CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This Chapter is divided into five sections. The Section 1 provides an overview of the entire study. The Section 2 summarizes the findings of the study based on the three research objectives. The Section 3 considers the theoretical and managerial implications of the study, which also include implications in strategic management perspective. Following this, Section 4 includes the limitations of the current research. Finally, the Section 5 concludes with the recommendations for further research.

6.1. Overview of the Study

In branding, in its pursuit to identify the factors that promote consumer-bond with brands, the studies in brand relationship literature recently afforded the development of models\theories of consumer brand relationships using undue dependence on interpersonal literature. However, the enthusiasm shown by these theorists to demonstrate these constructs’ ability to impact on consumer behavior has misguided consumer’s long term or deep rooted relationship with brands, apparently assuming “that peoples some of the time form relationships with brands in the same way in which they form relationships with each other in other social contexts”. In reality, this process of adaptation will create problems if the concept of brand relationships is not directly analogous to the theory of interpersonal relationship (Brevik and Thorbjornsen, 2008). According to Hunt and Menon (1995), the success of the adoption of metaphoric transfer from one literature (here from interpersonal to branding context) requires necessary translation from that literature to adapting discipline.
Hence, rather than continuing on undue dependence of interpersonal literature for the development of theories (e.g. Aaker et al., 2004; Monga, 2002; Ji, 2002; Park and Kim, 2001; Kaltcheva and Weitz, 1999; Olson, 1999; Fournier, 1998), a more fruitful approach would be to explore and understand the actual experience of consumers who have strong and deep rooted relationship with brands and to generate a theoretical model of the antecedents and consequences of consumer-brand relationships exclusively in branding paradigm. To this end, the present study initiated by pointing out the fact that although both practitioners and academicians have identified the role of brand relationships as an important concept, the theoretical contribution in his area has been hindered by several issues. First, extensive adaptation and use of interpersonal relationship theory from high involving relationship contexts to low involving consumer-brand relationship context using either exploratory or descriptive studies. Second, lacks clear guidelines for model specification. Third, the failure to integrate or identify inter-linkages between the attitudinal and behavioral components of consumer-brand relationship dimensions. Therefore, the proposed study using a fully mixed research design followed by a grounded theory approach, conducted a qualitative exploration using a series of in-depth interviews backed by theoretical sampling uncovered seven consumer-experienced brand relationship prototype. Then, we specified and interlinked these relationship prototypes using existing literature in the consumer-brand relationships and framed a most theoretical model. Thus, this study builds on previous research by considering constructs that have been studied independently and using interpersonal theories and showing that brand relationships can function as an integrated framework exclusively in consumer-branding context.

1.2. Discussion of the Findings
It was proposed that the consumer-brand relationship is an integration of attitudinal and behavioral components that is an aggregation of four dimensions: (a) cognitive component, (b) affective component, (c) conative component, and (d) action or behavioral component. These four components were generated and integrated during the qualitative phase of this study. The empirical interdependency among these components were confirmed during the grounded theory phase and SEM. The grounded theory phase of the study suggested that the emergence of these four attitudinal components happens at different stages of consumer-brand relationships. Thus, the results of the grounded theory support that the relationship between brand and consumer is sequential in which relationship starts through the establishment of cognitive aspects, augmented through affective aspects, maintained through conative, and finally it would create an outcome during behavioral phase. This conclusion is highly contentious in consumer-brand relationship literature and is a topic for further study. In addition, the interdependency of the four attitudinal and behavioral components was proposed to represent consumer-brand relationships become apparent during the quantitative phase of this study. In fact, this interdependency created significant path coefficients, which in turn evident from overall goodness-of-fit indices of the model.

During the grounded theory phase of the study it found that there were seven dimensions of consumer-brand relationships, such as brand attitude strength, brand satisfaction, brand trust, brand attachment, brand commitment, brand equity, and brand loyalty. Consumer brand attitude strength and brand satisfaction were the two major cognitive aspects which would emerge during the relationship establishment stage. Brand trust and attachment were the major source of affective dimensionality which would augment consumer-brand relationships. Brand commitment was the sole source of relationship maintenance, which is considered to be
the conative aspect of the relationship. Finally, the study found support for two major outcomes of the consumer-brand relationship, brand equity and brand loyalty. These two outcomes are considered to be the behavioral aspect of the consumer-brand relationships. The empirical testing and validation of the model supported the fact that the behavioral dimensions are really influenced by attitudinal dimensions.

The findings of the study truly advance the knowledge of the existing body of brand management literature, particularly the brand relationship to literature. This study highlights the role of the strong relationship between all the four attitudinal and behavioral components of consumer-brand relationships. In fact, the consumer-brand relationship is an integration of attitudinal and behavioral components, in which the relationship starts with the development of attitude strength and brand satisfaction, getting augmented through brand trust and attachment, maintained through brand commitment. This brand commitment would lead to two behavioral outcomes, such as brand equity and brand loyalty. Hence, the current study advances in the knowledge through its finding that the consumer-brand relationship is an integration of attitudinal and behavioral components, consist of cognitive, affective and conative components, which will lead to behavioral outcomes.

6.3. Research Implications

6.3.1. Theoretical Implications

The current understandings of the study extend and complement several theoretical frameworks and models that can be used to further enrich the consumer-brand relationship literature. First, the consumer-brand model extends the Fazio model (Fazio, 1986) of attitude behavior relationships. According to the model, previously developed attitude would influence behavior
only if these attitudes were retrieved from memory during the behavioral situation. These activated or retrieved attitudes are the basic component which helps to filter or bias the consumer’s immediate perceptions of the brand, which in turn helps to create the consumer’s definition of the event and ultimately influences subsequent behavior with respect to the brand. Attitude accessibility or the strength of the association would help to activate the previously formed attitude to activate from memory during the behavioral situation. More accessible attitudes have the ability and power to activate faster in a behavioral situation, and ability to influence perceptions and ultimately behavior.

Second, consumers were found to possess an inherent motivation for self-expansion, or a desire to incorporate others’ (here the brand) into their conception of self. This is agreement with self-expansion theory (Aron et al., 2005). The more an entity (brand) is included in the self, the closer is the bond that connects them (Park et al., 2010). When the brand starts offering resources in the service of self-expansion, consumers may start developing a strong connection between the brand and the self, which would lead to the development of frequent brand related thoughts and feelings or brand attachment. The consumers also develop a type of confidence expectation that he/she can rely on the trusted brand when the need arises. These affective or emotional elements (attachment and trust) are the key to interpersonal relationships. The study also found support that the customer’s affective or emotional responses towards a brand is maintained, amplified or altered depending on how the cognitive phase or the experience is interpreted and explained (Collins and Read, 1994). Once the cognitive phase is positively interpreted and motivated it would lead to an affective phase of attachment and trust. As the relationship forms, the attachment object makes its resources (hedonic, social, knowledge etc.) available to the self.
Finally it would lead to a cognitive re-organization that makes the attachment object’s resources seem as if they were one’s own.

Third, the extant research in relationship marketing has shown that consumers’ brand trust is one of the cornerstones of strategic partnership, because trust between two parties would lead to commitment (Hrebiniaık, 1974). Morgan & Hunt (1994) used McDonald’s (1981) social exchange theory to explain the relationship between trust and commitment, "mistrust breeds mistrust and as such would also serve to decrease commitment in the relationship and shift the transaction to one of more direct short-term exchanges"(page. 22). Trust is the major factor that determines relationship commitment. Once the consumer is committed towards the brand, he/she intends to remain loyal to and hence maintain a relationship with the brand in future. This means that committed consumers behave in a manner that supportive of relationship longevity. Strong commitment is derived from attachment to the brand is revealed by a set of commitment related behaviors that promote relationship maintenance acts. The behaviors of such commitment include brand loyalty (Ahluwalia et al., 2000), forgiveness of mishaps and brand advocating behaviors such as positive word-of mouth and the derogation of alternatives (Miller, 1997; Fournier, 1994).

Fourth, adding to the interpersonal attachment theory and findings of Park et al. (2010), the study results support that consumers’ who are attached to the brand are not just simply the beneficiary of brand’s resources, instead they also actively invest their own resources to the brand to maintain the brand relationship. Such resources include (a) buying extended brands (b) sacrificing resources such as time and money (c) social resources such as defending the brand to others and derogating its alternatives etc. (Johnson and Resbuilt, 1989, Park et al., 2010).
6.3.2. Managerial Implications

The well grounded and the integrative consumer-brand relationship model provides relevant information to the brand managers, also offers a wide spectrum of information to solve their managerial uncertainty and policy making in strategic brand management. First, the structure of the consumer-brand relationship model provides insights into the antecedents of behavioral loyalty. In particular, the model proposed in this study offers managers potentially important information for analyzing the brand’s strength in terms of its competitors in the product category. For example, if the major antecedent source explaining the brand loyalty to the brand is found in the absence of brand equity (the path is insignificant), explains that the brand might not have a differential knowledge structure in consumers’ mind in terms of its competitors. Conversely, if the commitment to the brand is the major antecedent source, the strength of the brand lies in its ability to create affective and conative (intentional) elements, and not in its differentiated knowledge structure of the consumer’s mind. Based on this explanation, brand managers should devise appropriate strategic actions. Brands that are competing in those product categories wherein differentiated brand knowledge structure matters could focus on strong, unique and favorable brand equity development in their strategic marketing actions to build strong relationships. In this condition, those brands that are able to frame a strong competitive frame of reference, point of parity and point of difference would be better off focusing on the aspects that facilitate differential comparisons. Similarly, if the brand is competing in those product categories wherein the brand knowledge differentiation is not too much essential, the brand managers should devise marketing programs to develop brand commitment or devise strategies to curb brand switching.
The mediating role played by the affective components, namely brand trust and brand attachment provide additional insights into the creation of brand commitment, brand equity and behavioral loyalty. For example, if the main antecedent source explaining brand loyalty to the brand is found in the absence of brand equity, the brand managers might targeted more to build brand attachment and therefore, brand commitment that resulted in brand loyalty. Conversely, if consumers’ brand commitment and attachments are mainly responsible for explaining loyalty to the brand, the equity element is lagging because of the non consideration of the trust element in brand building efforts.

Second, the companies intend to manage their brand with stronger customer brand relationships can consider the model for greater understanding about when, where and how to invest in the establishment of customer bond. For example, they may consider the process through which the development of bond with a brand could be executed. The identification of attitudinal and behavioral constructs and its integration proposed by this study would also more directly answer the call from the marketing practitioner community for more precision in terms of relationship establishment and decision making. To summarize, the consumer-brand relationship model developed in this study would help marketers realize the strategic management of relationships establishment, augmentation, maintenance and execution. Therefore, it is recommended that brand managers develop and manage consumer brand relationships from the perspective of the multi-dimensional integrative facet of consumer relationship and not merely based on traditional assessment and understanding of either attitudinal or behavioral perspective.
6.3.3. Implications for Strategic Management

From the consumer-brand relationship model developed in this study, the consumer brand marketers may clearly see the strategic management of consumer-brand relationships starts with establishing the cognitive components of the relationship: brand attitude strength and brand satisfaction. The next step focuses more on the pursuit of augmenting consumer brand relationships through constructs such as: brand trust and brand attachment, which function as the key mediators of in the whole process of consumer-brand relationships. Once the augmentation has achieved, marketers should concentrate on how to maintain consumer brand relationships. It could be achieved through a contative component, such as brand commitment, which function as a key component of relationship maintenance.

Noticeably, brand trust and brand attachment in affective stage as explicated by the model are proven to be resulted in brand commitment, which directly influences brand equity and brand loyalty. This exhibits the importance of affective and conative components in the context consumer-branding. Extant research also supports this finding that these two components (trust and attachment) are very essential for behaviors, such as loyalty and equity (Bandyopadhyay and Martell, 2007; Evanschitzky and Wunderlich, 2006; Oliver, 1997). Therefore, managers should pay special attention to these two components for building strong and deep rooted consumer-brand relationships.

Overall, the specific indicators for each latent construct as well as its relationship established by the model may help the consumer-brand marketer to establish an evaluation mechanism, which would monitor and keep consumer-brand relationships building efforts. Here in this research, the researcher would like to show the power that the concept of consumer-brand relationship plays in the context of consumer-branding. Strategic management of such
relationship dimensions established in this study characterizes as an interrelated sequential process, starting from establishing relationships through cognitive aspects, to augment the same using affective aspects, maintenance through conative aspects and generating its outcomes. Therefore, the brand managers are advised to keep updating on each stage and develop strategies accordingly to have real benefit from their relationship building efforts.

6.4. Limitations of the Research

The present study established a consumer-brand relationship model through the integration of attitudinal and behavioral components across four components of: (a) cognitive; (b) affective; (c) conative; and (d) behavioral. The final consumer-brand relationship model introduced in this study is generalizable across different product categories and consumer segments, but it must be acknowledged that the scope of the SEM phase was limited to five product categories and a single population group. The current study does not purport that the results, particularly the relationship among variables, possess any level of external validity. Therefore, any attempt to replicate the study in other product categories and population group is encouraged to test generalizability.

The extant literature in branding identified the role of consumer-brand relationships in management perspective. The issues are tied to the inability of the study to measure this aspect of the consumer-brand relationship. Moreover, it recognizes the failure to consider all the external variables, particularly other than the one from the consumers’ point of view, which might have confounded the results. The current study identifies this as an inherent limitation of this study.
One of the recognizable limitations of the current study is that the research was not designed as a longitudinal study. The study designed in such a way that to test and validate the conceptual model at a single point in time using cross-sectional data. To have more confidence and understanding, the model should be tested using longitudinal data. It will help the researcher to understand significant statistical change in a single population over an extended period. Nevertheless, the current study advances consumer-brand relationship knowledge through a novel model that integrates attitudinal and behavioral components that ultimately leads to behavioral outcomes.

6.5. Recommendations for Further Study

The current study provides another step in confronting the complex challenge associated with the process of consumer-brand relationships. Specifically, the study offers a framework to better understand the relationship between consumer and brands. In this regard, the study added more questions than answers. The following are some of the questions that are yet to answer:

1. Is the relationship identified in this study between consumer and brand context dependent?
2. Is it possible to isolate and measure the moderating influence of product involvement and brand involvement in the formation of consumer-brand relationships?
3. Are there any other constructs, other than from the consumer side, particularly from manager perspective influences the relationship between consumer and brands?
4. Are there any inherent heterogeneity or consumer segments based on the constructs identified at each stage of relationships in the model.

5. Does other moderating variables such as culture, gender and age of the consumers have an influence on consumer-brand relationships.

6. Is the consumer-brand relationship model adaptable to other industries and other consumer groups. A future research must simultaneously examine multiple industries and multiple consumer group within a single framework. This will provide more understanding about industry specific changes and dynamics of consumer-brand relationships.

6.6. Chapter Summary

Today, marketers are challenged by allocating financial and non-financial resources with the goal of strengthening the relationship between consumers and brands. However, the investment made by these companies ranging from corporate social responsibility activities to advertising are often misguided, and it happens mainly because of the lack of proper metrics to measure and evaluate the outcomes of these relationship building efforts. Consequently, objective of this study was to develop and test an empirical model that could measure consumer-brand relationships. Following a diverse methodological approach, the study developed the model of consumer-brand relationships. This model was developed and tested for reliability and validity following sequential mixed method design, incorporating the qualitative tradition of grounded theory followed by a quantitative method of structural equation modeling. The study provided a comprehensive approach for analyzing the dynamic relationship between consumers and brands.
In conclusion, the finding of this study offers a wide range of theoretical and managerial contributions.