

BRAND HATE: UNVEILING CAUSES AND URGENCY FOR CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

In the current digitally driven era, where customers are geographically dispersed but digitally integrated, the success of a brand largely depends upon its relationship with its customers. Due to the technological boom, especially the invention of the internet and rapid growth of social media, they got empowered enough to create or ruin a brand's image by sharing their views and experiences whether positive or negative, just with a single click. Thus, it becomes crucial for management to delve into research exploring consumer behavior and customer relationships. Much research has been conducted to define their positive relationships such as brand love, loyalty, commitment, attachment, resonance, etc. However, the studies examining their negative relationships are insufficient. This present study will focus on investigating an emerging issue of Brand Hate considering the darker side of consumers' relationship with brands. It will help to answer certain questions like what is Brand Hate? What are the reasons for the occurrence of hate among customers? Moreover, it will provide insights into the growing need to study this emerging phenomenon. This article will help academicians and practitioners understand the importance of managing healthy relationship bonds with customers.

Keywords: Brand Hate, Negative Emotions, Consumer Brand Relationship, Brand Avoidance

1. INTRODUCTION

The corporate world has witnessed a significant change due to the Industrial Revolution. The corporate landscape has fundamentally transformed as a result of innovation and technological developments like the internet, artificial intelligence, and sophisticated robots. The utilization of contemporary technologies has led to enhanced communication, which has increased consumer experiences and satisfaction.

On the other hand, it has heightened rivalry between the business establishments. It brings a major shift in management practices as earlier it was transactional-based but then shifted to relationship-based (Aziz & Rahman, 2022). Nowadays, big or small business houses have realized the importance of managing their relations with customers. Digital revolutions in the form of improved means of communication, including social media, have empowered them to share their shopping experiences (positive or negative) with others. They can now share their opinions, suggestions, and experiences with others via social media which unites them digitally even though they are geographically dispersed. Therefore, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) has become a crucial part of the marketing field.

Customers and their Emotions

Emotions hold a significant place in CRM as these are the driving force in the process of managing cordial relationships with customers. Customers' emotions, according to available literature, can be categorized into three broad categories: positive, indifferent, and negative. When their love or liking towards a particular product/service of a brand is expressed, it is considered a 'Positive emotion'. When they express their hate or dislike for a particular brand, it is regarded as a 'negative emotion'. However, if customers express neither love nor hate or are neutral toward a particular brand, it is termed as 'indifferent emotion'.

Abundance of studies has been done considering such a positive relationship defining its role in CRM. However, studies considering the negative relationship are still inadequate. Questions like Why do customers hate a particular brand? Why the study of brand hate is important? etc. are still seeking proper explanations. Therefore, this study will consider the darker side of a consumer's relationship with a brand and help management practitioners and academicians understand the imperativeness of this phenomenon.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study is as follows:

- To conceptualize the term brand hate.
- To illustrate the causes for the occurrence of brand hate among customers.
- To define the need for the study of brand hate.

2. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Brand Love- Love, being a relational construct is a core element of CRM (Batra et al., 2012). The term brand love was given by Shimp and Madden (1988), who used Sternberg's, (1986) 'Triangular Theory of Interpersonal Love' to develop a conceptual model of 'consumer-object-relationship' according to which a person experiences positive feelings of love for his material possessions. When a consumer feels a high degree of integration of a brand with his perceived self and finds it irreplaceable, it is considered as his love for that brand (Albert & Merunka, 2013).

Brand Hate- According to Hegner, et al., (2017), Hate is the second most important emotion after love. It is a term used widely in psychological studies to define interpersonal connection however studies considering the possibility of people's hate for objects are limited (Aziz and Rahman, 2022). Such type of hate in case of purchase-related decisions of customers is considered as brand hate. It is quite opposite to brand love. When a consumer interacts with a brand that performs poorly and gives awful experiences at an individual as well as social level, he tends to form intense negative feelings towards such brand and tries to detach himself from that brand (Aziz & Rahman, 2022; Kucuk, 2016).

This psychological state of mind is known as 'Brand Hate' (Aziz & Rahman, 2022). Different academicians give different explanations for the concept of Brand Hate. Bryson, et al., (2013) described it as an extremely negative emotion toward a brand whereas Romani, et al., (2015) described it as a severe form of dislike. This area of research on the negative aspect of the interaction between consumer and brand remained neglected for years and started gaining momentum recently (Aziz and Rahman, 2022; Bayarassou et al., 2020; Kucuk, 2019b; Fetscherin, 2019). The major reason behind this shift is the emerging importance of brand value. Nowadays, Business houses whether big or small, are recognizing the imperativeness of their brand value and considering it as their valuable asset (Hashim & Kasana, 2019) as they are aware of the fact that bad consumer-brand relationships and brand hate are significant and can negatively affect a company's performance.

4 CAUSES FOR THE OCCURRENCE OF BRAND HATE AMONG CUSTOMERS

4.1 MISMATCH

The major reason behind the occurrence of brand hate among consumers is mismatch. Such mismatch can be related to images, ideologies, or functions. If the mismatch of images occurs it is considered as 'Symbolic incongruence'. A mismatch of ideologies is considered an 'Ideological Incompatibility'. Functional mismatch arises when actual performance is not similar to the proposed one and is referred to as 'Functional Incongruence'. All these factors are amongst the highly possible reasons causing brand hate among customers and are discussed below:

- **Symbolic Incongruence**
A consumer, before purchasing a product or service, compares his or her image with the image of that preferred brand. If his or her perception of self is found to be identical to the image of the brand, then self-congruity arises and the consumer prefers to buy the product or service of that brand (Kumar & Nayak, 2014). On the other hand, if a mismatch is found between the customer's self-image and the brand image then incongruity arises that is termed as 'Symbolic Incongruity' (Aziz & Rahman, 2022). In this case, consumers don't prefer to buy the product or service from that brand. Because, it is assumed that a buyer may be more likely to choose a product or brand that depicts their true self and matches their personality rather than one that does not (Sop, 2022).
- **Ideological Incompatibility**
Ideologies are the set of beliefs. In the context of the consumer and brand relationship, Ideological incompatibility arises when the consumer's ideologies do not match the brand's ideologies. According to the literature, Ideological Incompatibility is a factor that includes consumers' perception based on legal, social, and corporate wrongdoings by a brand that leads to a strong negative feeling toward that brand and could develop through dishonest communication, unethical behavior, or the brand's inconsistent values (Hegner et al., 2017). Consumers boycott companies that violate human rights, indulge in unethical business practices, and pose environmental threats or damages (Micheletti et al., 2004; Friedman, 1985; Hegner et al., 2017).
- **Functional Incongruence**
The concept of functional congruence was given by Sirgy et al., (1991). Functional Congruence is related to the comparison between 'ideal product features' and their 'actual performance' (Kumar & Nayak, 2014). According to Claiborne & Sirgy, (2015), a high level of Functional Congruence leads to high brand loyalty. It is related to the utilitarian characteristics of the product of a brand and its store environment (Chen et al., 2016; Knittel, et al., 2016) and is directly linked to the customer's decision of purchase retention (Zarantonello, et al., 2016). On the other hand, Functional Incongruence arises when a customer forms a perception that a brand is offering cheap quality products /services and a store environment. As per a study conducted by Islam, et al., (2019), 'Functional Incongruence' is found to be a major reason causing brand hate.

4.2 VIOLATION OF EXPECTATIONS

Another possible reason behind the hate generation among customer is the violation of their expectations. While forming their purchase decision or selecting a brand, customers hold certain expectations from it. According to Hegner et al., (2017), During the post-purchase process, they compare the actual performance of the product or service with their initial expectations. If their expectations are met, they feel satisfied. Otherwise, expectation violence occurs that brings negative experiences to the customer. In a study conducted by Zarantonello et al. (2016), it was identified that expectation violence is a significant cause of brand hatred among customers. It brings undesired experiences like 'Consumer Dissatisfaction' and 'Negative Past Experiences' to the customers amongst which:

- **'Consumer dissatisfaction'** occurs from inconvenience, unjustified pricing, and poor services. According to Sarkar et al., (2021), Service failure severity brings dissatisfaction among customers which further leads to brand hate.
- **'Negative Past Experiences'** is a result of negative feelings caused by product service failure, dissatisfying service offerings, or negative country of origin, etc. (Oliver, 1980); Bayarassou et al., (2020).

5 BRAND HATE: AN EMERGING CHALLENGE

Though the concept of brand hate started gaining the researcher's attention recently, it has emerged as a critical challenge for the business houses and the growing brands. As identified by the existing research, brand hate hinders the process of growth of brands as it results in the below-mentioned behavioral outcomes:

- **Brand Avoidance/Switching**

According to Hegner et al., (2017), a customer, who once experienced extreme negativity or hate, tries to distance himself/herself from the brand. They either switch to another brand or avoid interaction with a faulty brand. Though both actions lead to similar consequences of non-consumption by customers, Brand avoidance refers to the circumstance in which one could simply "avoid" a brand without having purchased it, whereas brand switching implies that the consumer already has a purchase experience with the brand that was not so satisfactory.

- **Complaining**

Another behavioral outcome of consumer brand hate is complaining which can be either online or offline. When they share negative experiences with their friends, family, and people in their close network it is considered as 'private complaining'. However, in the current scenario where people are more addicted to social media, online posts, comments, blogs, etc. are the most common methods of 'public complaining' utilized by them to express their aggression (Fetscherin, 2019).

- **Brand Retaliation**

Customers often try to retaliate against the brand to punish them and to have a sense of being even. Hatred incites people to confront the target of their hate in an attempt to exact revenge or punish for whatever transgression the brand has committed (Fetscherin, 2019).

- **Negative word of mouth**

Displeased clients attempt to propagate unfavorable rumors around the community. Sometimes they do it intentionally to damage the brand, and other times they do it to alert the perception of potential buyers based on their own unfavorable prior experience. These negative words have a greater impact on the purchase-related decision-making process of the individuals (Aziz & Rehman, 2022).

6 EMERGING NEED FOR THE STUDY OF BRAND HATE

The brand hate concept is equally important to brand love as both are integral parts of customer's emotions. However, the latter one is thoroughly studied but the former one is still under-studied. The following points will help to understand the need for research on the concept of brand hate:

- Considerable efforts have been devoted in the past to investigating the positive association of a consumer with a brand considering it as Brand loyalty (Bloemer & Kasper, 1995), Brand Love (Khatri, et al., 2021; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), Brand Attachment (Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2011), Brand Passion (Albert, et al., 2013), Brand Equity (Aaker, 1992), Brand Romance (Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2011), and Brand Resonance (Keller, 2009), etc. (Fetscherin, 2019). However, studies related to the negative aspects of consumers' relationship with the brand are limited. Despite being a proven fact in consumer behavior, psychology, and neuroscience that people recall negative events more quickly than positive ones, the existence of only a handful of studies on negative brand association is remarkable (Fetscherin, 2019).
- In the present era, consumers are more curious to share their experiences with others. They share their opinions, and recommendations with others through word of mouth. Sometimes they share their negative experiences with others through negative word of mouth which are likely to spread more quickly than the positive one (Hegner et al., (2017). Social media platforms have become more like a weapon for them where they can post negative comments and reviews about their negative experiences with a brand they used.

- Sometimes they do so to warn other customers about their own negative experiences with that faulty whereas in certain cases they do so to retaliate against them with a desire to take punitive action against them. This is a matter of critical concern for business enterprises as Hegner et al., (2017) in their study, state that Brand Hate impacts the perception of customers towards a brand and also influences their purchase decisions.
- The Quantum of studies of negative aspects of consumers' relationship with the brands at the international level is considerable. However, many previously held studies have suggested its cross-culture and cross-industrial implications.
- In the Indian context study of brand hate is also limited. As per the findings of a study conducted by Aziz & Rehman, (2022), a major contribution to existing brand hate literature has been made from Europe (36%), North America (33%), and Asia (28%). However, India which is the most populated country in the world and provides a large customer base for different industries and brands, is contributing only 12% (Aziz & Rehman, 2022) to brand hate literature.
- India which is the most populated country in the world provides a huge customer base for different industries and brands. In the past few years, a huge transformation has also been witnessed in the attitude of Indian consumers regarding their preferences for brands as their purchase pattern is shifting towards branded products. According to recent surveys, more than 60% of Indian consumers expressed their preference for branded edible products like tea, coffee, juice, etc., and 73 % for beauty and healthcare products (Statista, 2024) which means the number of consumers of branded products is growing in the country.
- However, their concern for global brands is greater than local brands. In a survey conducted on Indian consumers, 75% of respondents agreed to the fact that global brands are superior to Indian brands and produce quality products than local ones (Statista, 2023). This emerging transition in purchase patterns indicates the need for a detailed study of appealing factors causing this transition.
- The study of the concept of brand hate will help the management to rectify the issues creating hindrances in the process of managing positive relationships with customers. It will help them to convert their customer's brand hate into brand love and maintain cordial relationships with them.

7 CONCLUSION

CRM plays a crucial role for businesses as it helps in maintaining cordial and long-lasting relationships with its customers. However, Consumers, in the context of consumer-brand relationships, vary significantly from each other. Some share a positive relationship with a brand while others feel negative emotions for the same brand (Hegner et al., 2017). The positive aspect of consumer relationships is well researched in the form of brand Love and its related concepts such as 'Brand Attachment', 'Brand Loyalty', 'Brand Equity' 'Brand Resonance', etc., But the darker side of consumer brand relationship depicting 'Brand Hate' is still inadequate. According to previous studies, some critical factors causing hate among the customers such as 'Symbolic incongruence' 'Functional Incongruence' and 'Ideological incompatibility' arise due to a mismatch among images, ideologies, and functions. Violation of expectations also contributes to brand hate by causing dissatisfaction and negative experiences for the customers. Due to advancements in technologies and the growing popularity of social media, brand hate is emerging as a critical challenge in CRM. Negative word-of-mouth communication creates a hindrance in the process of maintaining healthy relationships with the customer. Therefore, this issue needs to be addressed properly by the brands to strengthen their bonds and hence required, the call for study of brand hate.

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