5.1 Introduction

The findings of this research study offer both theoretical and managerial contributions to the brand strategy literature. Thus it can be concluded, developing strategies and tactics aimed at building strong and lasting relationships between customers and brands, it may be important to consider the manner in which the marketing communication messages are bolstered and reinforced. Developing close “connections” with a given brand as well as with the brand community should also solidify strong and lasting relationships between customers and the brand.

Marketing practitioners should note the importance of evoking special memories and rituals that serve to connect consumers to brands, thereby building emotional linkages which may create impenetrable barriers to competitive efforts (Keller, 2008).

In a highly competitive world, marketers find it increasingly difficult to make their brands “sticky” enough. While marketers aggressively pursue loyalty programs, the results remain less than spectacular. Is it possible to build brands that create and maintain a powerful attraction for consumers? Throughout this research, we maintain that a key metric for marketing success is to ascertain the degree to which target audiences romance a focal brand. If brand romance is high, attitudinal brand loyalty may also be high; if brand romance is low, marketers should focus their efforts on creating conditions that are conducive to brand romance because this approach may be more fruitful than traditional loyalty programs.

Despite some doom and gloom predictions for brands in general (too expensive, too much media saturation), branded goods remain as hot as ever. Certain focused and well respected
brands, often beacons of coolness and quality, are now cashing in by enriching other, more all-encompassing brands. The result: **BRANDED BRANDS**.

If for one reason or another, you’d slept through the past five years, only to find yourself suddenly awake in August 2010, you’d quickly realize the world of advertising and marketing has fundamentally changed in some ways. First, subconscious or subliminal communication (and research) has become part of the vocabulary of most marketers.

Second, power has shifted from brand owners to consumers - even the most powerful brands know that successful campaigns have to systematically engage consumers, who will in turn use their mighty word of mouth to spread the messages opposed to relying on big media budgets to do the work.

(Keller, 2008) emphasizes two fundamental questions marketers face in their attempts to develop a successful brand management strategy: First, what does the brand really mean to consumers? Second, if consumers do possess any knowledge of that brand, how does this brand knowledge influence the way these consumers respond to various influence attempts by marketers? In essence, the ultimate impact of a brand is dependent upon the quality of consumers' experiences with that brand and the extent to which these experiences succeed in creating vivid linkages within the mind of the consumer (Fournier, 1998).

It is hence vital for managers to learn everything about their consumers to understand them at a deep level and knowing what motivates them. Consumer interaction and consumer respect are important dimensions of the consumer-brand relationship which facilitate collaboration with consumers for product and service co-creation. Organizations can grow with their customers by identifying ways to meet more and more of their needs. It costs five times more to acquire a new customer, than to sell to a current customer. Constant product innovation can aid greater product adoption and brand resonance. The broader scope of the corporate brand facilitates brand thinking considerably beyond the product and its relationship with the customer.
5.2. Research Methodology

A systematic and organized set of research methodologies has helped me achieve the research objectives. Research instruments were specifically designed to obtain the required information. The population for this study comprised of urban consumers, who have either used the brand or are familiar with the brand in any form. A well defined sample population comprising focus groups of 30 consumers each, for each of the 50 brands where some of them were not mutually exclusive, were used as the respondents for the research study. The evaluation grid was intricately designed to tap the ratings of the attributes for each of the determinants as given by the respondents for each of the brand. The 1500 responses were processed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17.0 for the statistical analyses. Various statistical tools were used to analyze data like descriptive statistics to quantitatively summarize the data; factor analysis to extract the respective factors; data mining techniques like K-means clustering to extract the 11 distinct consumer segments. Creation of an experiment was a significant method used to study responses of consumers across 20 corporate blogs centered around two key functions of CBK and CBE, as this research study has been done on the dimension of the brand-customer relationship. Correlations were drawn to find out the relationship between two major contributing functions CBK and CBE; with the help of these tests, the data was successfully analyzed.

5.3. Summary of Conclusions

The objectives of the research were the following:

1. Identification of the brand identity attributes from a consumer perspective for streamlining brand functions.

2. Studying the level of Customer Centricity of a brand by developing a Brand Customer Centricity Calculator to identify specific areas of improvement for making brands more customer centric.

3. Designing an experiment to study the use of corporate blogs by organizations for enhancing Consumer Brand Knowledge and Consumer Brand Emotion levels.
3a. Study the variation in the pre and post levels of Consumer Brand Knowledge and Consumer Brand Emotion before and after consumer exposure to corporate blogs.

3b. Studying the relationship between the Consumer Brand Knowledge levels and Consumer Brand Emotion levels of the consumers.

In the purview of these objectives, an extremely scrupulous and conscientious research was carried out. After the in-depth and comprehensive study, the following conclusions were arrived at.

5.3.1. Conducting the Pilot Study for identification of the specific research area (identification of the gap)

The first objective was fulfilled by creation of a research tool, to illustrate the relationship between brand association and corporate brand identity, where a pool of 200 product brands was created. The pool created was a random selection of a set of product brands across eight Corporates (Chapter on Research Methodology). The study was conducted by using the brand pool as a research instrument. This was administered to respondents in urban Indian cities and only those brands which could find recognition with the respondents were included in the pool. The same was administered to a set of 100 respondents.

The study thus details that the brand image is what is currently in the minds of consumers, whereas brand identity is aspirational from the brand owners’ point of view. In the above context, I try to link corporate brand identity with the brand images of products in the corporate portfolio.

The next step involved computing correlation between the association scores of the eight corporates. The inverse correlation figures illustrated in the chapter on Results and Findings indicate a significant gap between the corporate brand identity per se and the association of the individual with the specific brand. This gap brings in the need to study the relevant literature in the domain of corporate brand identity and its constructs.
5.3.2. Identification of the brand identity attributes from a consumer perspective for streamlining brand functions.

The next step was to identify the determinants that make a brand customer centric. This was done by using a variant of the UCAV measure, along with a comprehensive literature review, catering to various dimensions of a brand. The measure is straightforward; it asks the respondents to write words or short phrases that describe the focal company/brand as if they were telling someone else about the company/brand. The goal is to capture the meaning of the company/brand for the individual.

This helped me to develop the research instrument for the purpose of the study. The list of 57 attributes (Table 3.2 as attached in research methodology chapter) was then used to develop the evaluation grid (Table 3.3. as attached in research methodology chapter). The data was collected from 200 respondents. The respondents were asked to group these attributes across the six major functions of the brand. This helped to fix the attributes under each function on the basis of the perspectives of the respondents. The evaluation grid was further used to conduct a factor analysis using Principal Components Analysis with Varimax rotation to regroup these attributes under their functional roles with respect to a brand. The same was used to extract brand identity determinants. The Kaiser rule for number of factors to extract was applied. This was done by using the highest loading as a determinant of the factor a variable belonged to. This helped me extract the Brand Identity determinants and thus, loading of the attributes on each determinant was done, which streamlined the six distinct functions of the brand for the purpose of this detailed research study. The six functions were, Emotional Connection, My Lifestyle and Image, My Perception, Consumer Brand Knowledge, Trust and Responsible towards Consumer (Table 4.9 under the chapter on findings and results).

5.3.3. Development of a Brand Customer Centricity Calculator (BCCC)

The 57 brand attributes were grouped under each of the above stated brand functions. Series of methodologies like choice heuristics, lexicographic heuristic model and weighted linear compensatory model were used to develop the equation using the six brand functions along with their individual weights. This helped develop, what I term as the Brand Customer
Centricity Calculator. *Emotional Connection* and *Consumer Brand Knowledge* emerged as the biggest contributors towards defining the consumer perception of a brand. The BCCS thus computed for each of the 50 brands were put through k-means clustering using SPSS 17.0 to extract distinct 11 consumer clusters. The characteristics of clusters were defined on the basis of their performance on each of the six brand functions and they were then subsequently given a name.

**5.3.4. Designing an experiment to study the use of corporate blogs by organizations for enhancing consumer brand knowledge and emotion levels.**

The experiment was carried out on the focus group of 30 respondents. Twenty corporate blogs from the previous study having the highest interactivity score for brand communication were lifted for the purpose of the experiment. The experiment was conducted to see the variation in the pre and post CBK and CBE scores of respondents. The variations observed, thus helped to calculate the delta values (post-pre/pre) for each of the respondents. The delta values calculated for both the functions were then used to see the correlation between the two. A positive high correlation was seen in case of 16 blogs, the other four blogs though, had a positive correlation, but the scores were lower as compared to the other blogs. The detailed results can be seen in tables under Chapter 5 on Results and Findings.

**5.3.5. Conclusion**

The various studies carried out in the achievement of the listed objectives in this research, show clearly that a brand finds it much easier to register in the consumer’s mind if the companies increase and maintain their dialogues with their most involved consumers and keep them informed and updated with the brand. Brand awareness is related to the strength of the brand in the memory, as reflected by consumers’ ability to identify various brand elements under different conditions.

It is an established truth that relates to the likelihood that a brand will come to a consumer’s mind when the consumer has a high level of awareness and familiarity and the ease with which the consumer does so, given different types of cues. The two focal brand functions CBK and CBE used for this study show that at any given point of time the consumer will
associate with a brand if the brand gives the consumer enough avenues and possible junctions to get closure to the brand, in terms of knowledge or information. Thus the success of marketing campaigns or programs is thus determined by their ability to create favorable associations. The brand knowledge plays especially an important role in determining the differential response which leads to brand equity.

5.4. Implications of the study

Organizations will gain only if brands become immortal. Marketing will gain if organizations are able to hit the nail on the head. The management of a brand involves maintaining the present (what the brand is now) while at the same time working for the future. Brands are built by the sum of all their behaviors creating value at contact points with customers. The classic brand management system in marketing is outdated and needs to be replaced by what they call the brand leadership paradigm. Customers want to be entertained, stimulated, emotionally affected and creatively challenged for a successful, complete, experiential marketing experience which they seek through the consumption of a brand.

The present study emphasizes that, to be truly effective at brand marketing, one needs to understand which concrete features and functional benefits of a brand (as a whole) evoke feelings most strongly. Moreover this relationship can be more strengthened when the companies can attempt to make the brands more customer centric keeping in cognizance the brand functions (Figure 5.1).

New consumer-brand relationships represent novel perspectives, resources and identities. Frequent interactions between the brand and the consumer may generate positive effect. Under the circumstances, the brand is dominant and brand resonance quickly increases. The consumer-brand relationship becomes strong. In mature relationships, there is a diminished role for novel perspectives, resources and identities. Consumers may attribute the loss of enjoyable emotion to the brand and a break in the relationship may result. This relationship suggests incorporating novel activities in the relationship, so that partners continue to feel attracted to each other. Marketers would need to re-invigorate brands, perhaps through repositioning, creating new sets of brand associations, modifying advertising campaigns, marketing strategies, etc. Such activities would offer more opportunities for self expansion.
and the consumer-brand relationship is maintained. In fact, the absence of novel elements in a long-standing consumer-brand relationship may explain why it is inexplicably terminated and the consumer moves on to a competing brand. While marketers understand the need to monitor attitudes, the need to monitor consumer attraction to their brands is of greater significance. The brand resonance construct assesses how much the brand satisfies their needs of stimulation, excitement and arousal.

**Figure 5.1: Structure of Customer Centric Branding**

![Structure of Customer Centric Branding](image)
5.5. Recommendations

5.5.1. Future of Branding

As mentioned before, experience is the third step in defining a Brand as a System. Brand experience is the aggregate of consumer perceptions that come from interacting with a brand. As Kevin Keller said: The power of a brand lies in the minds of consumers and what they have experienced and learned about the brand over time. The process of exposing consumers to the various attributes associated with a particular brand, a successful brand experience creates an environment in which the consumer will be surrounded by the positive elements attached to the brand.

The successful brand experience can operate on multiple levels, including adding a new communications channel to reach the consumer, adding a service element to the product that extends a stronger offer, and extending the brand across seemingly unrelated products and services. The overall brand experience represents a way to bring the consumer to the brand and establish a close relationship.

As discussed earlier, product companies that make the transition to customer-segment brands will still face significant challenges in building true customer-centric brands. Traditional brick and mortar retailers offer customers access to a broad range of product and service vendors, but they typically have very limited ability to compile profiles of individual customers. Direct marketing and Internet-based retailers often have deeper database marketing skills, but they (at least so far) lack access to a significant share of wallet of individual customers. Leading brands may have deeper profiles of clients, but they are often still governed by “vendor-centric” mindsets and cultures and their ability to establish trust based relationships with the customers.

Rather than “owning the customer”, collaborative marketing strives to give each customer the perception that they own the brand. To do this well, companies will also need to master the skills required to capture and analyze detailed information about individual customers. Helping to connect customers with other entities, collaboration marketers need to develop richer profiles of customers and their needs and should learn much more deeply and rapidly about their customers than traditional marketers who focus on
narrow “one to one” relationships. The good news is that powerful new platforms and tools, ranging from the Internet to Web services technology and powerful analytical tools, are becoming available to help brands implement these new marketing programs and deliver on new brand promises.

The various researches show the fundamental issue: consumers are suffering from attention deficit disorders brought on by too much choice. In theory, new media give consumers control over this complex world. When people can rouse themselves to use them, search engines, product ratings and social networks can help shoppers make better purchase decisions, but in reality the online world of search and word of mouth is just as complex and confusing as the offline world. As a result, I believe that people will still be drawn to a simple, straightforward brand promise. If they find that a brand lives up to its promise, they are likely to stick with it. If and when a brand exceeds their expectations, they are likely to recommend it to others. Advocacy will spread the word more effectively than search engine rankings or branded TV shows.

That said, a brand still needs to make its promise heard, and people need to find that promise personally relevant. They need to feel they can trust the company behind the brand to act in their best interests. Given the diversity of interests out there, many brands will need to align themselves with ever-narrower communities. If a brand cannot maintain broad, mass-market appeal, then it will have to focus on the needs of specific segments of consumers, which may be defined more by shared attitudes than demographics. A brand that can serve the needs of a specific target group better than any other can compensate for lack of mass appeal and trade volume by charging a premium price.

5.5.2. Branding: The Next Generation

The concept of branding is already undergoing dramatic changes. New technologies have allowed us to go beyond mass production and to mass customize brands. Currently brand manufacturers own their brands. This is changing. In the future brands will increasingly be owned by the consumer. The first signs of this shift appeared in the late 1990s. In the 1950s branding belonged to the USP -- the Unique Selling Proposition. This ensured that the physical product, rather than the brand, was the core differential. By the 1960s we began seeing the first signs of true Emotional Selling Proposition (ESP) brands. Similar products
were perceived as different primarily because of an emotional attachment. The organization or corporation behind the brand in fact became the brand. It was the organization's philosophy that distinguished it from others.

By the 1990s brands had gained enormous strength in their own right, and the Brand Selling Proposition (BSP) took over. The brand was stronger than the physical dimensions of the product.

5.5.3. The Future of Brand Management: My Prognostications:

- Building emotional connection will be key.
- Brands will focus more on creating/engineering the total customer experience.
- Customer-relevant innovation will be a key success factor.
- Outstanding customer service will also be a key success factor.
- Hiring the right employees and creating the appropriate culture will be essential.
- More and more, brands will co-create the customer experience with the customer.
- More and more, brands will need to "stand for something" to survive.
- Strong brands will not only "stand for something," they will also provide forums for people who believe in what the brands stand for.
- Organizations whose employees become consultants to and friends and partners with their customers will be the most successful (increasing CBK).
- One-on-one marketing will become more and more important.
- The Internet will also become increasingly important as a brand building vehicle.
- For larger organizations, customer relationship management (CRM) will become a critical success factor.
- Fast, flexible and agile organizations will increasingly "win" in the digital age.

5.5.4. Fast and Fearless: The Future is Blogs

One can’t avoid them – the blogs. They’re so plentiful that the opinions they offer are influencing our daily news reports. Given the evident potency of blogs, therefore, the important point is that blogs remain within their current sphere of influence, helping individuals to share their personal opinions on the world, and they should be adopted by brands as communication tools.
Chapter 5

The fact is that the marriage between blogs and brands is no longer a vision. And brands already appear on a frequent basis, not on behalf of their brand-builders, but promoted by their fans. This raises a potential danger: gradually the control over brand messages is being drawn away from brand builders and being redirected by consumers. So the brands should begin investing in posting their own frequent blogs on the net, representing their points of view and personalities.

The action would probably help brands get closer to their consumers by reaching right into those core communities of consumer fans.

5.6. Limitations and scope for further research

The research study is limited to a few aspects. Firstly, it explores only one dimension of the customer-brand relationship perspective, out of the known twelve dimensions organized around four perspectives of brand identity. Further the data has been collected to explore brand customer centricity across 50 brands. The brand customer centricity calculator thus developed can be further strengthened and validated through voluminous data collection. It can be further developed into a standard copyrighted tool for corporates, allowing brands to calculate their degree of customer centricity.

Further the experiment has been conducted on a focus group. The scale of the experiment can further be enlarged. Some extraneous variables which were ignored in the present study can be further controlled and the experiment can be strengthened as a standardized research tool.

A major limitation of sampling in my study comprises incorporation of only gender as a parameter and not other demographic factors as the diversity in brand typologies did not allow scope for any other factors to be incorporated.

This research work has been designed as a study employing quantitative and scientific methodology to the consumer-brand relationship across a diverse set of brands from amongst several verticals. The work traces the need for the concept of customer-centric branding, explores brand functionalities and proceeds to evaluate the degree of customer centricity of several brands. The study further designs an experiment to explore the usage of a corporate blog as a tool for enhancing consumer brand knowledge and consumer brand emotion.
Academics in marketing develop and test models and different theories in related areas of marketing. I hope to contribute to the literature by empirically testing how the inclusion of consumer knowledge level affects attitudinal judgement and recall when information is provided in a verbal or numerical mode and presented in a vivid or non-vivid form. In addition, the scope for examining the information mode and consumer knowledge literature is to attempt to demonstrate that consumers utilize their product knowledge to differentiate among attribute information in a manner consistent with the relative importance of the attributes. Theoretical implications of this research relate to how different consumers process and use numerical and verbal information in combination with a specific presentation form.