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Factors Influencing the Potential for Strong Brand Relationships with Consumer Product Brands: An Overview and Research Agenda

Abstract

Based on the premise that consumer product brands are different with respect to their potential to form strong long-term relationships with consumers, this paper aims to identify factors that influence brands' potential for strong long-term relationships and to suggest how these can be empirically investigated. The paper reviews brand-centric and consumer-centric research and identifies twelve brand variables that may influence the relationship potential of consumer product brands. A research agenda is suggested and a number of issues that needs to be resolved before empirical research can be carried out are discussed. The paper concludes by speculating on possible outcomes in future empirical studies and it is suggested that multiple brand variables will have to be employed to evaluate the relationship potential of brands.

Introduction

In the brand management literature there is a tendency to treat all consumer product brands as equal; implicitly or explicitly the recommendation is that all brands should strive for loyal and engaged customers who have a strong and long-term relationship with the brand. Whereas there are numerous examples of consumer product brands that have passionate long-term relationships with their customers, there are many more examples of brands that consumers buy, use, and appreciate but would not be very upset if they ceased to exist. One product category where some people form passionate relationships with certain brands is cars. There are clubs for virtually every car brand (cf. Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrman 2005) and, for example, people that drive *Saab* wave when they meet other drivers of the same brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). Motorcycles is another product category which incites passionate relationships with brands and *Harley-Davidson* is one of the most often mentioned examples of a brand with passionate customers (see, e.g., Schouten and McAlexander 1995). On the other hand, people do not seem to fall in love as easily with brands of laundry powder or breakfast cereals. There is not a long line of people wanting to join the *OMO* Club or thousands of active and engaged visitors to a web site dedicated to *Kellogg's* cornflakes.

Managers need information to help them decide how their money should be spent in order to yield the best possible returns. A brand manager has several options for how to spend the marketing funds for a brand; money can be invested in product development, distribution channels, advertising, relationship building activities, and so forth (Keller 2003). In order to choose wisely, the manager needs information on how his brand will respond to the various options he is evaluating. With respect to brand relationship building activities the brand manager needs to know whether consumers are likely to form strong long-term relationships with the brand. If a brand has limited or no potential for strong relationships, then the manager should not invest money, time and effort into, for example, supporting user clubs or web sites dedicated to the brand. Resources are more wisely spent on advertising or some other non-relationship oriented brand building tool. If, on the other hand, a brand has the potential for passionate relationships with its users, then investing money into activities that facilitate passionate relationships make economic sense. Thus, there is a need to delineate factors that could assist managers in evaluating the potential for passionate relationships for their brands.

The research on brand relationships, brand communities, and other related concepts to date have been mainly *consumer-centric*, that is, it has focused on factors in the consumer driving relationships (e.g., Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrman 2005; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo 2004; Fournier 1998). From a managerial point-of-view, the consumer-centric perspective is limited in the sense that most factors that have been identified as driving consumer-brand relationships are beyond the control of the manager. For example, Fournier (1998) found that childhood experiences and the brand choices of ex-husbands influenced the relationships the consumers in her study had with brands. Factors like these are clearly beyond the control of the manager and they do not offer much in terms of guidance for appropriate managerial action. In order to help managers evaluate the relationship potential for their brands it is necessary to identify brand factors, or consumer factors that apply for a relatively large group of consumers for the same brand, that influence brand relationships. For example, do factors like the brand's age, product category involvement, or consumers' purchase motives influence the potential for a passionate brand relationship?

The purpose of the present paper is to provide an overview of consumer product brand relationships as well as brand and consumer factors that are likely to influence the potential for strong long-term brand relationships. Moreover, a research agenda for quantitative, brand-centric research on different types of brands potential for relationships is presented. The focus is on consumer product brands and *not* on retail or service brands, or business-to-business brands. These brands have been extensively covered in the relationship marketing literature and other factors, for example, service quality influence the nature of, and propensity for, customer relationships and loyalty (e.g., Heskett et al. 1994; Rust, Zahorik, and Keiningham 1995; Zeithaml 2000).

The structure of the paper is the following. The theoretical background and literature review starts with an overview of brand relationships and how these can be operationalized in a managerially useful way. This is followed by an overview of brand-centric research, which is followed, in turn by an overview of consumer-centric research. Both overviews were done with the aim of identifying factors that might influence a brand's potential for relationships and these factors are summarized in a separate section. A research agenda follows, which addresses measures of brand relationship strength, brand variables that may influence brands' relationship potential, and the next steps before full-scale consumer research can be carried out. The paper concludes with a discussion section.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Brand relationships and brand resonance

Relationships are complex phenomena. Definitions of interpersonal or consumer-brand relationships or conditions necessary for relationships to occur, therefore, tend to be complex. For example, Fournier (1998, p. 344), drawing on (Hinde 1995), list the following four conditions that qualify relationships: "(1) relationships involve reciprocal exchange between active and interdependent relationship partners; (2) relationships are purposive, involving at their core the provision of meaning to the persons who engage in them; (3) relationships are multiplex phenomena: they range across several dimensions and take many forms, providing a range of possible benefits for their participants; and (4) relationships are process phenomena: they evolve and change over a series of interactions and in response to fluctuations in the contextual environment." Whereas these conditions provide a solid

foundation for describing and understanding relationships from an individual perspective, they are too abstract to be useful for a manager wanting to describe and understand the relationship, or lack of relationship, that consumers have with his or her brand.

What the manager needs is a view on brand relationships from the perspective of the brand. What are the possible dimensions of a brand relationship and how can these be operationalized to understand the relationship consumers have with the brand? This perspective on brand relationships can be found in Keller (2003) who uses the term *brand resonance* to describe the relationship and level of identification consumers have with a brand. Keller's approach has four main advantages for the manager:

1. It has a managerial perspective
2. It sees brand relationships from the perspective of the brand (i.e., it is brand-centric)
3. It has four clear dimensions that are managerially operationalizable on the level of the brand
4. Keller suggests questionnaire items that can be used to research the brand relationship consumers have with a specific brand

Given these advantages, Keller's concept of brand resonance will be used in this paper in the discussion of brand relationships in general and for specific brands.

According to Keller (2003, p. 92), brand resonance has four dimensions:

1. Behavioral loyalty
2. Attitudinal attachment
3. Sense of community
4. Active engagement

Behavioral loyalty refers to the brand's share of consumers' purchases in the category or their level of repeat purchases of the brand. Behavioral loyalty is, according to Keller (2003) necessary but not sufficient for brand resonance. This is in line with Fournier (1998, p. 343) who notes that behavioral loyalty often reflects inertia rather than true relationship loyalty. Attitudinal attachment refers to a strong personal attachment that goes beyond a positive attitude. The brand should be seen as something truly special. A sense of community is when customers identify with other people associated with the brand, for example, other people buying or using the brand. It is important to note that Keller (2003) talks about *a sense of community*, not proper brand communities (see, e.g., McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Muñiz and Schau 2005), which are more narrowly defined

(see below). Active engagement refers to when people engage in activities related to the brand, for example, correspond with other users or participate in discussions about the brand on web sites. To further illustrate the concept of brand resonance, Table 1 shows questionnaire items, suggested by Keller (2003), that can be used to measure brand resonance.

TABLE 1
DIMENSION OF BRAND RESONANCE AND SUGGESTED QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS
(TAKEN FROM KELLER, 2003, p. 98)

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Suggested items</i>
Behavioral loyalty	"I consider myself loyal to this brand" "I buy this brand whenever I can" "I buy as much of this brand as I can" "I feel this is the only brand of this product I need" "This is the one brand I would prefer to buy/use" "If this brand were not available, it would make little difference to me if I had to use another brand" "I would go out of my way to use this brand"
Attitudinal attachment	"I really love this brand" "I would really miss this brand if it went away" "This brand is special to me" "This brand is more than a product to me"
Sense of community	"I really identify with people who use this brand" "I feel like I almost belong to a club with other users of this brand" "This brand is used by people like me" "I feel a deep connection with others who use this brand"
Active engagement	"I really like to talk about this brand to others" "I am always interested in learning more about this brand" "I would be interested in merchandise with this brand's name on it" "I am proud to have others know I use this brand" "I like to visit the Web site for this brand" "Compared with other people, I follow news about this brand closely"

Like many other authors on brand management, Keller (2003) subscribes to the view that managers should strive for strong long-term relationships for all brands. He writes:

"Marketers building brands should use brand resonance as a goal and a means to interpret their brand-related marketing activities. The key question to ask is, To what extent is marketing affecting the key dimensions of brand resonance – consumer loyalty, attachment, community, or engagement with the brand? Is marketing activity creating brand performance and imagery associations and consumer judgments and feelings that will support these brand resonance dimensions?" (Keller 2003, p. 100).

Keller (2003) notes that not all consumers will have equally strong relationships with all brands, but he does not recognize that different brands have different potential for relationships or that it makes more or less sense for managers to strive for really strong relationships depending on the type of brand.

Brand-Centric Research

What brand managers need is knowledge that makes it possible for them to understand how large groups of consumers will respond to their brand and its marketing activities. They need to know how likely it is that a large share of their customers will develop a passionate relationship with their brand. Although most consumer-brand relationship research to date has been consumer-centric, there is some brand-centric research, which will be reviewed in this section.

de Chernatony (1993) proposed that brands develop through eight evolutionary stages. In this evolutionary process the brand goes from being manufacturer to consumer centered. The stages in this process are:

1. Differentiation Stage
2. Sign of Ownership Stage
3. Functional Stage
4. Service Stage
5. Legal Stage
6. Shorthand Stage
7. Risk Reduction Stage
8. Symbolic Stage

In the *differentiation* stage the focus is on differentiating the brand with a distinctive name, packaging, shelf displays, and so forth. The *sign of ownership stage* entails associating the product with its manufacturer and in the *functional stage* the brand is mainly associated with functional benefits. In the *service stage* services are added to the physical product and in the *legal stage* the company seeks legal protection for trademarks and other brand elements that can be legally protected. In the *shorthand stage* consumers associate the brand with a cluster of benefits that are easily recalled, and in the *risk reduction stage* consumers are confident about the outcome of choosing the brand, thereby reducing the risk for the

consumer associated with purchase of the brand. In the final stage, the *symbolic stage*, consumers use the brand to express their feelings, personalities and roles.

From a manager's point-of-view, there are a number of limitations to de Chernatony's (1993) evolutionary model. First, it appears that de Chernatony regards the model as applicable across the board for all types of product categories and brands. Irrespective of whether the brand is a perfume brand or a brand of canned tomatoes, over time it will evolve through the eight stages and reach the symbolic stage. This does not appear plausible, particularly not with respect to the symbolic stage. It is conceivable that consumers use brands in some product categories, for example, perfume or fashion clothes, to express their feelings, personalities and roles, but it is not equally conceivable for other product categories, such as canned tomatoes, washing powder, or painkillers. Similarly, it is likely that some brands are used to express consumers' feelings, personalities and roles at the same time as it is not likely for other brands in the same product category. Some soft drink brands, for example, Coca-Cola or Snapple, are more likely to have symbolic value for consumers than, say, retailers own soft drink brands.

A second criticism against de Chernatony's (1993) evolutionary model is that it is not clear what drives the evolutionary process or why the stages occur in the suggested order. Clearly, managerial action and competitive activity will influence how and when a brand develops and not all brands will develop through all stages. With respect to the order of the stages many questions can be raised. Why is the legal stage the fifth stage? In his book on brand management, Keller (2003) stresses the importance of legal protection for brand elements such as brand names, logos, and symbols and that this is considered at the earliest stages in the development of these brand elements. Thus, for many brands the legal stage could be the first or second stage. Another question is why the shorthand stage comes after the service stage? There is no reason why consumers would not associate a brand with a cluster of functional benefits before the product is augmented with services. Moreover, it can be argued that the service stage is not relevant at all for some product categories. Is it, for example, meaningful and profitable to develop services for a chewing gum or toilet paper brand?

In terms of being useful to the manager for evaluating whether the brand has the potential to form strong long-term relationships, de Chernatony's (1993) evolutionary model

offers limited grounds for managers to make decisions regarding how to best spend their brands' marketing funds. It seems likely that strong long-term relationships can only be expected during the symbolic stage, which would suggest that brand managers should only aim for passionate relationships given that their brand has gone through the preceding stages and have entered the symbolic stage. This suggests that brands need to have existed for some time before consumers will start to form strong long-term relationships.

An alternative way to classify brands is proposed in de Chernatony (1996; see also de Chernatony and McWilliam 1990) who suggests that brands can be classified according to whether they satisfy performance needs (functionality), personal expression needs (representationality), or whether the brand has "centrality value," that is, the brand holds and expresses strong views about the world (de Chernatony mentions *Benetton* as a brand with centrality value). de Chernatony (1996) does not test his proposed taxonomy empirically, but the distinction between functionality, representationality, and centrality value makes intuitive sense. Consumers clearly buy some brands exclusively for their functionality and other brands to express themselves. For example, a majority of middle-aged consumers buy underwear for functional purposes and may choose, say, a store brand, while many younger consumers, following current fashion with trousers hanging half-way down to their knees, show off their *Calvin Klein* or *DKNY* "undies" to the world. It is also clear that there are brands with centrality value, in addition to *Benetton* a brand like *The Body Shop* would be a good example.

A limitation with de Chernatony's (1996) taxonomy is that the distinction between brands with centrality value and the other two categories is not quite clear. It is possible for a brand to have centrality value and still be purchased for functional or representational needs. From the managerial point-of-view of evaluating the potential for passionate relationships, the taxonomy seems limited. It does not seem likely that the three categories alone can be used as a basis for evaluating the potential for strong long-term relationships. However, it is likely that there is a difference in the relationship potential between functional and representational brands, since brands used for personal expression should be of greater personal relevance to the consumer than brands used to satisfy functional needs. It also seems likely that brands with centrality value should have an increased potential for brand relationships.

Research by Riezebos (1994), reported in Riezebos, Kist, & Kootstra (2003), showed that some product categories are more sensitive to brands than other product categories. Riezebos found two factors influencing product categories' brand sensitivity: (1) "The extent to which consumers can judge whether the branded article will live up to their expectations before purchase (if this is not possible, a brand name can offer consumers a certain security)," and (2) "The extent to which a brand name may give consumers a certain identity" (Riezebos, Kist, and Kootstra 2003, p. 21). Thus, if consumers can evaluate the attributes and benefits relevant for the product's delivery on their expectations before purchase, then the product category will be less responsive to brands, but if it is difficult or impossible to evaluate the product before purchase then the product category will be more responsive to brands. This would mean that, for example, technology product categories such as computers or stereo equipment would be more brand sensitive than, say, fresh vegetables.

The second factor identified by Riezebos (1994) is that a product category will be more responsive to brands if consumers use brands from the product category to acquire or express an identity. Examples of this would include young men with shaved heads buying *Doctor Martens* boots and *Fred Perry* polo shirts in order to complete their skinhead identity, or Australian teens buying *Billabong* or *Ripcurl* t-shirts and shorts as part of their surfer identities. A possible criticism against Riezebos's (1994) second factor is that it applies to individual brands, rather than product categories. Many consumers buy boots, polo shirts, t-shirts, and shorts for functional reasons and not to acquire a certain identity. However, applied on the brand level, not the product category level, this factor makes intuitive sense as one that will influence the relationship potential for consumer product brands.

Table 2 shows rankings of the brand sensitivity by marketing experts (based on judgment) and consumers (based on experimental research) of twelve product categories. Overall, the rankings are fairly similar but there are some noteworthy differences. Consumers ranked milk and eggs fairly high (rank 3 and 5, respectively), while marketing experts ranked these two categories as the least brand sensitive. Marketing experts ranked cars as most brand sensitive, while consumers ranked cars as the fourth most brand sensitive product category.

TABLE 2
 THE BRAND SENSITIVITY OF DIFFERENT PRODUCT CATEGORIES AS JUDGED
 BY EXPERTS AND CONSUMERS (REPORTED IN Riezebos, Kist, and Kootstra 2003, P.
 22)

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Consumers</i>	<i>Marketing experts</i>
1 (Most sensitive)	Lipstick	Cars
2	Cigarettes	Cigarettes
3	Milk	Watches
4	Cars	Lipstick
5	Eggs	Washing Machines
6	Sweets	Women's Magazines
7	Women's Magazines	Shoes
8	Pans	Coffee Machines
9	Watches	Pans
10	Washing Machines	Sweets
11	Shoes	Milk
12 (Least sensitive)	Coffee Machines	Eggs

Consumer-Centric Research

As noted in the introduction, consumer-centric research offers limited brand management insights that are useful for managers. Most factors found in consumer-centric research to influence brand relationships are beyond the control of managers and likely to vary greatly across consumers and brands. However, some consumer-centric studies have found or suggested factors that may be managerially useful. These studies are reviewed in this section.

In a study using phenomenological interviewing, Fournier (1998) interviewed three female informants, "Jean," "Vicki," and "Karen," four to five times over a three-month period. The aim was to gain insights into the brand relationships of the informants and Fournier designed her interviews to yield information about the brand usage history of the informant as well as contextual details from the informant's world. One of the outcomes of Fournier's study was a preliminary model of brand relationship quality. Fournier suggests that there are six facets indicating the quality of the consumer-brand relationship. These facets are:

1. Love and Passion
2. Self-connection
3. Interdependence
4. Commitment
5. Intimacy
6. Brand Partner Quality

The six facets of brand relationship quality illustrate the individual nature of the consumer-centric brand relationship research and the large variation that can be expected across consumers, even for the same brand.

Although Fournier's (1998) study focused on consumer-centric factors that influence consumer-brand relationships, her study does suggest some factors that may influence a brand's potential for relationships. The following quotes illustrate the research approach in Fournier's study and suggest some factors that may influence a brand's relationship potential:

“A never-ending search for a sense of belonging and stability has also lead Jean to value heritage and tradition and to seek and maintain relationships with classic (and oftentimes ethnic) brands in response” (Fournier 1998, p. 359).

This quote suggests that “classic” brands might have a greater relationship potential than brands that are not perceived as “classic.” It also suggests that “ethnic” might be a brand factor that increases the relationship potential. Although Fournier (1998) does not provide definitions of these two concepts, they should be fairly straightforward to operationalize in empirical research and they are of interest in empirical research aiming to identify factors that increase the relationship potential of brands.

Fournier (1998) also found that her informants used brands in a symbolic function and as part of their personal identity.

“But Vicki believes that others’ evaluations are a function of the symbolic brand cues she displays and uses rather than the brand-supported performances she renders in valued social roles. Vicki is strongly motivated by the powers of brand image in a hypersignified postmodern society... She believes in the linguistic power of brands to the point where she is convinced that friends can effortlessly detail which brands she uses and which she avoids. In this sense, Vicki’s brand relationships are highly functional in enabling her projects of identity exploration, construction, and pronouncement. Through a

process of integration..., Vicki readily adapts her identity to fit the powerful institutionalized brand meanings she judges as relevant in this task... In line with the hypersignified condition said by some to characterize postmodern society, it is not *one* self that Vicki seeks to express but a *multiplicity* of potential and realized selves..." (Fournier 1998, p. 359).

This quote suggests that symbolism and personal expression are important properties of brands, which is in line with work of de Chernatony (de Chernatony 1993; de Chernatony 1996; de Chernatony and McWilliam 1990), discussed above. However, it does suggest one additional factor of interest: that some brands have widely accepted strong brand meanings ("powerful institutionalized brand meanings") and that a brand's meaning drives brand relationships. Moreover, the quote suggests that consumers may have multiple selves that they wish to express with different brands at different times. This points to the importance of allowing for this possibility in empirical research on brand relationships.

The final quote from Fournier (1998) suggests an additional brand factor that may drive relationships.

"The carefully selected brands in Karen's inner sanctum share an ability to make her feel good about herself, both by keeping a feared and undesired aging self successfully at bay and by providing expression of personal convictions in a battle between inner- and other-directed selves..." (Fournier 1998, p. 360)

This quote suggests that brands may have the ability to make consumers feel good about themselves and that this might increase a brand's relationship potential. The question is whether this is related to the quality of the brand and its functional performance, or whether it is a property within the brand itself that is independent of the physical product. However, the ability of brands to make consumers feel good about themselves could be of interest as a factor that influences the potential for brand relationships.

In a study designed to investigate brand communities, Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) interviewed members of four households two to four times per month during a 12-month

period. It is important to note that a brand community is more narrowly defined than Keller's (2003) *sense of* brand community (one of the dimensions of brand resonance), which refers to when customers identify with other people associated with the brand. Muñiz and O'Guinn define brand communities in the following way:

“A brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its center is a branded good or service. Like other communities, it is marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. Each of these qualities is, however, situated within a commercial and mass-mediated ethos, and has its own particular expression. Brand communities are participants in the brand's larger social construction and play a vital role in the brand's ultimate legacy” (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001).

Although this definition of brand community goes well beyond what would be required for consumers to be deemed as having a strong long-term relationship with a brand, it is of interest what factors may contribute to the creation of brand communities. As Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2001) study was consumer-centric, they did not focus on brand or consumer factors that apply for a relatively large group of consumers, but they do speculate about some factors that may increase the likelihood of brand communities being formed:

“These communities may form around any brand, but are probably most likely to form around brands with a strong image, a rich and lengthy history, and threatening competition. Also, things that are publicly consumed may stand a better chance of producing communities than those consumed in private” (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001, p. 415).

The first factor suggested in the quote, a strong image, is of interest in the present context but is more of an outcome variable than an independent variable. A brand manager can invest in marketing activities, for example, advertising to build a strong image. Thus, a strong image is not a factor inherently different between brands. The second factor, a rich and

lengthy history, is intuitively appealing as a factor that influences not only the likelihood of brand communities being formed but also something that might increase the potential for brand relationships. The third factor, threatening competition, is a plausible cause of brand communities being formed. One of the brand communities in Muñiz & O'Guinn's (2001) study was Macintosh users, who derived large part of their sense of community from the perceived threat from Microsoft. This factor could be of interest in a broader brand-relationship context but is not a factor that would apply across the board for all brands, since large or market-leading brands hardly will be perceived as threatened by the competition at the same time as they may very well have great brand relationship potential. This factor will not be considered as being of interest in the present context. The final factor suggested in the quote is that brands of publicly consumed products are more likely to form brand communities than brands of privately consumed products. This seems reasonable also with respect to the potential for brand relationships and this factor should be considered as a potential factor that influences the potential for brand relationships.

Additional Factors that Might Influence the Potential for Brand Relationships

In addition to the factors that might increase the potential for brand relationships suggested by the brand-centric and consumer-centric research reviewed in the preceding sections, there are additional factors suggested by research in other areas in marketing.

One of the most common classifications made in marketing research is between low-involvement and high-involvement products or product categories. It is also fairly common to distinguish between “rational” and “emotional” products. A well-known model from the area of marketing communications that combine these two dimensions is the Rossiter-Percy-Bellman Grid (Rossiter and Bellman 2005; Rossiter and Percy 1997). These authors distinguish between low and high involvement purchase situations, and between informational and transformational purchase motives. Involvement is mainly determined by the size of the economic and/or psychosocial loss at stake, but involvement also varies between individuals depending on whether they are new product category users and whether they are repeat buyers of a brand. If an individual is trying a new product category or a new brand, their involvement is expected to be high, irrespective of the potential economic and/or psychosocial loss.

Informational purchase motives have a negative origin and consumers are seeking to move from a negative emotional state to a neutral or mildly positive emotional state by purchasing a product or service. There are five informational purchase motives:

1. Problem removal
2. Problem avoidance
3. Incomplete satisfaction
4. Mixed-approach avoidance
5. Normal depletion

For transformational purchase motives, consumers are seeking to move from a neutral emotional state to a positive emotional state by purchasing a product or service. There are three transformational purchase motives:

1. Sensory gratification
2. Intellectual stimulation and mastery
3. Social approval

Combining the involvement and purchase motive dimensions results in a Grid with the following four cells: Low-involvement/informational, low-involvement/transformational, high-involvement/informational, and high-involvement/transformational. The question is whether the potential for brand relationships varies between these four cells. The positive nature of transformational purchase motives may suggest that consumers would be more likely to form relationships with transformational brands than they would with informational brands. It seems more likely that consumers would prefer a relationship with a brand that moves them from a neutral to a positive emotional state before a relationship with a brand that moves them from a negative to a neutral emotional state. Moreover, it is possible that consumers are more likely to form relationships with high-involvement brands rather than low-involvement brands.

Summary of Factors Influencing the Potential for Brand Relationships

The review of theory and earlier research in the preceding sections has suggested a number of factors that might influence a brand's potential for relationships with consumers. These will be briefly summarized in this section.

In de Chernatony's (1993) evolutionary model brands progress through six stages. The last of these stages is the symbolic stage in which consumers use the brand to express their feelings, personalities and roles. It seems reasonable that the likelihood of strong long-term relationships increases during the symbolic stage which means that brands need to have existed for enough time to go through the preceding five stages before consumers will start to form strong long-term relationships. de Chernatony (1993) does not discuss the time needed for the different stages, but it seems unlikely that new brands have the potential for passionate relationships with consumers during their first years of existence.

The taxonomy in de Chernatony (1996), which distinguishes between functional brands, representational brands, and brands with centrality value, lead to the suggestion that there is a difference in the relationship potential between functional and representational brands, with representational brands having more relationship potential. It was also suggested that brands with centrality value should have an increased potential for brand relationships.

The research by Riezebos (1994), reported in Riezebos, Kist, & Kootstra (2003), suggests that stronger brand relationships can be expected if consumers cannot evaluate the brand's expected performance before purchase. The same research also suggests that brands that consumers use to acquire a certain identity have a stronger relationship potential than other brands.

The research reported in Fournier (1998) suggested that "classic" brands, "ethnic" brands, brands with widely accepted strong brand meanings, and brands with the ability to make consumers feel good about themselves are more likely to develop strong relationships with consumers. The same research also suggested, in line with the work of de Chernatony (de Chernatony 1993; de Chernatony 1996; de Chernatony and McWilliam 1990), that symbolism and personal expression are important properties of brands.

On the basis of Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2001) discussion of factors that increase the likelihood of brand communities being formed, it is suggested that brands with a rich and lengthy history and publicly consumed brands have an increased brand-relationship potential.

The Rossiter-Percy-Bellman Grid (Rossiter and Bellman 2005; Rossiter and Percy 1997) lead to the suggestion that the relationship potential might be greater for high-involvement brands and for brands with transformational purchase motives.

Research Agenda

This section outlines how quantitative research that aims to identify factors that increase brands' potential for relationships could be carried out. It also discusses a number of issues that need to be addressed before full-scale quantitative research can be carried out.

The basic premise of research to be carried out to identify factors that increase brands' potential for relationships is that it should be brand-centric. The starting point for the research should be the brand. It is also important that the consumers interviewed or surveyed in the research are representative of ordinary consumers. They should not be selected because they are members of a brand community or because they are known to have a passionate relationship with a certain brand. The reason for this is that the research aims to identify brand factors that drive relationships within large groups of consumers, not small groups of extreme customers or users that have a different relationship with the brand in question than the large majority of consumers have. Moreover, the research needs to cover a fairly large number of brands in order to get brands representing different levels of the brand factors that are to be investigated. For example, it is necessary to include brands from all four quadrants in the Rossiter-Percy-Bellman Grid (Rossiter and Bellman 2005; Rossiter and Percy 1997).

Measures of Brand Relationship Strength

The concept of brand relationship must be operationalized. As argued above, Keller's (2003) concept of brand resonance makes managerial sense and it will be used as a basis for operationalizing brand relationship. For the convenience of the reader, the questionnaire items for each of the four dimensions of brand resonance (behavioral loyalty, attitudinal attachment, sense of community, and active engagement) suggested by Keller are repeated in Table 3.

TABLE 3
QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS SUGGESTED IN KELLER (2003, p. 98)

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Suggested items</i>
Behavioral loyalty	"I consider myself loyal to this brand" "I buy this brand whenever I can" "I buy as much of this brand as I can" "I feel this is the only brand of this product I need" "This is the one brand I would prefer to buy/use" "If this brand were not available, it would make little difference to me if I had to use another brand" "I would go out of my way to use this brand"
Attitudinal attachment	"I really love this brand" "I would really miss this brand if it went away" "This brand is special to me" "This brand is more than a product to me"
Sense of community	"I really identify with people who use this brand" "I feel like I almost belong to a club with other users of this brand" "This brand is used by people like me" "I feel a deep connection with others who use this brand"
Active engagement	"I really like to talk about this brand to others" "I am always interested in learning more about this brand" "I would be interested in merchandise with this brand's name on it" "I am proud to have others know I use this brand" "I like to visit the Web site for this brand" "Compared with other people, I follow news about this brand closely"

The questionnaire items in Table 3 provide a good starting point for operationalizing brand resonance, but they need to be supplemented with behavioral measures. Behavioral loyalty can be measured with self-report measures of actual purchase behavior. If self-report measures of actual behavior are included in the questionnaire, most or all of the attitudinal measures of behavioral loyalty in Table 3 could be left out. Keller (2003, pp. 464-465) suggests items like the following:

1. Which brand of (product category) do you usually buy?
2. Which brand of (product category) did you buy last time?
3. Do you have any brand of (product category) on hand? Which brand?

Whereas attitudinal attachment, being attitudinal in its nature, cannot be supplemented with behavioral measures, sense of community could. Depending on the brand under study, it is possible to ask about membership in brand clubs, whether they wave to or greet in some other way other users of the brand, and other behavioral indicators of brand community.

Also active engagement could be supplemented with self-report measures of actual behavior. Consumers should be asked about word-of-mouth behavior, online behavior, and similar behaviors indicating active engagement (cf. Keller 2003). The questions need to be

tailor-made for the brands under study, as not all brands have discussion groups on the Internet, offer customers to subscribe to newsletters, and so forth.

Brand Variables

The literature review unearthed a number of factors of interest for brands' relationship potential. The brand variables to be included in the research are the following:

1. How old is the brand?
2. Is the brand functional, representational, or is it a brand with centrality value?
3. Can consumers evaluate the brand's performance before purchase?
4. Do consumers use the brand to acquire a certain identity?
5. Is the brand "classic"?
6. Is the brand "ethnic"?
7. Does the brand have widely accepted strong brand meanings?
8. Does the brand make consumers feel good about themselves?
9. Does the brand have a rich and lengthy history?
10. Is the brand publicly consumed?
11. Is the brand low or high involvement?
12. Is the brand informational or transformational?

Ideally, all twelve variables should be operationalized in such a way that permits them to be ascertained *before* survey research is carried out to measure consumers' relationship with the brand. It is also desirable if they were to be operationalized in such a way that permits managers to establish the status of their brands easy and at low cost. The most straightforward variable to operationalize is, of course, the age of the brand (*Variable 1*). The other variables are, to a varying degree, more difficult to operationalize. An issue of importance to all variables is whether the variable can be determined on the brand or product category level. It is preferable if the product category level can be used, since this is a more general level that applies across several brands. Once the variable has been determined for the product category there is no need for individual brand research.

Whether a brand is functional, representational, or a brand with centrality value (*Variable 2*) must be established on the brand level not the product category level, since different brands in the same product category can belong to either category. A brand's status

can be established in different ways. One way is to do a quantitative survey among current users of the brand on why they buy and use the brand, and whether they perceive the brand to hold and express strong values. It is also likely that qualitative research, for example, focus group research could provide enough grounds to establish whether the brand satisfies functional or representational needs, and whether it has centrality value. An alternative approach would be to perform a brand identity analysis (Kapferer 1997), in which products sold under the brand name, marketing communications, internal documents, the brand's history, and so forth, is analysed in order to unearth the brand's inner nature, including the needs the brand aims to fulfill and the values it stands for. Unfortunately, a brand identity analysis is difficult to perform for someone outside the company that owns the brand, as the necessary material is not likely to be readily available to academics, competitors, or other outsiders. A second alternative to consumer research would be to use expert judges, for example, brand managers in the same product category or expert users to judge whether the brand is functional, representational, or a brand with centrality value.

It should be possible in most cases to establish whether consumers can evaluate the brand's performance before purchase (*Variable 3*) on the product category level. This could be established with quantitative consumer research, for example, in an experimental study or with qualitative research, as little variation between consumers would be expected. However, in many cases this variable could probably be ascertained by an expert judgment by a researcher or brand manager on the basis of experience and earlier research. However, the differences between marketing experts and consumers reported in Riezebos et al. (2003) warrant some caution with respect to using expert judges.

Whether consumers use the brand to acquire a certain identity (*Variable 4*) is similar in its nature to *Variable 2* ("Is the brand functional, representational, or is it a brand with centrality value?"). They both need to be established on the brand level and the possible research methods are the same for both variables (that is, survey research, qualitative research, brand identity analysis, or to use expert judges). An issue that needs to be addressed with this variable is the suggestion in Fournier (1998) that consumers may have multiple selves that they wish to express with different brands at different times. The research needs to allow for this possibility.

Whether the brand is a “classic” (*Variable 5*) and whether it is “ethnic” (*Variable 6*) must, of course, be established on the brand level. It is possible to measure how consumers perceive brands on these two dimensions, but a formal (i.e., a panel of expert judges) or informal (e.g., made by researcher or brand manager) expert judgment should suffice for most brands.

The question if the brand has widely accepted strong brand meanings (*Variable 7*) is similar in nature to *Variable 2* and *Variable 4*. It has to be established on the brand level and it can be researched with quantitative or qualitative consumer research, a brand identity analysis, or expert judgment.

Whether the brand makes consumers feel good about themselves (*Variable 8*) must be established on the brand level. This variable should be established with consumer research and in most cases this could be done with either quantitative or qualitative research.

To establish whether the brand has a rich and lengthy history (*Variable 9*), which must be established on the brand level, it should be enough to carry out a simplified brand identity analysis (Kapferer 1997). For most brands, the necessary material for this analysis should be available on the brand or company web site.

Where the brand is consumed, publicly or privately (*Variable 10*), should be established on the product category level. Even if there may be some variation between brands in a product category, for example, young people showing their underwear and older people hiding it, most product categories should be similar across brands with respect to how the brand is consumed. In most cases a formal or informal expert judgment should be sufficient for this variable, but in some cases it may be necessary to carry out qualitative consumer research.

Whether the brand is low or high involvement (*Variable 11*) should be established on the product category level on the basis of financial and/or psychosocial risk. If involvement were to be established on the brand level it would be necessary to take individual differences with respect to trial and repeat purchase into account (cf. Rossiter and Bellman 2005), which would make the variable unwieldy for the present purposes. To establish product category

involvement on the basis of financial and/or psychosocial risk it should be sufficient to use formal or informal expert judgment.

The final variable, if the purchase motive for the brand is informational or transformational (*Variable 12*) should be treated in the same way as *Variable 11* (involvement), that is, it should be established on the product category level and the type of purchase motive should be judged by formal or informal expert judges.

The twelve brand variables and how they should be established are summarized in Table 4. In those cases where several research methods may be an option, further theoretical analysis and empirical research is required to determine the best method (if one best method exists).

TABLE 4
SUMMARY OF BRAND VARIABLES AND HOW THEY SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Research Method</i>		
		<i>Consumer research</i>	<i>Brand identity analysis</i>	<i>Expert judges</i>
1. How old is the brand?	Brand			X
2. Is the brand functional, representational, or is it a brand with centrality value?	Brand	X	X	X
3. Can consumers evaluate the brand's performance before purchase?	Category	X		X
4. Do consumers use the brand to acquire a certain identity?	Brand	X	X	X
5. Is the brand "classic"?	Brand	(X)		X
6. Is brand "ethnic"?	Brand	(X)		X
7. Does the brand have widely accepted strong brand meanings?	Brand	X	X	X
8. Does the brand make consumers feel good about themselves?	Brand	X		
9. Does the brand have a rich and lengthy history?	Brand		X	
10. Is the brand publicly consumed?	Category	(X)		X
11. Is the brand low or high involvement?	Category			X
12. Is the brand informational or transformational?	Category			X

Next Steps

In order to establish a set of factors that increase the potential for brand relationships and that would be managerially useful, it is necessary to carry out full-scale quantitative research on consumers. However, before such research can be carried out some important issues need to be resolved.

The exact measures of brand relationship strength, or brand resonance, needs to be determined. Behavioral measures of behavioral loyalty, sense of community, and active engagement should be developed. In the development of behavioral measures it is necessary to allow for some variation between brands, even if the measures should be the same across brands as far as possible, for example, with respect to active engagement for which the opportunities open to the consumer vary between brands. There also appears to be some redundancy in the measures suggested by Keller (2003) and the number of items could be reduced.

An important decision to be made concerns the type of response scale for Keller's (2003) brand resonance questions. Their current wording suggests that Likert-type response scales (agree – disagree) should be used. However, Likert-type questions and response scales have the disadvantage that they allow for adverbs qualifying the intensity of the attribute of interest in both the question and the response scale, which makes interpretation of responses ambiguous (Rossiter 2002). For example, in one of Keller's (2003) questions for attitudinal attachment, "I really love this brand," there is the adverb *really* increasing the intensity of the statement, whereas in one of the other statements, "This brand is special to me," there is no adverb. Since the respondents have to choose a response alternative in which the intensity is again qualified with an adverb (agree/disagree *somewhat, completely*, and so forth) there is ambiguity as to how the responses should be interpreted. Thus, it might be advisable to rewrite Keller's (2003) questions to suit an alternative response format, for example, to use, as suggested by Rossiter (2002), neutral questions and to build in the intensity only in the response alternatives.

Another issue pertaining to the measurement of brand resonance is how the measures should be combined into indices for the four dimensions. It is necessary to decide whether the different questions should be given equal weight and how different types of response scales should be treated (e.g., how to include dichotomous behavioral questions in the same index as attitudinal questions with, say, a seven-point response scale).

The concepts underlying the brand variables need to be defined in order for the variables to be operationalized. Unfortunately, most of the research reviewed provide none or fairly vague definitions of the concepts underlying the twelve brand variables. (An exception

is Rossiter and Bellman, 2005, who provide clear definitions of involvement, and informational, transformational and their underlying purchase motives.) Once the concepts have been properly defined, the best or preferred research method for ascertaining the brand variables for a certain brand should be established. For more than half of the brand variables, multiple methods are possible and a choice has to be made. This will require an empirical evaluation in which the alternative methods are used simultaneously and the outcomes compared.

Discussion

This paper started from the premise that consumer product brands are different with respect to their potential to form strong long-term relationships with consumers. It then suggested that Keller's (2003) concept of brand resonance is a managerially useful conceptualization of brand relationships. An overview of brand-centric and consumer-centric research as well as some marketing research not directly related to brands unearthed twelve brand factors that might influence the potential a brand has for relationships. In establishing a research agenda a number of issues related to the measurement of brand resonance and the operationalization of the twelve brand factors were discussed.

At this stage it is only possible to speculate about the outcome of full-scale empirical research on what factors influence the relationship potential of brands. However, results in earlier research and well-known examples of brands with strong relationships with large number of customers could provide some indication. Cars appears to be a product category with strong relationship potential. There appears to be clubs for most car brands (Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrman 2005) and two of the brand communities in the study by Muñiz & O'Guinn (2001) were *Saab* and *Ford Bronco* communities. Many motorcycle brands have clubs, not only the oft-mentioned *Harley-Davidson* (e.g., Schouten and McAlexander 1995), but also many other brands like *Triumph* and *Honda Gold Wing*. Computers and computer programs also appear to have relationship potential: *Apple Macintosh* has a very strong brand community (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001) and there are online communities for *Linux* users (Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo 2004). There are also brand communities for TV series such as *Star Trek* and *X-files* (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001) and online communities for a number of computer and video games (Dholakia, Bagozzi, and

Pearo 2004). Other brands that come to mind are football teams like *Manchester United*, *Coca-Cola*, and the Australian icon *Vegemite*.

So, where do these brands stand on some of the twelve brand factors? Most of them have a rich and lengthy history, but some of them don't (e.g., computer and video games). Some of the brands are, arguably, classic brands (e.g., *Harley-Davidson* and *Coca-Cola*), while others are not. The brands represent both low and high involvement product categories as well as informational and transformational purchase motives. (However, further research may show that involvement and purchase motives need to be adjusted for some brands. For example, it is likely that the purchase and usage motive for a member in a Macintosh brand community is not informational, as for most computer users, but that the purchase motive is social approval, in the brand community, which is a transformational purchase motive.) Thus, these brands with demonstrated relationship potential vary with respect to some of the brand variables suggested in this paper. This suggests that it will not be possible to consider one brand variable at a time to evaluate the relationship potential, but rather that each variable increases the likelihood of brand-relationship potential and that a number of variables need to be considered simultaneously.

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