

Brand Fidelity: A Relationship Maintenance Perspective

ABSTRACT

An in-depth literature review associated with consumer/brand research provides the foundation for this paper through explicating the evolution of this important research stream. The literature findings highlight significant challenges in the conceptualisation and measurement of key consumer-related constructs such as brand loyalty, brand commitment and brand love. Drawing upon these findings, the authors propose that relationship maintenance mechanisms (i.e. cognitive and behavioural) provide the key to measurement and prediction of consumer/brand relationship strength. On this basis, this paper offers *brand fidelity* as a novel approach in understanding how consumers demonstrate their love and commitment for the brand through engaging, subconsciously or otherwise, in relationship maintenance cognitions and behaviours. Defined as *the consumer's faithfulness to a brand partner demonstrated by an aggregate of behaviours (i.e. accommodation/forgiveness, willingness to sacrifice) and cognitions (i.e. derogation of alternatives, cognitive interdependence and positive illusions) that maintain relationship stability and durability*, brand fidelity provides a solid foundation for future research offering significant value to academics and brand practitioners alike.

Key Words:

Consumer/Brand Relationships, Brand Commitment, Brand Loyalty, Relationship Maintenance, Relationship Fidelity

INTRODUCTION

For decades academics and practitioners have directed considerable effort toward understanding and measuring consumer responses to product/brand offerings. Early consumer research was centred around the notion of customer satisfaction (e.g., Anderson, 1973; Pfaff, 1972), with a heavy focus on customer expectations and perceived product performance prevailing (e.g., Day, 1977; Miller, 1977). The 80s and 90s brought about a changing research focus to brands (as opposed to products) and the need for understanding the longer-term outcomes of customer satisfaction. Consequently, many studies were focused on defining and measuring such constructs as brand loyalty and brand commitment (e.g., Amine, 1998; Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978). The current era of consumer research has embraced psychological theory relating to interpersonal relationships, with the notion of brand love dominating much of the current consumer literature (e.g., Albert *et al.*, 2008; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Fetscherin *et al.*, 2014; Langner *et al.*, 2014; Long-Tolbert and Gammoh, 2012; Rauschnabel and Ahuvia, 2014).

In order to further progress this research stream, where consumers seek out complex need fulfilment through active participation in the co-creation and maintenance of brands, it is critical we learn from past research trajectories. Thus, the goal of this paper is twofold. First, the relevant literatures surrounding consumers and brands are reviewed in order to make sense of our knowledge from a historical, or evolutionary, perspective. Such an in-depth review helps us understand how our knowledge of consumer/brand relationships has evolved over time and highlights the criticisms and challenges that have moved academic and practitioner thought through the various research stages.

Second, in identifying historical trends in the literature, this paper suggests future consideration of adopting a research mind-set beyond understanding how and why consumer/brand relationships develop, to a focus on how such relationships are maintained. In this respect, we make justification for proposing a new construct, *brand fidelity*, that is centered on consumer actions and thoughts, which exemplify active participation in the maintenance of strong consumer/brand relationships. Defined as *the consumer's faithfulness to a brand partner manifested through various behaviours (i.e. accommodation/forgiveness – performance and price) and cognitions (i.e. derogation of alternatives and cognitive interdependence) that maintain relationship stability and durability*, brand fidelity provides opportunity to significantly enhance how we view and, subsequently, measure consumer/brand relationships in the future. We offer *brand fidelity* as a construct that augments our understanding of consumer/brand relationships and, in doing so, provides a comprehensive framework for future research to explore its operationalization and, subsequent, diagnostic capabilities through empirical validation. As such, this paper has solid implications for both brand researchers and brand practitioners.

METHODOLOGY

The literature review of this study is based on the logic of purposeful sampling, whereby qualitative data (in this case, publications), which illuminates issues relating to the research purpose (Patton, 2002), is gathered and analysed through a three-step process. Following a similar methodology to that used by Green *et al.* (2016), the first step, known as *orientation*, involves conducting a broad review of the literature to provide initial summaries of research

problems, theories, relative emphasis and trends relating to consumer responses to brands. Building on the findings of step one, the second step, *orientation*, involves further search for additional literature to highlight patterns and/or deviations in philosophical outlooks and assumptions associated with the conceptualisation and measurement of consumer/brand relationships. Finally, in step three (i.e. *delineation*) the findings of step two are used to identify evolutionary shifts in the trajectory of consumer/brand research. As a result, the findings enable the ensuing discussion relating to the evolution of consumer/brand relationship research and which is graphically depicted in Figure 1.

EVOLUTION OF CONSUMER/BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

In the 1970s, marketing theory and practice was centrally focused on the concept of customer satisfaction (e.g., Anderson, 1973; Day, 1977; Miller, 1977; Pfaff, 1972). This was an era when marketplace offerings were largely firm-controlled and the satisfaction of customers' needs and wants was considered paramount to firm profitability (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982). Thus, the bulk of early research was concentrated on the nature of customer satisfaction and its antecedents (e.g., Oliver, 1977; Olshavsky and Miller, 1972; Olson and Dover, 1976). As a result, the measurement of customer expectation (dis)confirmation and perceived performance associated with products dominated marketing research foci during this period (e.g., Day 1977; Miller 1977).

Building on early customer satisfaction research, the 1980s and 90s brought about research momentum in two keys areas (1) customer satisfaction outcomes, and (2) the focus being on brands, rather than products (Reynolds and Gutman, 1984; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995).

While the notion of customer satisfaction “has long been considered one of the cornerstones of marketing strategy” (Roy *et al.*, 2013, p. 329), the use of satisfaction as a proxy for loyalty was considered to be fundamentally flawed (Oliver, 1999) as not all satisfied customers are loyal and, while loyal customers are typically satisfied, satisfaction cannot be assumed due to the potential effect of habitual supply conditions (Amine, 1998). On this basis, there was a significant shift of research concentration centred on the consequences, or outcomes, of satisfaction (e.g., Oliver, 1999; Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2007).

In addition, the interest in the brand concept was sparked by the recognition that consumers have different types of needs over and above that relating to the product’s functional (or performance) capabilities (Keller, 1993). As such, the brand management concept (Park *et al.*, 1986) encapsulated more than mere product performance and positioning, but rather the introduction, elaboration and fortification of brand meaning in consideration of consumers’ functional, symbolic (e.g., Sirgy, 1982; Solomon, 1983) and experiential (e.g., Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992; McAlister, 1982) needs. In this sense, the brand focus represents a long-term orientation (Park *et al.*, 1986) and the interest in consumer/brand relationships (Fournier, 1998) was sparked. In behavioural terms, the strength of consumer/brand relationships fundamentally stems from repeat purchase/patronage. However, relationships between consumers and brands are much more complex than that (Christodoulides and Chernatony, 2010). As a result, there has been considerable research attention given to examining the aspects of such relationships, which has given rise to a plethora of literature focussed on brand loyalty, brand commitment (e.g., Crosby and Taylor, 1983; Mattila, 2001; Moorman *et al.*, 1992) and, more recently, brand love (e.g., Albert and Merunka, 2013; Batra

et al., 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Roy *et al.*, 2013). As such, these constructs provide the basis for the ensuing discussions.

Brand Loyalty:

The nature and measurement of brand loyalty has long been debated. At the fundamental level, conceptualizations of the construct were drawn from the behavioural characteristics of “loyal customers”, operationalised as repeat purchase behaviour, purchase and switching intentions (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978; Reichheld and Teal, 1996; Popp and Woratschek, 2017). However, others (Dick and Basu, 1994; Mattila, 2001; Mitra and Lynch, 1995; Leckie *et al.*, 2016) have argued that loyalty also encompasses cognitive aspects evident in the decision-making process involving brand evaluation, preference and attitudes. On this basis, a widely accepted definition of brand loyalty is “the biased (i.e., non-random) behavioural response (i.e. purchase), expressed over time by some decision-making unit with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of such brands as is a function of psychological (decision-making) evaluative processes” (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978, pp. 80-81). However, Fournier and Yao (1997) argue that, while this definition does capture the temporal nature of loyalty, it still fails to capture “the dynamic, evolutionary character of the phenomenon itself” (p. 453). On this basis, they proposed that brand loyalty is better understood from a relational perspective that specifically considers “the nuances of meaning, context and temporality” (Fournier and Yao, 1997, p. 454) in consumer/brand partnerships. Using idiographic analysis, Fournier (1998) proposes a model of brand relationship quality and stability/durability (p. 366) that identifies *love/passion*, *self-connection*, *commitment*, *interdependence*, *intimacy* and *brand partner quality* as being indicative of brand relationship

quality. In this sense, Fournier (1998) argues that brand relationship quality provides a much richer understanding of the strength and sustainability of consumer/brand relationships that brand loyalty does not capture. While Fournier's (1998) BRQ model has since been criticised on the basis that not all brands relate to their customers in the same manner (Dowling, 2002), the value of the BRQ model is drawn from the very comprehensive nature of the model and, as a result, it has been widely accepted, used and adapted.

Brand Commitment:

Often referred to interchangeably, brand commitment and brand loyalty have been the focus of much research since the 1970s. Brand commitment is proffered to represent the underlying motivations associated with repeat purchase behaviour and brand preference (i.e. brand loyalty) (Moorman *et al.*, 1992). Specifically, it is argued that brand commitment provides more depth in our understanding of "loyal customers" as it captures the emotional aspects of consumer/brand partnerships (Mattila, 2006) that are highly indicative of relational strength (Moorman *et al.*, 1992). In addition, as brand commitment essentially differentiates highly probable repeat purchase behaviour (i.e. true brand loyalty) and less probable repeat purchase behaviour (i.e. spurious brand loyalty), then commitment is considered a better indicator of brand loyalty depth (Jacoby and Kyner, 1973).

There are two types of commitment i.e. affective and calculative (Mattila, 2006; Cifci and Erdogan, 2016). Affective commitment is largely exemplified through the emotional bonds consumers have with brands. In other words, affective commitment represents the consumer's liking or attachment to the brand, over and above brand attribute evaluation

(Morgan and Hunt, 1994). On the other hand, calculative commitment represents a cognitive evaluation of the benefits and costs attached to the brand (Hennig-Thurau and Klee, 1997; Jones *et al.*, 2010). Thus, a consumer will remain committed to a brand if the perceived benefits of the brand continue to outweigh the perceived costs. This represents much more of a “head” purchasing strategy than “heart” purchasing strategy (i.e. affective commitment). However, affective commitment is more likely to produce long-term consistent behaviour, as opposed to calculative commitment, as it depends less on contingent factors associated with the brand (Amine, 1998; Punniyamoorthy and Raj, 2007). This exemplifies the significant role that emotion (or affect) plays in consumer/brand relationships (Fournier and Yao, 1997).

While there have been several attempts to define the underlying dimensions of the relatively complex and highly-related constructs of brand loyalty and commitment (Huang *et al.*, 2007), the measurement of both has remained simplistically unidimensional. The majority of research, particularly focussed on the examination of antecedents to commitment/loyalty, has fundamentally used scales comprised of 2 to 6 items, with single items covering such aspects as general commitment/loyalty, switching behaviour, purchase intentions, price sensitivity and word-of-mouth (e.g., Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2002; Eisingerich and Rubera, 2010; Kim *et al.*, 2008; Nam *et al.*, 2011, Pulligadda *et al.*, 2016 and more). While such measurements capture an abridged evaluation of commitment/loyalty, they do little to pinpoint specific behaviours within consumer/brand relationships that are indicative of the depth on consumer/brand relationships. In fact, Fournier and Yao (1997) criticise the operationalization of the loyalty construct for being uninspired, non-diagnostic and conflicting.

Brand Love:

Over the past decade, research related to brand love has gained momentum with considerable divergence in relation to the definitional boundaries of the brand love construct. Drawing on Sternberg's (1986) triangulation theory of love (i.e. intimacy, passion and decision/commitment), Shimp and Madden (1988) proposed that love (in consumption situations) comprises of liking, yearning and decision/commitment. This notion laid the groundwork for others (e.g., Ahuvia, 2005; Thomson *et al.*, 2005; Wang and Wallendorf, 2004, and more) to empirically establish that love is, indeed, a valid consumption-related construct. However, research relating to the dimensions of brand love is voluminous and varied. For example, intimacy, passion, decision/commitment, strong positive feelings (affect), idealisation, memories, unicity, long term duration, anticipated separation distress, self-brand integration, dreams, uniqueness, beauty, declaration of affect, past behaviour, willingness to invest, friendship (extension of this relationship), and attitudes (e.g., Albert and Merunka, 2013; Albert *et al.*, 2008; Batra *et al.*, 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Fetscherin *et al.*, 2014; Langner *et al.*, 2014; Long-Tolbert and Gammoh, 2012; Maxian *et al.*, 2013; Rauschnabel and Ahuvia, 2014; Rossiter, 2012; Roy *et al.*, 2013; Sarkar *et al.*, 2012), are all proposed dimensions that define brand love and many of these underpin the operationalization of brand love in empirical studies.

In addition, the lines between brand love dimensions, the antecedents to brand love and the outcomes of brand love are also considerably blurred. For example, self-brand integration and strong positive feelings (affect), identified by some (e.g., Batra *et al.*, 2012; Langner *et al.*, 2014; Maxian *et al.*, 2013; Rauschnabel and Ahuvia, 2014, and more) as being dimensions of

brand love, are proposed by others (e.g., Albert and Merunka, 2013; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Sarkar *et al.*, 2012; Wallace *et al.*, 2014, and more) as being antecedents to brand love. While other antecedents are proposed to be product hedonism (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), romanticism (Sarkar *et al.*, 2012), materialism (Roy *et al.*, 2013), trust (Albert and Merunka, 2013), brand experience (de Oliveira Santini *et al.*, 2018) partner quality and social support (Long-Tolbert and Gammoh, 2012).

To a lesser extent, confusion exists in relation to the outcomes of brand love, with trust being cited as a dimension of brand love (Albert *et al.*, 2008), an antecedent of brand love (Albert and Merunka, 2013) and an outcome of brand love (Loureiro *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, there appears to be some consensus over other brand love outcomes with purchase intention (Fetscherin *et al.*, 2014; Sarkar *et al.*, 2012), word-of-mouth recommendation/advocacy (Fetscherin *et al.*, 2014; Sarkar *et al.*, 2012), loyalty (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Loureiro *et al.*, 2012; Roy *et al.*, 2013; Alnawas and Altarifi, 2016) and commitment (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Loureiro *et al.*, 2012; Garg *et al.*, 2016) being cited as prominent outcomes. However, given the disparate operationalization of these outcome constructs across studies, it is suggested that consensus may be an apparition based on construct labelling, rather than construct measurement/validity.

Given the conceptual disparities associated with the brand love construct, it is not surprising that its measurement is also highly debated. For example, Rossiter (2012) criticizes the conceptualizations and measurement of brand love by Batra *et al.* (2012) and others (e.g., Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006) on the basis that (1) the measures lack content validity, (2) the measurement scales should not be continuous because such measurement fails to

distinguish between brand love and brand like, and (3) the measurement model (i.e., of Batra *et al.*, 2012) should be formative rather than reflective. On this basis, Rossiter (2012) proposes an alternative contrastive single-item measure, including five response options¹ and concludes that (1) brand love is an emotional state experienced by a minority of customers, (2) the proportion of “brand lovers” is dependent on product category, and (3) brand love (if achieved) equates to high behavioural returns.

In contrast, Zarantonello *et al.* (2016), promote the measurement of brand love via a 13-item scale covering five dimensions (i.e. *fantasies and thoughts, attachment, self-expression, pleasure* and *idealisation*). Furthermore, Bagozzi *et al.* (2017), consider brand love to be a highly complex multi-faceted construct in their development of a 26-item scale covering 13 dimensions of brand love, including higher-order factors (i.e. *self-brand integration, passion-driven behaviours, positive emotion connection*) and other factors such as *attitude strength and valence, long-term relationship* and *anticipated separation distress*. As evidenced by the reviewed literature, it is apparent that academic consensus on the conceptualisation and measurement of brand love remains an elusive concept.

While there is conflicting views over the interpretation of brand love, there is growing agreement that love, when taken in the context of brands, is best understood from a relational rather than emotional perspective (Ahuvia *et al.*, 2014). Yet several studies (e.g., Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Loureiro *et al.*, 2012; Maxian *et al.*, 2013) use unidimensional emotional measures in their operationalization of brand love. As love is both companionate

¹ Response options include hate, dislike, neutral, liking and love categories.

(relating to the relationship) and passionate (relating to strong emotion), different types of love draw upon different aspects (Hatfield *et al.*, 1984). However, as relationships develop and deepen, companionate love comes to the forefront as it represents the strengthening of and commitment to the relationship.

---- Insert Figure 1 Here. ----

Summarizing the Consumer/Brand Relationship Evolution

Through the literatures associated with customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, brand commitment and brand love, we have come a long way in understanding consumer/brand interactions and relationships. However, these literatures are still plagued with definitional inconsistencies relating to context (i.e. construct perspective), construct dimensionality (representation versus causation), construct positioning (i.e. antecedents versus outcomes) and, importantly, problems associated with gathering accurate perceptual interpretations from research subjects who are asked to self-report at a deep emotional level (Gupta and Zeithaml, 2006). These challenges are not identified to criticise the academic calibre of researchers or the academic rigour of previous work, but rather to highlight the need for new consumer/brand research to address these issues, where possible.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

What we do know about strong brand emotions (i.e. commitment and love) is that they are best understood from a relational, rather than emotional perspective (Ahuvia *et al.*, 2014). In

fact, as early as 2001, Keller identified consumer/brand relationships to be characterized by intensity and activity. Intensity refers to the emotional attachment and/or sense of community the consumer derives from the brand relationship. Activity, on the other hand, refers to the behavioural manifestation of the emotional attachment (intensity) of brand loyalty. This is in line with Aaker's (1996) argument that consumers actively interact with brands, just as individuals do with their friends. Further to this, Keller (2009) later argues that brand resonance, which encapsulates another important aspect of contemporary consumer/brand relationships, is exemplified by the degree to which consumers are "in sync" with the brand.

These are all relevant points that are central to a more effective understanding and measurement of consumer/brand relationships. It is not our intention here to denounce the notion of brand commitment or brand love. To the contrary, we believe brand commitment and love are alive and well in today's brand-dominated marketplace. We suggest that, rather than trying to gauge the strength of emotions (i.e. intensity), a more palpable approach resides in recognising the behavioural (i.e. activity) and cognitive (i.e. "in sync") manifestations of those consumers who are committed and "in love" with a brand. We believe relationship *maintenance* provides us with the key in this respect.

Based on the notion that actions speak louder than words, we argue that relationship maintenance behaviour more accurately represents commitment strength over self-reported desires. Just as purchase intentions are not always found to be good indicators of purchase behaviour (Auger and Devinney, 2007; Carrington *et al.*, 2010), we argue that, desires/emotions may not always be good indicators of relationship maintenance. From a

measurement standpoint, just as personality inventories ask individuals to self-report their behaviours so that researchers can analyse personality type, we suggest researchers should ask individuals to self-report relationship maintenance behaviours in order to assess the degree of brand commitment/love they have toward the brand. Doing so circumvents the problems associated with respondent competency and data integrity (previously discussed) and brings us proximally closer to understanding brand performance. On this basis, we offer *brand fidelity* as a construct upon which to understand the cognitive and behavioural aspects of relationship maintenance, thus, providing future opportunity for effective brand performance measurement.

BRAND FIDELITY: CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Challenging earlier social psychological approaches, which viewed relationship commitment as an outcome of positive affect, Rusbult (1980) first proposed the investment model, which was developed in the context of romantic relationships. In broad terms, the investment model of commitment processes depicts relationship commitment as directly affecting relationship behaviour and mediating the relationship between satisfaction, alternatives and investments on behaviour. Previous modelling of commitment largely relied on positive affect, such as satisfaction, to explain a person's commitment to a relationship. Rusbult (1980) went further to argue that commitment is also influenced by the existence (or not) of attractive alternatives (particularly relevant in the marketing context) and how much is already invested in the relationship. On this basis, Rusbult (1980) argued that the key to understanding commitment lies in determining *why* relationships persist, not just how satisfying they are. Rusbult *et al.* (1998) went on to explain that relationship commitment is

a consequence of dependence and dependence represents the additive effect of satisfaction, investments and (lack of) alternatives. In this sense, relationship commitment is a psychological state that directly influences everyday behaviour in relationships and mediates the effects of satisfaction, alternatives and investments on behaviour (Rusbult *et al.*, 2012).

The investment model has since been widely used in a number of relational contexts. For example, online travel behaviour (Nusair *et al.*, 2010), B2B marketing (White and Yanamandram, 2007), financial marketing (Huang *et al.*, 2007), mobile internet market (Giovanis, 2016) and brand loyalty (Li and Petrick, 2008) have all benefited by the application of the investment model in empirically advancing theory within these contextual domains. Nonetheless, all of these studies have centred their focus on the antecedents of commitment and little, if any, attention has been given to the relationship maintenance behaviours depicted as a consequence, or manifestation, of commitment or the desire to maintain relationships.

Importantly, in applying the growing momentum of the relationship metaphor to marketing contexts (e.g., Fournier and Yao, 1997; Morgan and Hunt, 1994), Fournier (1998) proposed the notion of “brand as relationship partner” and developed a comprehensive model of brand relationship quality and stability. Central to this model is the notion that brand relationships should be understood through “what consumers do with brands to add meaning to their lives” (p. 367). On this basis, Fournier (1998) argues that meaning, elaboration and reinforcement processes, associated with both relationship partners (i.e. consumer and brand), define the quality for the relationship.

Since then, considerable research attention has been given to the brand relationship quality facets (i.e. *love/passion, self-connection, intimacy, interdependence, brand partner quality and commitment*) espoused in Fournier's (1998) model. For example, *passion, self-connection* and *intimacy* commonly underpin contemporary research associated with brand love (e.g., Albert and Merunka, 2013; Batra *et al.*, 2012). In addition, the underlying elements of brand relationship, such as *brand trust, dependability* and *consistency* (Fournier, 1998) have also taken up firm residence in the marketing literature (e.g., Albert and Merunka, 2013; Bengtsson *et al.*, 2010; DelVecchio, 2000), along with a plethora of research relating to commitment and relationship interdependency (Bansal *et al.*, 2004; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). While the concepts contained within these literatures are often overlapping and contradictory (as previously discussed), they do confirm the validity of the relationship metaphor in consumer/brand research and play a key role in understanding how strong consumer/brand relationships are built.

However, of particular interest in this paper, is brand relationship maintenance (not development) and, thus, it is the factors, in Fournier's (1998) model, that provide the conduit between brand relationship quality and relationship stability/durability (i.e. *accommodation, tolerance/forgiveness, biased partner perceptions, devaluation of alternatives* and *attribution biases*) that attract our attention. Furthermore, the findings associated with Fournier's (1998) research are well aligned with the relationship maintenance mechanisms identified by Rusbult *et al.* (2001) and Rusbult *et al.* (2012) in their extension of Rusbult's (1980) investment model of commitment processes (i.e. *accommodation, forgiveness, cognitive interdependence, derogation of alternatives, positive illusions* and *willingness to sacrifice*). As such, the parallel between the two models (e.g., Fournier, 1998; Rusbult *et al.*, 2012), and

further calibrating research evidence, relating to individual relationship maintenance dimensions, establishes our understanding of relationship maintenance dimensions, and provide the definitional boundaries of our proposed construct i.e. *brand fidelity*.

Relationship Maintenance Dimensions

While the terms relationship stability, durability and fidelity have been referred to haphazardly in the literature (Brucks *et al.*, 2000; Park *et al.*, 2002; Ryan *et al.*, 1999) few studies have attempted to offer a suite of behaviours/cognitions that define these terms. Notable exceptions are Fournier (1998), in the marketing context, and Rusbult *et al.*, (2001) and Rusbult *et al.*, (2012), in the context of romantic relationships. Contextual differences aside, the results of both studies share significant common ground, in that behavioural maintenance dimensions, such as *accommodation/forgiveness* and *willingness to sacrifice*, along with cognitive maintenance dimensions, such as *cognitive interdependence*, *derogation of alternatives* and *positive illusions*, appropriately frame what we currently know of relationship maintenance factors.

Behavioural Dimensions:

Accommodation and forgiveness are both explicated in the relevant relationship models of Fournier (1998), Rusbult *et al.* (2001) and Rusbult *et al.*, (2012). The theory of accommodation was derived from the studies of Hirschman (1970), in relation to the decline of organisations, and Rusbult *et al.* (1982) who studied responses to dissatisfaction in close relationships. Accommodation refers to the situation where one party fails to follow through on a promise (or acts in some unexpected way) and the other party stifles the urge to

retaliate (i.e. destructiveness); instead, responding in a manner that will promote the relationship (i.e. constructiveness) (Rusbult *et al.*, 1991). From a consumer/brand perspective, the “accommodation” of the committed consumer to the brand, in times of below-par performance, not only shields the brand from financial loss (i.e. losing committed customers) but also helps diffuse the situation in the eyes of other consumers. In this sense, highly committed consumers behave in a manner that provides a safety net for the brand and protects/maintains the relationship (Fournier, 1998).

Forgiveness and accommodation share considerable common ground. Forgiveness, in ongoing relationships, refers to “the tendency to forgo vengeance and other destructive patterns of interaction, instead behaving towards the perpetrator in a positive and constructive manner” (Finkel *et al.*, 2002, p. 958). In this sense, forgiveness underpins accommodation behaviour as forgiveness refers to an individual’s stance (e.g. “I forgive you”/“I do not forgive you”) enacted through behaviour, either destructive (i.e. retaliation) or constructive (i.e. relationship maintenance). In fact, measured from this perspective, Hegner *et al.* (2017) found that forgiveness was, indeed, a consequence of brand love.

There is a clearer distinction between the two in the context of romantic relationships as accommodation can mean simply agreeing with a partner in order to avoid an argument, whereas forgiveness may be related to much more serious matters that involve severe physical, psychological or social costs (Rusbult *et al.*, 1991). In terms of brand relationships, the distinction is not quite so clear, with “bad behaviour” of the brand (in most cases) being performance or price related, causing a level of discomfort or inconvenience, rather than

causing serious personal damage. It is on this basis that the lines between accommodation and forgiveness, in the context of consumer/brand relationships, become blurred.

Similarly, it is argued that *willingness to sacrifice* also has a close connection to accommodation and forgiveness (Rusbult *et al.*, 2001). For example, from a consumer/brand perspective, when a negative brand experience occurs, the committed consumer's decision to forgive will motivate the enactment of constructive relationship behaviours (i.e. accommodation) (Xie and Peng, 2009). However, in doing so, such behaviours may be costly, or stand in opposition to direct self-interest, thus, representing sacrifice.

Clearly explicated in Rusbult *et al.*, (2012) model, as a key relationship maintenance factor, willingness to sacrifice, has received considerable attention in the marketing literature. Largely, research has studied sacrifice from the price (i.e. premiums) or product availability (i.e. stock shortages) point of view (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Jones *et al.*, 2010; Jones and Taylor, 2007). However, there is little debate over the positioning of willingness to sacrifice as a key consumer response outcome variable, viewed either as a manifestation of brand loyalty (e.g., Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Jones *et al.*, 2008) or explicitly as an outcome of commitment (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Rusbult *et al.*, 2012).

Cognitive Dimensions:

Compatibility between Fournier's (1998) and Rusbult's *et al.*, (2001) relationship models is also evident in relation to the derogation (Rusbult *et al.*, 2001) or devaluation (Fournier, 1998) of alternatives. *Derogation of alternatives*, or the derogation effect, involves the downplaying of the attractiveness of alternative relationship partners and the over–

estimation, or leniency, in relation to the attractiveness of current relationship partners (Rusbult *et al.*, 2012). Empirically supported in the context of romantic relationships (e.g., Arriaga *et al.*, 2007, and more), the derogation effect may represent an important behavioural outcome of brand relationship commitment. In this sense, the consumer becomes a strong advocate for the brand and, in doing so, is biased toward the strengths of their chosen brand partner, and proactive in highlighting the weaknesses of other brand alternatives (i.e. derogation).

Positive illusions (Rusbult *et al.*, 2012) or biased perceptions (Fournier, 1998) also align with the derogation effect. Positive illusions refer to committed individuals perceiving imperfect relationships in somewhat idealized ways or, in other words, through rose-coloured glasses (Murray and Holmes, 1997). However, positive illusions go beyond simply concentrating on the partner's strengths (while at the same time dismissing their weaknesses) to visualizing strengths that, in reality, do not exist. This is a common occurrence in romantic relationships as partners try to sub-consciously substantiate their relationship and reduce cognitive dissonance (Rusbult *et al.*, 2001). The same could also be said of consumers who engage in brand advocacy behaviour in order to reduce cognitive dissonance (Soutar and Sweeney, 2003; Wangenheim, 2005). Furthermore, understanding positive illusions in relation to brands is important as "positive illusions capture a prospective sense of conviction or security that is not simply isomorphic with satisfaction" (Murray and Holmes 1997, p. 586).

Cognitive interdependence, as discussed by Agnew *et al.* (1998) in romantic relationships, refers to "a mental state characterized by a pluralistic, collective representation of the self-in-representation" (p. 939). For example, this is demonstrated by the use of more plural pronouns

such as “us”, “we” and “our”. More recently, the common practice of combining partners’ names (e.g. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie) to label the romantic relationship (e.g. Brangelina) exemplifies the perceived overlap in mental representations of partners involved in highly committed relationships (Agnew *et al.*, 1998). However, this dialectal behaviour is found to be much more specific to romantic relationships, in contrast to relationships involving best friends (Agnew *et al.*, 1998). On this basis, it is less likely that reference to consumer/brand relationships would include such pronouns/labels. However, cognitive interdependence could well manifest itself in the consumer/brand relationship through the use of language characterized by “ownership” (Kachersky and Palermo, 2013; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2007). For example, reference to “my brand” does imply a representation of the self-in-brand relationship and, as such, represents a cognitive manifestation of interdependence (associated with the brand). In addition, it places the brand relationship as central to one’s life, a notion advocated by Fournier (1998) and one that is strongly linked to brand intimacy (Long-Tolbert and Gammoh, 2012).

BRAND FIDELITY: DEFINED

The term “fidelity” has been referred to loosely in the marketing literature, mostly being discussed to as a proxy label for (or closely related to) behavioural loyalty and purchase intentions (e.g., Gianni and Franceschini, 2003; Jones and Taylor, 2007; Ryan *et al.*, 1999) and largely lacking in definition. Of the few researchers, who attempt to define fidelity in the consumer context, there is little agreement over its definition and, subsequent, operationalization. For example, in their study of social contagion in new product adoption,

Langley *et al.* (2012) claim fidelity to be the tendency of the consumer “to make accurate copies of new behaviours” (p. 629); the tendency of which is highly dependent on the personality traits of the consumer. In contrast, Dumitrescu and Ichindelean (2011), when studying customer relationship cycles, define customer fidelity as “the felt satisfaction after the consumption of a product/service” (p. 105). Moreover, in multi-format retailing, Arrondo *et al.* (2002) operationalize fidelity as relative household expenditure level. These disjointed interpretations of fidelity provide little theoretical guidance and highlight the need to justify the use of the term in this current investigation.

We believe, the term “fidelity”, appropriately captures of essence of the construct under development here. To clarify, fidelity relates to an individual’s faithfulness to a person, cause, or belief, demonstrated by continuing loyalty and support and being faithful implies durability, stability and exclusivity (OED, 2004). Therefore, brand fidelity is a particularly relevant label for our construct as durability, stability and exclusivity are all necessary elements of strong consumer/brand relationships (Fournier, 1998; Fournier and Yao, 1997) and it is the maintenance of such relationships that ground this study. On this basis, we define brand fidelity as *the consumer’s faithfulness to a brand partner demonstrated by an aggregate of behaviours (i.e. accommodation/forgiveness, willingness to sacrifice) and cognitions (i.e. derogation of alternatives, cognitive interdependence and positive illusions) that maintain relationship stability and durability.* Refer Figure 2.

--- Insert Figure 2 Here ---

In terms of the behavioural manifestations of brand fidelity (*i.e. accommodation/forgiveness, willingness to sacrifice*) we offer the following definitions:

- *Accommodation/forgiveness* refers to the degree to which an individual is forgiving of and provides support to a brand partner in times of price/performance variations;
- *Willingness to sacrifice* refers to the degree to which an individual is willing to make sacrifices to continue their relationship with the brand partner.

Two points of clarification are required here. First, although referred to separately in previous studies of romantic relationships (*i.e., Rusbult et al., 2012; Rusbult et al., 2001*), for the purpose of understanding consumer/brand relationships, we have collapsed accommodation and forgiveness into one behavioural category based on our previous argument regarding the blurred lines between the two in the context of consumer/brand relations. Second, in adapting our thinking to the current research context, accommodation/forgiveness is referred to, here, in relation to unexpected events associated with price and/or performance variations.

In relation to the cognitive manifestations of brand fidelity, the following definitions are proffered:

- *Cognitive interdependence* refers to the degree to which an individual feels “at one” with the brand partner and takes personal ownership of the brand
- *Derogation of alternatives* refers to the degree to which an individual focuses on the strengths of the brand partner and the weaknesses of its competitors;

- *Positive illusions* refers to the degree to which an individual has positive illusions of the brand partner, which may (or may not) reflect reality

For clarity, the definitional boundaries and dimensionality of the proposed brand fidelity construct are graphically depicted in Figure 2.

Brand Fidelity in the Bigger Picture

For the purpose of clarity, Figure 3 provides a pictorial map that essentially summarizes the arguments presented in this paper and the placement of brand fidelity in the “bigger picture”. Using Figure 3 as a point of reference, it is important to make some final points of clarification. First, we acknowledge that relationship foundations (i.e. product-related and market-related factors) fundamentally dictate the degree to which consumers wish to establish a relationship with the brand. Higher level brand relationship quality (i.e. commitment, love, fidelity) is not necessarily relevant for all brands as such relationship development and maintenance is highly dependent on product/brand category and marketplace characteristics. In fact, research suggests that the depth of consumer/brand relationships is highly dependent on factors such as product type (i.e. hedonic versus utilitarian) (Chaudhary, 2018), product category involvement (i.e. high versus low involvement) (Christy *et al.*, 1996), the brand’s personality (Smit *et al.*, 2007) and the type of relational exchange (i.e. B2B versus B2C) (Valta, 2013). Thus, as shown in Figure 3, we acknowledge that such factors establish the boundaries within which the brand fidelity construct has value.

Second, while brand commitment and brand love take up their rightful position in underpinning the development of consumer/brand relationships, such emotional factors are difficult to articulate and measure (as discussed extensively in this paper). In addition, the strength of the emotional bond the consumer has with the brand is represented by the degree to which they are motivated to work towards maintaining that relationship. Just as with all relationships, a proclamation of love is easy to make; the protection and maintenance of the relationship is a lot more difficult and requires effort from both parties. For these reasons, the brand fidelity construct represents the consumer's behavioural and cognitive "effort" toward relationship maintenance as a true indication of their emotional attachment, over and above that which may be self-reported. In this sense, the strength of the consumer's emotional bond with the brand is inferred by their actions (i.e. brand fidelity).

Finally, we acknowledge that the *dimensions* of brand fidelity, as shown in Figure 3, hold similarities to other well-researched constructs such as brand citizenship behaviours, attitudinal and behavioural loyalty, switching costs and the like. However, the contribution of brand fidelity to the consumer/brand literature does not reside in its dimensions in isolation, but rather as a formation of these dimensions in representing the gamut of relationship maintenance behaviours/cognitions that are grouped together to form brand fidelity. In other words, the value of the brand fidelity construct is manifested through the synergy of its dimensions. Furthermore, given that individual dimension similarities exist in the literature, the future operationalization of brand fidelity will be well-informed by the literature and, as such, measurement challenges often associated with new scale development will be significantly circumvented.

--- Insert Figure 3 Here ---

CONCLUSION

In truly embracing the notion of consumers and brands as “relationship partners”, this paper introduces a novel approach to effectively understand consumer cognitions and behaviours that exemplify stable, durable and exclusive consumer/brand relationships. Drawn from the theories associated with commitment and relationship maintenance surrounding romantic love, *brand fidelity* shows strong promise as a valuable marketing concept and metric worthy of future academic and practitioner attention. Metaphorically, the *brand fidelity* construct effectively captures the implicit vows that consumers make to their brand partners. For example, when a consumer takes the brand as their own (e.g. cognitive interdependence); they may do so for richer or for poorer (e.g. willingness to sacrifice); in sickness and in health (e.g. accommodation/forgiveness) and forsaking all others (derogation of alternatives). In demonstrating fidelity to their brand partner, consumers explicitly protect and maintain sustainable brand relationships.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Figure 1: Evolution of Consumer/Brand Research

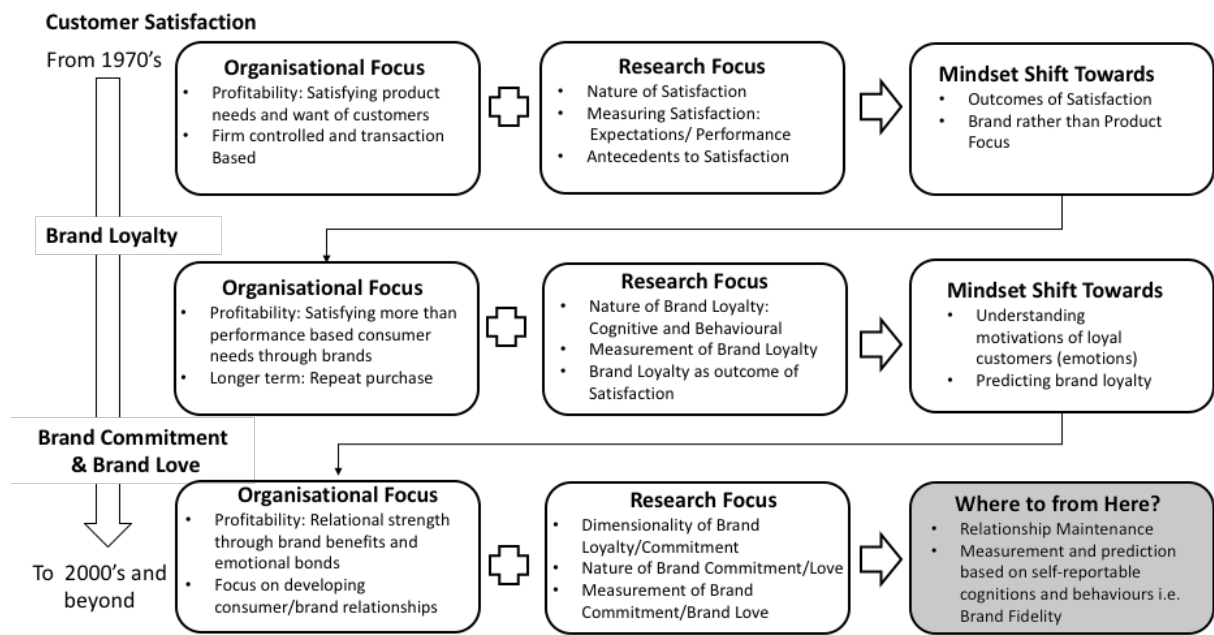


Figure 2: Brand Fidelity Defined

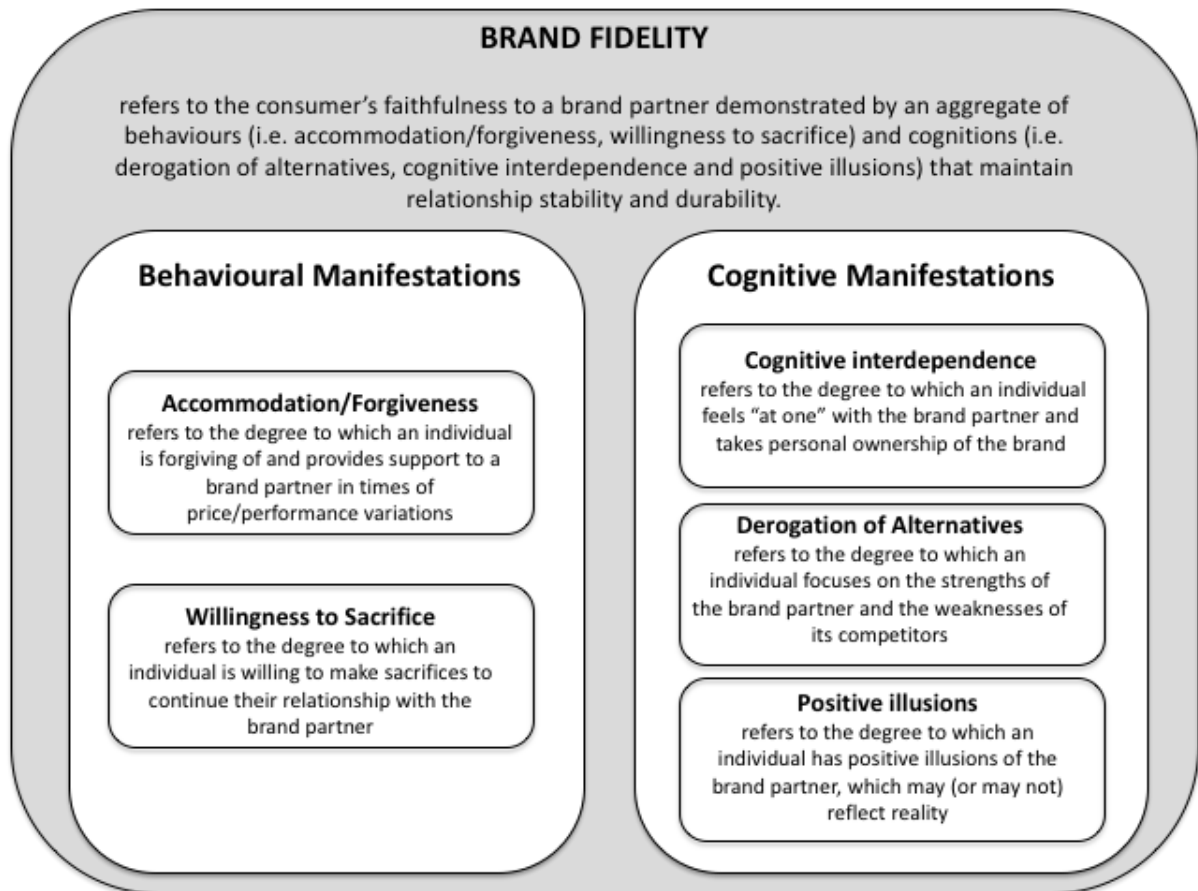


Figure 3: Mapping Consumer/Brand Relationships

