

Consumer Research Insights on Brands and Branding: A JCR Curation

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INTRODUCTION

Brands are a fact of everyday life and an omnipresent reality for consumers. Understanding how consumers respond to brands—what they think and feel and how they act toward them—is a critical aspect of consumer research. Consumer research in branding is expansive in nature and has investigated a wide range of topics in terms of how different kinds of consumers respond to different types of brands and branding activities in various contexts (Schmitt 2012).

Researchers have explored how consumer responses to brands vary by factors such as knowledge, experience, gender, attitudes, and cultural background. They have studied the effects of brands that vary by product or industry type, personality or other image factors, country of origin, and more. They have explored branding as applied to products or services, people, countries and other geographical locations, and the like. Different forms of marketing activity relating to various aspects of the classic marketing mix (the “4 Ps”: product, price, place, and promotion) have been assessed, and the contexts studied have included a host of situations or settings.

Consumer researchers have studied these topics—and others—in numerous articles published in JCR though the years. This research curation, however, focuses on branding research only over the past several years, highlighting five main themes from this more recent era of research:

- The pleasure and/or pain of brands
- Brand attachment and loyalty

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- Consumer relevance and distinctiveness in branding
- Consumer communications about brands
- Managerial branding considerations

Despite the relatively short time period involved, these five themes exhibit some of the diversity in subject matter characteristic of branding research. Some of these themes tap into broader interests in consumer research that also can be found in research streams outside of branding. Others capture phenomena wholly unique to the branding area. All themes reflect conceptual rigor and practical relevance. For each theme, we provide some background and highlight the findings of two recent JCR articles, one of which we describe in more detail in the form of its abstract and discussion of its future research implications. We conclude with commentary on other future research directions for brands and branding.

THE PLEASURE AND/OR PAIN OF BRANDS

In theory, brands can play many different roles for consumers. In a basic sense, brands can make consumer lives simpler, easier, or more rewarding. Moreover, brands can take on rich meaning and allow consumers to signal to others, or themselves, who they are or who they would like to be and what they value. Yet not all consumers ascribe to the positive qualities of brands, and some consumers actively dislike brands and branding in general. Understanding the basic forces—positive and negative—associated with brands is an enduring consumer research priority.

Recent JCR Research

Reimann, Nuñez, and Castaño (2017) show the remarkable power of brands to insulate consumers from physical pain. Brands allow consumers to cope with pain by offering them a reassuring sense of social connectedness. On the other hand, Brick et al. (2018) show the yin-yang of brands in one of the most important aspects of consumers’

lives: their relationship with close others. They find that brands can also be a source of conflict, as summarized in their abstract below.

Brick et al., “Coke vs. Pepsi: Brand Compatibility, Relationship Power, and Life Satisfaction” (2018)

Individuals often evaluate, purchase, and consume brands in the presence of others, including close others. Yet relatively little is known about the role brand preferences play in relationships. In the present research, the authors explore how the novel concept of brand compatibility, defined as the extent to which individuals have similar brand preferences (e.g., both partners prefer the same brand of soda), influences life satisfaction. The authors propose that when brand compatibility is high, life satisfaction will also be high. Conversely, because low brand compatibility may be a source of conflict for the relationship, the authors propose that it will be associated with reduced life satisfaction. Importantly, the authors predict that the effects of brand compatibility on conflict and life satisfaction will depend upon relationship power. Across multiple studies and methodologies, including experimental designs (studies 2, 3, 5) and dyadic data from real-life couples (studies 1, 4, 6), the authors test and find support for their hypotheses. By exploring how a potentially unique form of compatibility influences life satisfaction, including identifying a key moderator and an underlying mechanism, the current research contributes to the literatures on branding, close relationships, consumer well-being, and relationship power.

Several aspects of this research are noteworthy. One crucial consideration, building on past research and worthy of further study, is how brands are embedded in consumer lives and part of their identities in profound ways. Additionally, this research reinforces one of the most central considerations in branding—compatibility, or “fit”—which manifests in different ways with many different branding phenomena (e.g., brand extensions, leveraged secondary associations from cause marketing or sponsorship). Finally, another valuable insight suggested by this research is the polarization that can occur with brands; that is, the same brand can elicit decidedly different responses from different people. Greater attention to the downside of brands and branding and their more detrimental effects with certain consumers is needed.

BRAND ATTACHMENT AND LOYALTY

Not all brands have the same importance to consumers, and understanding why some brands take on special meaning has much theoretical and managerial importance. In a practical sense, in today’s intensely competitive marketplace, firms are going to greater and greater lengths to try to forge strong bonds with consumers and build mutually beneficial relationships. Understanding consumer-brand relationships has been a fertile research topic for years now

as the complexity of those relationships continues to spawn intriguing and productive new research directions.

Recent JCR Research

Khamitov, Wang, and Thomson (2019) offer a comprehensive meta-analysis of factors affecting when and how different types of brand relationships increase loyalty. The authors find that various brand, loyalty, time, and consumer characteristics all can affect brand relationship elasticity. They specifically reinforce the power of the intangible and emotional qualities of brands. Huang, Huang, and Wyer (2018) home in on a very specific consideration—how consumers connect with brands in crowded social settings, as summarized in their abstract.

Huang et al., “The Influence of Social Crowding on Brand Attachment” (2018)

Feeling crowded in a shopping environment can decrease consumers’ evaluations of a product or service and lower customer satisfaction. However, the present research suggests that a crowded environment can sometimes have a positive impact on consumer behavior. Although feeling crowded motivates consumers to avoid interacting with others, it leads them to become more attached to brands as an alternative way of maintaining their basic need for belongingness. The effect does not occur (a) when the crowding environment is composed of familiar people (and, therefore, is not considered aversive); (b) when individuals have an interdependent self-construal (and consequently, high tolerance for crowdedness); (c) when people are accompanied by friends in the crowded environment; (d) when the social function of the brands is made salient; (e) when people have never used the brand before; or (f) when the brand is referred to as a general product rather than a specific brand.

Understanding situational and contextual influences on consumer behavior with respect to brands offers much practical value to marketing managers who must make many different types of decisions based on assumptions about how consumers will behave in particular places or at particular times. Identifying boundary conditions in these and other ways is important to provide a more nuanced depiction of how consumers actually think, feel, and act toward brands under certain circumstances or in specific settings. Finally, more generally, this research underscores the contingent nature of consumer processing of brands and the need to thoroughly investigate moderator variables that can impact the direction and strength of branding effects in meaningful ways.

CONSUMER RELEVANCE AND DISTINCTIVENESS IN BRANDING

Distinctiveness is at the core of branding and a key element in virtually any definition of brands. Branding

success is all about differentiation and offering consumers unique value. Unique value requires relevance, too; accordingly, another core branding concept is brand relevance and how meaningful a brand is to consumers. Ensuring that brands are relevant and differentiated, however, is a challenging managerial priority in today's fluid and fast-changing marketplace. Consumers are also seeking relevance and differentiation and consequently demanding personalized, customized brand offerings that suit their individual preferences and distinguish them from others. In part because of these new dynamics, many important consumer research opportunities are emerging in how consumers and brands fit into their respective landscapes.

Recent JCR Research

[Torelli et al. \(2017\)](#) show how consumer feelings of cultural distinctiveness in foreign locations can lead to consumer preferences for more culturally aligned brands, even if those brands may be deficient in other ways. In a desire to connect with home and not feel as distinctive, consumers broaden how they actually think of “home.” By expanding their in-group boundaries in that way, they exhibit preferences to include culturally related brands that are merely similar in geographic proximity or sociohistorical or cultural roots. [Puzakova and Aggarwal \(2018\)](#) show how a consumer desire for distinctiveness can actually result in less preference for an anthropomorphized brand, as summarized in their abstract.

Puzakova and Aggarwal, “Brands as Rivals: Consumer Pursuit of Distinctiveness and the Role of Brand Anthropomorphism” (2018)

Although past research has shown that anthropomorphism enhances consumers' attraction to a brand when social-connectedness or effectance motives are active, the current research demonstrates that anthropomorphizing a brand becomes a detrimental marketing strategy when consumers' distinctiveness motives are salient. Four studies show that anthropomorphizing a brand positioned to be distinctive diminishes consumers' sense of agency in identity expression. As a result, when distinctiveness goals are salient, consumers are less likely to evaluate anthropomorphized (vs. nonanthropomorphized) brands favorably and are less likely to choose them to express distinctiveness. This negative effect of brand anthropomorphism, however, is contingent on the brand's positioning strategy—brand-as-supporter (supporting consumers' desires to be different) versus brand-as-agent (communicating unique brand features instead of focusing on consumers' needs) versus brand-as-controller (limiting consumers' freedom in expressing distinctiveness). Our results demonstrate that an anthropomorphized brand-as-supporter enhances consumers' sense of agency in identity expression, compared to both an anthropomorphized brand-as-agent and an anthropomorphized

brand-as-controller. In turn, enhancing or thwarting consumers' sense of agency in expressing their differences from others drives the differential impact of anthropomorphizing a brand positioned to be distinctive.

Two aspects of this research are especially noteworthy in terms of future research. Given how many marketers are trying to bring their brands to life—literally and figuratively—in today's digital world, anthropomorphism is likely to continue to be an important consumer research topic. In particular, AI and robotic advances in service settings and elsewhere will raise a number of similar issues in terms of how consumers interact with more human-like marketing devices. These are complex phenomena that will require new theoretical development as well as the careful adaptation of concepts from consumer psychology originally developed with humans. Secondly, understanding how consumers and brands are—or want to be—distinctive is a fundamental element of branding that can yield interesting insights with a variety of branding phenomena.

CONSUMER COMMUNICATIONS ABOUT BRANDS

Communications are the lifeblood of any brand. In a “paid-earned-owned-shared” media world, consumer-to-consumer communications are taking on increased importance. Different communication channels have different properties, however, that require careful analysis and planning. Understanding what, when, where, how, and why consumers decide to share information or opinions about brands is a research priority that will likely continue to drive research activity for many years to come.

Recent JCR Research

Through an extensive text mining study of social media, [Villarreal Ordenes et al. \(2019\)](#) use speech act theory to identify distinct elements—rhetorical styles such as alliteration and repetition, cross-message compositions, and certain visual images—that lead to greater consumer sharing of messages posted by brands. They reinforce the power of informational and emotional content in online brand messages and find some important distinctions in message sharing across Facebook and Twitter social media platforms. Moving to also include the offline world, [Shen and Sengupta \(2018\)](#) found that when consumers communicate about brands to others by speaking versus writing, they develop deeper self-brand connections, as summarized in this abstract.

Shen and Sengupta, “Word of Mouth versus Word of Mouse: Speaking about a Brand Connects You to It More than Writing Does” (2018)

This research merges insights from the communications literature with that on the self-brand connection to examine a

novel question: how does speaking versus writing about a liked brand influence the communicator's own later reactions to that brand? Our conceptualization argues that because oral communication involves a greater focus on social interaction with the communication recipient than does written communication, oral communicators are more likely to express self-related thoughts than are writers, thereby increasing their self-brand connection (SBC). We also assess the implications of this conceptualization, including the identification of theoretically derived boundary conditions for the speech/writing difference, and the downstream effects of heightened SBC. Results from five studies provide support for our predictions, informing both the basic literature on communications, and the body of work on consumer word of mouth.

Word of mouth has been a critical aspect of marketing since the origin of commerce. In today's digital world, word of mouth can take many different forms (structured vs. unstructured, public vs. private, and so on). Understanding the full consumer psychology implications of reviews, in particular, is a top research priority given their increasingly important role in consumer decision-making. Contrasting oral and written speech, as in the referenced article, will have important implications for social media usage and marketing communications more generally. Lastly, the crucial mediating role of self-brand connections reinforces the need to consider the relevance of brands and when and how they are drawn into consumers' identities and lives.

MANAGERIAL CONSIDERATIONS IN BRANDING

There is a managerial side to branding that can benefit from principles and insights gleaned from more practically minded consumer research. Managers make numerous decisions on a daily basis related to building, measuring, managing, and protecting their brands with significant short- and long-term consequences. A thorough understanding of applicable consumer behavior theory is extremely valuable to guide that decision-making. The research opportunities here are vast, as a wide gap still exists in many areas between academic research and industry practice.

Recent JCR Research

Studying the James Bond film franchise, [Preece, Kerrigan, and O'Reilly \(2019\)](#) take an evolutionary approach to study brand longevity. Applying assemblage theory, they show how brands can optimally balance continuity and change at different levels over time. [van Horen and Pieters \(2017\)](#) show how copycat brands—that is, those that imitate brand elements of another brand—meet with more success when the imitated product is in a

product category distinct from that of the imitated brand, as summarized in their abstract.

van Horen and Pieters, “Redefining Home: How Cultural Distinctiveness Affects the Malleability of In-Group Boundaries and Brand Preferences” (2017)

Copycat brands imitate the trade dress of other brands, such as their brand name, logo, and packaging design. Copycats typically operate in the core product category of the imitated brand under the assumption that such “in-category imitation” is most effective. In contrast, four experiments demonstrate the benefits of “out-of-category imitation” for copycats, and the harmful effect on the imitated brand. Copycats are evaluated more positively in a related category, because consumers appraise the similarity between copycat and imitated brand more positively than in the core category, independent of the perceived similarity itself. This is due to a reduced salience of norms regarding imitation in the related category. Moreover, the results show a damaging backlash effect of out-of-category imitation on the general evaluation of the imitated brand and on its key perceived product attributes. The findings replicate across student, MTurk [Amazon Mechanical Turk], and representative consumer samples; multiple product categories; and forms of brand imitation. This research demonstrates that out-of-category brand imitation helps copycat brands and hurts national leading brands much more than has so far been considered, which has managerial and public policy implications.

Research on trade dress goes to the very heart of brands and branding: the brand elements themselves. Because of how they shape awareness and image with consumers, brand elements are often invaluable assets to brand marketers. A deeper understanding of their intrinsic properties, as well as their interface with various marketing activities, would be very helpful for managers. More generally, adopting a legal perspective to branding research, as with this article, should be encouraged given its increasingly significant role in managerial decision-making. In a related sense, given that most brands span multiple categories, ensuring that a broader multicategory perspective is recognized in branding research is also essential.

OTHER FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The five themes reviewed above each suggested a number of important future research directions. Nevertheless, an abundance of other research opportunities also exist in other areas with brands and branding, five of which are highlighted here (for further discussion, see [Keller 2016](#); [Keller et al. 2020](#)).

Brand Emotions and Feelings

Brand meaning is a core branding concept—what consumers know, think, and feel about a brand

(John et al. 2006; Keller 2003). Prior branding research has focused largely on more cognitive aspects and what consumers think and know about brands. Much still needs to be learned, however, about the more affective elements and the role of emotions and feelings for brands and branding (Pham, Geuens, and De Pelsmacker 2013; Verrochi Coleman and Williams 2013). A number of questions can be posed, such as:

- What are the most important types of brand feelings and emotions? What is a useful taxonomy of brand feelings and emotions?
- What are the most effective ways for marketers to elicit brand feelings and emotions? How do different marketing activities create brand feelings and emotions?
- Can affective information be shared by consumers as effectively as more cognitive information? What is the role of word of mouth and social media for spreading feelings and emotional qualities of brands across consumers?
- How easily can feelings and emotions be linked to a brand? In what ways are they stored and later activated?
- In what ways do feelings and emotions affect consumer decision-making? When can positive brand feelings overcome product deficiencies? When can negative feelings undermine product advantages?

Brand Intangibles

As noted above, successful branding is about differentiation. Increasingly, *brand intangibles* are playing a bigger role in creating, or at least strengthening, differentiation. Brand intangibles are those associations to a brand that are not directly related to the product or service and its function and performance. In a broad sense, the increased emphasis on brand intangibles reflects the fact that consumers have become more interested in learning about the people and companies behind products and brands, posing questions such as: Who are they? What values do they hold? What do they stand for? How do they make the product or service?

By definition, brand intangibles can take many forms, but several lines of inquiry are highlighted here (following directly from these questions) that deserve greater scrutiny by consumer researchers, such as:

- How do consumers form opinions about authenticity (Newman and Dhar 2014; Spiggle, Nguyen, and Caravella 2012)? How important is it for a brand to be seen as authentic or genuine?
- How does history or heritage define a brand (Paharia et al. 2011)? In what ways can it help or hurt? How flexible are consumers in updating their perceptions and beliefs about brands? What is the proper balance of continuity and change for brands over time?
- How do consumers view political stances by brands (Horst 2018)? How do they respond to brands taking positions on important political issues that support or contradict the positions they hold?
- What are consumer expectations for corporate social responsibility for brands (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Chervin and Blair 2015; Kotler and Lee 2005; Torelli, Monga, and Kaikati 2012)? What are the accepted standards for sustainability, community involvement, and social

impact? How do consumers make those judgments? How do they influence brand attitudes and behavior?

- Given the subjective nature of brand intangibles, how do marketers reconcile the potentially varying or even contradictory opinions held by different consumers about any particular brand intangible? How much consensus can reasonably be expected?

Brand Positioning

One well-established strategic tool for branding is the concept of *positioning*—how consumers think or feel about a brand versus a defined set of competitor brands (Keller, Sternthal, and Tybout 2002). Although historically significant, some marketers have questioned the value of traditional positioning in developing modern marketing strategies. One fundamental question is the role of consumers in setting strategies for brands. Some marketing pundits proclaim that “customers are now in charge of marketing,” maintaining that consumers now set the strategic directions of brands. Such statements, however, presume that consumers are empowered, enlightened, and engaged with respect to brands and branding. In other words, consumers have the motivation (engagement), ability (enlightenment), and opportunity (empowerment) to actually impact brand strategies.

Yet the reality is that only some consumers seem to want to get involved with only some brands and, even then, only some of the time. Most consumers appear to have little to no interest in having any kind of relationship beyond purchase and consumption for most of the brands in their lives. Gaining a clearer understanding of empowerment, enlightenment, and engagement across the customer franchise for a brand is crucial, as suggested by the following questions:

- In what ways do consumers think they can influence brand strategy? How much input do consumers think they should have about what a brand does?
- How much do consumers know about brands and branding? How deep and broad is consumer brand knowledge? How do they define the “rules of the game” for branding?
- How actively invested are consumers with a brand’s fortunes? How much do consumers care about how other consumers view a brand or how it is performing in the marketplace as a whole?
- How much do consumers want to engage with brands and in what ways? What is a useful taxonomy of brand engagement?

Developing a more complete understanding of the consumer-brand terrain along these lines will be invaluable in understanding how different types of relationships are formed between consumers and brands (Fournier 1998).

Brand Purpose, Storytelling, and Narratives

In part due to this changing marketing environment, a host of other branding concepts have been put forth in recent years to guide marketing strategies (e.g., brand

purpose, brand stories and narratives). Brand purpose relates to the higher-order mission of brands and their broader social goals. Brand storytelling and narratives go beyond individual attributes or benefits to provide a more literary and holistic account of what a brand is about. A number of questions are relevant here for consumer researchers about this general approach and these specific concepts, such as:

- How well do these alternative brand strategy concepts tap into our understanding of consumer behavior? What assumptions do they make about consumer behavior? When are they most valid or useful? Are they ever unhelpful or even counterproductive?
- What types of brand purposes are most meaningful to consumers? How should brand purposes be crafted internally and expressed externally? How should brand purpose relate or be aligned with other aspects of the brand positioning and strategy? For example, how closely tied should brand purposes be to the products or services for the brand?
- What makes brand stories or narratives compelling (Escalas 2004)? Are there any disadvantages to their use? Can brand stories or narratives distract marketers or consumers from a focus on potentially more important product or service performance considerations?

Brand Measurement

Lastly, for both academics and managers to fully understand the effects of brands and branding, there needs to be a deep, rich understanding of how consumers think, feel, and act toward brands. Although one common industry research technique has been consumer surveys, as consumers have become more difficult to contact and less willing to participate, the viability of surveys has diminished in recent years. Yet marketers today arguably need to stay closer than ever to consumers, underscoring the need to develop new methods and evolve existing ones to gain critical insights into consumers and brands.

Fortunately, as much as any area, branding research has benefited from a full range of quantitative and qualitative methods that go beyond surveys and other traditional data collection methods (e.g., focus groups). For example, researchers are continuing to refine neural techniques (Chang, Boksem, and Smidts 2018; Yoon et al. 2006) and ethnographic methods (Belk 2006; Chang Coupland 2005). One particularly promising tack involves digital methods and measures that can be used at the individual or market level to monitor online behavior (Berger et al. 2020; Moe and Schweidel 2014; Yadav and Pavlou 2014). Although full of potential, the methodological properties of these digital approaches need to be validated carefully, and boundaries need to be established as to their comparative advantages and disadvantages.

More broadly, for all traditional or emerging research methods, strengths and weaknesses must be identified and contrasted in terms of their effectiveness and efficiency in gaining consumer and brand insights. In many ways,

brand-building can be thought of in terms of painting a picture of a brand in consumers' minds and hearts. Extending that metaphor, it is important that marketers skillfully combine a full range of research methods to be able to appreciate the colors, vividness, and texture of the mental images and structures they are creating.

CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps not surprisingly, research on branding mirrors many of the broad themes found in consumer research more generally. Consumer researchers of all kinds are interested in achieving a better understanding of consumer motivations and desires and how consumers choose to interact with the world around them, especially in digital terms. Researchers studying branding have certainly homed in on these and other topics and also have focused on more managerial considerations, all of which help marketers achieve a deeper understanding of consumers to help them build, measure, manage, and protect brand equity.

The reality is that brands and consumers are inextricably linked. Brands exist for consumers, and consumers generally value brands. Yet, in today's data-rich world, both brands and consumers can be too easily reduced to online and offline statistical footprints. It is incumbent upon consumer researchers to breathe life into branding to ensure that consumer psychology as applied to branding is undeniable in its importance and essential to marketers everywhere.

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