From Brand Awareness to Brand Love: A Conceptual Discussion of Brand Love Progression

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Abstract
Love in consumption has drawn enormous attention in the recent years in the field of marketing especially in searching for long term sustainability in consumer and brand relationship. The metaphor of human interpersonal relationship has greatly inspired researchers into adopting love concept in consumer consumptions. The purpose of this conceptual discussion is to gain a deeper understanding of consumer brand love relationship formation from its developmental perspectives. Build upon the interpersonal relationship development theories, this study proposes a framework of progression that conceptualise the stages of development of consumer brand love formation from the initial stage of awareness to the stage of love, i.e. Brand Awareness → Brand Liking → Brand Experimenting → Brand Passion → Brand Love. The ability to visualise each stages of development may contribute significantly to branding managers in determining the right marketing campaigns, treatments and strategies in achieving brand love and ultimately sustainable brand loyalty.

Keywords: brand love, progression, development, awareness, liking, experimenting, passion

Background
Over the past four decades the concept of ‘loyalty’ has been an important topic in marketing (McConnell, 1968). Firms spent millions of dollars annually creating and building the concept of loyalty (Reinartz and Kumar, 2002). It is strongly suggested that the concept of loyalty could bring tremendous advantages to corporations, i.e. attracting customer repeat purchases, preventing customer from switching, reducing marketing cost, reducing price sensitivity, encourage positive word of mouth and improve profitability (Godson, 2009; Dick and Basu, 1994; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). The concept of loyalty has grown to become the important drivers to a healthy and profitable company through its ability to reduce marketing cost, maintaining price level and market share. It has attracted considerable amount of interests from the academics and practitioners in further exploring its benefits and has since expanded into various categories such as customer loyalty, brand loyalty, service loyalty, stores loyalty, vendor loyalty (Dick and Basu, 1994).

Although the concept of loyalty is acknowledged, however, some scholars found customer loyalty is relatively short lived. The concerns of sustainability of brand loyalty concept are being questioned by scholars. Following the development of brand loyalty progression in the past 25 years, it is noted that customer are getting less brand loyal than before (Johnson, 1984; Dekimpe et al. 1997; Beemer, 1997; Kapferer, 2005). Johnson (1984) highlighted several reasons for the decline of brand loyalty, 1) greater concern of price awareness that provide greater comparison in brand evaluation, 2) brand proliferations that leads to more options and 3) greater brand or product similarities that leads to less distinct in brand or product selection. The weakness of brand loyalty is further aggregated as Sondoh (2009) highlighted the entire brand loyalty phenomenon cannot be assessed if the attitudinal loyalty is not extended over to action behaviour. Oliver (1999) suggests that the pursuit of loyalty as a strategic business goal needs a paradigm shift. His literature review found clear instances that satisfaction and loyalty do not move in
tandem, for example, citing study on automotive industry in which out of 85% to 95% of reported satisfied customers, only 30% to 40% returned to the same brand.

Learning from the weakness of brand loyalty, scholars explored deeper into emotion connectivity between consumer and brand, in searching of a better sustainability in loyalty. Brand and consumer relationship metaphor is believed to be a new direction in achieving intimate, permanent and stable relationship between the consumer and their brands (Fournier, 1998; Zhou, 2007). Drawing from the theories of animism, arguably Fournier (1998) provided the first working concept of consumer and brand as a relationship partner. She argued that the concept of brand loyalty has lost its nuances in the traditional brand loyalty research. As a result, the basic questions of why consumer seek and valued ongoing relationship with the brand remain largely unanswered. She proposed the consumer and brand relationship model to measure the relationship strength and stability over time between consumer and their brands. The strength of consumer and brand relationship concept lies in the meaningful relationships between consumer behaviour and brand behaviour that forged the compatibility and bonding between the brand and its owner. This phenomenon has been acknowledged to provide an extensive cohesiveness where the brands cohere into the system that the consumer created (Fournier, 1998).

Although the relationship concept in branding has momentously gained its acknowledgments among marketers and academia for the past decades, scholars still doubting the legitimacy of brand as relationship partners (Bengtsson, 2003; Patterson and O’Malley, 2006). Specifically, Bengtsson (2003) criticised the absence of reciprocity, interdependency and intimacy in a unilateral relationship between consumer and brand compared to human to human relationships. Patterson and O’Malley (2006) on the other hand, criticised the limitation of interpersonal relationship metaphor usage in consumer and brand relationships context, 1) the concept of interpersonal relationship is too powerful to be directly adapted into commercial environment and 2) the brand conceptual entity is managed by corporations for its own gain that resulted in lack of personification of natural human attributes that characterised human relationship.

In order to forge a deeper understanding into the complex consumers’ emotion, feeling, cognition and expectation in relationships, scholars have focused the inside of consumer rather than closer to consumer. Scholars have shifted to engage consumers on the level of senses and emotions that could forge a deeper and lasting relationship connection with their brands (Gobe, 2001). Learning from the perspectives of human emotion, the elements of emotions were extensively adopted into the relationship model in searching for a better bonding between consumer and brands.

Whang et al. (2004) explored the meaning behind consumer often claim they are in love with a product or brand. They found the consumers’ claimed love towards the products or brands resembles an interpersonal love relationship. This finding has attracted scholars to further study the new concept of love in branding. Caroll and Ahuiva (2006) introduce the concept of brand love in searching for the linkage to higher level of loyalty. Their findings are very encouraging that brand love is not only has very positive influence on brand loyalty but also strongly correlates to positive word of mouth. Batra, Ahuiva and Bagozzi (2008, 2012) found the concept of brand love facilitate passion driven behaviour, (such as strong desires to use the brand and interact frequently with it), create positive emotional connection with the brand and sense of long term relationship and more importantly is the ability to connect to with consumer’s life deeper meanings and important values.

In practice, marketers have acknowledged the usefulness of brand love concept, where the adoption have generated positive results such as higher level of loyalty, increase willingness to pay a price premium, forgiveness of brand failure and positive word of mouth (Roberts, 2004). Scholars found that the brand love concept has the ability to directly adopt the human interpersonal love theories to explain the love relationship between consumers and brands and some popular interpersonal love theories that have been adopted are the theory of prototype of love (Fehr and Russell, 1991) adopted by Batra, Ahuiva and Bagozzi (2008, 2012), the typology of style of loving (Lee, 1977) adopted by Whang et al. (2004) and the triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986) adopted by Heinrich and Muhl (2008).
However, despite of its growing popularity, brand love concept is still in its infancy and current studies has generally focused around the basic definitions, dimensions, concept of brand love, antecedents and outcomes of brand love (Albert, Merunka and Florence, 2008; Batra, Ahuvia and Bagozzi, 2008, 2012; Caroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Sarkar, 2011). It is notable that other fundamental aspects of love relationship are yet to be adopted in the brand love concept, such as the developmental aspect of consumer love towards the brands. The development of interpersonal relationship has been an important aspect of study in social psychology and in every major discussions of dyadic love relationship (Penrod, 1983; Michener, DeLamater and Myers, 2004; Werner and Baxter, 1994; Knapp and Vangelisti, 1992; Regan, 2003; Trenholm and Jensen, 2004; Diamond, Fagundes and Butterworth, 2010). The above limitations and inadequacy have lead to the current discussion that aims to explore the formation, development and progression of brand love from the consumer perspectives.

Conceptualising Consumer Brand Love Relationship Progression

Studies have suggested that consumers are capable to love an object (Fehr and Russell, 1991; Whang et al. 2004), however, there are critics debating that consumer and objects (product or brand) relationship metaphor are a unilateral relationship process that is incapable to mimic the human to human interactions. This critique has been supported by scholars, such as Bengtsson, (2003), Patterson and O’Malley, (2007), Cooke and Harris, (2007) arguing that the relationship formation is a process that require the elements of reciprocity, intimacy and interdependency between two parties which are absence from the consumer to objects (product or brand) relationship formations.

Theoretically, although this critique stands, however, it does not wholly represent the true picture of the love relationship between consumer and their brands. According to Fournier (1998), consumer and brand relationships can be legitimised through animate, humanized and personalised the brand objects and furthermore, consumers are capable to associate with the human characteristics (personality) that were assigned to the brand (Aaker, 1997). Fournier’s (1998) reviews of the conceptual foundations of brand as relationship partners have implied that relationships are process phenomena that evolve and change over time and this one fundamental knowledge has not been considered by the critics of relationship metaphor.

In fact, there were many aspects of research in marketing have emphasised on the developmental process in consumer behaviour especially in branding, advertising, consumer learning and experiential consumption, (i.e. brand and customer loyalty hierarchy (Dyson, Farr and Hollis, 1996; Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne, 1991), consumer hierarchy of effects in advertising (Barry, 1987), consumer behavioural learning in marketing (Rothschild and Gaidis, 1981) and consumer experiential aspects in consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982).

Based on Barry’s (1987) reviews on the development of the hierarchy of effects in advertising have highlighted that the developmental notions of stair-step hierarchical response process in consumer has been adopted since 1921 from the work of Kiston’s (1921), stair-step hierarchical framework that conceptualised the buyers’ mind processes into four stages of development, (i.e. Attention > Interest > Desire > Confidence > Action. Subsequently, many scholars have acknowledged and adopted this notion of stair-step hierarchical concept to illustrate consumer responses to marketing stimuli, i.e. Lavidge and Steiner (1961) proposed a six stages of consumer responses to advertisement (Awareness > Knowledge > Liking > Preference > Conviction > Purchase), argued that consumer do not jump stages but will go through a series of steps to that threshold of purchase. Similarly, Rogers (1962) proposed a five stages of consumer new product adoption process (Awareness > Interest > Evaluation > Trial > Adoption) and Howard and Sheth (1969) proposed a framework of buyer behaviour process (Attention > Comprehension > Attitude > Intention > Purchase).

Studies of consumer behavioural learning (Rothschild and Gaidis, 1981) have also suggested that consumer will follow a sequence of learning in responding to marketing stimuli. This learning theory illustrates that in the initial phase, an advertisement will lead to the response of awareness and knowledge
gain. Subsequently, in the next phase, the knowledge will induce product trial where consumer learned and experienced about the product and finally reinforcing satisfaction in establishing repeat buying behaviour.

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) illustrate from the aspect of experiential consumption, suggest that experiential consumption is seen as a response system that will progress from memory or imaginary stage to preference and emotional stage and finally arriving at consumption stage. Holbrook and Hirschman’s view have emphasised the applications of a developmental sequence in experiential consumptions.

Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne (1991) have conceptualised consumer loyalty in a series of stages i.e. Prospect > Purchaser > Client > Supporter > Advocate > Partner. They suggest that consumer will develop their loyalty towards a brand or supplier over time through a sequence of developmental stages. Dyson, Farr and Hollis, (1996) have proposed a pyramid concept of consumer brand loyalty developmental framework to illustrate the developmental steps of consumer moving up the pyramid of relationship with the brand, i.e. Presence > Relevance > Performance > Advantage > Bonding. According to Dyson, Farr and Hollis, (1996), the model conceptualised brand relationship building involves a sequential series of steps, where each step is contingent upon successfully accomplishing of the previous step.

The reviews above have demonstrated a close fundamental similarity in the sequential developmental process between the perceived developmental process in consumption experience, branding, consumer loyalty, advertising and the developmental process of human interpersonal love relationship, where all demonstrated the similarities of the sequence of development from the lowest to the highest level of intensity in their relationship progression. The reviews above have also shown a strong likelihood that consumer and brand love relationships development are capable to emulate the human to human relationship framework of development and progression. More importantly, the reviews have also provided the capability to understand and visualise the inside of the love relationship developmental process between the consumer and their brand through the conceptualisation of the relationship progression into a stage-liked pattern. Therefore, in order to address the theoretical and knowledge gaps in consumer brand love relationships studies, there is a need of a new theoretical framework.

The review of relationship developmental studies above have indicated a clear pattern of adoptions of the interpersonal relationships model (see Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987) in marketing. In conceptualising the buyer and seller relationship development, Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) have directly adapted Scanzoni’s (1979) framework in developing the stages of relationship growth between the buyer and the seller.

In order to conceptualise and justify the rational of this proposed conceptual framework, there are few assumptions that need to be adopted. First, the theory of animism (McDougall, 1911; Gilmore, 1919) and the theory of brand personality (Aaker, 1997) were referred. The theory of animism, suggest human are capable to anthropomorphize and interacts with objects (nonmaterial world) and the theory of brand personality suggest human are capable to view the brand as objects with personality and characteristics (i.e., appearance, designs, looks, colour, symbolic meaning and other aesthetic and functional characteristics). These assumptions are important in terms of enable consumer to view the brand as the relationship partner that is capable to attract and interact with them. Second, it is necessary to extend the assumption that this relationship is capable to emulate the relational characteristics that can be develop, maintain and enhance over time. This assumption is important to enable the view of brand and consumer relationships are dynamics and are capable to develop and change over time. Lastly, it is important to assume that the love development will develop and progress in stages or phases. This assumption is essential that the love relationship between the brand and consumer should gain certain level of maturity and stabilised in each stage before moving to the next stage. With these assumptions, the adoption of an interpersonal relationship framework or combination of frameworks is deemed possible and rational.
Drawing from the perspective of interpersonal love relationships development and progression frameworks (i.e. mate selection perspective, social exchange perspective and interpersonal communications perspective), the consumer brand love relationship progression framework will be referred and emulate. Corresponding with these bases, the framework of Knapp and Vangelisti (1992) interpersonal relationship development were referred in this study. Knapp and Vangelisti’s framework of ‘coming together’ demonstrate the five stages of the sequence of development that illustrates the changes of the level of intensity in the progression of a relationship. Their framework projected a systematic patterns of development from an initiating stage to the bonding stage that can be closely characterised the love relationship developmental pattern between consumer and their brand. Further, Knapp and Vangelisti (1992) have distinctly divided the formation (coming together) and dissolution (coming apart) of a relationship that can be viewed as a separate phases. In general most of the interpersonal relationship developmental frameworks such as Scanzoni (1979); Levinger (1980); DeVito (1996) have emphasised on the full cycle of interpersonal relationship development from the initial stage to the stage of dissolution (ending). In this study, it is specifically focus only on conceptualising the consumer brand love developmental stages from awareness stage to the stage of love.

The initial concept of awareness is adopted from the work of Scanzoni (1979). Scanzoni described in any initial situations, partners will begin with the aware of each other before any initiation of interaction. The concept of awareness fits well in the unidirectional relationship context between consumer and brands. The concept of liking and passion is adopted from the works of Shimp and Madden (1988). They argued that the feeling of liking and passion exist in consumer and objects relationship and states that it is similar to interpersonal love relationship. They further provide evidences that consumer developed the feeling of closeness and connecting with consumption objects from their studies of household products. And finally, the concept of experimenting and love is adopted from the works of Knapp and Vangelisti (1992). The concept of experimenting, according to Knapp and Vangelisti (1992) is the process of exploring the unknown such as strangers trying to become acquaintance to learn more about each other in order to recognise and match their similarities and difference. Knapp and Vangelisti (1992) describe this processes as implied where partners will engage in exploring, trying and matching each other similarities and differences in discovering the willingness to pursue a relationship. Likewise, the concept of bonding between partners in Knapp and Vangelisti (1992) is adopted to illustrate to context of love between consumer and brands.

On the consumer brand love stages of progression perspective, the conceptualisations of interpersonal love progression models (Scanzoni, 1979; Levinger, 1980; Knapp and Vangelisti, 1992; DeVito, 1996, 2002) were adopted. Working on the same metaphor of interpersonal love relationship, the consumer brand love relationship development should begin from the stage of awareness. Next, once the awareness is established, in an interpersonal love relationship development, it is expected that the two strangers will initiate their first small or light conversation to get to know each other’s. In interpersonal love relationship frameworks, this stage is characterised as the process of attraction that consist of the feeling of liking, interest and general pleasure emotion between the two strangers that will lead to affiliation and desire to expand one’s interpersonal communication and progression (Levinger, 1980; Scanzoni, 1979; Knapp and Vangelisti, 1992; Wood, 2004). On the same metaphor, in the context of consumer and brand love relationship development, after the establishment of knowledge about the brand, consumer will likely to engage in brand or product trials in order to decide the continuation of affiliation with the products or brands. The next stage of progression, in interpersonal love relationship, partners will move to a more serious stage of integrating and consolidation (Knapp and Vangelisti, 1992;
Levinger, 1980). In this stage couples becomes very close to each other, spent most of the time together and passionate about each other (Wood, 2004; Knapp and Vangelisti, 1992; DeVito, 1996, 2002). Adopting the same metaphor, consumer will develop passionate feeling towards the brands i.e. from the process of experimenting, consumer will likely to engage through evaluation process to establishing strong emotion towards the brand. Next, in interpersonal love relationship couple will arrive to the ultimate stage of marriage. This stage symbolised the stage of partners committed to each other and ready to take up the responsibility for each others. In the same metaphor, in consumer and brand love relationship development, the feeling of passion about the brand will progress and arrive to the feeling of ultimate love for the brand. Figure 1 below illustrates the proposed conceptual model of the consumer brand love relationships stages of progression.

![Figure 1: The Proposed Consumer Brand Love Relationship Stages of Progression](image)

**Conclusion**

The metaphor of human interpersonal relationship has greatly inspired marketing researchers to explore the possibilities of emulating the similar concept into consumer consumption. Love in consumption has drawn enormous attention in the recent years in the field of marketing especially in searching for long term sustainability in consumer and brand relationship. This consumer brand love relationship stages of progression framework is fulfilling the current theoretical gaps in brand love research. This study strives to unveil how consumers experience the stages of development and sequence of progression in their brand love relationships. There were several new knowledge are likely to emerged from this conceptual proposal. First, this current conceptual idea is potentially to complement the existing status quo of existing studies in brand love which only focussing on the antecedents and the outcome of brand love, omitting the dynamic aspect of consumers brand love relationship. Past studies paid much effort in unveiling and confirming the outcomes of brand love, but no attempt thus far to reveal the insights how consumers and their brands’ love relationship develop and progress. Current scholars have overlook the significant of the cultivation of brand love is essential before the outcome of brand love could be measured. In addition, this conceptual idea is also expected to provide numerous implications to the marketing practitioners. It is strongly foresee that this developmental model will benefit marketers especially for those who are involved in brand management (i.e. brand advertising, brand communications, brand image building, brand equity management and others branding related specialist). This progression model provides a visualisation of how consumer progress and develop in their brand love relationship formation. In practice, this is an important aspect of brand management to marketers. This progression model highlights that if firms are able to visualise the brand love relationship stages of progression, they will be able to identify the correct integrated communication strategies that targeting at different level of intensity. For instance, the adoption of advertising appeal and messages in the stage of brand awareness should not only focus on brand attributes that will evoke consumers’ brand recognition and brand knowledge but also motivating them to progress into the stage of brand liking or the stage of brand experiment and finally to brand love.

To close with the brand relationships insight, probably the fundamental arguments in this concept are the appropriateness and validity of the relationship between consumer and their brand in terms of the ability to mimic interpersonal interaction with intimacy, reciprocity and loyalty (Cooke and Harris, 2007; Bengtsson, 2003; Patterson and O’Malley, 2006). Perhaps, one cannot deny that consumer falls in love
with their brand. Most of the researchers in this area of research strongly believe that consumer do falls in love with their brand (Whang et al., 2004; Caroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Albert, Merunka and Florence, 2008; Batra, Ahuvia and Bagozzi, 2008). Furthermore, past studies of consumer brand love have discovered strong evidence that consumer possesses strong emotional attachment towards objects besides human beings. Leading researchers such as Shimp and Madden (1988), Ahuvia, (1993) and Whang et al. (2004) have discovered consumer possess strong emotional attachment with products or brand, such as loving their pets, cars, bikes, paintings, musical instruments, books or computers.

References


