

Brand Relationships: Unilateral or Bilateral?

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ABSTRACT

Although the brand-customer relationship (BCR) is a special form in the theory of relationship marketing, there is only a few of researches that discriminate various brand-consumer relationships. This paper aims at classifying BCRs according to two basic approaches: (1) the unilateral relationship creating an emotional bond; and (2) the truly bilateral relationship in which a social bond is formed through a proactive interaction between two relationship partners based on transactional and social interactions. Research results point out shortcomings of the current approach to brand relationship and hope that social bond may lead to various outcomes of the relationships such as commitment, share of goals and values and self-expression that surpass the simple brand loyalty.

Keywords: Brand relationship, unilateral relationship, bilateral relationship, transaction- interaction, social interaction, emotional bond, social bond

1. INTRODUCTION

There are numerous definitions of relationship in different fields of study, such as psychology (eg Motorn & Douglas, 1981), sociology (eg Blumstein & Kollock 1988) and marketing research (eg Fournier, 1998; and MacInnis et al, 2009). Partner in relationship may be objects, human beings or brand names. Particularly, reseaches show that relationships evolve cyclically and exist in different forms (eg Fournier, MacInnis et al, 2009; Berscheid, 1996). As a result, no common definition is accepted in general theories of relationships.

Studying the BCR based on theory of relationship marketing has interested more and more researchers and brand managers because of benefits it brings to enterprises, customers and civic organizations engaging in development of such relationships. In Vietnam, however, this issue is still new and discussed by only a few articles on scientific journals.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

Although BCR is a special form of marketing relationship, only a few researches have been carried out to classify different BCRs. This paper aims at classifying nature of brand relationship in two basic approaches: a unilateral and a bilateral relationship. Phases of brand relationship are examined in order to distinguish the structure of those two approaches. The paper tries to pinpoint shortcomings that require further researches, such as preconditions for a relationship, roles of marketing communication and social communication in relationship bonds, and different relationships as results (or behavioral expression) of different bonds, etc.

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3. THEORETICAL BASES

a. Development of the relationship theories:

Psychology maintains that personal relationship creates a unity and shares norms, rules and worldviews (eg Morton & Douglas, 1981). Sociology defines relationship as a chain of continuous interactions between phases from the past to future in which involved parties are interdependent, that is, an act by this party affects results for others (Blumstein & Kollock, 1988). In marketing theories, relationships are considered as exchanges between partners with reciprocal understanding that change over a series of interactions and in response to contextual change (Fournier, 1998). Particularly, relationships also evolve along with other forms of relationships (Fournier, see MacInnis et al, 2009, Berscheid, 1996) with objects, human beings or brands. No definition, however, is generally accepted by theories of relationships.

Until recently, Fournier has summarized three important tenets (see MacInnes et al, 2009) where brand is (1) a provider of resources and meanings to help human beings achieve targets of higher levels; (2) complicated, multi-dimensional (including more than 50 dimensions), typical of duality (cooperative or competitive, functional or emotional, deep or superficial, etc.), and diversity such as positive (committed, intimate), neutral (task-oriented), or negative (enslavement); and (3) reflects the process of establishing, developing and terminating the relationship.

b. Typical relationships:

- Relationship between human being and objects: In an animist approach, human beings believe that all objects have their souls (Aggarwal, in MacInnis et al., 2009) and they use this core ownership to develop and strengthen perception of the self (MacInnis et al., 2009). However, the relationship between human beings and objects is indirect and unilateral (Shimp & Madden, 1988), and therefore anthropomorphizing objects is a common practice in most sociological studies (Fournier, 1998) and a state of extreme desire for products is typical (Shimp & Madden, 1988) when human beings may “love” or feel “lovelorn” about some consumer object. However, not all relationships are based on love because love is merely a form of relationship (MacInnis et al., 2009).

Marketing relationship: The marketing relationship examines a wide spectrum of relations among different marketing partners along the chain of supply – including sellers, buyers, suppliers, distributors, competitors and customers, etc. (Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2000). This view focuses on corporate activities that aim at establishing the control over relationships (Customer Relationship Management [CRM] programs for example) rather than treating customers as proactive partners in a reciprocal and equal relationship.

Relationship between human being and brand: Although limited, the theory of marketing relationship has served as a dynamic for expansion of the concept of interpersonal relationship into a context of a brand-customer relationship (Fournier, 1998). Brands may be animated, humanized, or somehow personified (eg favorite cartoon characters) to serve as symbols (eg celebrity, spokesperson, or witness) for brands. However, it is more appropriate to refrain from using anthropomorphization for turning objects into relationship partners (Fournier, 1998).

Knowledge of typical relationships shows that current concept of BRC is still limited to units of pairs and unilateral relationship as a state of existence. This view reduces marketers' scopes when examining the role of brand as a positive and proactive relationship partner.

4. RESULTS

a. Brand-relationship approach:

- Unilateral relationship: It is a relationship in which only one party knows the other and gradually develops an emotional bond with its beloved objects, such as between a monkey with a manikin, a child with a puppet or cartoon character, and consumers with products/brands (MacInnis et al., 2009). Although a two-way interaction is lacking, such relationships can provide various benefits, such as preference/attitude, trust, intimate bond, comforts, etc. If two parties start interacting (between individuals and brands or real beloved objected) a bilateral relationship will occur and create a social bond (Palmatier et al., 2007). It is a natural process in the really bilateral relationship in comparison with a unilateral one or absence of such relationships (Figure 1).

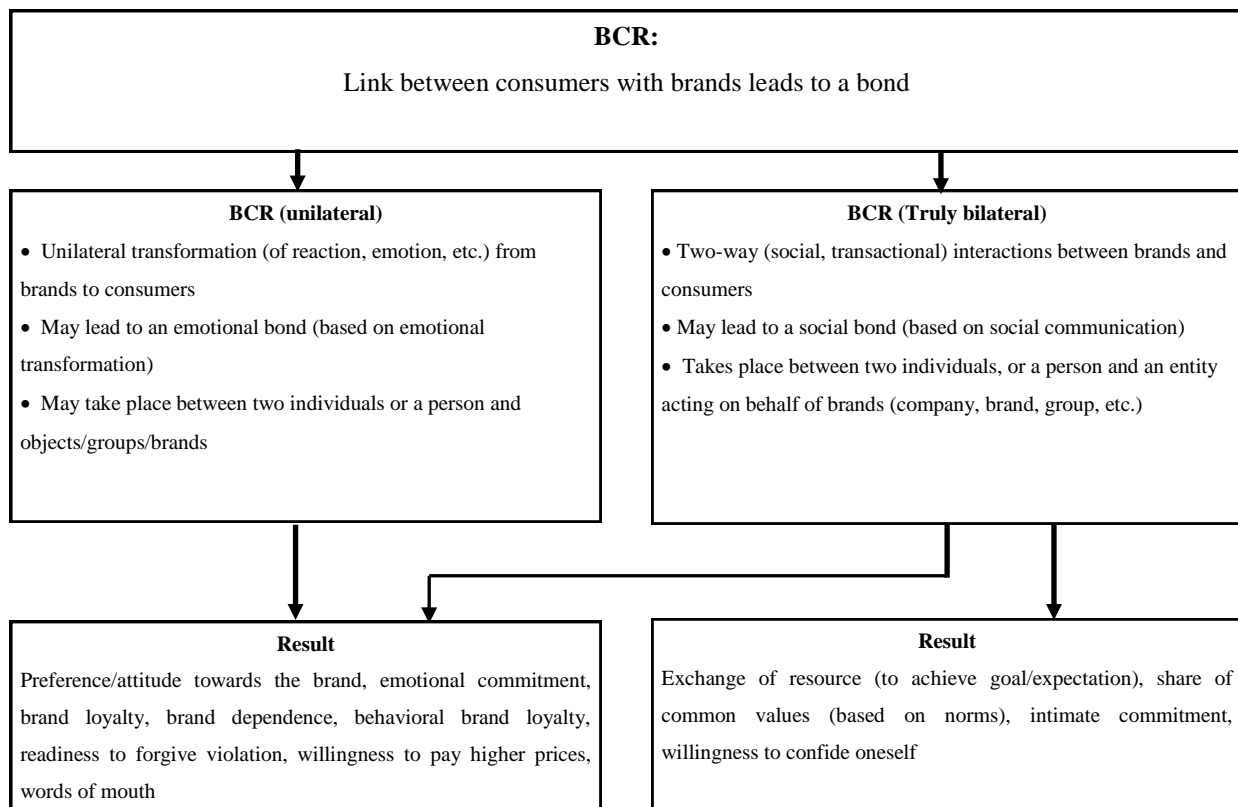


Figure 1: Framework of approaches to brand relationships

Bilateral relationship: The relationship becomes truly bilateral with the presentation of the transformation process based on interaction between two active partners characterized by at least three basic elements: reciprocity, observing social norms, and maintaining social bond (Dwyer et al., 1987; Fournier, 1998; Palmatier et al., 2007).

Concept of reciprocity is based on social exchange (Li & Dant, 1988) and equity theory (Blumstein & Kollock, 1988). Social norms only depend on interpersonal communication between involved partners and are directed by community norms (MacInnes et al., 2009). Social bond is perceived as intimacy between partners arising from relationship interactions that are inherited and developed over time and become protocol or culture of the community. Individuals participating in brand community share such values as knowledge, identity, world view, obligations and ethical responsibility to society (Blumstein & Kollock, 1988; see MacInnes et al., 2009), and increase mutual understanding, trust and bond. This social bond leads to some noteworthy relationship results, such as intimacy and share of resources needed for achieving goals/ expectations in the life (MacInnis et al., 2009, Blumstein & Kollock, 1998).

b. Relationship-process approach:

Reciprocity, interaction and development of relationship norms are central to the bilateral process but the current view on BCR employs a very popular definition of reciprocity (Fournier, 1998). Studying the truly bilateral BCRs requires examining the reciprocity more directly based on both theories of relationship and of exchange – core theories of relationship marketing studies. And thus, discussing relationship stages from (1) awareness, (2) exploration, (3) expansion, (4) commitment to (5) dissolution (Dwyer et al., 1987) can provide a better understanding of the truly bilateral BCR.

c. Two-component approach: transactional interaction and social interaction:

Examining the BCR should be based on interactive and reciprocal process combined with theories of exchange and of interpersonal relationship. The author therefore suggests examining both transactional and social interactions in the BCR process. Examining transactions is based on theory of exchange of material resources in which reciprocity takes the form of a purchase (of a product). Examining social interactions is based on the theory of interpersonal relationship in which the reciprocity takes the form of personal exchanges (of identity, viewpoint, information, etc.). Each interactive component corresponds with a kind of information communicated by relationship partners, which creates different kinds of bonds or self-brand connections (MacInnes et al., 2009). Particularly, social communication is emphasized here as an essential element in formation of social bond (Figure 1).

At stages of exploration and expansion of relationship, a customer can reach a social interaction with the brand he/she desires but cannot afford to buy. At stages where customers take part in both transactional and social interactions with the brand but the product was removed from the distribution market (transactional interaction ceases existing) they may maintain some social interaction with the brand. At the stage of dissolution, customers may stop one interaction and still maintain the remaining interaction.

d. Role of social communication in brand relationships:

Theories of exchange and interpersonal relationship suggest that exchange or communication of information is a structure that allows the bilateral relationship process. In traditional marketing communication, message projected on customers is only enough for unilateral relationship. In the context of BCR, two-way information (transactional or social interaction) from each party is different and supports communication between customers and brand. Social community, psychological community or Internet environment is an example of brand as a portal for exchange of information with

a set of different interfaces through which customers can interact with entities related to the brand via such interfaces.

e. Outcomes of relationships:

An outcome of a relationship is defined as a consequence concerning two or more relationship partners changing the environment and/or choice or strengthening, sharing goals during the relationship process. Different outcomes depend on cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects in each stage of the relationship process. Some outcomes only appear after interaction takes place and therefore it only exists in truly bilateral relationship while others may arise from merely emotional bond in some unilateral relationship (Table 1).

Table 1: Outcomes by relationship stages

Process/Outcome	Outcomes of unilateral relationship	Outcomes of truly bilateral relationship
Cognitive	Preference, attitude, satisfaction, acquaintance	Share of goals and expectations based on established norms
Affective	Commitment, trust, ease	Commitment, intimacy
Behavioral	Loyalty, dependence, willingness to forgive violations	Willingness to express oneself and share personal information

- Outcomes of unilateral relationships: Such cognitive outcomes as preferences, satisfaction or acquaintanceship may originate from trust in information received from one-way marketing communication (traditional advertising). Similarly, affective outcomes may depend on feelings projected from one partner to another. In some cases where two-way communication is lacking certain behavior or behavioral intention may take place because of trust (hyper cognition- attitude) and emotion (affection) placed in relationship partner. Thus, outcomes of unilateral relationships may be attributed to existing attitude or presence of emotional bond without requiring a bilateral process. The unilateral relationships are still resulting in emotional benefits and reflect a strong loyalty toward the beloved object.

- Outcomes of truly bilateral relationships: Outcomes of these relationships require reciprocal interactions and even the presence of a social bond – the key factor of interpersonal relationships. Recent studies emphasized the formation of a social bond as a result of development of expectations and share of goals and cognition-resources (Escalas & Bettman, 2005, and MacInnis et al., 2009) based on established norms (Blumstein & Kollock, 1998). The higher the degree of bonding, the stronger the intimacy – emotion (Fournier, 1998) and willingness to express self-behavior (Aaker et al., and MacInnis et al., 2009).

5. LIMITATION OF CURRENT VIEWS ON BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

Theories of brand-customer relationships that employ anthropomorphization to make the brand accepted as a relationship partner become weaker when relying too much on the quasi-relationships, or unilateral relationships, without requiring a direct interaction between customers and brands. However, the use of brand allegory to make it similar to a two-party active relationship (as a marriage relationship

for example) in the context of BCR is not always supported by researchers (Fournier 1998). This limitation makes marketers believe that the Brand Relationship Quality (BRQ) with six emotional factors are present in customers' mind. Further BCR researches have paid more attention to emotional commitment (Thomson et al., in MacInnis et al., 2009) representing strong brand relationship but failed to focus on the bilateral process used for creating social ties. As a result, the BCR may become the core of relationship marketing but traditional transactional approach (purchasing is considered as a basic element) and emotional ties cannot predict radically behavior relating to brand.

This situation leads to three shortcomings in BCR researches: (1) Existing BCR theories only examine customer as an active relationship partner; (2) Interaction as a core factor of BCR is only emphasized in situations it is used, and (3) The role of social communication between customers and brands is not explored. These shortcomings are inevitable because existing views on BCR still have a "cognitive" nature and seem to reflect only a unilateral relationship. It is therefore essential to explore a new BCR – a truly bilateral BCR – that requires the presence of social ties between two proactive relationship partners.

Technological advances are increasingly supporting interactive communication. While transactional interaction has been clearly defined, the social interaction requires more explorations to help customers accept brands as proactive and positive relationship partners. Does BCR also exist in those two kinds of relationships although both of them are true to definition of relationships in a broad sense, they are still different in terms of characteristics and relationship outcomes (Table 1)?

Knowledge presented in Figure 1 and Table 1 shows that the BCR is a true relationship if (1) shortcomings in concepts of BCR in the context of unilateral relationship and emotional ties are revealed; and (2) BCR cannot be seen as a "state of existence" and should be examined as a process including transactional and social interactions and two-way communication needed for maintaining social bonds.

6.DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCHES

Examining the BCR as a truly bilateral process: Theories of personal relationships and relationship marketing provide us with an insight into the BCR as a truly bilateral relationship in which a social bond is formed through a proactive interaction between two relationship partners (a bilateral process) based on transactional and social interactions (Figure 2).

A social bond is an important factor of a truly bilateral BCR: BCR researches have discussed power of BCR and outcomes of intimacy and relationship depth (Fournier, 1998) can create a social bond with a brand. Forming a social bond, however, requires social interactions (Palmatier et al., 2007) – share of personal information (Aaker et al., and MacInnis et al., 2009). Thus, using the concept of social bond is a way for identifying customers who take part in social interaction with a brand (or discriminating between unilateral and truly bilateral BCR). The notion that customers create a social bond with a brand goes beyond the concept of brand loyalty in terms of behavior, habit or simple "effect" (Fournier, 1998) (Figure 2).


Brand as a proactive partner		Customer as a proactive partner	
Interaction			
Transactional		Social	 Social
Exchange of goods/services via money (purchase)	Exchange of necessary information to complete the transaction (transactional communication)	Exchange of more information than what is need for completing the transaction (social communication)	

Figure 2: BCR as a truly bilateral relationship

Classifying relationship outcomes: We cannot, by employing existing BCR researches, determine whether social bonds exist and when they are present, or whether a connection is affective (I love iPhone), or brand bond is based on social interaction (iPhone loves me too). The best way to distinguish different relationships, therefore, is to employ two levels of interaction (transactional and social ones) as shown in the following matrix (Figure 3).

	Social interaction		
	Low	High	
Transactional interaction	High	Transactional BCR	Truly BCR
	Low	Without BCR or potential BCR	Social BCR

Figure 3: Matrix of relationships based on transactional and social interactions

Moreover, examining various brand-customer relationships has both theoretical and managerial implications. Developing a model for measuring effects of each relationship on relationship outcomes is necessary for further researches.

7. CONCLUSION

The paper tries to pinpoint the limitation of the existing belief that treats BCR as a “state of existence” that leads to different views on causal relationship between competitive concepts, such as attitude, commitment, attention, love, attachment, etc. in many existing BCR models. The author suggests examining the BCR employing a set of approaches and interactions expressed in a matrix classifying relationships according to their nature, which can help predict different relationship outcomes. Additionally, the paper implies that the BRQ is best characterized by two components: (1) Social bonds that take shape, exist, develop and decline over time depend totally on communication and interactions (components at present that maintain commitment); and (2) Emotional bonds that is formed

by past experience and kept in customers' mind (past component that maintain attachment). Theoretically, these results help explain the concept of attachment to the brand recently suggested by Park et al. (MacInnes et al., 2009). Regarding brand management, the results can help marketers maintain the relationship quality at the highest level by coordinating/ maximizing both social and transactional interactions■

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