

Talking With You - Not At You: How Brand Ambassadors Can Spark Consumer Brand Attachment

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Abstract:

Purpose: To investigate the potential of a brand ambassador, who is the designer or maker of a product, to influence feelings of attachment towards the brand through unscripted co-created brand related events.

Design/methodology/approach: Contrary to using paid endorsers via traditional advertising or other forms of promotion, consumers and ambassadors engaged and interacted directly via brand hosted, non-sales oriented product events. This was achieved via the use of live streaming technology and actual brand wine makers. Respondents completed pre and post event online surveys to quantify changes in brand attachment, price willing to pay and likelihood to provide positive word-of-mouth.

Findings: The spontaneous interaction in even one event, via the satisfaction of cognitive, social and emotional needs driving engagement in these events lead to substantial and significant changes in brand attachment with flow on to changes in willingness to pay a price premium and positive word-of-mouth.

Practical implications: The research illustrates that low cost, web based technology can be used to provide wine consumers and brand ambassadors the opportunity to interact freely and co-create interesting and motivating brand related experiences that can stimulate and enhance brand attachment with flow on effects to achieving higher prices and consumer lead endorsements.

Keywords: Brand ambassador, attachment, engagement, co-creation, brand-building

INTRODUCTION

Previous ways to reach groups of consumers via advertising have been related to traditional mass media advertising. Whilst such channels may offer important opportunities for marketers, brand managers must fully understand how to exploit them for maximum benefit and effective information transfer {Kucuk, 2010 #296}. Therefore, the use of spokespersons in advertising and other forms of promotion has been of interest to both academics and practitioners for years, with previous research concentrating on the influence of celebrity endorsers as brand endorsers transferring information in an effective way (Kamins, Brand, Hoeke and Moe 1989). These studies show that celebrity endorsement can enhance advertising effectiveness, brand recognition and recall, with positive flow on effects on purchase intentions (Misra and Beatty 1990). Research has also established that celebrity attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness can drive brand perceptions as well as attitudes towards an advertisement (Kahle and Homer, 1985; Lafferty and Goldsmith; 1999), although the credibility of an endorser, and his/her 'fit' with company and brands they represent, were actually found to be more important in predicting consumers' positive evaluations and subsequent purchase intentions (Lafferty and Goldsmith 1999). Therefore, whilst many different types of endorsers can promote and influence consumer beliefs about a brand, the credibility and fit of the source can be more critical factors in determining the effectiveness of a brand representative on these opinions.

Therefore, more and more consumer brands like Sony, Microsoft or Virgin use their company 'pioneers' as brand ambassadors to promote their products and services. However, while consumer research has investigated the effect of spokespersons, celebrity endorsers and employees and consultants as corporate endorsers of brand perception, studies about brand ambassadors are rare (e.g., Andersson and Ekman 2009). Brand ambassadors are special spokespersons as they are company owners or senior employees who cultivate the idea of the company's brand and shape its products and services. These ambassadors can embody the product in the closest and most credible way. In the relationship literature, brands are defined as a relationship partner with human characteristics (Thomson 2006) or as an exchange partner interacting with customers (Fournier 1998). Given the notion that a brand ambassador is shaping a brand's characteristics, a brand ambassador should have the capability to deepen brand attachment. Brand attachment has become a focal construct in both consumer and brand research due to its strong influence on behavioral outcomes (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich and Iacobucci 2010; Thomson, MacInnis and Park 2005). As in the relationship literature, brands are defined as a relationship partner with human characteristics (Thomson 2006) or as an exchange partner interacting with customers (Fournier 1998), this study investigates the effect of an 'in-house' wine brand ambassador (embodying and speaking for a brand) on brand attachment. This was investigated at both the wine region (brand) level and the individual wine brand level via three distinct studies.

LITERATURE SUMMARY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

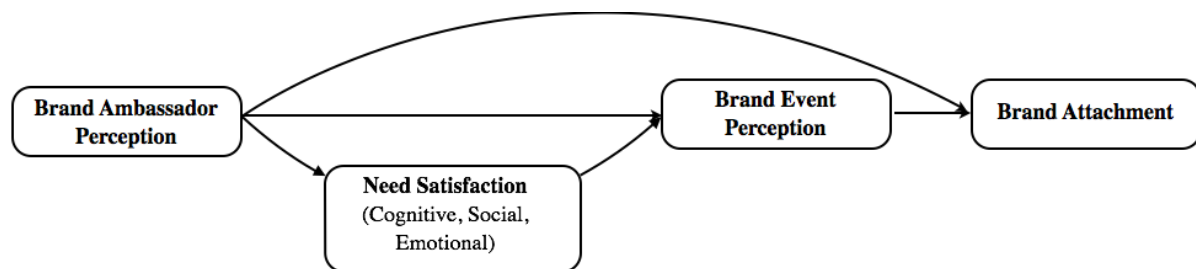
Today's consumers are ever more confident and outspoken about their views regarding the products that they buy. They want their voices to be 'heard' by those who own and control the brands they consume (Miller, Fabian and Lin 2009). They also expect to get information, not only from each other, but also directly from credible brand 'sources' (Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau 2008; Schau, Muniz and Arnould 2009; Tarnovan 2011). This phenomenon has been encouraged and promoted via brand media strategies, such as reality TV shows and the use of social media (Yubo and Jinhong 2008; Jie and Daugherty 2009). This research focuses on brands' ability to leverage these trends and employ their own brand 'ambassadors', in the context of internet-based live streaming technologies, using them to bring consumers and brand ambassadors together in unscripted non-sales oriented events. Forms of online and offline consumer networking strategies have the potential to reach consumers in a different way {Trusov, 2009 #170}. Usually, where brands have been involved, contact has been through forms of sponsorship or via a paid endorser, where direct interaction between consumers and brand representatives is extremely limited, scripted or non-existent. Consequently, direct interactions between brands and consumers, both on and offline, are not truly co-created experiences where value is given and derived by both parties. This is because such contexts have typically excluded marketers' direct brand involvement. Hence, the ability to stimulate and build brand attachment via the satisfaction of consumer needs in the context of brand-initiated, as opposed to consumer initiated, interactions is unknown. Therefore, this research uses interactive brand events to investigate the direct interaction between a brand's ambassador and consumers.

Furthermore, recent research in both social (La Guardia and Patrick 2008) and consumer psychology (Proksch, Orth and Cornwell, in Press; Thomson 2006) advocates taking a motivational perspective when researching attachment formation. In fact, recent brand attachment research suggests cognitive (Proksch et al., in Press 2006), social (Escalas and Bettman 2003) and emotional (Reimann, Castano, Zaichkowsky and Bechara 2012) needs as important drivers explaining the attachment formation process. Furthermore, consumers engage in online interactions to satisfy their cognitive, social and emotional needs in a way that emulates traditional face-to-face contexts {Jae Wook, 2008 #12}. Therefore, the present research investigates cognitive, social and emotional needs in order to explain the suggested brand ambassador-provoked attachment process.

While previous research has concentrated on the influence of endorsers on perceptions and behavioral responses (usually related to an advertising context), this research concentrates on brand attachment (with potential follow-on benefits in terms of positive word-of-mouth and willingness to pay a price premium) by specifically investigating the potential role of a brand ambassador to 'spark' or instigate brand attachment where little or none existed previously, or to reinforce an existing relationship. Specifically, we examined the processes underlying the influence of the brand ambassador on brand attachment (with flow-on effects to WOM and WPPP) based on brand event perception as mediator, something not previously investigated. Specifically, the influence of the wine brand ambassador on brand event

perception, participants' satisfaction of event-related needs (cognitive, social, emotional) was investigated. Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized relations.

Figure 1. Hypothesized relationships between model constructs.



METHOD

The research comprised of three different studies with a consistent context, an online live video streaming wine brand event hosted by wine makers in the Adelaide Hills, the Clare Valley and the Barossa Valley in South Australia. Respondents were recruited from the general population of regular wine buyers in the Adelaide metropolitan area and participated by logging in to a specially designed website portal. Wine makers were on camera, in open dialog discussing their wines. Essentially, this was a form of online tasting where participants would be consuming the same wine as the one being presented by the ambassador or a wine of their own choosing. These events were totally unscripted, meaning that ambassadors typically provide information about themselves, the wines and varietals they were presenting but remained open to all types of questions from the participants (product and non-product related) to which the hosts would answer accordingly. Participants also engaged and interacted with each other in a live chat forum. The video streaming permitted participants to listen to the information and the responses made by the wine makers and allowed them type in questions or comments as they wished. The wine makers could see the questions on a computer monitor and respond accordingly. Each event ran for approximately one hour. In studies one and two a specific wine region was the 'brand' framework and different brand ambassadors presented at each event, whereas in study three the same brand was the focus of each event and the ambassadors were the same each time.


Study one, involving wines from the umbrella brand of the Adelaide Hills Wine Region, was designed to provide insights in the interaction between the brand ambassador and participants in the wine events in order to determine if the brand ambassadors influence was strong enough to engage participants and if it satisfied their needs. To understand the impact and perceptions of the brand ambassador, two types of interpretation of the transcripts of the recorded chat from 24 events that were conducted (with between six and ten participants) were completed. First, idiographic analysis (Thompson et al. 1990; Thompson et al. 1994; Fournier 1998) was used to analyze the meaning of the brand ambassador in the social and bidirectional interaction facilitated by the event. In a second step, an across-event analysis of comments and interactions between respondents and the ambassadors was conducted in order to find patterns of underlying basic mechanisms explaining and supporting the literature and our posited relationships between the constructs described. As the influence of such an

ambassador on consumer reactions and perceptions has never been explored, qualitative data and debriefing comments were also needed for the development of a scale to measure quantitatively consumer opinions about the ambassador that could also be used empirically in later studies (α 0.96 with 80% of variance explained). Similarly, a measure to determine consumers' opinion regarding their perception of the event (uniqueness and engagement) was also developed (α 0.86 with 70% of variance explained). The development and validation of these measures constitute an important contribution to future theoretical development in these areas of research. In summary, analysis of the text from these events provided robust evidence supporting that the events were thoroughly enjoyed, particularly when ambassadors were friendly, knowledgeable, approachable and 'down to earth', any actions such as ignoring respondents' questions or comments or hints of 'elitism' from ambassadors were met with comments in kind from respondents and negative feedback to the researchers post the event. Importantly, valuable product oriented information was also exchanged extensively between the ambassadors and the participants.

Studies two and three employed a quantitative experimental design whereby respondents were again recruited from the general population of wine consumers (males and females over 18 that buy wine at least 2 times per month) in the metropolitan area of Adelaide, South Australia, with the assistance of the brands involved. In contrast with study two, where the same brand ambassadors (a couple) from a single brand hosted some 26 events ($n=114$), study three represented a regional wine brand (Barossa Valley South Australia) where 24 different brands were represented by their own brand ambassadors ($n=111$). Respondents completed an online pre-event survey where wine consuming habits and wine preferences were collected along with demographic details. These surveys were completed at least one week prior to an event. Consumers' current levels of brand attachment were quantified, along with their WPPP for a bottle and their likelihood of voicing positive WOM on the brand's behalf. Respondents' needs for cognition (Cacioppo, Petty and Feng 1984), need for social engagement (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell and Schreindorfer 2013) and emotional satisfaction (Raman, Chattopadhyay and Hoyer 1995) were also measured. Between 8 and 15 respondents were invited to attend a computer suite at the University of Adelaide, where they logged into the event and participated. Small sample tastings were provided to allow participants to experience the wine and discuss it with its creator and each other. Respondents completed a post-event survey where their levels of cognitive, emotional and social satisfaction were measured and their opinion of the brand ambassador was captured along with their perception of the event. They were also asked again, what they would be willing to pay for a bottle of wine linked to the event and their likelihood of passing on positive WOM. The analysis of the data from both studies was focused on quantifying the degree of change in the dependent variables due to the influence of the brand ambassador and the mediating variables of needs satisfaction and impression of the event itself.

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Barossa HQ: St Hallett EPISODE 10 - WEDNESDAY, 18TH OF JULY 2012



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NOTES & RESOURCES

'EDEN VALLEY SHIRAZ'

Join Senior Winemakers, Stuart Blackwell and Toby Barlow, from St Hallett at Barossa HQ on Wednesday 18th July at 7.30pm (Adelaide time).

We'll be tasting & discussing their 2010 Matsoos Single Vineyard Shiraz and the 2010 Faith Shiraz!

To purchase these wine, please visit the St Hallett Online Store at www.sthallett.com.au

So grab a bottle, taste with us and join in the conversation at Barossa HQ!!!

thank you maarten418 0

Cheers and thanks for the tastings sweeneytod 1

thankyou very much, loved the wine, see you up there soon Michael Ewer 0

Thanks to you both - REALLY interesting and learned a lot - cheers! Annemaree 1

thank you. Great wines :) Erin 0

Thanks Stuart and James! Roberta Veale 0

This event has finished.

Barossa Dirt

BarossaDirt @IGlostonbury very true! There's always a few xl-5's somewhere in our car too! yesterday · reply · retweet · favorite

BarossaDirt @IGlostonbury Another punter suggested it could be handy in an enforced 'dry emergency!' yesterday · reply · retweet · favorite

BarossaDirt Not sure if this will take off with the good ladies of the #Barossa...? heraldsun.com.au/entertainment/.../wine

Figure 2. Example of Live Streaming Event in Barossa HQ

RESULTS

Study two revealed that the influence of the brand ambassador on needs satisfaction was both significant and substantial: cognitive ($R^2_{adj} = 0.295$), social ($R^2_{adj} = 0.274$) and emotional ($R^2_{adj} = 0.84$). To test the expected mediating roles, Hayes' (2012) bootstrapping procedure was employed, using the SPSS Process Macro to test for single and multiple mediation. This analysis confirmed the significant mediating influences of needs satisfaction to event perception with flow-on effects to brand attachment (with downstream effects on WPPP and WOM). The influence of needs satisfaction, on brand event perception was found to be substantial ($R^2_{adj} = 0.755$), while the influence of brand event perception on changes in brand attachment was also significant ($R^2_{adj} = 0.204$). The power of the brand ambassador to substantially and significantly change consumer brand attachment, through needs satisfaction and perceptions of the event, even with just one experience, was fully supported.

Study three results showed again that the influence of the brand ambassador on the change in brand attachment was fully mediated by needs satisfaction and perceptions of the event (with flow-on to WPPP and WOM). Using Hayes (2012) Process Macro testing, the findings include that the influence of the brand ambassador to needs satisfaction, again, is important: cognitive ($R^2_{adj} = 0.115$), social ($R^2_{adj} = 0.100$) and emotional ($R^2_{adj} = 0.209$) with a very substantial total effect on brand event perception ($R^2_{adj} = 0.708$). In turn, brand event perception was found to exert a strong influence on the change in brand attachment ($R^2_{adj} =$

0.145) with substantial change in WOM ($R^2_{adj} = 0.658$) and a significant change to WPPP ($R^2_{adj} = 0.0570$). Given that this was the outcome from a single event, these are important findings, especially when over 20 different brand ambassadors had represented different brands from within the same region.

DISCUSSION

The empirical results from both quantitative studies, informed by the analysis of extensive qualitative data collected in study one, appear to afford some generalizability and suggest that the power of a legitimate, credible, knowledgeable brand ambassador to co-create an interesting and satisfying brand related event is real. Whilst it has long been held that brand attachment builds over time as a result of numerous consumer/brand experiences, this research shows that even one event may have the potential to ‘spark’ attachment in a powerful way, providing brand enhancement where a relationship already exists. Moreover, the effect of this one single event has been shown to substantially change brand attachment, in both a single brand and an umbrella branding context. These studies have also demonstrated that consumers have now evolved and grown in self-confidence to the degree that they are now willing to ‘open up’ to a brand representative if the environment of the interaction satisfies their needs, cognitive, social and emotional. Other contributions of the research involve the development of validated measures for quantifying the attractiveness or ‘likeability’ of the brand ambassador and the degree to which an individual becomes immersed and engaged in an event. The testing and development of live streaming websites employing this technology is also an innovation. It provides practitioners and scholars with valuable information about consumer acceptance of this approach and their appetite for greater interaction with brands and their representatives.

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