Chapter 34
"Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done":
Attaining Divine Transcendence Through Brand Fandom, Evidence From India

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ABSTRACT

Majority of prior research show that individual's relationship with a brand is dyadic. However, the primary need for human beings is to forge meaningful interpersonal relationships, and brands can act as facilitators to achieve this need. Thus, consumer-brand-consumer relationships are rather triadic, with brands acting as an epicenter around which close-knit human relationships are formed. This chapter discusses the indispensable roles of consumers' close social relationships with their brands representing a knit brand fandom of like-minded consumers who share common consumption values and attain transcendence through branded consumption. Using grounded theory analysis, we discover that Indian consumers' cultural values of filial piety, face saving, need for escapism and brand ethnocentrism act as antecedents to consumers' romantic brand love. This romantic brand love progresses into single brand devotion through the moderation of selective perception, and ultimately translates into a close-knit brand fandom, mainly if the consumers find the brand to enable self-expression. The role of brand-hero is also important in the formation of brand fandom, as brand hero can inspire consumers and bind them together to work for common interest of the brand. Brand fandom results in consumers experiencing flow and transcendence, where they experience a temporary sense of separation from the mundane and unity with a higher plane of existence.

INTRODUCTION

Brand loyalty is acknowledged as a construct of major importance in marketing literature, and brand affect is a key predictor of brand loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). A realistic analysis of contemporary purchase behavior of consumer, however, divulges that consumer these days largely displays multi-brand or polygamous brand loyalty, where consumer allocates varying proportions of his/her total resource to multiple competing brands in a product category (Dawes, 2009). This is a state when the manifest loyalty is created more by passive situational factors (Oliver, 1999) rather than the strongly held emotional preferences (Day & Montgomery, 1999). From candies to cars, the traditional "till death do us apart" monogamy with a brand is rare in today's marketplace. This behavior stems from the fact that several brands may satisfy a customer at any given point of time due to several attributes (Sarkar, Sarkar, & Ponnam, 2015). Thus, mere satisfaction does not ascertain brand loyalty (Reichheld, 2001).

Contrastingly, some previous studies do reveal that at times, consumers do display intense monogamous behavioral loyalty to some brands like Apple Newton (Muniz & Schau, 2005) and Harley Davidson (Schembri, 2009). Muniz & Schau (2005) illustrate how Apple Newton users portrayed intense behavioral loyalty to the brand. Apple Newton fans stood by the brand in spite of Apple abandoning the brand; they never lost faith in the brand even in face of persecution and mockery by non-users, and advent of advanced digital personal assistants compared to the obsolete platform of Apple Newton. Muniaz and Schau (2005) state, "This research explores the grassroots brand community centered on the Apple Newton, Supernatural, religious, and magical motifs are common in the narratives of the Newton community, including the miraculous performance and survival of the brand, as well as the return of the brand creator. These motifs invest the brand with powerful meanings and perpetuate the brand and the community, its values, and its beliefs" (p.737). Schembri (2009) demonstrates how Harley Davidson fans get deeply drawn in the brand, such that their lifestyle and existence orbits around Harley consumption. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) provide anecdotal evidence of how though Harley fans weretreated as outcastes by rest of the society; Harley Owners Group (HOGs) form a uniquely distinct sub-culture of consumption, with its own set of goals, ethos, codes, values and activities that powerfully connect the consumers to Harley. These research works (Muniz & Schau, 2005; Schembri, 2009) posit that the aforementioned brands possess strongly bound communities of followers, who attribute paramount importance to the brand in their lives. An elucidation to such zealot behavior could be found in 'brand fandom', a closely knit community of brand fans, who engage in a distinct consumption subculture (Schouten & McAlexander, 2009).

The remaining paper is organized as: i) Review of the extant literature on brand love and devotion to theoretically understand brand fandom and the associated factors, ii) describing the methodology followed and the grounded theory study findings, and iii) discussing the theoretical contributions and managerial implications of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extant Research on Dyadic Individual-Brand Relationships

Fournier (1998) states, "At the core of all strong brand relationships was a rich affective grounding reminiscent of concepts of love in interpersonal domain" (p. 363). Prior research shows that individual's

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