Brand Engagement: An Analysis on Motivation

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ABSTRACT

Understanding what drives consumers to invest time, money, and effort in a brand is key in developing successful marketing strategies. Defined as the tendency to incorporate brands into the consumer's self-concept, brand engagement is one construct used to understand such drive. This paper explores the concept of brand engagement through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and McClelland's theory of needs. The analysis is organized in four sections. First, it provides a summary of the two fundamental theories, their development and key concepts. Secondly, it identifies key findings in previous brand engagement research involving motivation theories. The third segment outlines the strengths and weaknesses in research about brand engagement as a function of motivation. The paper ends with a brief overview and implications for marketers with directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

> *"Intense activity is often mistaken for evidence of self determined action, although we know that it may well be no more spontaneous than the behavior of an actor or a person hypnotized."*
> - Erich Fromm (1994) Escape from freedom (p 252)

An important factor in understanding consumer behavior derives from understanding how consumers use brands. Among the different ways consumers choose to interact with brands, brand engagement is perhaps the strongest predictor for brand loyalty (Keller, 2001). From this idea grows the need to understand what drives consumers to invest time, money, and effort in a brand. Park, Jaworski, and Macinnis (1986) suggested that in order to understand brand choice, we must understand consumer needs. Similarly, Bayton (1958) believed behaviors to be driven by needs and stated that consumer products could be defined in terms of the needs they fulfilled.

Therefore, this paper attempts to provide a complementary approach to understanding brand engagement through the lens of motivation theories. Sprott and colleagues (2006) defined brand engagement as "the propensity for a person to incorporate important brands into the self-concept" (p. 3). Originally named Brand-Extended Self Construal (Sprott et al., 2006), Sprott and colleagues renamed the construct, "brand engagement in self-concept" (BESC) (Sprott et al., 2009) to measure the degree to which consumers incorporated brands into their self-concepts. This article attempts to advance the understanding of brand engagement by exploring consumer motivations that may underline this construct. The author believes that these findings can yield greater insights into why consumers engage with brands and have important implications for marketing, brand management, and consumer behavior research.

The analysis is organized in four sections. The first section provides a summary of two fundamental theories: Maslow's hierarchy of needs and McClelland's theory of needs, their development and key concepts. The second section identifies key findings in previous brand engagement research involving motivation theories. The third section specifies strengths and weaknesses in brand engagement research as a function of motivation. Finally, the fourth section provides an overview of the issues presented as well as additional direction for future research.

MAJOR THEORIES

Understanding motivation requires understanding the wants, needs, and drives of the consumer. In consumer research, motivation theories can shed light on the attitudes, beliefs, and motives that drive purchase decisions. Understanding the different degrees in people's motivations is important to explain brand preference and brand engagement.

Grubb & Grathwohl (1967) found that brands serve as social symbols that carry shared meanings. This supports Levy's (1959) argument that people not only buy products for their utilitarian principle but also for what they mean. Consequently, a considerable amount of research has been dedicated to understanding the relationship between consumers and their brands (Fournier, 1998). Researchers have found that brands fulfill consumers' functional needs (Park, Jaworski, & Macinnis, 1986) as well as esteem needs (Coulter, & Price, 2008; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Park, Macinnis, & Priester, 2006; Sirgy, 1982; Strizhakova,). More recently, researchers have developed measurement constructs of product engagement resulting from motivational drives (van Doorn, et al., 2010) as well as measurement constructs to include brands as part of their self-concept (Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2006; Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009; Sprott, Czellar, Spangenberg, & Raska, 2009)

The amount of research connecting human needs to consumer behavior, specifically in terms of brand engagement, focuses this paper to further investigate humanistic theories of motivational such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs and McClelland's theory of needs.

Abraham Maslow (1943) proposed a theory of human motivation based on a hierarchy of needs to explain that people are motivated by unmet needs. He arranged these needs in order of importance: physiological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Escalas & Bettman (2005) explained that brands become part of the individual's self-concept when they "help consumers achieve goals that are motivated by the self" (p. 379). Therefore, different brands should be able to fulfill different needs on Maslow's hierarchy. A real world application would have brands for utilitarian products be the stimulus needed to spur the desire by a consumer to meet physiological needs. Yet, Maslow's hierarchy implies that as lower needs are met, higher needs become salient. For instance, Allen (2001) found that consumers preferred the Toyota Corolla because it met their safety needs. However, choosing a car may involve more than meeting safety needs but also esteem needs. Therefore, a car may not only need to be safe but it may also need to make the consumer look good. Maslow's hierarchy of needs may serve as an important tool to understand purchasing decisions as they relate to building and maintaining self-concept.

In terms of brand engagement, previous research seems to indicate that both physiological and safety needs need to be met before deep engagement with brands takes place. It is therefore important to define each of these needs:

- Physiological needs: At the very basis of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy we find the most basic needs necessary for survival such as food or water. It would be safe to assume that these needs when severely deprived will override any brand loyalty or any need to engage with a brand. A thirsty man will not mind drinking from a faucet even though he may long for FIJI water.

- Safety needs: Once physiological needs are met, Maslow (1943) suggests that we are then preoccupied by feelings of safety. Safety needs may kick in when making purchasing decisions. Parents may think of safety when buying a toy for their children and forego the brand. However, a smart brand that understand its consumer and his or her needs, will built the fulfillment of safety needs into the brand in order to make it a more viable choice.

- Belongingness and love needs: Maslow (1943) explains that everyone has a need for holding positive evaluations of oneself as well as to be evaluated positively by others. At this level of need, brands can serve as an indicator, for others, and ourselves that we have reached something. The need for belongingness or to fit-in may be served by brands that are common among the consumers reference group; while the need for status and recognition can also be achieved by engaging with brands that provide a sense of achievement.

- The need for self-actualization: Maslow (1943) tops the pyramid with the need to feel self-fulfilled. In other words, the need to achieve one's highest potential. In terms of the relationship with brands this could be equivalent to becoming a member of an elite group or the beneficiary of restricted rewards.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a universal theory of human motivation that can be used to develop new products, focus promotional strategies, segment markets, and overall communicate better with consumers while creating an environment conducive for brand engagement to take place.

Taking Maslow's work a step further, David McClelland (1967) developed a theory based on motivational traits. Mainly centered on Maslow's needs for esteem and self-actualization, McClelland (1967) suggested that throughout the lifespan, people are motivated to achieve one of three areas:

- Achievement: McClelland (1967) found that some individuals are driven by the need for achievement. That is, a need to do something worth of receiving a praise for (Pincus, 2004). This consumer responds to feedback and likes to be noticed (Borgadus, 2009). Brands that allow consumers to stand out, express their individuality, or be better at a task, are more likely to be endorsed by consumers in this category.

- Affiliation: Similar to Maslow's need for belongingness, McClelland's need for affiliation suggested that there are consumers who are in need of being part of something or someone (McClelland, 1967). Consumers in this category need to be part of the in-group and look the part. They need to share their likes and dislikes with people like them. In consumer behavior, these people can make or break a brand through their participation in

brand discussions but may also become the most brand loyal through the feedback and loyalty of the group.

- ▪ Power: Being able to exert influences fulfills the need for power (McClelland, 1967). McClelland and Burnham (2000) found that power is one of the greatest motivator and that consumers who need power are usually good leaders who know how to influence others. Therefore, brands that meet power needs also create brand ambassadors that will speak well of the brand as they engage with it.

Although McClelland's theory has mostly been used in the area of business management to describe leadership traits (Borgudus, 2009; de Mooij, 2004; McClelland and Burnham, 2000); there is evidence that suggests that this theory can find its place in consumer behavior (Pincus, 2004), especially in understanding brand engagement.

KEY FINDINGS

The use of motivation theories to understand brand engagement is rather recent because the construct is fairly new. Fournier (1998) stated that questions regarding why consumers seek relationships with brands had [at that point] remained unanswered. Moreover, throughout the literature, mentions of 'engagement' were scarce and have only recently been used as an aspect of brand management (Keller, 2001).

Although the use of motivational theories to explain brand engagement is not widespread, the study of consumer behavior and its relationship with motivation theories has always been a topic of research. The first mention of motivation as a factor in understanding consumer behavior with implications for advertising was found in Bayton's article *Motivation, cognition, learning – Basic factors in consumer behavior* (1958). He found consumers to be grouped in three need categories: affectional or the need to maintain relationships; ego bolstering or the need for recognition and esteem; and ego-defensive or the need to prevent loss of recognition and esteem (Bayton, 1958). Among the implications for advertising, Bayton (1958) suggested that consumers would be motivated to think more critically about their purchases if the goods tapped into their ego-bolstering needs. These ideas could be extended to brands today. Therefore, one could expect that certain brands can be infused with fulfillment of ego-bolstering, affectional, or ego-defensive needs to promote more or less cognitive processes at the time of purchase.

Maslow's belongingness and esteem needs as well as McClelland's affiliation needs seem to have the highest relevance in understanding consumer behavior. This idea is supported by the considerable amount of studies in the subject stating that identification positively correlates with consumption and that consumers engage in consumption behavior to construct their self-concepts as well as to create their personal identity (Belk R., 1988; Kuester et al., 2007). Grubb & Grathwohl (1967) found that brands serve as social symbols that carry shared meanings and that consuming these brands contributes to the preservation and enhancement of consumers' self-concepts. Levy (1959) found that people do not only buy products for their utilitarian principle but also for the meaning they carry; while Sirgy (1982) argued that self-esteem and achievement can be used to predict consumer decision making. The most extensive studies regarding brand

engagement and its place in the construction of self-concept can be found in Sprott and colleagues research (2006; 2009; 2009a).

Consumers with higher social needs may value more prestigious public brands (Solomon, 1983); therefore, recognizing consumer esteem and belongingness needs is an important tool for marketers during the brand development stage (O'Cass and Frost, 2002; Park et al., 1986). Additional research exploring the relationship between consumers and their brands have found that consumers connect more with brands that hold images that are shared by the consumers' reference group (Escalas & Bettman, 2005) thus fulfilling the need to belong; and that brands are used to seek social approval in their respective environments (Kuester, Hess, Hinkel, & Young, 2007). Fournier (1998) argues that in order to better understand the processes involved in consumer-brand relationships, researchers must study such relationships in the larger context, specifically within the scope of the consumers' personality that include needs, beliefs, values, as well as motivations.

Overall, researchers suggest that introducing measures of motivational needs can better assess consumer behavior. Pincus (2004) found that by measuring the degree of need fulfilled, there is an opportunity to measure the consumer's motivational impact and suggests that motivational impact can be critical in determining brand success.

STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES

The survey of the literature review regarding brand engagement and motivation theories is both inspiring and frustrating. The few papers that make an effort to bring forth an understanding of consumer behavior, specifically brand engagement, answer some questions while leaving some areas untouched. Moreover, much of the work is still fragmented and in need of further investigation.

Most of the research centers around one motivational need or theory and there are only a handful of scales measuring motivation to explain brand engagement. Among the few measurements and related concepts regarding consumer behavior including brand engagement (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Keller, 2001; O'Cass and Frost, 2002; Sprott, Czellar, and Spangenberg, 2009; Strizhakova, Coulter, and Price, 2008; van Doorn et al., 2010), one problem remains across the research: the lack of consistency. Although research does provide support that brand engagement can be predicted from consumers' motivational needs, it seems, at least for now, that each case must be studied upon its own merits and results cannot be generalized without proper testing.

In practicing marketing and brand management in the United States, one is challenged by the diversity of the marketplace. Studies show that values, beliefs, and motives are not universal and can vary greatly from one culture to the next. Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price (2008) found that consumers in emerging cultures, such as recent immigrants or consumers that maintain strong cultural ties to their ancestral traditions are more likely not to develop long-term relationships with branded products. They suggest that the novelty of a branded product concept may symbolize a break away from traditions (Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008). These finding opens questions about how different cultures may act upon their needs and how needs vary

culturally. Marieke K. de Mooij (2004) explains that people from different cultures may do things for different reasons. In this sense, motivational needs as explained by Maslow (1943) and McClelland (1967) cannot be literally applied from one culture to the next. However, they do provide a solid framework from which to start understanding cross-cultural consumer behavior.

In any case, variance across culture may be a blessing in disguise. One of the many advantages of using motivation theories to explain consumer behavior is the ability to segment markets. Although motivational needs may be different across cultures, this may also be true for different groups across ages, social economic status, or lifestyles. In any case, research shows that needs can be used successfully to segment the market and serve them better. In creating new products for specific groups or building communication campaigns, understanding the drives behind the consumer can prove beneficial.

Another strength in using motivation theories was established in the understanding of the role of brands in consumer's self-concept. As suggested by Duncan & Moriarty (1998), communication with brands can build or destroy important brand relationships. Discovering self-image and brand-image congruency as a predictor of consumption tendencies give valuable insight into the motivating forces of consumers. Chattaraman, Lennon, & Rudd (2010) argue that consumers today are constantly redefining their cultural identities, and re-creating their selves. Finding how brands help consumers do this can aid marketers with the creation of new products and services, product positioning strategies, and communication campaigns. In today's global market, brands, their images and personalities, may be created to be more in-tuned with consumers' attitudes, values, and self-concepts.

Moreover, the literature suggests that research is needed to more exhaustively identify the underlying factors of brand engagement. Motivation theories attempt to understand the *why* behind behavior. Therefore, it is surprising that more research on brand engagement has not followed a motivation approach.

CONCLUSION

As the review of the literature highlights, marketers and brand managers who want to take a different approach in understanding consumers may find motivation theories to be insightful. The research presented here supports the importance of practicing high-quality research to understand how and why consumers engage with brands. Brand engagement is important because it is a strong predictor of brand loyalty (Keller, 2001). Therefore, understanding why consumers choose to engage with brands, how they do it and the needs brands fulfill takes marketers and managers one-step closer into building stronger brands. This review explores Maslow's hierarchy of needs and McClelland's theory of needs as it draws a better understanding of brand engagement. The review suggests that understanding the wants, needs, and drives of consumer through the motivation lens provides new insights into consumer behavior, especially brand engagement. However, the survey of the research shows that there is room for improvement. Before inviting researchers to jumpstart new areas, studies dedicated to motivational needs and brand engagement continue to be scarce; therefore the creation of scales to assess motivation is an important area to explore. Beyond the initial scope, research on brand talk or how consumers

talk about brands, to whom, and where would constitute an important are of study. Moreover, the advance of new technologies that allow consumers to create their own personalized cyber space, greater exchange of information, and overall more opportunities to fulfill their belongingness and esteem needs; brand communication is perhaps one of the fields that will experience more changes in the coming years.

Previous research has found that brands serve as social symbols and carry shared meanings. The virtual world allows consumers to share more about themselves than ever before. It can be said that consumers buy personalities, not products. Consumers today have more fluid identities and more opportunities to share such identity. Consequently, understanding the relationship between consumers and their brands is inherit to the success of the brand and therefore worth studying.

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