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BRAND THEOLOGY: CONDITIONING AND CONFIGURING CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

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ABSTRACT

Background of this study is formed standing against the view that "marketers should customize their Brands as per the Consumer Behaviour". This study takes a reverse view and explores the possibility to find whether consumer behaviour be shaped by brands. If a brand can shape consumer behaviour, would bring splendid outcome to the chronicle of brandings. The aim of this study was to explore the possibility whether consumer behaviour could be shaped by brands in this world of cluttered Brands. The method of this study was completely Meta Analysis based on secondary knowledge and information. The core method of this study was connecting the dotted lines across knowledge of different disciplines even psychology and neuropsychology and getting them ordered to focus the light on objective of this study. The study finds that, Brand Positioning could be used to manipulate and better represent a brand in order to shape consumer behavior. This study further finds that despite the power of data collection and analysis technology, individual's behaviour remains tantalizingly unpredictable, because a great deal of brand choice and purchase behaviour is automatic and no longer exists in the province of consciousness. This study suggests marketers to focus on in-depth issues more; and to less depend on directly asked-answered questionnaire method, as questionnaire-based research work reaches consumer's conscious level, where a few decisions are actually taken, if not all.

KEYWORDS

Brand, Consumer Behavior, Consumer Psychology, New method of Branding.

BACKGROUND

There are now millions of middle-class people looking for an international behaviour and international products. Unilever through market research found that 'metropolitan Thais are more eager to try new products than many other nationalities. Moreover, young women believe that changing their shampoo brands regularly makes their hair look better and there is an increasing number of people becoming "fashion conscious" especially regarding their hair' (Malhotra, 2004).

Based on the information, Unilever has tapped into the market with customized products/brands, and have gained a good amount of profits as Malhotra (2004) mentions taking into account the cultural background and the cultural evolution of the Thai population Unilever has reoriented its strategy. Thus, Thailand has become one of Unilever's key centres for the development of new hair products and Unilever's Organic shampoo was first launched in Thailand before being available worldwide.

In the whole scenario, brand was designed and positioned according to the behaviour and culture of the consumers. This is the mostly used marketing practice by the managers across the globe. Simply this policy is to discover the existing culture and consumers' needs and then to re-position the brands. That is, Consumer Needs help shaping the Brands.

This study seeks for ways to manipulate brand's attributes instead of customizing the brand at regional and cultural level. If a brand's relation with human behaviour can be manipulated so that they can shape consumer behaviour, would bring splendid outcome to the history of brand, which will not only create merely brand loyalty but also the brand will be instilled within the consumer mind in a way, which is hard to change, even if someone wants to. This would definitely create stronger brands.

However, in recent years, the more trade barriers are being removed the tougher business is. That is why, branding has been getting more and more emphasize day by day. At the same time, more and more creative thinking is explored for creating, positioning and communicating brands. In search of creative ways of branding, this study explores the relationship between a brand and consumer and the impact a brand may have on consumer behaviour.

BRAND AS A CONSTRUCT

'The word "brand" is derived from the Old Norse brandr meaning "to burn." It refers to the practice of producers burning their mark (or brand) onto their products' (Wikipedia, 2011). 'The Italians were among the first to use brands, in the form of watermarks on paper in the 1200s' (Colapinto, 2011). Although today's modern commercial concept of branding developed in late 18th century especially in England and the USA. Among the commodities of that era "Sunlight" is a brand of household soap originally produced by the British company Lever Brothers (Later used as Lever) in 1885. 'It was the world's first packaged, branded laundry soap' (BBC, 2011). Previously Lever and other companies in England used to sell in huge 10kg slabs. Lever introduced 100gm piece of soap with every soap branded with its unique logo, another reason for this launch was an attempt to protect counterfeit and make the product stand out. They also wrapped every 100gm soaps with paper printed Sunlight 'branded' across it. The role of the Sunlight label was shorthand: a promise that a customer would get a certain quality standard every single time that commodity was purchased. On that era the effect was instead of asking for just soap, consumer started to ask for Lever's Sunlight. This also brought a consistent level of promise for consumer that every time they purchase a Lever's Sunlight they were assured to get a certain level of quality. For this proposition of delivering assured quality consistently, Lever charged premium (and market was ready to pay) over any other soaps in the market during that period which was merely a commodity in that time. Naturally this phenomenon occurring in England was not the only example of the world's getting into the era of commercial branding. The same period, across the Atlantic in the USA, 'a chemist by the name of John Pemberton from Atlanta had created a cola beverage that made labourers feel miraculously refreshed. He branded his product Coca Cola in an attempt to distinguish his product from other similar competitors' (Pendergrast, 2000).

A number of definitions were found for 'Brand'. Simoes & Dibb (2001) says 'A brand embodies a whole set of physical and socio-psychological attributes and beliefs which are associated with the product. It is more than the shaping of distinctiveness: it is the forging of associations.' While Hankinson & Cowking (1993) says 'A product or service made distinctive by its positioning relative to the competition and by its personality, which comprises a unique combination of functional attributes and symbolic values'. Chernatony & Dall'Olmo (1998) suggest that 'the brand is a multidimensional construct whereby managers augment products or services with values and this facilitates the process by which consumers confidently recognise and appreciate these values'. Kapferer (1997) mentioned that "the brand is a sign therefore external whose function is to disclose the hidden qualities of the product which are inaccessible to contact" (p. 28).

In culmination to the above definitions, first of all it can be said that, Brand is a multi dimensional construct and thus its definition is multi facet. Brand is a set of physical and socio-psychological attributes and beliefs associated with the product. Brand is distinctive by its positioning relative to competition and by its personality that combines unique functional attributes and symbolic values. Brand facilitates consumers confidently recognise it. Brand is a sign that discloses the hidden qualities of the product.

In exploring links between brand and its impact on consumer behaviour the above definition provides insights important to the topic. As it is said product associated Socio – psychological attributes and beliefs are subsets to brand, indicates that Brand may have impact on consumer psychology through this attribute, and consumer psychology may bring impact on consumer behaviour.

BRAND – CONSUMER RELATIONSHIP

Many of the studies involving brands have focused on the product attributes or benefits. Aaker, D.A., (1991) conducted a study to test whether two brands of beer had established associations with their use contexts in terms of whether the consumers felt “warm”, “friendly”, “healthy”, and “wholesome” in using the beers. The findings were that one brand of beer was associated with “warm” and “friendly” whereas the other brand was evaluated higher on “healthy” and “wholesome”. Other researchers also have shown that brands can be linked to other value, like Cova (1997) says that brands possess a ‘linking value’, which links the brand users into groups or communities. Mihalis Kavaratzis & Ashworth (2005) further extends this ‘community-link’ idea and say that there are strong associations between the adoption of life-styles as group identifiers and the specific brand to the extent that groups themselves become branded with the product (‘Armani set’).

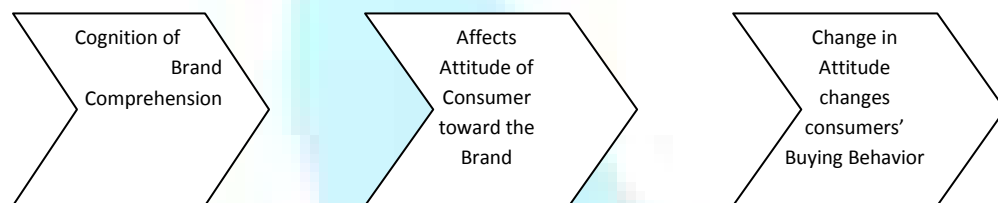
As per the literature, brands have linking value. This value may link the brand itself to an adjective (friendly, healthy) or it may link the brand user/consumer with a group that has strong association with that brand. Consumer’s intention to be included to a particular group is the trigger to use a particular brand and the brand is used as a group identifier.

BRAND – CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Several consumer researchers have developed buyer behaviour models which are based on the C-A-B (Cognition, Attitude, and Behaviour) (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005) paradigm as a backbone. For example, Howard and Sheth (1969) in The theory of buyer behaviour have used C-A-B paradigm. In their conceptual framework, brand comprehension affects attitude, which then affects intention or purchase. Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) further added to encompass social pressure on consumer behaviour. In this context, subjective norms refer to perceived social pressures encountered when making a brand choice.

C-A-B PARADIGM MODEL

FIGURE 01: C-A-B PARADIGM (KAVARATZIS & ASHWORTH, 2005)



Sheppard et al.’s (1988, p. 336) meta-analysis revealed “a frequency-weighted average correlation” for the prediction of behavioural intention from attitudes and subjective norms. In other meta-analyses (Kim & Hunter, 1993a & 1993b), attitude was a significant predictor of behaviour. The literature says cognition from brand comprehension affects attitude toward a brand and attitude further affects intention to purchase. Social norms also shape consumer’s brand choice. Evidence shows that, attitude may be used to predict consumer buying behaviour. It is noticeable that, in most of the consumer behaviourists’ works, ‘behaviour’ has been defined as narrowed down to “behaviour related to purchase”.

BRAND PERSONALITY OR BRAND PERSONIFICATION

Considering the existing literature, brands can be described with human like personalities (Plummer, 1984), where personality comprises a set of traits or factors (Eysenck, 1970; Norman, 1963 & Pervin, 2003). In brand personification, consumers are expected to intend to have a relationship with a brand that has personality similar to his/her (Blackston, 1992 & 2000). On the other hand, through marketing activities of the firm, brands iteratively affects consumers’ attitude toward the brand (Dall’Omo Riley & de Chernatony, 2000). Brands might be described, for example, as having friendly or exciting personalities (J. Aaker’s, 1997). Brand personality may help consumers differentiate among the myriad products available in the marketplace (Keller, 2003).

Brand Personality is a Construct that suggests, brands’ personality has an impact on consumers’ buying behaviour. Tendency of higher association between brand and consumer of like personality is the core philosophy of this construct. Moreover, as the literature says, iterative communication of brand attitude may change even unlike consumer’s attitude favorable to the brand.

However, it does not necessarily establish any relationship to show that brand’s personality (independent factor) brings changes to consumer’s personality (dependent factor).

CONSUMERS’ SLEEPER EFFECTS

Sometimes it may happen that, consumers cannot remember being exposed to the ad still they exhibit changes in their perceptions of the advertised stimulus. This phenomena has been defined as Sleeper Effects by Pashupati (2003), while others have named it as preconscious processing effects (Janiszewski, 1988), incidental ad exposure effects (Shapiro, MacInnis, & Heckler, 1997), unconscious perception effects (Shapiro, MacInnis, Heckler, & Perez, 1999), and implicit memory processes (Holden & Vanhuele, 1999). Krishnan and Chakravarti (1999) also have suggested that consumers can learn, retain and act on information via unconscious and implicit learning processes.

Sleeper’s Effect can be an important factor for marketer as well as consumer behaviourists, as it brings changes in consumer minds though not consciously. Importance to study Sleeper’s Effect rises to immense height, as this does not happen consciously, and there lies the beauty of Sleeper’s Effect, as well as complexity for the consumer behaviourists.

BRAND & NEUROPSYCHOLOGY

The representation of a brand (its mental pattern of connections) at the neuronal level is called a brand engram, a phrase first coined by Robert Heath (2000a & 2000b). Most part of a brand engram is under the authority of subconscious mind, route to which is not merely a question-answer method (Gordon, 2001). Gordon (2001) further says that, individual’s behaviour remains tantalizingly unpredictable, because a great deal of brand choice and purchase behaviour is automatic and no longer exists in the province of consciousness.

Gordon’s findings draw a picture of consumer’s mind dividing into conscious and subconscious level and giving more decision-making weights to subconscious level. That means, in exploring impact of a brand on consumer behaviour, consumers’ minds should be considered at both subconscious and conscious levels while giving more weight to subconscious level.

CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR & CLASSICAL CONDITIONING THEORY

In any endeavor to study human behaviour, classical conditioning theory always precedes any other theories or literature. In psychological term it is defined as a process of behaviour modification by which a subject comes to respond in a desired manner to previously neutral stimulus that has been repeatedly presented along with an unconditioned stimulus that elicits the desired response (Adopted: Wikipedia, 2011).

Many of our behaviours today are shaped by the pairing of stimuli. Have you ever noticed that certain stimuli, such as the smell of cologne or perfume, a certain song, a specific day of the year, and results in fairly intense emotions? It's not that the smell or the song are the cause of the emotion, but rather what that smell or song has been paired with...perhaps an ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend, the death of a loved one, or maybe the day you met your current husband or wife. We make these associations all the time and often don't realize the power that these connections or pairings have on us. But, in fact, we have been classically conditioned.

Classical conditioning theory works with advertising too. For example, many beer ads prominently feature attractive young women wearing bikinis. The young women (unconditioned stimulus) naturally elicit a favorable, mildly aroused feeling (unconditioned response) in most men. The beer is simply associated with this effect. The same thing applies with the jingles and music that accompany many advertisements.

Thus, Classical Conditioning Theory establishes its role clearly on relationship between a brand and its consumer. If the brand is effectively successfully associated with a stimulus, whenever consumers would see or experience that particular stimulus, will recall the brand, or the other way, if any stimulus (feeling/experience) is effectively successfully associated with a brand, whenever consumers would see or experience that particular brand, will recall the stimulus (feeling/experience). Here goes the role of classical conditioning theory to comprehend for the marketers.

CONCLUSION

Branding has been getting more and more emphasize day by day. At the same time, more and more creative thinking is explored for creating, positioning and communicating brands. In search of alternative creative ways of branding, this study explores the relationship between a brand and consumer and the impact a brand may have on consumer behaviour.

In summing up, the relationship between a brand and consumer, following factors are important to comply:

1. Brand is a multi dimensional construct and thus its definition is multi facet. Therefore in positioning own brand, a marketer should explore all possible areas that could be used to manipulate and better represent the brand. The possible areas, though not limited to, are: physical and socio-psychological attributes & beliefs associated with the product, distinctiveness of positioning and personality, uniqueness of functional attributes and symbolic values, ease of recognition etc.
2. The marketer may choose to use the socio – psychological attributes and beliefs that are subsets to brand, to stimulate or craft consumer psychology in a desired way, which would be favorable for the brand.
3. Marketers should recognise that, brands have linking value. This value may link the brand itself to an adjective (friendly, healthy) or it may link the brand user/consumer with a group that has strong association with that brand. Consumer's intention to be included to a particular group is the trigger to use a particular brand and the brand is used as a group identifier. Thus, marketers may want to posit their brand in a way, so that it is linked to a positive adjective or linked to a group, which is mostly sought by consumers.
4. Targeting 'Increasing intention to buy' directly may not be that fruitful as purchase behaviour is not changed by brand communications directly. Firstly, cognition of brand comprehension is achieved and then cognition affects attitude toward a brand and attitude further affects intention to purchase.
5. While drawing a Brand's Personality marketer should focus on higher association between brand personality and consumer of like personality. Therefore, the brand personality should be such that consumers intend to follow and enjoy imitating. Brand personality should not sketch out a figure that is drawn based on an alien. An alien-like brand personality would fail to develop the association with consumers of same personality.
6. Ad recall is a mostly used tool in contemporary market research arena that is used to predict ad awareness, or brand awareness. However, this study suggests that consumers may not be able to recall the ad but may display the expected behaviour for the brand. This phenomenon is called Sleeper's Effect and sleeper's effect says that, marketers should not solely depend on 'ad recall' as an indicator of ad awareness or brand awareness.

All marketing personnel in the planet earth have always intended to use data and information around its target group, to predict consumer's behaviour. This study issues a reminder for all marketers that, neuropsychology says that despite the power of high-tech instruments and the vast amount of data collected with it, individual's behaviour remains tantalizingly unpredictable, because a great deal of brand choice and purchase behaviour is automatic and no longer exists in the province of consciousness. Neuropsychology also dictates that, a formal or informal level of questionnaire-based research work may reach consumer's conscious level, where a few decisions are actually taken, though the methodology of the research work may be based up on sound statistical ground. That is why this study suggests the marketer to focus on in-depth issues more while deciding about the consumer behaviour of its target market, instead of directly asked-answered questionnaire method.

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