect of brand meaning, and marketing in general, is the notion of a brand as a 'promise' or 'covenant' (Balmer and Gray 2003; Berry 2000; Bitner 1995; Brodie et al. 2006; Calonius 2006; Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony 2000; de Chernatony and Segal-Horn 2003; Gronroos 2006; Levitt 1981; Vallaster and De Chernatony 2005; Ward, Light, and Goldstine 1999). As the previous sections have indicated, this idea of the brand as a promise is also particularly useful for helping to understand brand avoidance.

A promise is an assurance or declaration that something will or will not happen and, as a result, promises create a reason to expect something (Gronroos 2006; Merriam-Webster 1998). However, an interesting aspect of promises is that they may be based on real or imaginary resources, and can be either implicit or explicit. Furthermore, like any other form of social communication, promises involve an element of subjective interpretation/evaluation by the parties involved, both before and after a transaction (Calonius 2006; Gronroos 2006). Thus, in the consumer's mind, a brand promise is an assurance that by purchasing a specific brand, certain events should follow.

Since many consumers cannot fully experience nor assess a product or service in advance, many purchase decisions are essentially based on implicit or explicit promises or 'metaphorical reassurances' (Levitt 1981), and, therefore, promises are a crucial component of marketing. This study suggests that not all brand promises are positively interpreted. Instead, some brand associations may be re-constructed in the mind of the consumer to represent a promise of an undesirable outcome; one that is incompatible with the individual's requirements.

We argue that brand avoidance may arise from incidents where brand promises have been undelivered/broken, or when brand promises have been negatively re-constructed in the mind of the consumer to represent an assurance of something symbolically unappealing, socially detrimental, or functionally inadequate. In all cases of brand avoidance, the brand and what it is interpreted to deliver, is perceived to be incompatible with the consumer's needs or wants. A consequence of this negative re-construction of the brand promise is that the consumer is motivated to avoid the brand.

Increased Attractiveness of Competing Promises.

Most consumer purchase decisions are influenced by both approach and avoidance. So, individuals are pushed away from undesired end states, just as much as they are pulled towards achieving desired end states, and in most cases the two forms of motivation operate simultaneously (Bourdieu 1984; Elliot 1999; Markus and Nurius 1986; Ogilvie 1987; Soloman 2002; Wilk 1997). When a consumer re-constructs a brand's value constellation to represent an incompatible promise, not only may that act lead to avoidance of the brand, but the promises of competitors may also become more attractive to the consumer. As a result, the consumer approaches competing brands to satisfy his or her consumption needs and wants. This preference for competing promises may indirectly exacerbate the avoidance of the offending brand. This proposition is displayed in figure 1 by the arrow leading from competing promises to brand avoidance. The way in which an incompatible promise may motivate consumers to approach competing brands holds an interesting insight for the concept of brand loyalty.

Brand loyalty is a well researched area (Baldinger and Rubinson 1996; Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Jacoby and Kyner 1973; Oliver 1999; Roselius 1971); however, as early as the 1970's, brand loyalty was suggested to consist of both acceptance *and* rejection. Therefore, "not only does [brand loyalty] 'select in' certain brands; it also 'selects out' certain others" (Jacoby and Kyner 1973 p. 2). Similarly, we contend that brand avoidance not only results in the active rejection of certain brands, but at a broader level, it is also a phenomenon that impacts on the attractiveness of competing brands.

Some participants' narratives of brand avoidance were mentioned alongside notions of brand loyalty, which provides an interesting juxtaposition that contributes to the understanding of both brand loyalty and brand avoidance. For instance SR's avoidance of McDonald's does not operate in isolation within the consumption system. What becomes apparent is the inextricable link between the incompatible promises of McDonald's and the increased attractiveness of competing brands:

> *I like Wendy's because I like their chicken burgers, and just cause they make them fresh they haven't been sitting their for ages. You know at McDonald's they could have been sitting there for a while. At Wendy's they make them fresh and they have fresh salads in them and stuff. I think the quality at Wendy's is better, probably paying more but I think its better quality and they use real chicken.* SR Int 2 (Female, 45)

SR's avoidance of McDonald's is mentioned alongside her loyalty for Wendy's. Therefore, is SR's hatred of McDonald's pushing her towards the competing promises of Wendy's? Or is her love of Wendy's pulling her away from the offending brand? The most sensible answer is probably both, since approach and avoidance are able to operate concurrently within each person (Elliot 1999).

Negative Brand Equity.

Another interesting proposition that has emerged from our interpretation of the qualitative data, relates to the resource-based view of the firm (Barney 1991; Barney, Wright, and Ketchen Jr. 2001; Hooley, Broderick, and Moller 1998; Hooley, Greenley, Cadogan, and Fahy 2003; Srivastava et al. 2001; Srivastava et al.

1998), and is illustrated on the bottom left corner of figure 1.

Brand equity was originally defined as a set of assets or liabilities linked to the brand's name that adds value to, or subtracts from, the firm or its customers. Thus, positive brand equity is the added value that the brand provides to the company through the extra money a consumer is willing to pay for the branded service or product (Aaker 1996; Keller 1993). The concept of brand equity as a balance of both negative and positive components has still been relatively ignored in most branding research, with most studies focussing only on the positive components of brand equity.

With regards to the resource-based view of the firm, Srivastava, Fahey, and Christensen (2001) have elucidated the multitude of ways in which a brand is able to enhance shareholder value. Although there is little dispute that a well-managed brand is a market-based asset, there has been scarce discussion over the idea of the brand as a market-based liability. Thus, there still exists a gap in this area, despite the recommended importance of exploring the reasons why a market-based asset might "deprecate, decay, or decline" (Srivastava et al. 2001).

We develop the notion of the brand as a market-based liability by drawing upon Barney's (1991) conceptualisation of a firm's resources, where an asset is described as one of a number of resources that "improve a firm's efficiency and effectiveness" (Barney 1991p. 101). We consider a liability to be the opposite of an asset; and therefore define a market-based liability as anything that decreases a firm's efficiency and effectiveness in the marketplace. This research uses qualitative data in the form of participant quotations to demonstrate that, within the marketing and consumption system, certain incidents may result in a brand promise becoming negatively re-constructed, thereby leading to brand avoidance attitudes and behaviors. A brand that suffers from sustained periods of brand avoidance or failing consumer relationships may develop negative brand equity, since customers consistently react unfavourably to the brand (Aaker 1996; Keller 1993). The brand could then develop negative network equity, as the perceptions and behaviors of additional distributors, retailers, and the market place in general, co-mingle to form an unfavourable impression of the brand. Since the avoided brand decreases a firm's efficiency and effectiveness in the marketplace, the brand might be considered a market-based liability, because it is actually a disadvantage for the company to possess such a brand.

From the firm's perspective, the simplest method of dealing with a market-based liability may be to discard the brand as soon as negative promises begin to develop. However, we argue that the reality of the situation is not black and white. Since negative brand promises are constructed within a complex marketing and societal environment, it is likely that a state of flux exists between the positive brand building efforts of the firm and the negative brand associations that exist within any market. Brand managers should acknowledge that both aspects contribute to the co-constructed meaning of most brands.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND CONCLUSION

Traditionally, marketing managers have concentrated on strategies that aim to persuade customers to select their brands, but some consumers actively avoid certain brands. Lack of research and knowledge relating to this area means that "conventional brand management literature offers little concrete advice on how brand strategists can proactively diagnose the cultural vulnerabilities that could eventually erode their customer-based equity" (Thompson et al. 2006 p. 61). To this end, we offer the negative promises framework as a tool which managers may use to diagnose any brand avoidance issues that they encounter.

One caveat that accompanies any research using a relatively small number of informants is that the findings must be considered alongside the context in which the study has taken place. In this study, the reasons for brand avoidance emerged from a relatively small group of informants; thus, the findings should only be interpreted as being representative of the participants' attitudes and behaviors. For instance, although several participants expressed an avoidance of McDonald's, this is a successful brand that is clearly satisfying its target market. Therefore, any implications that have emerged from the participants of this study must be interpreted within the context of this research. Thus, we offer a theoretical contribution of why some brands are avoided by some consumers, rather than representative account of brand avoidance in the wider consumer population.

Another limitation of this study, lies in the question: how important is it for managers to deal with brand avoidance? If the majority of target consumers are satisfied with a brand, then there is no need for a company to risk its strategic positioning by addressing people's perception of a brand's incompatible promise. Thus, the brand manager must decide whether the net gain of new customers, as a result of addressing an incompatible brand promise, is greater than the net loss of the original target market. However, it would still be prudent for companies, particularly controversial ones like McDonald's, to monitor the opinion of brand avoiders, if only to be aware of the anti-consumption attitudes directed at their brand. The ability to understand and possibly change brand avoidance attitudes and behaviors in consumers should be considered an important long-term goal of any organisation, even if the number of complaining consumers is relatively small.

Even more managerially useful, would be for future research to interview people who avoid the very brands that have been designed to target them. Many companies use brand guidelines that describe, exactly, the type of person to whom each brand is designed to appeal, such information may be requested from a brand's parent company. Future studies could then recruit participants based on two criteria: (1) they fit a certain brand's target consumer profile and, (2) they actively avoid that brand. Results of such studies, focusing on actual target markets, should help to bridge the gap between the theoretical contributions of this paper and the practical requirements of brand managers.

A final limitation of our study may be that the core concept of an incompatible promise could have been abstracted further to arrive at an even more parsimonious explanation of brand avoidance. For instance, it could be argued that *negative brand meaning* may be the most parsimonious explanation for brand avoidance. Thus, the reason for brand avoidance is because the brand represents negative meaning to the consumer; the implication follows that all a brand manager needs to do is to ensure that their brand meaning does not become negative. Obviously, not only would this be an overly simplistic, and somewhat naive, view of the marketing world, but it is also does not provide a practical way of understanding brand avoidance. Such an abstracted view is too parsimonious and becomes unworkable, particular if it does not elaborate on the elements that constitute negative brand meaning. Although it is important for grounded theory research to abstract from the qualitative data to provide a higher order construct/theory, it is equally important (especially in marketing) that the theory is not too abstract or unworkable. The negative promises framework is a perspective that provides an elevated understanding of brand avoidance but remains practical.

In conclusion, the challenge of balancing between parsimony and complexity has not been successfully negotiated previously in brand avoidance research. The majority of prior studies have been too narrow, failing to account for the myriad of reasons motivating brand avoidance. Further, the area has lacked a unifying construct that is both abstract enough to account for the many reasons for brand avoidance, yet concrete enough so that managers may find it useful. We address this challenge by offering the notion of an incompatible brand promise as a unifying concept that accounts for the majority of brand avoidance behaviors and attitudes. We suggest that this metaphor provides an elevated, yet workable, understanding of brand avoidance.

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