

An Exploration of the Components of Relational Bonds to an Arts Festival Brand

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Abstract

This research investigates the nature of the bonds that consumers form with a brand that provides highly uncertain outcomes, and is only available intermittently. The research model draws upon elements of Keller's (2001) conceptualisation of brand resonance, and extends McAlexander, Kim, and Roberts' (2003), and Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) brand community construct, testing these in an atypical service environment. Qualitative research suggested the need for a broader view of the bond formed in these circumstances, specifically one comprising measures of anticipation of usage, social attraction, commitment, loyalty, and trust. This paper reports on analysis undertaken to develop such a construct, which has been labelled "brand affinity". Tests for discriminant validity suggest that the brand affinity construct is a distinct construct that can be used to measure consumer attitudes toward a highly uncertain, intermittently available product.

Introduction

Although many researchers now argue that a focus on building long-term relationships with customers produces superior organisational performance, the majority of the contexts studied could be considered relatively stable and predictable in terms of the availability of the product and the potential outcomes of the consumption experience, for example, retail clothing, airline travel (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol, 2002), and life insurance (Gruen, Summers, and Acito, 2000). The predictable quality of the offering and relatively frequent contact between customer and organisation mean that relationship formation in these contexts is comparatively straightforward. There has been little research, however, into the formation of relationships and the nature of customer loyalty in contexts that might be considered by consumers to present uncertain outcomes and in environments where the offering is intermittent, such as annual arts festivals, seasonal sporting fixtures or occasionally used services (e.g., repairs).

The assumption could be made that these types of interactions are more likely to be transaction-based, owing to the nature of the offerings, i.e., short-term, seasonal, and once off productions. Therefore, it could be expected that it will be difficult to develop a relationship between the customer and the organisation or brand due to the lack of investment in the relationship, the break between interactions, and the possibility of extra-dyadic behaviour between consumption opportunities (Christopher, Payne, and Ballantyne, 2002; Drigotas, Safstrom, and Gentilia, 1999; Grönroos, 1990). The products involved, by their very nature, also often involve unpredictable outcomes and high levels of perceived risk. In arts festivals, for example, it is the accepted norm to present new and challenging work, as well as change artistic directors frequently, and, therefore, any sense of predictability that might be gained through continuing artistic curatorship is also removed.

Consequently, it is difficult to provide accurate or concrete information about the content of these products in advance, which increases the level of uncertainty for consumers (Hirschman, 1983). However, since many of these products are hedonic in nature, those who consume the offering are much more likely to form bonds with the product, as the hedonic

experience has the potential to be highly involving from a psychological, socio-cultural, and relational perspective (Fournier, 1998; Holt, 1995; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002).

Initial qualitative research (four focus groups) with 30 artists participating in an annual arts festival revealed that they had a relationship with this brand that had been shaped by the intermittent and uncertain nature of the festival. They had also recognised a similar bond amongst their audience; “[The festival] audience aren’t going to choose by price, and aren’t going to choose by a glossy brochure. The safety net is that you know when you go to [the festival] that you are going to get a lot of s**t, but you are also going to get some really good stuff, as well. So the audience has to decide, and that’s where you get your ‘thinking’ audience, who are usually willing to take a bit of a risk” (quote from festival artist). Additionally, the artists felt that they benefited from the positive attitude that audiences had towards the festival as a whole. The audience was positive and committed to the festival brand, and this translated to open mindedness and support for the various individual acts that comprised the festival.

In this paper, a new construct termed “brand affinity” is proposed, and tested here, to explain the relationships consumers form with uncertain, intermittent product offerings, such as arts festivals. Brand affinity is posited to be a higher-level connection with the broader arts festival brand, rather than specific products under the “umbrella” of the brand. Brand affinity is posited to incorporate attributes including allegiance or loyalty to the brand, identification with the brand and its attributes, a resonance between the brand and the customer, and an appeal to the customer that he or she belongs to a unique grouping.

Background

Most consumption experiences are difficult to distinguish from the social and cultural contexts within which they occur. Consumption can be viewed as a way of defining oneself and developing links with like-minded others (Holbrook, 1992; McCracken, 2005), and of connecting with others within a broader social system (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; McCracken, 1988). Consumers, therefore, are likely to undertake activities and buy products that contribute to their sense of self, and participate in activities with people they like, and with like-minded people (Holbrook, 1992). Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) and McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) used the term “brand community” to describe a specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. Specifically, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) contended that members of brand communities had a sense of moral responsibility toward members of the brand community and to the brand itself. This meaning, however, is experienced in shared negotiation with other customers, generally at an implicit, rather than explicit level. It is argued that, in some contexts, brand affinity extends the brand community conceptualisation to encompass an individual social element, in addition to the common interest component, which is the major focus of the term community (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001).

In the past, affinity has not been used commonly, or consistently, in consumer behaviour research. Recently, however, more practitioners and researchers in the area of relationship marketing and services marketing are using this expression to describe a higher level of allegiance to service brands, particularly in areas such as sports, arts, and charity organisations (Danziger, 2004; Macchiete and Roy, 1992; Van Gelder, 2003). Van Gelder (2003) suggested that consumers might have a feeling of attachment or affection for a brand,

where they actually care about the success of the brand. Macchiete and Roy (1992, p. 48) defined brand affinity as “an individual’s level of cohesiveness, social bonding, identification and conformity to the norms and standards of a particular reference group”. From a sociological perspective, affinity with a group is considered one way for individuals to achieve a social cohesion in a fragmented world (Vela-McConnell, 1997).

As such, affinity differs from other high order mental constructs such as commitment and loyalty. Commitment is often defined as a desire to remain in a relationship, or resist changing preferences (Crosby and Taylor, 1983), whereas affinity, in addition to commitment and loyalty, can be aligned more closely with a desire for the well-being of the group or partner (Heady, 2003). In the case of affinity, the desire to remain in the relationship is important, but other factors are more central. Commitment is said to be an antecedent of loyalty (Pritchard, Havitz, and Howard, 1999). Therefore, it is argued that both loyalty and commitment are components of affinity.

Proposed Components of Brand Affinity

It is proposed here that, along with evaluation of the service components, and satisfaction with the core artistic product (Gabbott and Hogg, 1997), brand affinity encapsulates the nature of the relationship that consumers form with a brand in this setting. In contexts that are intermittently available, and have high uncertainty of outcomes, it is argued that brand affinity consists of the following components:

Anticipation, like consumption, can be thought of as a source of utility through imagining and anticipating pleasure (Loewenstein, 1987). Sigman (1991) suggested that people use abstract means to remain loyal in relationships. One of these methods is an anticipation of the next opportunity that a person has to participate in the relationship. The discontinuous nature of some nonprofit activities, such as seasonal arts festivals, exhibit similar characteristics to the high involvement nature of many contemporary committed relationships (Sigman, 1991). Similarly, McCracken (1988) argued that consumers “bridge” the gap between usage of products, and actual opportunities to use the product, by anticipating their next purchase.

Social Attraction, rather than admiration, love, or personal attraction, makes a group more cohesive, and contributes to the individual’s social identity, and his or her commitment to the group (Hogg and Hains, 1996). Depersonalised attraction results in the individual seeing other group members not as complex, multidimensional whole persons, but as a representation of a cohesive group prototype. It has also been suggested that this need to affiliate with others might outweigh the generally accepted need for transactional satisfaction, or immediate rewards, that distinguish many marketing environments (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002; Oliver, 1999). Consumers’ use of the product, with its high uncertainty of outcomes, could be interpreted as a broader commitment to the “idea” of the brand.

Loyalty and Commitment: Keller (2001) argued that the strongest bonds between customers and brands are those that have meaning beyond transactional consumption. In particular, Keller stated that a brand needs to be perceived as something special in a broader context, through an attitudinal loyalty and commitment to the brand itself, which goes beyond purely consuming the brand. Furthermore, the nature of the product itself may also enhance the customer’s commitment to the brand (Lydon and Zanna, 1990). Lydon and Zanna (1990) argued that adversity heightens commitment, because the experience of adversity prompts individuals to search for and acquire some cognitive basis for that commitment. It follows,

therefore, that commitment to a product that requires higher levels of cognitive processing, such as contemporary art, might augment further an individual's commitment to the product, the brand, or the organisation responsible for the product.

Trust is considered a foundation of any relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Relationships that are built on trust are valued highly, and people who have a strong sense of trust between relationship partners, are likely to commit themselves to that relationship (Achrol, 1991). There is little doubt, then, that trust is a key determinant of relational commitment (Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar, 1998). Trust has been defined as a confidence in the exchange process, in that the partners have a sense of both the reliability and integrity of the exchange (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Singh and Sirdeshmukh (2000) suggested that customers who trust a brand tend to retain their positive expectations and assessments of the product longer than those who do not trust the brand, even if they undergo negative product experiences.

Method

In order to examine the brand affinity construct empirically, a large annual fringe arts festival (hereafter "Fringe") was chosen as an appropriate context to explore the nature of the bond that consumers form with a brand. This context was chosen because Fringe was presented annually, and the type of events at Fringe presented high uncertainty of outcomes, i.e., Fringe management, the brand owner, had no control over the art events presented at the festival. In particular, Fringe provides a mixture of arts events, art forms, and performers, which result in disparate levels of quality. Furthermore, in the case of Fringe, it does not have any contractual or membership bond for audiences to maintain a relationship, therefore, any bond that may be present, is a psychological, rather than contractual, one.

Data were collected over two seasons of the festival, in 2003 and 2004, using a self-administered questionnaire. Patrons were able to complete a questionnaire in person at the venue, or were provided with a flyer that directed them to a web site where they could register to receive the questionnaire as an embedded email. In total, 687 responses were received over the two collection periods (381 in 2003, and 306 in 2004). The data were then combined in accordance with Menard's (1991) repeated cross-sectional design methodology, to test the measurement models. The data were examined for any notable discrepancies across responses in the two collection periods. Only a small number of significant differences were found between years, and across paper and online collection methods, and this was well below the number expected by chance alone. In addition, a thorough examination of the demographic data across each of the collection groups yielded no significant differences between groups.

A specific instrument to measure brand affinity was developed using items derived from a range of sources, taking into account the components mentioned previously in this paper. Measures from a range of disciplines, measuring loyalty (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Hellier *et al.*, 2003; Kelley and Davis, 1994), commitment and identification (Bhattacharya, Rao, and Glynn, 1995; Bhattacharya, 1998; Gundlach, Achrol, and Mentzer, 1995; Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Hogg and Turner, 1985; Pritchard, Havitz, and Howard, 1999), interpersonal and social attraction (Hogg and Haines, 1996; Van Gelder, 2003), anticipation (Shiv and Huber, 2000), resonance (Keller, 2001), and trust (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Sargeant and Lee, 2004).

The items that survived an initial content validity test were subjected to an instrument purification process. Initial exploratory factor analysis (maximum likelihood with oblimin

rotation with Kaiser normalisation) was conducted on all brand attitude items used in the questionnaire (n = 15). In keeping with standard practice (Hair *et al.*, 2006), items that failed to load sufficiently or loaded on two factors were removed. Confirmatory factor analysis was then conducted on the remaining six items. Upon examination of the CFA conducted in AMOS, the fit statistics were not acceptable across three of the potential methods of examination, viz., absolute fit, residual based fit, and comparative fit. Therefore, the model, as it stood, was rejected. Upon reconsidering the previous EFA in SPSS, it was decided to remove the lowest loading factor in the measurement model. Therefore, the variable “If it is a Fringe event, I will probably enjoy it” was removed and the model was re-analysed. Fit statistics suggested an acceptable fit (Kline, 2005), and all weightings were significant at the 0.001 level. The remaining items were then tested for internal reliability, resulting in a Cronbach’s coefficient alpha of 0.82. All items had item-total correlations above 0.40. Items used to measure brand affinity are noted in Table 1.

Table 1: Items Used to Measure Brand Affinity – Results of Purification Process using Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Measurement item	Factor loading
I am a loyal patron of Fringe.	0.65
I care about the long-term success of Fringe.	0.71
I like people who attend Fringe.	0.68
I look forward to Fringe Festival.	0.82
You can count on Fringe to have good events.	0.60
P = 0.02, GFI = 0.99, AGFI = 0.96, CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.03	

NB. All scales were seven-point, Likert type scales.

Upon examination of the confirmatory factor analysis, all of the critical ratios were significant. In addition, a separate test using pattern and structure coefficients (Thompson, 1997) was conducted to ascertain whether the brand affinity construct had discriminant validity from the other attitude questions in the questionnaire, namely, service attitudes, and core event attitudes. Each of the constructs displayed discriminant validity. Therefore, this exploratory study presents a valid instrument to measure the attitudes and relational bonds that consumers form with a highly uncertain, intermittently available service, such as a contemporary arts festival.

Summary of Findings and Discussion

The brand affinity construct, which was tested empirically amongst users of the highly uncertain, intermittently available service, provides a multifaceted measure of involvement with a brand. All items contained in the construct made direct reference to the brand itself, therefore, it is arguable that respondents were more likely to be providing evaluations of their attitudes toward the brand, rather than an attitude toward the core product, the venue, or the staff at the venue. This results in a conceptualisation of brand bonding which is focussed primarily on the consumer’s relationship with the brand, and with others who use the brand. Confirmatory factor analysis, and internal reliability checks of the brand affinity construct, suggested that the items contained in the measurement model were a robust measure of the phenomenon. Clearly, the construct of Brand Affinity, and its antecedents, needs further, and wider, examination in a range of contexts. Of particular interest, would be to examine the influence of brand affinity on the future behavioural intentions of consumers in a range of contexts, including commercial, nonprofit, and hedonic environments.

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