

How to achieve affective commitment in luxury car brand communities

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the effect of luxury values on affective commitment mediated by brand tribalism and brand reputation. The proposed model was tested using participants (201) of 8 car brand communities (BMW, Mercedes, Audi) located in Portugal and UK. Findings reveal that brand tribalism is more important than brand reputation to lead to affective commitment. Functional values are more effective to create brand reputation than to improve brand tribalism. Social values influence more on brand tribalism than on brand reputation. Individual values exercise a significant effect on brand tribalism. The study also provides managerial implications, limitations and further research.

Keywords: *affective commitment, luxury values, brand tribalism, brand reputation, luxury car sector*

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Introduction

Consumer-brand relationship has been attracting interest and importance for researchers and brand managers, since late nineties of 20th (Loureiro, 2012). Understand how consumers are connecting and relate with their preferred brand helps to create favourable experiences and to establish long-term relationships. However, a gap was found in the literature review, regarding the effect of luxury values on affective commitment. This study is the first attempt to help to fulfil this gap. In this vein, we select the automotive sector to test the model. More exactly the car brands communities: BMW, Audi and Mercedes, to test the proposed model. A luxury car is a styled, high quality, luxurious automobile intended for comfort and pleasure of its owner that is affordable only by the high income group. Luxury cars are unique and distinctive within the market in terms of brand, price, and amount of extra accessories, engineering requirements, performance, technology and available options (Anurit, 2002).

The major aim of this paper is to explore the effect of luxury values on affective commitment, mediated by brand tribalism and brand reputation. Therefore, we test a model using data from 201 responses of the overall participants from 8 car brand communities. The cars brands considered in this study are BMW, Audi and Mercedes-Benz. In order to test the model this study uses the repeated indicators method (Chin, Marcolin and Newsted, 2003; Kleijnen, de Ruyter and Wetzel, 2007) and Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach is employed to estimate structural paths coefficients, R^2 , Q^2 , and Bootstrap techniques.

In this vein, following this introduction, next section provides a conceptualization of Luxury values, luxury car brands and brand community. Then we present the background and hypotheses to be tested. Section 4 describes the method and the last two sections present the major findings, conclusions and implications.

Conceptualization

Consumer luxury values

In order to achieve an understanding of the nature and drivers of consumer luxury values, a definition of luxury brands must be underlined. However, as luxury is a subjective and multidimensional construct, defining luxury brands is not an easy task and must follow an integrative approach (Wiedmann, Hennigs and Siebels, 2009). Luxury brands are usually linked with brands of limited supply, high price, excellent quality, aesthetic beauty and rarity and exclusivity (Choo et al., 2012). Since they are related to objects of desire, luxury brands provide extra pleasure being able to satisfy both psychological and functional needs of their owners (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). Therefore, the strategic mission of luxury brands is built on the premise that they represent enough value to both the individual and significant others that exceed the high product price.

The customer value of a luxury brand has been conceptualized by previous studies (e.g., Vigneron and Johnson, 1999; Smith and Colgate, 2007; Tynan et al., 2009; Wiedmann et al., 2009; Christodoulides et al., 2009; Choo et al., 2012). The question of what effectively adds luxury value in the consumer's perception was defined based on a hierarchical and multidimensional model that accommodates financial, functional, individual, and social aspects (Wiedmann et al., 2009). The financial dimension of luxury value encompasses both monetary elements such as price and what consumers sacrificed to benefit from the brand. As in the present study only consumers pertaining to the high income group that joined brand communities were targeted, the financial dimension was not considered. The functional dimension of luxury value refers to the core product benefits and utilities given

by the brand to the consumer. Thus, it includes usability, uniqueness, quality, reliability, and durability values. The individual dimension addresses personal matters toward luxury consumption such as hedonism, materialism and self-identity. The social dimension focuses on the perceived utility consumers obtain owning brands acknowledged within their social groups such as conspicuousness and prestige.

Luxury car brands

Luxury car brand provides desirable features beyond strict necessity and seems to be just a class above other car brands. A luxury car is a styled, high quality, luxurious automobile intended for comfort and pleasure of its owner that is affordable only by the high income group. Luxury cars are unique and distinctive within the market in terms of brand, price, and amount of extra accessories, engineering requirements, performance, technology and available options (Anurit, 2002).

The reason for choosing the brands (BMW, Audi and Mercedes-Benz) was due to the fact that the three are the most representative to the E (executive cars), F (luxury cars) and S (sport coupés) car segments according to European Commission (1999). The boundaries between segments are blurred by factors other than the size or length of cars. These factors include price, image and the amount of extra accessories.

Brand community

Brand communities have become an increasingly important phenomenon in contemporary marketing (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). They were clearly stimulated by the emergence of Web 2.0 that provided an innovative technological toolset for the coalescence of communities around brands (Cova and white, 2010).

Consumers with similar norms, values and habits tend to congregate in groups called communities of consumption. A special kind of community of consumption is the brand community, which Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) defined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand". A brand community "is a friendship group of consumers with a shared enthusiasm for the brand and a well-developed social identity, whose members engage jointly in group actions to accomplish collective goals and/or to express mutual sentiments and commitments" (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006, p. 45).

Consumers can achieve social need satisfaction when they build and maintain relationships and the brand takes advantage from their loyalty, advocacy, and recommendations to other consumers (e.g., Stokburger-Sauer, 2010; Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann, 2005; Fournier, 1998). In addition brand communities can help in strengthening consumer-brand relationships (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 413) has proposed three main characteristics of brand communities. First, we have the consciousness of kind, which is "the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community". Second, the presence of shared rituals and traditions, which "perpetuate the community's shared history, culture, and consciousness". The third indicator of community is a sense of moral responsibility, "which is a felt of sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole, and to its individual members".

Background and hypotheses

Brand tribalism

Brand tribalism is a relatively new concept, introduced by Cova and Cova (2002) that identifies a community of self-selected individuals formed on the basis of an emotional attachment to a product or a brand. Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009) developed a construct linked to aspects of the consumer lifestyle, passion of life, the collective memory of the brand and the acceptance of certain reference groups, which they called “brand tribalism”, and concluded that brand tribalism is an important predictor of the strength of brand relationships.

Since brand communities allow customers to share experiences about brands and influence other group members (Swaminathan et al., 2007), revising the power of word-of-mouth communications (Pawle and Cooper, 2006), therefore, we postulate that when consumers of luxury brands identify themselves with the brands, feel pleasure acquiring and using the products, believe that the brand gives them prestige and perceive the usability and the uniqueness of such products (luxury values), then the same consumers will be more engaged in participating in communities of self-selected members emotionally attached to a brand (tribes). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Luxury values, social (H1a), individual (H1b) and functional (H1c) have positive impacts on brand tribalism.

Brand reputation

Brands with good reputation fulfil its stated promises and marketing signals. So, they are likely to succeed in the market by attracting more customers. However, the development of brand reputation implies more than meeting customer expectations. It is linked to the aggregate perception of various audiences towards the brand (Herbig and Milewicz, 1993). Brand reputation should be managed during the brand’s lifetime and cannot be changed in the short run. De Chernatony (1999) points out the importance of the congruence between brand identity, understanding as key beliefs and the brand’s core values (Kapferer, 2008), and brand reputation. Thereby, luxury values should positively influence the reputation of a luxury brand. Based on the above discussions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: Luxury values, social (H1a), individual (H1b) and functional (H1c) have positive impacts on brand reputation.

Commitment as a brand relationship construct

Developing and nurturing customer/brand relationships has become a central issue in both marketing research and practice (Aaker, Fournier and Brasel, 2004), due to its strong influence on customer retention and profitability. Consumers may develop relationships with brands based on brand characteristics, their perceptions, experiences and behaviours. Relationship marketing is a long-term process based on the concepts of connection and interaction between the active consumers and the brand. In this vein, a brand can be treated as an active contributing partner in a dyadic relationship that exists between the person and the brand (Aaker and Fournier, 1995). Schultz and Schultz (2004) sustained that brand relationship could be viewed as a type of financial, physical or

emotional bond that brings brands and the customer together. Accordingly, the emotional exchange is recognized as an important measure of the strength of customers' attachment to a brand (Aaker et al., 2004).

Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009) included the emotional outcomes of the transactions that occur during the lifetime of a brand emotional exchange as a dimension of brand relationship and analysed the influence of the overall perceptions of the brands in the form of their reputation and the social influence they experience in terms of brand tribes as drivers of brand relationship. The good/service perceptions and its overall reputation could influence the consumer relationship quality (Stuart-Menteth et al., 2006). Furthermore, the role of luxury brands as relationships builders is now acknowledged (Cailleux, Mignot and Kapferer, 2009) and luxury brand managers are aware of the importance of the customer-brand relationship.

Commitment is considered a core relationship-based constructs (e.g., Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Sirdeshmukh *et al.*, 2002; Loureiro, Ruediger, and Demetris, 2012). The current study focuses on affective commitment meaning the degree to which a customer identifies and is personally involved with a luxury car brand.

Based on the reported research, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Brand tribalism has positive impact on affective commitment.

H4: Brand reputation has positive impact on affective commitment.

Method

To test the hypotheses, a questionnaire was created regarding the items of the constructs and a section for socio-demographic variables. The questionnaire was first written in English and then translated into Portuguese. Back-translation was then used to ensure that the questionnaire communicated similar information to all respondents (Sekaran, 1983). Then, the questionnaire was pre-tested by 10 individuals, managers and some members of the car brand communities. Then, the members of the communities were invited to participate using an online survey, during the period of February to March 2012. The cars brands considered in this study are BMW, Audi and Mercedes-Benz. The reason for choosing such brands regards the fact that the three brands are the most representative to the E, F and S car segments according to European Commission (1999). We measured the constructs with multi-item scales. Luxury values are assessed by using a scale presented by Wiedmann et al. (2009). Brand tribalism is measured based on Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009). Affective committed to luxury car brand is adapted from Loureiro, Ruediger, and Demetris (2012) and, finally, brand reputation (corporate) is adapted from Loureiro and Kastenholz (2011). All items were measured by using a five-point Likert-type scale. At the time when the survey started, a total of 10 thousand members were registered. We received 201 responses. Of the overall participants from 8 car brand communities (Portuguese and UK), 82.4% are male what represent the proportionality of the total members of the communities contacted. Almost 80% (79.2%) range from 31 to 50 years of age. The number of participants using each of the three brands is divided almost evenly (BMW-37.4%, Mercedes-Benz-31.7% and Audi-30.9%).

Major Findings

The model proposed in the current study is complex and has formative constructs. In order to test the model this study uses the repeated indicators method (Chin, Marcolin and Newsted, 2003; Kleijnen, de Ruyter and Wetzels, 2007) and Partial Least Squares (PLS)

approach is employed to estimate structural paths coefficients, R^2 , Q^2 , and Bootstrap techniques.

The PLS model is analysed and interpreted in two stages. First, the adequacy of the measurements is assessed by evaluating the reliability of the individual measures and the discriminant validity of the constructs (Hulland, 1999). Then, the structural model was appraised. Item reliability was established by examining the loading of the measures on their corresponding construct. All items with loadings have values above 0.707, which indicates that more than 50% of the variance in the observed variable is explained by the construct (Carmines and Zeller, 1979). Composite reliability was used to analyse the reliability of the constructs since it has been considered to be a more accurate measurement than Cronbach's alpha (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). All constructs are reliable since the composite reliability values exceeded the 0.7 threshold and even the strictest one of 0.8 (Nunnally, 1978).

The measures demonstrated convergent validity as the average variance of manifest variables extracted by constructs (AVE) was at least 0.5, indicating that more variance was explained than unexplained in the variables associated with a given construct. The criterion used to assess discriminant validity was proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981), suggesting that the square root of AVE should be higher than the correlation between the two constructs in the model. This criterion was met.

Regarding structural results (see figure 1), all path coefficients are found to be significant at the 0.001, 0.01 or 0.05 levels, except the causal order individual value->b. reputation. Thereby, hypotheses H1, H3 and H4 are fully supported and H2 is partially supported by the sample. All values of Q^2 are positive, so the relations in the model have predictive relevance. The model also demonstrated a good level of predictive power (R^2) as the modelled constructs explained 82.5% of the variance in affective commitment, 77.2% in b. reputation and 94.2% in b. tribalism. In fact, the good value of GoF (0.83) and the good level of predictive power (R^2) revealed a good overall fit of the structural model.

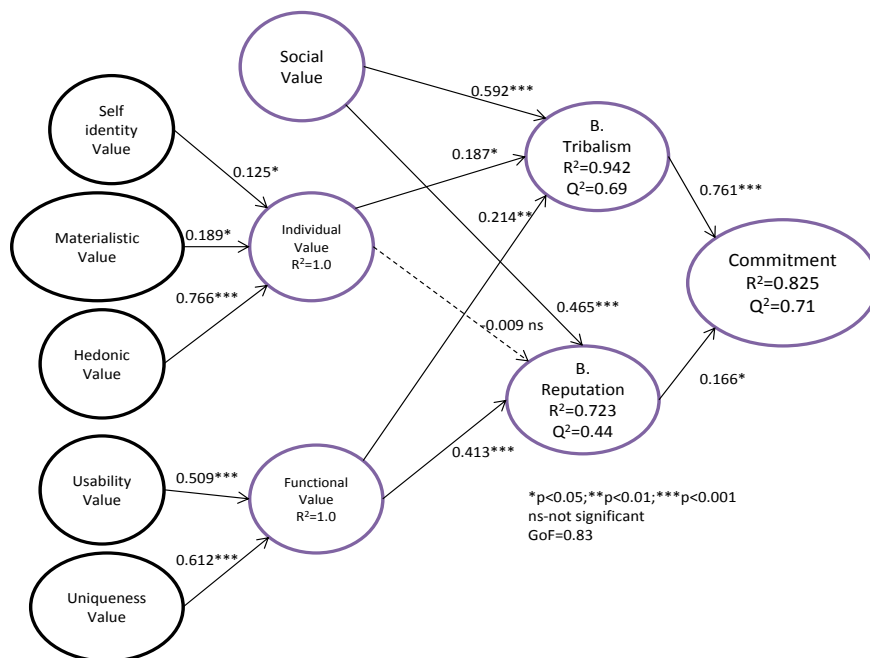


Figure 1. Structural results of the proposed model.

Conclusions and implications

This study attempts to explore the effect of luxury values on affective commitment, mediated by brand tribalism and brand reputation. The findings reveal that social values and functional values are important predictors of brand tribalism and brand reputation. However, functional values, usability, and uniqueness of the cars are more effective to create brand reputation than to improve brand tribalism. Social values have more influence on brand tribalism than on brand reputation. Individual values have a significant effect on brand tribalism and this, in turn, has an important role on affective commitment. The three dimensions of individual values do not have the same strength. Hedonic values are the most impactful to build individual values. Moreover, consumer's personal orientation on luxury consumption which addresses personal matters, such as materialism, hedonistic and self-identity, seems not be a key factor to improve the reputation of a luxury brand.

The current study allows us to understand that luxury values do not act as a whole in the development of affective relationships between brands and consumers. In accordance with the Veloutsou and Moutinho' study (2009) for Coca-Cola and Pepsi brands (not luxury brands), in the luxury car community context, brand tribalism ($\beta=0.761$, $p<0.001$) is more important than brand reputation in the formation of affective commitment.

The findings have some managerial implications. Managers should be aware that the core benefits and basic utilities of a luxury car (such as uniqueness and usability) and the perceived utility individuals acquire by having a car with a brand recognized within their own social group(s), such as prestige, contribute to positively reinforce brand reputation and may significantly affect the evaluation and the propensity to purchase or consume luxury car brands. Social aspects of displaying status, success, distinction and the human desire to impress other people can positively contribute to the emotional life of the consumer, brand liking and to have a sense of belonging by buying and using the same car brand as community friends. A collective memory of consumers in a luxury car brand community can reflect reference group cohesion, improve consumers' lives and their sense of emotional authenticity, which, in turn, enhances the relationship consumer/consumer and brand/consumer.

Regarding limitations and future avenues, some points should be attended. More data should be collected in other product categories communities of luxury brands; explore the role of other factors as drivers to brand tribalism and brand relationships or explore how consumers engaging in a brand community can influence the positive word-of-mouth and long-term relationship. We also suggest to analyse the model in a cross-cultural perspective. For instance, the results may be different in brand communities with participants from Middle East or East.

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