LINKING BRAND TRUST, BRAND COMMITMENT, AND PRODUCT FAMILIARITY TO FUTURE PURCHASE INTENTIONS

We examine the mediating role of consumer relationship willingness in the relationships between brand trust, brand commitment and product familiarity, and future purchase intention. Data from 308 printer users in Hong Kong reveals that consumer relationship willingness partially mediates the relationships between brand trust and brand commitment, and future purchase intention, and plays a full mediation role in the relationship between product familiarity and future purchase intention.

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the mediating role of consumer relationship willingness in the relationships between brand trust, brand commitment and product familiarity, and future purchase intention. It is widely believed that the relationship between a firm and its customers is critical to the firm’s survival and success (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; Fournier, Dobscha, & Mick, 1998; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Consequently, relationship marketing is becoming popular both in practice and in academia, with firms professing to practice it in new and better ways, and academics extolling its merits (Fournier et al., 1998). However, many people are coming to realize that relationship marketing is troublesome in practice. Central to this problem is that not all customers are equally receptive to relationship marketing (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Odekerken-Schröder, De Wulf, & Schumacher, 2003) and, more significantly, firms do not always truly value and treat consumers as equal partners (Fournier et al., 1998). Therefore, to get relationship marketing practices back on track, it is imperative that firms identify the types of consumers that are receptive to marketing relationships and then woo them with reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship marketing practices.

Few researchers have considered the question of the types of customers that are interested in or willing to form a relationship (Barnes, 1997), but in recent years the question has received more scholarly attention. Both conceptual and empirical investigations into the role of consumer relationship proneness in relationship marketing effectiveness have begun to emerge (Christy, Oliver, & Penn, 1996; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001, and Odekerken-Schröder et al., 2003). De Wulf et al. find that consumer relationship proneness significantly moderates the impact of perceived relationship investment on relationship quality. Odekerken-Schröder et al. explore the mediating role of consumer relationship proneness in the relationship between the personal traits of consumers and the relationship outcomes, such as satisfaction and commitment.

Bagolizi (1995) argues that reciprocity is embedded in consumer-firm relationships. Fournier et al. (1998) reiterate that there should be a balance between ‘giving’ and ‘receiving’ in a good relationship. Fully concurring with both Bagolizi and Fournier et al., we believe that only when there is a balance between ‘giving’ and ‘receiving’ in a consumer-firm relationship can the relationship be lasting and rewarding. Hence, we introduce a concept of consumer relationship willingness, which is defined as a customer’s conscious tendency to engage in reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships with producers in a particular product.
category. By introducing this new term, we highlight the underlying importance of reciprocity and mutual benefit in consumer-firm relationships.

The objective of this study is to build and test a model of consumer relationship willingness that integrates brand-consumer relationship and product familiarity in the explanation of future purchase intention. More specifically, we demonstrate that there is an alternative path that links brand trust and brand commitment to future purchase intention that uses consumer relationship willingness as the mediator. The findings will help firms to design their relationship marketing practices and to specifically target existing customers who have trust in and commitment to their brands. In addition, we explore a possible link between product familiarity, consumer relationship willingness, and future purchase intention.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Brand loyalty, brand commitment, and brand trust. In the literature of brand loyalty, there are two closely related yet distinct concepts, those of brand commitment and brand loyalty. Brand commitment reflects the degree to which a brand is firmly entrenched as the only acceptable choice within its product class (Traylor, 1981). Although brand commitment implies brand loyalty, the reverse does not hold necessarily true. Brand loyalty may simply reflect the consumer’s need to reduce effort and to simplify the decision making process. Brand commitment is a better indicator of consumer satisfaction with brand choice (Warrington & Shim, 2000). Other researchers hold that brand loyalty encompasses both behavioral and attitudinal components (Aaker, 1991; Assael, 1998; Oliver, 1999). Behavioral (or purchase) loyalty consists of repeated purchases of the brand, whereas attitudinal brand loyalty includes a degree of dispositional commitment in terms of a unique value that is associated with the brand. Therefore, attitudinal brand loyalty closely resembles brand commitment.

Although the literature of brand loyalty is regarded as being “perhaps most capable of informing theory concerning consumer-brand relationship” (Fournier, 1998, p. 343), it has recently stagnated. The notion of loyalty has lost its nuance in traditional brand loyalty research, and conceptualizing it as a long-term, committed, and affect-laden partnership could lead to the ignorance of many other valuable relationship forms, such as consumer-brand bonds (Fournier, 1998). Fournier (1998) and Fournier and Yao (1997) persuasively demonstrate the existence of a consumer-brand relationship by highlighting the ways in which brands can be animated, humanized, or to some extent personalized. It has been found that consumers show no difficulty in consistently assigning personality qualities to inanimate brand objects (Aaker, 1997), in thinking about brands as if they were human characters (Levy, 1985; Plummer, 1985), or in assuming the perspective of the brand to articulate their own relationship views (Blackson, 1993).

With the recent shift in research focus away from brand loyalty toward consumer-brand relationships, new concepts, such as brand trust, have been developed in the consumer-brand domain. Arguing that although brands themselves may not be capable of trust, brands have the response potential to elicit trust from consumers, Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) define brand trust as the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function. Along a similar line, Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán (2001) regard brand trust as a feeling of security that is held by the consumer that the brand will meet their consumption expectations.

Product familiarity. Product familiarity has long been an important issue in consumer research. Studies have been conducted to investigate the role of product familiarity in learning new information (Johnson & Russo, 1984) and information acquisition (Simonson et al., 1988), in choice and matching judgments (Coupey et al., 1998), in post-purchase responses, and in customer satisfaction, repurchase intentions, and word-of-mouth intentions (Söderlund, 2002).
Consumers who are highly familiar with a particular product category may patronize any firms that provide such products. Nevertheless, the effects of product familiarity may be extended to future purchase intention indirectly through the mediation of consumer relationship willingness.

**Brand trust and consumer relationship willingness.** Drawing on the aforementioned definitions of Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán and of Chaudhuri and Holbrook, we define brand trust as the average consumer’s confidence in and reliance on a brand to perform its stated function.

Trust gives the customer confidence in the equity and reliability of the service or product that is offered by a firm (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999), and also gives confidence in the credibility of the firm (Macintosh & Lockshin, 1997). The resultant reduction in perceived risk and uncertainty means that consumers are more than willing to engage in relationships with the producer of a trusted brand, as this can provide them with additional benefits, such as a sense of security, reliable quality products, and related services. Furthermore, in a trusting environment, consumers are more ready to disclose their personal information to a firm since they are confident that the firm will be more likely to reciprocate their favors. Hence, we offer our first hypothesis.

\[ H_1: \text{Brand trust is positively related to consumer relationship willingness.} \]

**Brand commitment and consumer relationship willingness.** Commitment is widely recognized to be central to the success of relationship enhancement (Fournier et al., 1998; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Moorman, Deshpandé, & Zaltman, 1993; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). At brand level, commitment is regarded as an emotional or psychological attachment to a certain brand within a product category (Coulter, Price, & Feick, 2003; Fournier, 1998), and reflects the degree to which a brand is firmly entrenched as the only acceptable choice within that category (Warrington & Shim, 2000). In this study, we adopt the definition of Coulter et al. (2003).

Moorman et al. (1993) suggest that customers who are committed to a relationship might have a greater propensity to act in a manner that is consistent with that commitment. Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) echo this view, and argue that consumers are likely to act consistently with their beliefs. Committed customers are also more willing to cooperate with their product providers (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999), and as a result will be more forthcoming with their personal information and will disclose this information to the firm of their committed brand. In return, they expect the firm to reciprocate the favor by providing them with various benefits. We therefore argue that customers committed to a brand may have a greater willingness to engage in reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships with the brand producer.

\[ H_2: \text{Brand commitment is positively related to consumer relationship willingness.} \]

**Product familiarity and consumer relationship willingness.** Product familiarity is defined here as the extent of a consumer’s familiarity with a particular product category. The literature suggests two seemingly contradictory alternatives concerning the relationship between product familiarity and information search, firstly that customers who are more familiar with a certain product category tend to be more active in searching for new product information to update their knowledge of that product category (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988; Johnson & Russo, 1984), and secondly, that consumers who are more familiar with a product limit their information search (Johnson & Russo, 1984). A closer look at the two alternatives reveals that they are actually more complementary than contradictory, and in fact suggests a positive relationship between product familiarity and consumer relationship willingness. On the one hand, to make the right choices in future, customers not only need to store information in their memory, but also need to update that

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information from time to time. On the other hand, they need to reduce their choice set, as the search for information can be costly and time consuming. In a world of information explosion, consumers are usually happy to accept relationship marketing practices that offer them information at a minimum cost. To reduce expensive search costs, these consumers are more likely to narrow down their choice set (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995), and to engage in mutually beneficial relationships with the chosen product providers. Hence, we hypothesize that

_H3: Product familiarity is positively related to consumer relationship willingness._

**Consumer relationship willingness and future purchase intention.** As has been mentioned, consumer relationship willingness measures a consumer’s willingness to engage in reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships with firms. The reciprocal and mutual benefits that are embedded in it provide a solid foundation for the further development of a long-term relationship between consumer and firm. By disclosing their personal information, such as name, address, and personal preference, consumers help the firm to design and produce better quality and tailor-made products. In return, customers expect to receive better products and other related benefits. This significantly reduces both the perceived risk and uncertainty of the customer by staying with the same firm (Stern, Thompson, & Arnold, 1998), and also their opportunity costs. Satisfied customers, who foresee the reduced uncertainty and opportunity cost of staying with the same firm, are more likely to repurchase from that firm. We therefore offer the following hypothesis,

_H4: Consumer relationship willingness is positively related to future purchase intention._

**METHODOLOGY**

**Sampling and data collection.** The sampling frame involves consumers in Hong Kong. Chinese culture is well known to be relationship rich and oriented toward the long term (Hofstede, 1991). Hong Kong, therefore, provides a supportive cultural context for studying the issues that are related to consumer-firm relationships. In addition, most of the existing studies on consumer relationship proneness have been conducted in Western countries. Empirical investigation in a non-Western context can help test the generalizability of the theories that come from the West. Hong Kong, as a former British colony, has a political, legal, and economic system that is comparable to those of Western economies such as the UK and the USA, and thus other contextual interferences are minimized. We decided to conduct empirical tests within a product category, as it is considered appropriate to study issues that are related to brand trust and brand commitment within a single product category (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001; Warrington & Shim, 2000).

The telephone numbers of 1,500 households were generated randomly from the Hong Kong Residential Telephone Directory 1999. If there were two or more eligible members in a household, then we chose the respondent randomly. Three hundred and eight questionnaires were collected, giving a response rate of 20%.

Of the respondents, 55.8% were male and 44.2% female. Their ages ranged from 17 to 45, with 22.7% being aged between 17 and 20, 36.4% between 21 and 25, 18.2% between 26 and 30, 12.3% between 31 and 35, and 0.4% between 36 and 45. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents had a monthly income of HK$0-5,000, 23.6% had an income of HK$5,001-10,000, 37.7% had an income of HK$10,001-20,000, and 10.9% had an income of HK$20,001-85,000. In terms of educational level, 0.7% of the respondents had a primary school education, 32% a high
school education, 4.6% had a diploma, 18.3% had a university or higher education, and 44.4% did not want to specify their educational level.

**Instrument, reliability, and validity.** A structured questionnaire was used to reduce the potential problems of fatigue and time pressure during a telephone interview, and so that respondents would find it easier to answer the questions and would not perceive the interview to be time consuming (Aaker & Day, 1990). A back-translation technique was used so as to ensure the accuracy of the items, as the interviews were conducted in Chinese. Reliability tests were carried out to ensure that the scales in the questionnaire produced consistent results for the variables. The results indicated that the Cronbach’s alpha of all of the constructs was above 0.80, which shows the high reliability of the scales. Furthermore, to test the validity of all of the measures used, both discriminant and convergent validity tests were conducted.

Convergent validity is concerned with whether multiple measures of the same construct are in agreement. According to Anderson and Gerbing (1988), convergent validity can be tested with a measurement model by examining whether the estimated pattern coefficient of each indicator on its posited underlying construct is significant. To test the convergent validity of the measurement model, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted, which resulted in a satisfactory model ($\chi^2_{(36)} = 267.049$, goodness-of-fit index [GFI] = 0.884, normal fit index [NFI] = 0.914, and comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.930). Thus, convergent validity was achieved. Discriminant validity was then assessed by a principal component factor analysis of all of the construct items using a varimax rotation method. The factor analysis extracted five expected factors: consumer relationship willingness, brand trust, brand commitment, product familiarity, and future purchase intention, with each item being loaded onto its corresponding factor. The five factors explained 70.337% of the total variance, and therefore discriminant validity was also achieved.

### 3.3 Independent Variables

*Brand trust* ($a = .89$). The brand trust scale was adapted from those used in Garbarino and Johnson (1999) and Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001). There are six items on the brand trust scale rated on a 7-point Likert scale that ranges from 1, “strongly disagree”, to 7, “strongly agree.” The exemplar items are “I believe that this brand can be relied upon to keep its promise”, “This is an honest brand”, and “This brand is trustworthy”.

*Brand commitment* ($a = .90$). The brand commitment scale consists of six items, such as, “I have a strong sense of loyalty to this brand”, “I am proud of being a customer of this brand”, and “Even if I find the price of another brand is lower, I will not switch to that brand”. The items were adapted from Garbarino and Johnson (1999) and Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001).

*Product familiarity* ($a = 0.81$). The product familiarity scale was developed from a detailed consultation of the relevant literature, such as Coupey et al. (1998), and Grewal et al. (1998). The scale consists of two items. They are “How knowledgeable are you about the price of printers of Epson, Xerox, and Canon?” rated on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 “not knowledgeable at all” to 7 “very knowledgeable”, and “Please rate how familiar you are with printers” rated on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 “extremely unfamiliar” to 7 “extremely familiar”).

**Dependent variable.** *Future purchase intention* ($a = 0.82$). This scale comprises the two items of “Are you willing to repurchase the products of this brand in the future?” and “Are you willing to give first consideration to this brand for future purchases?” rated on a 7-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 “not at all willing” to 7 “extremely willing”. The two items were developed from Fournier (1998) and Garbarino and Johnson (1999).

**Mediating variable.** *Consumer relationship willingness* ($a = 0.90$) The seven items that were used in this scale were adapted from the measures that were used in Stone and Woodcock (1995)
and in Ambler et al. (1999), and are rated on a 7-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree”. The exemplar items are “I wish to establish a long-term relationship with the producer of this brand,” “I wish to maintain frequent contact with the producer of this brand,” “I am willing to give my personal details to the producer of this brand”, “I am willing to cooperate with the producer of this brand so that it can provide me with better products and services”, and “I hope that the producer of this brand can provide me with new product information frequently.” This scale is designed to capture a consumer’s willingness to engage in a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship with a firm.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The hypothesized structural model was tested using AMOS 4.0 (Arbuckle, 1999). The covariance matrices are provided in Table 1. The overall fit of the hypothesized model is reasonably good ($\chi^2_{(34)} = 308.85, p = 0.000$, goodness-of-fit [GFI] = 0.868, comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.914, and normed fit index [NFI] = 0.897). All four of the hypothesized paths are significant at $p<0.05$. As expected, both brand trust and brand commitment are found to be highly correlated with consumer relationship willingness, thereby supporting both Hypotheses 1 ($\beta = 0.484, p < 0.001$) and 2 ($\beta = 0.201, p < 0.001$). Similarly, Hypothesis 3 is also supported, which indicates that product familiarity does lead to consumer relationship willingness ($\beta = 0.213, p < 0.01$). Finally, Hypothesis 4, which predicts a positive relationship between consumer relationship willingness and future purchase intention, is strongly supported ($\beta = 0.404, p < 0.001$). In Figure 1, it can be observed that both brand trust and brand commitment also have a direct impact on future purchase intention ($\beta = 0.202, p < 0.01; \beta = 0.098, p < 0.05$), which suggests that the relationships between brand trust, brand commitment and future purchase intention is partially mediated by consumer relationship willingness. In addition, a non-significant relationship between product familiarity and future purchase intention ($\beta = 0.003, p > 0.05$) suggests that the relationship is fully mediated by consumer relationship willingness. Although no hypothesis was offered of the relationship between brand trust and brand commitment because the relationship has been suggested conceptually and supported empirically in the existing literature, a link between the two variables was added to the model and was subsequently supported.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We set out to explore the mediating role of consumer relationship willingness in the relationships between brand trust, brand commitment, and product familiarity and future purchase intention in the product category of printers. The study benefited enormously from the recent theoretical and empirical advancements in the study of consumer-brand relationships, brand trust, and brand commitment (Chauhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001; Fournier, 1998). The introduction of consumer relationship willingness with an explicit emphasis on reciprocity and mutual benefits is of both theoretical and practical significance. All of the four hypotheses were strongly supported. The findings suggest that although consumer
relationship willingness partially mediates the relationships between brand trust, brand commitment, and future purchase intention, it plays a full mediating role in the relationship between product familiarity and future purchase intention. The underlying managerial implication is that firms can retain existing customers and attract new customers from competitors by first pinning down the customers who display relationship willingness, and then specifically targeting them with reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship marketing practices.

Our results show that both brand trust and brand commitment have a positive impact on future purchase intention, either directly or indirectly, through consumer relationship willingness. The findings support the existing argument that trusting and committed customers are more likely to repurchase from the same firm (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). More significantly, it reveals that there are alternative avenues such as consumer relationship willingness, through which brand trust and brand commitment can exert their influences on the future purchase intention of consumers.

This finding has some interesting managerial implications. As consumer relationship willingness can be leveraged to connect brand trust and brand commitment with future purchase intention, no effort should be spared by firms in targeting reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship marketing practices at this particular group of existing customers who trust and are committed to their brands. By strengthening their relationships with committed customers, firms can prevent them from being poached by competitors. Consequently, relationship marketing practices can help firms to achieve relationship marketing success in terms of repeat purchases of consumers by capitalizing on the consumer relationship willingness that is embedded in the existing customers who have trust in and commitment to the brand.

The results reveal that the relationship between a customer’s product familiarity and their future purchase intention is fully mediated by the customer’s willingness to engage in a relationship with the producers of printers. No direct relationship is found between product familiarity and future purchase intention, which indicates that whether a consumer is familiar with the product category of printers or not does not affect their future purchase intentions. A possible explanation is that a consumer may be very familiar with printers but does not necessarily need to patronize the same brand repeatedly simply because of this familiarity, as there are other competing brands available. However, the influence of product familiarity as channeled through consumer relationship willingness can be extended to future purchase intention.

This finding also has significant managerial implications. In terms of the printer industry that is used as the vehicle for this study, firms should target their reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship marketing practices more specifically at the two particular groups of consumers that are familiar with printers: existing customers and potential customers. First, firms should identify those who are familiar with printers from the pool of existing customers. They can then provide more tailor-made information to customers who are seeking information and who have a good knowledge of printers. As such customers are often relationship willing, they are more likely to stay with the same firm. Second, firms should identify and target potential customers who are familiar with the product category of printers, but have thus far been patronizing other brands to try and to win them over from their competitors. By specifically directing their relationship marketing efforts toward these two particular groups of consumers, firms can not only retain their existing customer base, but also attract new customers. Payne and Frow (1997) observe that firms recognize that their future success depends on the joint activity of keeping their most profitable customers and acquiring new ones from competitors. Relationship marketing practices that focus on reciprocity and mutual benefits can be an effective and productive way of achieving this, and indeed, evidence indicates that printer producers are starting to pay attention to reciprocity and
mutual benefits in their efforts to build relationships with both their existing and potential customers\(^6\).

Although every care has been taken with this study, some inherent problems remain. First, the data were collected from printer users only. Although the focus on a particular product category is a widely used practice in the study of consumer-brand relationships, this might also affect the potential generalizability of the results, and caution should be employed when applying the results to other related consumer product markets. Second, over 50\% of the respondents were aged between 18 and 25, and the findings of this study predominantly represent this age group, even though this reflects the reality of the demographic of printer users in Hong Kong. In addition, as this is one of the first studies to use consumer relationship willingness as a mediating variable in the relationships between brand trust, brand commitment, product familiarity, and future purchase intention, we have kept the model simple and straightforward and have left out some variables that might have similar effects either as dependent or independent variables. However, such a sacrifice at the early stage of model development and testing should be generally considered acceptable.

In future studies, more antecedents and outcomes of consumer relationship willingness could be identified and studied. For example, antecedents such as relationship benefits, shared values, and communication effectiveness could be added to the model. With respect to the outcomes, more variables, such as the consumer’s propensity to leave, cooperation, and overall satisfaction could be incorporated into the model. Furthermore, it might be fruitful for future research to investigate the moderating role of consumer relationship willingness in the relationships between brand trust, brand commitment, and brand outcomes. For example, the interactive effects between brand trust and consumer relationship willingness might have impact on the relationship between brand trust and overall satisfaction, and could also influence the relationship between brand trust and future purchase intention. The new term of consumer relationship willingness can also be applied to the study of business to business marketing at the interorganizational level and to the examination of how a firm’s relationship willingness might affect another firm’s relationship marketing success. Finally, for the purpose of cross-validation, a comparative study could be conducted to investigate the differences and similarities in the roles of consumer relationship willingness in different cultural contexts, such as the US, Japan, and China.

This study represents one of the first studies to investigate the mediating role of consumer relationship willingness in the relationships between brand trust, brand commitment, product familiarity, and future purchase intention. We find strong support for our theoretical prediction that consumer relationship willingness plays an underlying mediating role in the retention of existing customers who display brand trust and brand commitment, and in the attraction of potential customers who have a good knowledge of a product category. By introducing this new term and emphasizing the advantages of reciprocity and mutual benefits, we have gone some way to advancing future developments in relationship marketing, both in theory and in practice. The theoretical implication is that future investigations of relationship marketing should emphasize the role of reciprocity and mutual benefits in consumer-firm relationships. Furthermore, the findings offer some invaluable implications for practicing managers, and especially for those who are involved in the printer market and related product categories, that they should target their reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship marketing practices at the two most receptive groups of customers: existing customers with

\(^6\) For example, both Hewlett Packard and Epson in Hong Kong are starting to make an effort in this direction in the home printer market by offering benefits such as information on specific products (such as manuals, warranty information, and model-specific FAQs), on promotions and events, and on the latest products. In return, they request personal information from customers through registration for these benefits. See www.hp.com.hk and www.epson.com.hk.
brand trust and brand commitment, and existing and potential customers who are familiar with the product category.

\[ (\beta = 1.089^{**}) \]

\[ (\beta = .404^{***}) \]

\[ (\beta = .098^{*}) \]

\[ (\beta = .201^{***}) \]

\[ (\beta = .213^{**}) \]

\[ (\beta = .013, \text{n.s.}) \]

\[ (\beta = .202^{**}) \]

Note:

n. s. = not significant

\( \chi^2 \) (34) = 308.85, GFI = 0.868, CFI = 0.914, NFI = 0.897

Path (brand trust \rightarrow brand commitment added but not hypothesized)