Love or Convenience? Consumers’ Relationships with Original Brands and their Counterfeits

Mercadotecnia

CASTAÑO RAQUEL
ITESM
rcastano@itesm.mx

PÉREZ MARÍA EUGENIA
ITESM
meperez@itesm.mx

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore the relationships consumers forge with original brands and their counterfeits and the effect of these relationships in consumer’s satisfaction with the brand. Our study reveals that the relationship established with the original brand gets to play a deep emotional role, whereas the consumer relationship with the fake is rooted mainly on convenience, social purposes. We propose that while original brands inspire consumers´ love and that counterfeits can´t make people fall in love with them.

Keywords: brands, counterfeits, relationships.
Introduction

Researchers have identified that consumers differ not only in their perception of brands but also in the way they relate to them. The basic question of the reasons and the different ways consumers form lasting relationships with brands has been the objective of previous research (Aaker, Fournier & Brasel, 2004; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Fournier, 1998). The brand loyalty literature has been the most traditional in developing theory regarding consumer-brand relationships (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). Although loyalty itself is a rich relationship concept its operationalizations relying on sequence or frequency of purchase have been attributed a notion of inertia more than loyalty with its full relational significance. The seminal work of Fournier (1998) provides a solid conceptual foundation for characterizing and
better understanding the different types of relationships consumers form with brands.

Describing the underlying mechanisms of consumer-brand relationships will provide a better understanding of how consumers relate to brands. In this research, we aim to bring a new perspective to this topic by examining the relationships consumers form with original luxury brands versus the relationships they form with their counterfeits. We drew upon the self expansion model (Aaron et al., 1995) to suggest that at the core of all close brand relationships is an affective basis grounded on the concept of love in the interpersonal domain. The present work considers the applications of the basic concepts and findings related to the self-expansion model to identify the underlying mechanisms that sustain the relationships of consumers with original brands and their counterfeits.

**Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses**

The Self Expansion Model

The self-expansion model is a conceptual framework that intends to describe how people think, feel, and act in the context of close relationships. It was originally proposed by Aron and Aron (1986) and integrates views on the evolution of the self and the nature of love with work on motivation and cognition. Aron and Aron (1995) state that although love encompasses emotions, it is fundamentally motivational as when people love they are seeking an infinitely expanding self. An important consequence of falling in love is an increased feeling of self-efficacy and self-esteem (Aron, Paris and Aron 1995). A major line of work developed from this model has focused on a predicted increase in satisfaction in long-term relationships from joint participation in self-expanding activities. In this research
we drew upon the self expansion model to show how the underlying mechanism of love differs in the relationship consumers have with original brands versus the relationship consumers have with their counterfeits.

Love versus Convenience

Brand love is a concept that appraises a satisfied consumer. It is the degree of passionate, emotional attachment for a particular brand and is usually higher for hedonic brands than for utilitarian brands. Brand love is linked to high levels of loyalty and positive word of mouth (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). Brand love is selective: over a vast amount of products or bands, only few are loved. These loved brands get to play a special role in consumers’ understandings of who they are as people (Ahuvia, 2005). The consumption of branded counterfeit products presents consumers with seemingly contradictory feelings. Externally counterfeits allow them to represent the image of a wealthy consumer, one that would naturally belong to their aspirational group. While internally consumers of counterfeits are aware of having paid only a fraction of the original brand’s price and do not really feel emotionally attached to the counterfeit product (Perez et al., 2010). We propose that while consumers use both the original brand and its counterfeit to express themselves socially, when they fall in love it will be with an original brand. At the most copying luxury brands create a convenience relationship that helps the owner through the awareness created by the original brand. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H1: Consumers experience significantly higher levels of brand love for the original brands than for their counterfeit branded products

Brand love encompasses both rational judgments about a brand as well as emotions (Ahuvia, 2005). According to Albert et al. (2007), consumer-brand love includes the following elements: (1) passion for a brand, (2) brand attachment, (3) positive evaluation of the brand, (4) positive emotions in response to the brand, and (5) declarations of love towards the brand. According to Aaron et. al., (1995)
love is the merging of lover and beloved. Although love encompasses emotions, it is fundamentally motivational as when people love they are seeking to accomplish goals. Important consequences of falling in love are increased feelings of self-efficacy and self-esteem. Love constructs and maintains identity.

The consumption of branded counterfeit products presents consumers with seemingly contradictory feelings. Externally counterfeits allow them to represent the image of a wealthy consumer, one that would naturally belong to their aspiration group. While internally consumers of counterfeits are aware of having paid only a fraction of the original brand’s price and do not really feel emotionally attached to the counterfeit product (Perez et al., 2010). The relationship with the original brand gets to play a deeper emotional role in consumers’ understandings of who they are as people, whereas it seems that the consumer relationship with the fake is rooted mainly on convenience, social purposes.

We propose that while consumers use both the original brand and its counterfeit to express themselves socially, when they fall in love it will be with an original. At the most copying luxury brands create a convenience relationship that helps the owner through the awareness created by the original brand. Counterfeit luxury products lack the individuality and emotional appeal of the original brand and thus provoke less feelings of satisfaction. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H2: Consumers experience significantly higher levels of satisfaction with the original brand than with the counterfeit branded product

Methodology

The research was conducted among 332 Mexican consumers who have owned or own an original luxury brand product (handbags, sunglasses, shoes, watches, etc.) and a counterfeit of the same brand. We considered that owning both the original and the counterfeit would allow these consumers to know well the tangible and intangible characteristics of both. Although counterfeiting exists in many product categories (drugs, electronics, videos, food, etc.) in this study we concentrated on
fashion luxury brands, considering the symbolic associations consumers may forge with them.

The study required that participants would have enough means to buy an original luxury brand thus delimitating their status to the highest economic strata (A/B) in Mexico. This segment represents 7.4% of the country’s population (AMAI, 2011); a related result was that most of them have at least high school education (98.8%). We strived to have a broad spectrum of participants with respect to other demographic characteristics therefore our sample included women (64.5%) and men, in ages from 16 to 67, students (59.6%) and non students.

Participants were asked “Have you ever owned an original luxury brand product and its counterfeit? (For example the Gucci original sunglasses and their counterfeit)” We also asked them to mention the brand and the category to which it belonged (sunglasses / handbags / wallets / watches, etc.). The brands more frequently mentioned by participants from a total of 65 were Ray Ban (13%), Louis Vuitton (12.7%), and Coach (12%) and from the 14 mentioned categories the ones more frequently cited were handbags (32.2%), sunglasses (23.5%) and wallets (9.6%).

In order to evaluate the closeness of the relationship between consumers and the original brand, and between consumers and the branded counterfeit we conducted a one way ANOVA comparing the original versus the counterfeit with respect to each of the following scales: Brand Love (Carrol & Ahuvia, 2006) and Satisfaction with Brand (Oliver, 1980). (See appendix 1)

Results

We found significant higher brand love and satisfaction with the brand between consumers and the original brands than between consumers and the counterfeits, as can be seen in the following table:
ANOVA comparing the original versus the counterfeit with respect to each scale

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<th>Original</th>
<th>Counterfeit</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Mean  SD</td>
<td>Mean  SD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brand Love</td>
<td>3.488 .653</td>
<td>2.352 .761</td>
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<td>Satisfaction with</td>
<td>4.189 .765</td>
<td>2.572 1.077</td>
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Note. df = 1

Because a close relationship is characterized by love and satisfaction the results of H1 and H2 lead us to the conclusion that consumers’ relationships are closer for original brands than with counterfeits.

Discussion

The brand relationship paradigm has changed the way marketing is understood and practiced today, according to Kapferer (1992) establishing a lasting relationship between consumers and a brand should be the brand’s main purpose. For this to happen consumers must perceive a coincidence between themselves and not only the functional benefits the brand provides but with its meaning and essence. When this occurs consumers make brands a part of their lives (Fournier, 1998).

For consumers to establish an enduring relationship with a brand they must find satisfaction in buying, owning, using, and displaying it. They must have an affinity with the brand’s image and symbolic attributes, one that results in feelings of love that may even lead them to become brand evangelists.

What happens when consumers have the option to buy counterfeits of their loved brands? Many do, as counterfeits may look like the originals while costing only a fraction of what these cost. Additionally the counterfeit branded product benefits
from the aura of prestige created by the original brand and can be used in front of others without them noticing the difference. However consumers who have an emotional relationship with the original brand and who know that a counterfeit is only a fake have difficulties establishing with it a trust relationship; consumers seem to establish with counterfeits a relation characterized more by short term convenience than by long lasting love.

**Limitations and Future Research**

This research was conducted among Mexican consumers, therefore a limitation and at the same time a potential avenue for future research would be to compare its results versus those obtained with consumers belonging to different cultures. Are there cultural elements that facilitate love for counterfeits, or that inhibit consumers’ satisfaction with them?

Another possibility to extend this research would be to study consumers’ proneness to establish relationships with counterfeits in other product categories. It could also be interesting to compare in the same study, among the same consumers the reactions towards counterfeits and original brands from several product categories.

A longitudinal research studying consumers who own originals and their counterfeits would yield relevant information about the evolution of consumer-brand relationships. Can consumers’ satisfaction and love diminish/increase with time? If this happens in the relationship between a consumer and an original brand how does it affect the consumer - counterfeit relationship? Because sales of counterfeit products represent up to 7% of world trade (Kent, 2011) both the relevance of this research area and the need to further it must be recognized.
References

AMAI. http://www.amai.org/


### Appendix 1

**Satisfaction with the brand scale**

(adapted from Oliver 1980; Spreng, Mackenzie, and Olshavsky 1996):

1. Please answer the following questions for the **original luxury brand** (or counterfeit of the original brand):

   a. I am satisfied with my decision to buy this product.

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   b. My choice to buy this product was a wise one.

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   c. Overall, I am delighted that I use this product.

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   d. I am extremely glad that I chose this product over other products I was considering at the time of purchasing.

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   e. This product fully meets my expectations.

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Please answer the following questions for the original luxury brand (or counterfeit of the original brand):

a. This is a wonderful brand.
   \[
   \begin{array}{cccccc}
   \text{1} & \text{2} & \text{3} & \text{4} & \text{5} \\
   \text{Completely disagree} & & & & \text{Completely agree} \\
   \end{array}
   \]

b. This brand makes me feel good.
   \[
   \begin{array}{cccccc}
   \text{1} & \text{2} & \text{3} & \text{4} & \text{5} \\
   \text{Completely disagree} & & & & \text{Completely agree} \\
   \end{array}
   \]

c. This brand is totally awesome.
   \[
   \begin{array}{cccccc}
   \text{1} & \text{2} & \text{3} & \text{4} & \text{5} \\
   \text{Completely disagree} & & & & \text{Completely agree} \\
   \end{array}
   \]

d. I have neutral feelings about this brand.
   \[
   \begin{array}{cccccc}
   \text{1} & \text{2} & \text{3} & \text{4} & \text{5} \\
   \text{Completely disagree} & & & & \text{Completely agree} \\
   \end{array}
   \]

e. This brand makes me very happy.
   \[
   \begin{array}{cccccc}
   \text{1} & \text{2} & \text{3} & \text{4} & \text{5} \\
   \text{Completely disagree} & & & & \text{Completely agree} \\
   \end{array}
   \]

f. I am fully satisfied with this product.
   \[
   \begin{array}{cccccc}
   \text{1} & \text{2} & \text{3} & \text{4} & \text{5} \\
   \text{Completely disagree} & & & & \text{Completely agree} \\
   \end{array}
   \]
f. I love this brand!

1  2  3  4  5
Completely disagree  Completely agree

g. I have no particular feelings about this brand.

1  2  3  4  5
Completely disagree  Completely agree

h. This brand is a pure delight.

1  2  3  4  5
Completely disagree  Completely agree

i. I am passionate about this brand.

1  2  3  4  5
Completely disagree  Completely agree

j. I’m very attached to this brand.

1  2  3  4  5
Completely disagree  Completely agree

k. I feel very close to this brand.

1  2  3  4  5
Completely disagree  Completely agree

l. This brand and I are deeply connected.

1  2  3  4  5
Completely disagree  Completely agree
m. The brand and I are somehow bonded.

1    2    3

Completely disagree     Completely agree