VEGA School of Brand Leadership

Honours program – Brand Leadership Part Time

Alchemy

<u>Topic</u>

The Consume-Brand Relationship: Understanding consumer behaviour and reactions to brand transgressions.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context

In this chapter, the introduction of the study will be outlined to give you an understanding of the points of interest and origination of the study and why it was embarked on. Furthermore, the research question will be outlined along with a brief introduction to the literature review, methodology and assumptions as a way to set the scene for the more in depth chapters.

1.2 Background

In a perfect world, the relationship between a consumer and a brand would be an infallible one. A relationship where supply and demand go hand in hand, and expectations are managed and aligned from both sides of the relationship spectrum. Unfortunately, this utopian market is not one that all consumers will experience. The reality is, that brands are human by association (brands are managed by people, hence display behavioural characteristics of those who represent them), and therefore imperfect. The focus of this research is less concerned with *if* brand failure or transgressions occur will occur, as that will be taken as inevitable but rather on what impact that failure will have on the behaviour of the consumer who experience it. It is in this thinking that the research problem and objectives can be introduced. The research problem can be posed as a question, being 'What are the specific situational characteristics in which behaviours of a brand could lead to a negative change in consumer behaviour?' Not a benign or inconsequential behavioural change, but rather a fundamental change to the purchasing behaviour and loyalty of the consumer towards the brand.

To begin this analysis, concepts such as relationship theory and consumer-brand relationships must first be defined in detail. From this foundation, the next step would be to understand the paths a relationship could take, what could impact it, and specifically for this research, how it could possible end. This detail will be elaborated on in the literature review of Chapter 2.

1.3 Research problem and questions

Much like interpersonal relationships, it is assumed that at a point, some consumers will simply end the relationship with the brand either as a natural progression, or as a result of some event. In extreme cases, consumers may even retaliate against the brand if the

event in question is a failure on the brands part that the consumer is impacted by (Fajer & Schouten, 1995).

Could a brands' failure really be enough of a trigger to cause a consumer to never use/purchase said brand again, or are there other mitigating behaviours the brand can enforce to retain consumer patronage? To understand this concept further, extensive research has been conducted into the concepts of relationship theory, consumer behaviour and other related topics within available literature.

The research questions therefore are:

1. Can a brand transgression result in termination of the consumer-brand relationship?
2. Is a brand able to recover from a transgression in order to selvage the relationship?
3. Under what circumstances would a consumer terminate the consumer brand relationship?

1.4 Objectives of the study

1. The first objective of the study is to determine the establishment of a relationship between the consumer and the brand that could be terminated in the first place. This may be obvious, but it is important to establish the foundation before the actual insights can be extrapolated.
2. To understand how consumers react to brand transgressions and how it impacts their behaviour towards the brand.
3. Define what consumer-brand relationship termination is, and how it could occur.
4. Understand the brands role in the relationship termination, and how their actions can actively lead to this eventuality.

This study is aimed at understanding the seemingly simple, but potentially complex nature of the consumer-brand relationship with the hope of guiding brands on how to deal with customer relationship management and/or issues management. It is better to deal with an issue proactively or positively upfront, than to allow it to progress to the point where the consumer's attitude towards the brand is so tainted that it cannot being recovered.

This will be done by reviewing existing literature on consumer-brand relationships and comparing this to the feedback obtained through focus groups with consumers in South Africa.

1.5 Literature Review

In terms of sourcing existing literature and theory, academic resources such as the Journal of marketing management; Journal of consumer research and Advances in consumer research are just a few of the reference points that were utilised. These resources provided the necessary starting point for the merger of brand theory and consumer behaviour required for this research.

Theorists such as Fournier, 1998; Hemetsberger, Kittinger-Rosanelli & Friedman, 2009; Hollebeek, 2011 have presented research on the topics of consumer behaviour and more specifically on the notion of relationship formation between consumers and brands. These authors outline the establishment of such relationships, which are then extended into the notion of said relationships coming to an end (Aaker, Fournier and Brasel, 2004). It is at this point, that the research presented currently is positioned continue. With the understanding that consumers form relationships with brands, and then that these relationships can end, it is the desire of this author to understand what can cause this relationship demise, but specifically from the perspective of what impact the brands behaviour has on this change. Can the brand transgress so flagrantly that the consumer has not other choice (perceived) that to part ways?

1.6 Methodology

Although originally conceived as a mixed methodological approach of both quantitative and qualitative research and analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2014), once the research was conducted, it was clear that this was a purely qualitative research approach. The approach here is to gather information from consumers through conversation and observation of reactions to discussions, and to use a inductive approach to analyse the data (Bryman & Bell, 2014).

1.6.1 Research Design

Following the sequence of steps for qualitative research methods as outlined by Bryman & Bell (2015), the topic was defined (understanding consumer behaviour and reactions to brand transgressions), followed by a review of literature on the topic. Next an appropriate framework (or research design) was defined to meet the needs of the intended research (Bryman & Bell, 2014; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Given that little literature is available on the specific topic of consumer behaviour in relation to brand transgressions and consumer-brand relationship termination, the research design chosen is grounded theory. Grounded theory, first introduced by Glasner and Strauss in 1967 (Bryman & Bell, 2014), allows for the formation of theory through the research process and data collected. With the topic of this paper being one that has not been explicitly researched and reported on in widespread

literature, grounded theory will allow the data to be analysed and interpreted, and for a theory to be developed in conjunction with what literature there is available on related topics (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

1.6.2   Data Collection Method and analysis

Data was collected through focus groups, whereby both structured and unstructured discussions took place with a number of participants (44 in total) across a number of sessions (seven in total). The various times were made available to all the invited participants and they selected when they could attend. In the session, structured questions were posed to the group, but discussions were allowed to vary if a particular group was interested in a topic raised/scenario raised by another participant. This information was capture in notes as well as recovered. A research assistant accompanied the author to assist with capturing information as well as to ensure that no observer bias was evident, or that the analysis after the focus groups wasn't biased either.

For the analysis, coding was utilised, where by the raw data collected was grouped and systematically categorised into themes and trends in the conversation within each focus group and across all participants. Findings and recommendations were then stated based on these categories/themes.

1.7 Assumptions

Before the assumptions are defined, they have been influenced through personal experience of situations where the author has witnessed or experienced brand transgressions and the resultant impacts. The desire in pursuing this research topic has developed over years of interest in observing the delicate balance between consumers' expectations and the manner in which brands manage and deliver on these expectations. By default through personal intrigue, the author has spent vast amounts of time through his adult life in a pseudo-ethnographic observation exercise of understanding brand experience from the consumers' perspective. It is this interest in the consumer experience, which has led to the research approach outlined in this paper. To understand at what point brands may fail in the mind of the consumer, to the extent that the consumer is lost to that brand.

The assumptions from the onset are:

1.   There will be a tipping point at which the consumer's tolerance will wain when the transgressions of the brand reaches a critical mass, frequency or severity.

2. Regardless of any negative consequences the consumer may experience, such as inconvenience or increased cost, consumers would be willing to leave/change products or brands if the brands transgression is severe or prolonged enough.

3. In some cases the brands poor reactions or lack of resolution to the customers' dissatisfaction can ultimately lead to the termination of the relationship.

1.8 Delimitation of the study

This study will focus on the change in the status quo of an existing relationship between a consumer and a brand. It is not focused on understanding how relationships form, although some review of literature in this field will be present. Rather the study is aimed at understand what degree/type of transgressions will result in a change in the relationship, and more specifically the termination of the relationship by the consumer. Further more, the research will focus on literature that explains relationship theory, brand loyalty and consumer behaviour as a means of establishing a foundation from which to expand the limited existing literature on the termination of consumer-brand relationships as a result of brand transgressions.

The limitations of this research is that there is limited available literature on this particular focus, nor is there readily available industry insights on the topic. Previous research has been conducted on relationship theory and evolving brand relationships, but little specifically on how consumers react when brands do not deliver on their promises or act in a way that is unacceptable by the consumer (aka. Transgression).

1.9 This research paper is subdivided into four further sections, presented as follows:

- Chapter 2: Literature Review
- Chapter 3: Methodology
- Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings
- Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations
- Following that there are sections containing a glossary of terms, and a list of referenced texts (reference list) and consulted texts (bibliography).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

An analysis of available literature on the topic resulted in a more widespread view of consumer behaviour than just the termination of a relationship (Fournier, 1998; Hemetsberger, Kittinger-Rosanelli & Friedman, 2009; Hollebeek, 2011). Instead of just focusing on the impact of brand failings as this research was positioned from inception, available research leaned towards the concept of relationship theory more holistically, and its application to the *consumer-brand relationship* (Fournier, 1998; Hemetsberger, Kittinger-Rosanelli & Friedman, 2009; Hollebeek, 2011). Within this construct, prevailing literature focuses on both the building up of, and the deterioration of the consumer-brand relationship. However what is interesting from other authors on the topic is the fact that they focus more on the personification of the brand, and the almost human nature of the relationship. This supports the notion made in the introduction, of brands being imperfect by association as people manage them. For our purposes here, it is on the deterioration aspect of the relationship paradigm, or parting of ways, that this research will attempt to shed further light and understanding on. More specifically, on how the failure or transgression on the part of the brand leads to a change in behaviour in the consumer.

It would be pragmatic at this point to define the proposed classification of what is being referred to as a brand failure or transgression (See glossary of terms). This definition is not necessarily derived from theory, but rather a common understanding of how the author perceives the concept of brand failure and transgressions. The purposes of outlining it here is to ensure the reader is comfortable with the authors positioning. Brand failure is perceived as being a lack of delivery from a brand to a consumer and a lack of expectation management in terms of product/service quality; quantity; value; availability; authenticity and/or timeous delivery (not an exhaustive list). Transgression similarly, is an act by the brand which could relate to the factors above, and which is directly against the brands promise or essence in the eyes of the consumer (as per Aakar's healthy brand theory, 2004). The transgression may be a simple failure to properly deal with or rectify the initial failure, i.e. the brand not replacing damaged good delivered to the consumer, or may be general poor customer service management, neglect or avoidance. Generally speaking, the approach here is to understand the consumer's perspective when the behaviour of the brand is enough to categorically alter the terms and conditions of their relationship.

2.1 Understanding Attachment.

In order to understand the resultant consumer behaviour change in relation to a failed brand promise and/or delivery, it must first be accepted that there is in fact a relationship

in place. This notion is not made to be flippant, but rather to circumvent the necessity for delving into the theory involved around the establishment of a relationship between the brand and the consumer. This understanding of an existence of a brand-consumer relationship is made clear through existing literature, and is defined as an emotional connection and commitment between the two entities with a rational expectation of behaviour from one to the other (Fournier, 1998; Hemetsberger, Kittinger-Rosanelli & Friedman, 2009; Hollebeek, 2011). The author explores extensive psychological and behavioural theory to clearly understand what a relationship is, how it is formed and then relate it back from an interpersonal perspective to a brand-consumer perspective. They identify and outline the relationship characteristics from initiation, formation, stabilisation and maintenance of a consumer-brand relationship, in a similar fashion as relationships between individuals. For the brand to be in a position to fail the consumer, there must be some form of a relationship in place (Hollebeek, 2011), however broad, from which a failure to meet expectations can be gauged.

Research suggests that much like interpersonal attachment theory (Coon, 2001), consumers' attachment to brands can be just as emotionally charged and meaningful (Hemetsberger, Kittinger-Rosanelli and Friedman, 2009). Therefore, brand attachment suggests that similar feelings of association could lead to enhanced commitment, dedication and loyalty to the brand or its products with the associated expectations of reciprocity that come with it.

It is perhaps necessary to introduce the notion of brand loyalty at this point in its interrelatedness with the concepts of brand experience and affective commitment (Iglesias; Singh & Batista-Foguet, 2010). In their article entitled "The role of brand experience and affective commitment in determining brand loyalty", the authors hypothesise that it is the brand experience (i.e. how the consumer encounters and interacts with what the brand has to offer) that will influence both the consumers' affective commitment to the brand and their tendency to form a loyalty to it. They also outline the notion that the consideration of brand experience has long been identified as an important characteristic in consumer understanding. Iglesias et al substantiated their literature review with articles from as far back as 1983 and 1985 by Berry and Jackson respectively. It's not only the services or products that the consumer is paying for, but how they experience every aspect of the brand in totality. The interrelatedness of the above aspects (Brand loyalty, brand experience and affective commitment) further supports the focus for this research into how a series of experiences (brand failures) can result in an alteration in consumer behaviour (Affective Commitment and Brand Loyalty) (Iglesias et al, 2010).

Iglesias et al (2010) went on to introduce an additional element that was substantiated by the work of Dall'Olmo Reiley & de Chernatony (2000) being the idea of consistency. Although this may seem obvious to many, it is pertinent to stipulated that in order to develop brand loyalty the consumer's experience of the brand must also be consistent. With this in mind, it is relevant to further extend our understanding of a brand failures to include a series of inconsistent experience of the brand's product or service delivery.

2.2 Understanding failure

Having established that the possibility for a committed consumer-brand relationship exists, the next logical assumption is that there is potential for said relationship to be changed, evolve and/or dissolved over time as well. In their article entitled 'When good brands do bad' Aaker, Fournier and Brasel (2004) unpack the complex journey a consumer will progress through, when confronted with a transgression on the part of the brand (transgression relating to any behaviour by the brand outside of what is expected by the consumer, further supported by Rucker, Hu & Galinsky, 2014). In whatever format the transgression takes, be it an oversight or active negligence, it triggers a thought process that could lead to a realisation by the consumer of an unequal commitment in their "shared relationship". It is both the transgression itself and the post-transgression behaviour of the brand that results in the understanding that the consumer is potentially more invested/committed to the relationship than the brand is (Aaker, Fournier & Brasel, 2004). This means that the brand is therefore capable of disappointing the consumer. Hemetsberger, Kittinger-Rosanelli and Friedman (2009) contribute to this notion by outlining that in a case where the brand shows an inability to positively and proactively rectify its failure or address the consumers concerns, it is often more detrimental than the initial transgression itself.

This begins to lead us down the path towards understanding what impacts a failure from the brands perspective may have on the consumers' behaviour towards that brand (Canhoto, 2013). Hemetsberger, Kittinger-Rosanelli and Friedman (2009) identified in their paper entitled "Bye bye love – why devoted customers break up with their brands", that consumer-brand separation may have two paths. The first is less relevant to the purpose of this research, as it focuses on parting of ways due to a shift in mind-set or changing lifestyle/stage of the consumers' personal development. As detailed by Fournier (1998) the customer-brand separation/relationship deterioration can be identified in two categories, 'the entropy model' (the first form of brand termination) and 'the stress model' (the second form of brand termination).

2.2.1 The entropy model

This is a less relevant category as it refers to relationships that have faded or drifted apart over time from change of interest or lack of maintenance, as described above (Fournier, 1998). As consumers grow-up, mature, get bored or experience new things, their preferences and needs change too. Often with this evolution of character or circumstance, they find themselves less and less interested in brands or products they previously associated with (Hemetsberger et al, 2009).

2.2.2 Stress Model

The stress model, the second and more relevant concept of relationship termination, is far more on point for this research, as it is refers to a more active and intended termination of the relationship (Fournier, 2009). One party (in this case the consumer) is so distraught by the behaviour of the second party (the brand) that they actively seek to end the relationship. The brands behaviour is referred to as the stress factors, and is the trigger to the change in the consumer behaviour (Fournier, 2009). From reviewing the article by Hemetsberger et al (2009), the highlighted "terminating brand love" concept leads to three relationship termination patters as identified by Fajer & Schouten (1995). These patterns were:

1) Physical separation
2) New brands replace old ones
3) A partner in the dyad reveals or does something to alienate the other.

The first two patterns relate to the entropy model, whereas pattern number three is directly related to the focus of the research in question. This is the occurrence where the consumer experiences a transgression from the brand that is unpleasant and counter-productive for the consumer (Hemetsberger et al, 2009). This transgression may result in a behavioural change for the consumer in relation to the brand, i.e. they may begin to question the trustworthiness, appropriateness or relevance of the brand to them. According to Johnson, Matear and Thomas (2011) this can even go as far as resulting in illegal acts of rebellion against the brand (such as theft and vandalism) in extreme cases.

It is from this reasoning, that this research is positioned to delve deeper into the second (stress model) stream of termination/detachment in the consumer-brand relationship. By doing this, the intention is to understand what impact brand failures, or transgressions, has on the behaviour of the consumer toward the particular brand in question.
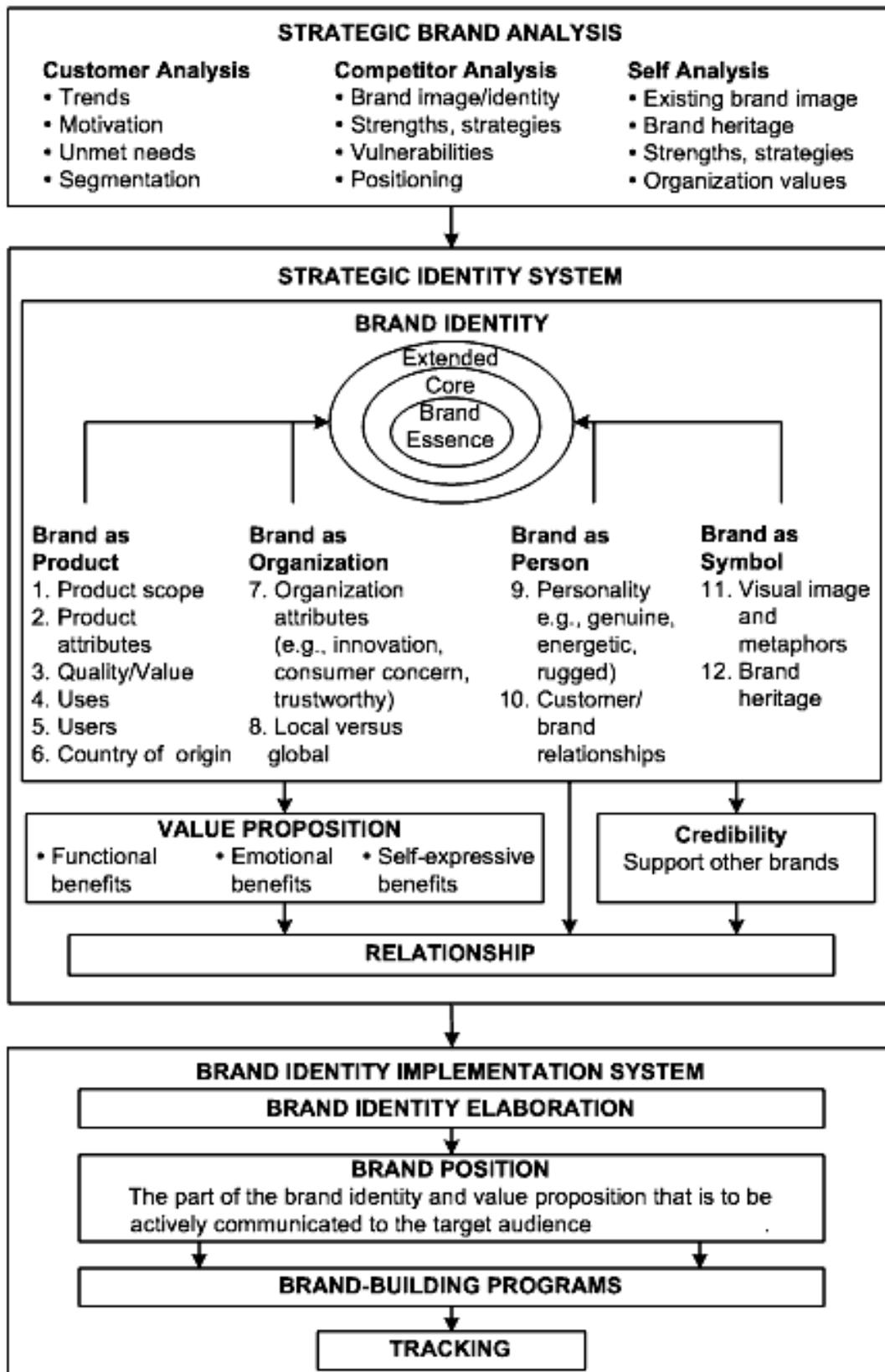
In his book "Brand Schizo" Mike Stopforth, a South African entrepreneur and digital brand agency founder, outlined the concept of brands almost having multiple personality

disorders. It may seem extreme to suggest a brand could have mental pathology, but his overall analogy is on years of experience with local brands and their delivery to consumers. Stopforth discusses (in an intended personification of the brand) the idea that brands get so consumed in activities like marketing and advertising and industry competition that they forget to put the consumer first. In order to put the consumer first, they need to put the needs and best interests of the consumers first. They need to meet these needs by delivering products, services and behaviours that are in line with what the consumers wants and expects. The pathology becomes apparent when brands promise one thing and deliver something else (Stopforth, 2014). It is the gap between these two concepts (promise and delivery) that this research has been conceived.

2.3 Brand theory

In reviewing the available literature on the topics of relationship theory and brand loyalty etc., it was determined that the concept of Brand Identity was at the heart of the research (Aaker, 2000). Through establishing a strong foundation of the brand and understand how the brand fits into the industry, the environment and the lifestyle of the consumers. The Aakers Brand Identity model begins by analysis the brand in terms of itself, its competitors and its customers, it then progresses to understanding the true identity of the brand in relation to these elements (Aaker, 2000). It is important for a brand to understand these elements to know who deliver its products and service to its consumers. The development of the brand identity then expands to include value proposition and creditability. It is within these concepts that the brand should start to identify what it stands for in relation to the deliver to the consumers and who they will manage issues and consumer engagements. The relationship is the most important component to consider, but a brand cannot establish and maintain a clear and mutually beneficial relationship if they haven't first clarified who they are and have a clear identity. (Below is the detailed outline of the Aaker's brand identity model).

Brand Identity Model

STRATEGIC BRAND ANALYSIS

Customer Analysis
- Trends
- Motivation
- Unmet needs
- Segmentation

Competitor Analysis
- Brand image/identity
- Strengths, strategies
- Vulnerabilities
- Positioning

Self Analysis
- Existing brand image
- Brand heritage
- Strengths, strategies
- Organization values

STRATEGIC IDENTITY SYSTEM

BRAND IDENTITY

Extended
Core
Brand
Essence

Brand as Product
1. Product scope
2. Product attributes
3. Quality/Value
4. Uses
5. Users
6. Country of origin

Brand as Organization
7. Organization attributes (e.g., innovation, consumer concern, trustworthy)
8. Local versus global

Brand as Person
9. Personality e.g., genuine, energetic, rugged)
10. Customer/ brand relationships

Brand as Symbol
11. Visual image and metaphors
12. Brand heritage

VALUE PROPOSITION
- Functional benefits
- Emotional benefits
- Self-expressive benefits

Credibility
Support other brands

RELATIONSHIP

BRAND IDENTITY IMPLEMENTATION SYSTEM

BRAND IDENTITY ELABORATION

BRAND POSITION
The part of the brand identity and value proposition that is to be actively communicated to the target audience

BRAND-BUILDING PROGRAMS

TRACKING

Kilde: Aaker, David A. & Hoachimsthaler: Brand Leadership. The Free Press. 2000.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Both Bryman & Bell (2015) and Terre Blanche & Durrheim (1999) outline the establishment of a research approach as being of critical importance at the offset of the research project. Although certain elements my change over time, it is important to understand what you are researching (your research topic) and how you plan to research it (your research design) (Bryman & Bell, 2014).

Although this research is intended to inform brand teams on service delivery insights, is primarily from a consumer point of view. What this means is, the outcome of this research can be used by brand management teams to inform their approach to improving customer relationship management. However the data must be gathered from the consumer's perspective in terms of their experiences with brands and brand behaviour.

3.2 Background

There are many different approaches when establishing a research project. As Bryman and Bell explain (2014) the research design can be quantitative or qualitative and furthermore it can be inductive or deductive.

For this research paper, little existing research is available on the specific topic, but a host of content is available for peripheral and related concepts (i.e. behavioural theory and relationship theory). With this in mind, the aim is to further understand the topic and secondly to develop a theory through the data gathered and the findings.

3.3 Research Design

As already eluded to, the research design is the framework around which the research is conducted. It outlines who the research will be approached, the methods by which data will be collected, the tools and approaches for analysing the data and finally influences how the analysis is interpreted (Bryman & Bell, 2014; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Due to the nature of the topic and the data needed, the research presented here With this is mind the research methodology should reflect this, and be developed around the consumer (or participants) and not the consumer forced into the research approach. As such, the research methodology outlined below, is proposed in such a way so as to capture as real and honest a perspective as is possible from participants. The approach will be designed with the intention of encouraging open and authentic engagement and sharing from the participants.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

This is an inductive research approach, and requires qualitative data collection and analysis. The method of data collection is through focus groups, whereby participants are encouraged through structured questions to share their experiences.

3.4.1   Sampling

Terre Blanche & Durrheim (1999) discuss the concept of statistical significance and optimal sample sizes. Their theory suggests that sample sizes need to be large enough to have significance. In this regard, the approach to sampling for this research was in line with a non-probability sampling approach, which has it's negative aspects as described by Terre Blanche & Durrheim (1999). As the sampling is not randomised, there is the risk of bias on the part of the authors. The participants can be selected based on a specific need (for example) or based on the authors' ability to gauge their responses. Although this cannot be fully negated, this was addressed the introduction of a research assistant for the focus group process, who was unrelated to the research initially. With this addressed the aim was to sample a group of 50 participants, as a general figure perceived to be a feasible number to approach and gain access to. This sample needed to be representative of the entire population (Bryman & Bell, 2014), but also faces the limitations of time and access. As Bryman and Bell explain, in order to apply your findings and recommendations to the entire nation, your sample therefore needs to be able to be representative of that wider audience. In this instance, the author was limited to convenience (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999) and was able to send out invites to participate and approach people in the immediate environment. This included client environments, working environments, retail environments (Malls and shopping centres) and academic institutions. As outlined in Table 1, of the original target of 50 participants, a total of 44 participants were confirmed and participated in the research. Of this group, given the restriction of time available for fieldwork the target is to include a minimum of 50 participants. Over the period of three weeks, between eight and ten focus groups of five to eight participants each will be conducted.

In an attempt to prevent each focus group from being populated by similar participants, each invite was sent with the full list of available focus group time and venue allocations. The intention was that once the participants had responded to the invites, the focus group lists will be coordinated and the adjusted to accommodate over or under booked sessions. This is important to attempt to counteract skewed data towards any one market segment or demographic (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). In these sessions open-ended

questions relating to brand promise and experiences were posed to the participants in a structured manner.

Group Number	Relation / Context	Number or Participants	Gender distribution	Race Distribution	Youngest	Oldest	Ave Age
1	This group was related to the authors work, consisting of staff, suppliers, office neighbours and industry acquaintances.	6	2 Male; 4 Female	3 white, 3 black	23	58	34
2	This group was made up of client participants. Various company and brand owners who contract my agency to manage their brand communications.	6	1 Male, 5 Female	1 Black, 1 Coloured, 4 white	32	40	37
3	Random collection of digital agency based individuals who allowed the researcher to group them together.	4	2 Male, 2 Female	4 Black	25	27	26
4	Students – these were students that the author lectures, who were willing to participate, but were available at the same time and place.	7	3 Male, 4 Female	3 Black, 3 White, 1 Coloured	22	24	22
5	Family – This group contained personal family members of the author, and so the focus groups were conducted by a third part on the authors' behalf (who sat in on all previous sessions as well).	5	3 Male, 2 Female	5 White	26	58	40
6	This group consisted of random acquaintances of the author who were invited to the focus group.	9	6 male, 3 Female	1 Black, 7 White, 1 Coloured	22	41	29
7	This group contained a crowed sourced group of participants. Using extensive social/digital media audiences, the author requested local interested parties to participate in a consumer behaviour focus group.	6	5 Male, 1 Female	5 White, 1 Indian	34	55	41

Table 1. Focus Group demographic information

3.4.2 Research Instruments

The responses were recorded (with the participants' approval) and the transcripts analysed for qualitative insights and trends (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999) allowing for content analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2014).

An example of the types of questions which may be posed to the groups are listed below:

- "*Please describe an experience when your expectation of a product/brand/service was not met, and what the resulting outcome was.*"
- "*Please share a circumstance where a long-term, trusted brand you used/purchased no longer delivered on a promise, and how (if at all) it affect your use of that product*"

With this research feedback, coding will be applied to assist with categorising specific information into manageable and interpretable categories (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Each of the structured questioned posed, will have a range of categories into which the answers could fall. The first of these categories will simply be sentiment, is the response positive or negative towards a brand? Leading on from that the categories such as level of the emotive responses (i.e. high, medium, low) if the consumer-brand relationship was terminated (yes/no) a code will be applied to the time periods it took to separate from the brand completely (i.e. 0-6 months; 6 months to a year; a year to 2 years etc.). Developing the proposed coding structure in advance allowed for the inclusion of critical information into the questions posed, and therefore to extract the necessary information from the responses. But it also allowed for quicker recording and documenting of the responses during the session, which meant that more time could be spend interacting with the participants rather than taking notes. Another positive to have coding parameters in place for the structured questions was that it allowed for an informal category to be applied to the conversation that ventured outside of the structured questions.

The author was able to define what the sentiment of the discussion was based on pre-existing coding structures, as well as the emotion the participants assigned to the discussion.

3.5 Trustworthiness (Validity and reliability)

As this is a qualitative research design, there is some difficulty in establishing the concepts of validity and reliability. However with this in mind there are components that can be assessed to support the notion of adapting validity and reliability in some aspects for qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2014). These include reporting on internal validity, which this research achieved by ensuring that there was more than one observer when data was being collected and analysed (Bryman & Bell, 2014). More importantly Bryman & Bell go on to introduce the concept of trustworthiness, which is allows for the notion that research in the social sciences can allow for more

than one truth (i.e. different experiences and outcomes, but still real). In order to establish trustworthiness of this research, the following four criteria will be addressed:

3.5.1 Credibility

Credibility can be established through ensuring that the documented data and the interpretation there of, are verified with the participants who provided it. This means that one the data is captured, coded, analysed and interpreted, that the finds are reviewed with the participants prior to conclusion or publication, so as to ensure that the authors interpretations are correct (Bryman & Bell, 2014). In this research this was not holistically achieved to time restraints, however at the end of each focus group, the author and the research assistant recapped the discussion, providing a summary of what was asked and recorded and further asked the participants to confirm their acceptance of the captured content.

3.5.2 Transferability

As this research does not consist of vast quantities of quantitative data, but rather targeted audience of detail-rich qualitative data, it can be said to be transferable, as be the definition outlines by Bryman & Bell (2014). The participants were varied in age, gender, race and location. If you refer to Table 1, focus group 6 was the author's family, who are all South African Expatriates now living in the United Kingdom. This gives a broader context but also resulted in the ability to contrast local experiences with international. Through the collection of all the qualitative data gathered, there is potential for transferal of deep insights into this particular cultures experience.

3.5.3 Dependability

Dependability speaks to the formal approach of due diligence. This is an almost auditable approach of retaining all associated content and data as well as having documented accounts of the procedures followed and the approach taken (Bryman & Bell, 2014). Aside from the deletion of the recorded sessions after the analysis, as per the commitments made to the participants, all other activities relating to this research have been documented and retained for future use or reference.

3.5.4 Conformability

Conformability requires that the author be able to show/prove that no bias, personal opinion or influence has been embedded in conducting the research (Bryman & Bell, 2014). In the current research this can only be achieved via the inclusion of the research assistant who was uninvolved in the initial stages of setting the research tic and conducting the literature review. By only including him

in the focus groups and the data capturing and analysis, it shielded him from trying to answer the research questions through the focus group process.

3.6 Data Analysis Methods

The research design is Grounded Theory and the data analysis will be conduced through coding and application of inductive thinking (Bryman & Bell, 2014). The data in this research approach was extracted by means of capturing feedback provided from participants in focus groups. A research assistant assisted the author by sitting in on all groups and assisting that all content was captured. This ensured that 1) no context was lost, and 2) the author's potential bias for the research was not projected onto the participants or captured in the notes of the sessions.

The coding was utilised pre-planned categories of codes were applied to the notes taken in the sessions as well as the secondary review of the recordings from the sessions. This allowed the author to immediately compartmentalise information and begin building themes. It also allowed for a structured approach to the session, as information that did not fit into an existing code, could be documented as new potential categories that the author may not have considered.

Once the data had been categorised, it allowed for clear themes to be observed and insights to be extracted from them. Findings and recommendations were then stated based on these categories/themes.

3.7 Ethical considerations

From an ethical research perspective (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999), it will be assured that participates in this research will not be in anyway negatively impacted. Aside from being ask to provide a portion of time to engage in the focus group, participation will be of their own free will, and no data that could identify or isolate them in any way will be captured. Demographic information such as age, gender, and race will be captured only to allow for any statistical interest, such as if particular ages groups or gender classification takes longer to change behaviours etc. No identifying (name or identification number) information will be assigned to their focus group transcript/feedback.

3.8 Research Challenges.

From a data gathering perspective, it may be difficult to entice participants to take 30 to 60 minutes out of their time to participant in a focus group. To mitigate this risk, the focus groups were conducted in multiple locations and at times that will be

convenient to the participants invited. The author scheduled sessions at corporate offices, tertiary education institutions, restaurants and at homes. This allowed for potential participants to select the venue that was most appropriate for them, thereby encouraging participation.

Concerns of anonymity will be mitigated by not recording any personal identifying information of the participants in the session, and the focus group scheduled destroyed after the session are concluded.

With the proposed collection and analysis of the focus group feedback there is the risk of losing objectivity and forcing data to align via the questions asked. To mitigate this issue, it is proposed that an impartial party be approached to review the raw data/transcripts and the outcome developed to ensure consistency and objectivity throughout.

Finally with the idea of consumer-brand relationships being similar to attachments with people and therefore emotionally involved, some participants may not be willing to explain the emotional "break-up" to the required detail for a proper analysis. This will need to be addressed through follow up questions in a changed format, or alternatively that respondent's feedback will need to be excluded should they be too vague for proper analysis.

Chapter 4: Data analysis and findings

4.1 Context

The original thinking of focus groups as outlined guided the data collection approach, however the groupings of participates proved to be less controlled that planned. Originally the intent was to develop a schedule of available time slots grouped into session in which various invited participates could assign themselves. It turned out that groups of people who already knew each other or were somehow linked where scheduling themselves in the same session, or asking to be grouped together. This had many reasons, from availability of time to location of participates. Regardless of the fact the original intention was to schedule groups of unacquainted participants, this proved to be unfeasible. It became apparent that potential participants in similar life situations (work/study) we available at similar times, and we're more willing to participate if they could do it in pre existing groups, rather than individually.

In the end a total of seven focus groups were conducted over a three-week period from 14 June 2015 to 4 July 2015. The majority of the groups were facilitated in the last week and a half, and a total of 44 participants were involved.

4.2 Procedure

The Focus groups were conducted for a minimum of 45 minutes and a maximum of one and a half hours. In this time, they were positioned in a circle of chairs, with each participant facing inwards. In some instances (i.e. with the groups conducted at Vega School of Brand Leadership) the participants were positioned around a table). The sessions were structured around a hierarchy of open ended questions, which ranged from general consumer behaviour related questions to more specific, targeted questions around consumer-brand relationships and reactions to scenarios.

The focus group question hierarchy was as follows:

1. General Consumer behaviour questions
   a. Where do you prefer to do your shopping (grocery or personal items)?
   b. How often do you go shopping?
   c. What sort of brands do you spend your money on most? (Although the participants were not give then category of products or services, their responses were categorised into one of these two)
   d. Which brands give you the best service, and why?
   e. Would you prefer to shop in a store/mall or online? Why?

2. Scenario based questions
   a. Please describe a situation when you believe that your expectations were not met in regards to a purchase you made.
      i. How would you raise your concern to the above scenario?
      ii. How would you expect a brand to react?
   b. Would you say you are generally satisfied with the product/services you pay for from brands in South Africa?
   c. In your opinions, which brands are the least efficient/effective in customer relationship management? Why?
   d. Can you describe a situation where you believe a brand did not react appropriately to a concern resulting from a purchase?
   e. What has been the worst purchasing/brand related experience you have personally encountered?
3. Consumer-brand relationship questions
   a. Do you have a brand that you feel you are loyal too? If so, what?
   b. Why do you believe you are loyal to that brand?
   c. Have you ever stopped using/buying a product/service from a brand due to their behaviour or actions?
      i. What would a brand have to do in this situation to prevent you from leaving them?
      ii. At what point did you decide to abandon the brand?
      iii. Would you consider returning to the brand?
   d. Does the product/service itself impact your decision to stop using a brand?
   e. At what point would you draw the line and leave a brand regardless of how much you desired or needed their product/service?

The above questions outline the skeleton of the questions posed in the focus group. Participants were encourages to all participate on all questions and provide their insights and ideas. They were asked to not interrupt each other's responses, but were encouraged to pose questions to one another and contribute to each other's thoughts and answers.

Although these questions were asked in each session, each session's conversations took different paths. Some groups focused more on the products and services themselves, comparing similar purchasing behaviours and others focused more on the interaction between brand and consumer, supporting each others frustration with poor service delivery, or reinforcing praise for particularly effective brands. The facilitators (the author of this paper and a research assistant) allowed the conversations to stray to an extent, but would draw

then participants back in by posing the next question, if the conversation diverted to far off of the topic or started to become counterproductive.

In each of the seven focus groups, participants joined and were assigned a participant number. Each filled out their demographic information, but no identifying information, on a form, and then proceeded to be asked to agree to being recorded. The research assistant documented general comments through the session and noted them against the participant's number. These notes were then later compared to the recordings and any missing or incorrect information was adjusted. The notes were then collated to allow for each question to be compared against the recorded information across all 44 participants.

4.3 Coding – Data grouping

The data collected from the research focus groups equated to a vast amount of qualitative information. The approach was to take the notes taken by the author and the research assistance and compared those against the recordings taking during the sessions. Although at first it was difficult to remember the participants based on their voices, but by comparing the comments to the notes taken, it was easier to determine the participate (based on their participant number) in relation to their comments.

After some adjustments were made to capture exact phrasing and details of examples, the analysis of the collected data was conducted.

As discussed by Bryman & Bell (2014), coding these discussions proved to be a challenge as they were focused around open questions, and we also gave the participants limited freedom to expand their conversations and feedback into areas they felt was of importance. The result of this meant that the feedback captured varied greatly in terms of the participants reference points. For example when asked about what brands the participants spend the most on, some referred to large scale purchases (cars and houses) meaning scope of the spend, whereas others referred to daily purchases (like cigarettes) meaning the frequency of purchases and spending. In this instance, the coding approach of separating the purchase types in the categories of product or service, and the coding category of purchasing commitment (low commitment being day-to-day purchases, or high commitment being high value or volume purchases).

4.4 Findings

A systemic thinking approach was utilised for grouping and categorising the data. At first all the data points were listed as individual items and concepts, and through processes of elimination the vast array of data points were grouped together on multiple iterations to narrow the data set down to a more simplistic and inclusive range of three themes of content.

4.4.1   Theme 1: Consumer sentiment

Consumer sentiment was the category into which all comments relating directly to questions posed or indirect comments made were grouped, that related to consumers opinions or impressions of the brands they relate to or use regularly.

- Interestingly 57% (25 of the 44) of the participants could be categorised as generally satisfied with the brands they choose to spend their money on. They made comments along the lines of "I have very few issues with any of the brands I buy, cant remember the last time I complained about something", and "for the most part the things I by I am happy with". In comparing these users over arching responses, they tended to be content with their brands in general and/or indifferent to brand/purchasing activities.

- 27% (12 of the 44) were in a middle ground or categorised as on the fence. Although they were satisfied with their day-to-day brands and purchases, they experienced poor brand delivery experiences, which they felt relevant for this line of questioning. They all stipulated that in general they were satisfied but that they did have regular interactions with brands who didn't meet their expectations, which was more of a nuisance factor than anything else.

- 16% (7 of the 44) of the participants reported that they were very frustrated by brands and services and had recently had an encounter with a brand that had failed to deliver on their product/service promise. These participants we categorised as anti brand-advocates. They explained that they had recently (in the last two weeks), made a purchase that had resulted in them having to complain and in 5 of these cases, the participants had to complain more than once or escalate the complaint due to being dissatisfied with the outcome.

In some instances, the 16% (anti brand-advocates) were able to move some of the generally satisfied participants out of that category, and into the on the fence

category. This was observed in 4 separate cases in different session. This lead the author to believe that when someone has had a negative experience with a brand, they can be persuaded to perceive their experience as more intense one they know someone else (peer review) has had a similar experience.

4.4.2   Theme 2: Brand Transgressions

In terms of brand transgressions, this is where the audience were engaged in a conversation that related to what brands could do that was wrong. It was this section of the discussion that varied the most in terms of feedback, and which strayed the most from the structured questions and discussions. Participants lists some of the following as what they believe to be brand transgressions:

- In consistent product size or quality
- Poor customer service (in-store or on the phone)
- Poorly trained staff – i.e. product knowledge or service approach was lacking
- Inability to rectify an issue once it is reported.

There were a host of other comments made in this regard, but the above-mentioned categories were the most mentioned. To simplify the feedback within this category the content was grouped into three themes: Active transgressions, Passive transgressions, and Poor quality transgressions.

These categories were identified through the volume of comments where the participants discussed what constituted a brand transgression to them (after having the concept explained) and what they perceived to be the most problematic.

- Passive transgressions were the issues faced by a consumer where something relating to the brand has had an unavoidable issue such as a product that doesn't work or a service that wasn't delivered adequately. Examples of these that were provided by the participants included telecommunication companies having issues like network down times or breaks in the service delivery (like dropped calls on a cellphone) or milk going off in a store because of (perceived) load shedding issues. 91% of the respondents said they had encountered this before, and of these only 18% (8 of the 44) mentioned that they were unsatisfied with the outcome of the incident once it was reported
- An active transgression is were the consumers perceived the brand to have been in full control of a situation and they opted to not correct the issue before it reached the consumer. These include examples such as faulty products

that should have been through quality control checks (dirt of buds in food products in stores); services rendered which do not work for the consumer (example give of car servicing which did to fix the problem – many similar examples were given across sessions). In these instances the participants felt that they should not be inconvenienced by such events and that it was the role of the brand to ensure that they prevent the consumer from experiencing such incidents. 85% of the participants agreed with the conversation in this regard, stating the brands should have a higher attention to detail and quality control. The other 15% inferred that in some instances brands couldn't be held responsible 100% of incidents. This 15% suggested that the consumers should give the brand at lease a change to deal with the issue and rectify their mistake.

4.4.3 Theme 3: Tipping Point

The tipping point category refers to the point at which a brand pushes a consumer to the point of ending the relationship. This discussion took some time in all session to clarify. Some participants had strong opinions on ethical and quality standards which could not be overlooked, and if a brand (for example) sells stolen or damage goods, or their business operations impacted the less fortunate or took advantage of others, that they would in theory not use these brands. However, aside from the esoteric concepts, the more direct brand transgressions were discussed along the line of extreme cases, like a person being injured or becoming ill from a product. At this point the conversation was guided to allow the participants to provide feedback via storytelling. The purpose was to ascertain if there were other elements that would result in consumers reaching the tipping point.

Through these discussions it was discovered that 74% (32 of the 44 participants) felt that if a brand did not adequately resolve and issue once it was brought to their attention, that this would be ground to end the relationship. All participants were asked to take a stance on this concept, and the discussion expanded into different scenarios:

- If it is a franchise and one particular branch provided bad service, but the head office or other branches dealt with it properly, they would most likely continue using the brand, but potentially not return to that particular brand.
- If a particular employee of the brand was the cause of the issue/complain but another employee or the owner/manger were able to assist and deal with problematic employee, then they would consider staying with the brand.

Across the entire discussion two trends were observed:

1. Consumers intuitively want to find a way to resolve issues quickly and efficiently, and not have them escalate into a big deal. They look for a way to not leave the brand and rather focus on resolution.
2. When it is an extreme case of impact on the consumer, they want retribution. If the consumer has been negatively impacted or inconvenienced, they want the brand to own up to the issue, deal with the problem (i.e. remove the faulty product or discipline the problematic employee) and provide some sort of compensation for the consumer for their trouble.

Holistically, the focus groups resulted in an understanding that consumers want to experience brands and products in their best light and would prefer to steer clear of issues and incidents. This may seem obvious, but it is an important starting point to allow for further insights to be derived.

Following on from this, consumers actively look for a way to rectify issues when they do arise, but they expect the brand to take an active role in this process and to make the situation as efficient and effective as possible for the consumer.

When the situation escalates into a crisis or extreme problems, consumers want swift reaction from the brand and they want the brand to own the problem and provide a solution with compensation. It takes a lot for the consumer to decide to terminate a relationship with a brand, but 72 % said they would if they brand was unable to adequately deal with the issue, and of those 95% said they were more likely to terminate the relationship with a brand if the brands response to being made aware of the issue was a negative one. I.e. if an issue arises and the consumer makes the brand aware of it, they expect a brand to proactively rectify the situation, when they have experienced a brands' staff being disinterested, rude or unhelpful they were more likely to leave the brand than if it was a serious issue but the brand dealt with it in a quick and effective manner.

In closing on this section, the some participants did mention that in certain cases, the consumer-brand relationship was out of their hands. Examples of electricity supplier, Eskom, or South African Revenue services (although not a true service) were mentioned in that if consumers don't like the service or treatment they receive, there is little they can do about it.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and recommendations

In closing, this research was not intended to be a general behavioural or relationship analysis, but rather focused specifically on the resultant impact of transgressions from a brand (failed brand promise or delivery) on the consumers' behaviour towards the brand. As such this research will not be looking into the concepts of relationship formation or brand promise development. This research will also not be concerned with observing the relationship between the brand and the consumers. It will be entirely focused on a retrospective look at how behaviours of a brand, past or present, have impacted consumers' behaviour.

With the ever-growing globalisation of the consumer market, and the increasing integration of digital media communications in the consumers' lives, consumers are no longer constrained to the will of the brand. Should a brand fail, the premise is that consumers will move on to a brand that they believe won't fail them or that offers them the desired produce/service to replace their existing brands with. Although total termination of the relationship is not the only option, this research is aimed to understand what those behaviours could be and how best to understand them for developmental purposes of brand management and customer relations.

Brands need to first and foremost listen to their consumer, it is important to have an outside-in perspective of branding and service delivery. The consumer wants to be heard and assist in a manner they find adequate.

Brands should have detailed customer relationship management processes in place that ensure that when consumer issues arise, that they are dealt with in a timeous, proactive and efficient manner. It is more likely that consumers will terminate their relationship with a brand if the issues are not dealt with properly and in a positive way.

The consumer-brand relationship is much like interpersonal relationships. It takes maintenance from both parties, but it is the brand itself that needs to ensure that once they take money from a consumer, that their brand promise is maintained and delivered upon.

Glossary of Terms:

Brand Transgressions – there are many terms that relate to a brand failing to meet a consumers needs. Brand transgressions relate to brand failures, lack of expectation management, poor quality service or product delivery and general negative actions (either intended or unintended) on the part of the brand.

Product Brands – Any brand that, from a consumer's perspective, makes its profits through the sale of tangible products that the consumer would purchase and use (i.e. Cars, Books, Cellphones, Laptops etc.).

Service Brands – Any brand that, from a consumer's perspective, makes its profits through the sale of intangible service offerings that the consumer would purchase and use (i.e. Gym contracts, airtime/data for cellular devices, airline trips etc.).

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