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Brand relations and life course: Why old consumers love their brands

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ABSTRACT The relationship between age and the importance of brand relation is investigated. In a first exploratory survey, this relation appeared to be U-shaped. Brand relations are relatively strong for both consumers under 30 and those over 60. In a second survey, a theory-based explanation is sought as to why the importance of brand relation increases with age over 50. The answer lies in a decreased tolerance of ambiguity, consistent with low cognitive-affective complexity. Given hedonic innovativeness and future time perspective, the relation between age and brand relation becomes stronger. The results imply that brands should communicate to older consumers: ‘we have a long future together, our new products are attractive and we don’t take you out of your comfort zone’.

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INTRODUCTION

Because of aging of many of the populations in Western society, marketing to older consumers has recently become more and more important. Although there is a rising interest in the academic world in issues of marketing to consumers over 50, many of the fundamental questions in marketing have had limited attention in relation to aging. One of these questions is the relationship with brands. What do mobile phone brands mean to older consumers compared with 20-year-olds? Has the relationship with a car brand grown over the years? What does a food brand mean to someone’s physical well-being? Is it the same when you are old, compared with when you

are young? There is some evidence that the use of brands, in terms of number of brands, does not change during the life course (Yang *et al*, 2005; Uncles and Lee, 2006). Although the number of brands per household decreases with age, this effect disappears when household size is taken into account. According to Uncles and Ehrenberg (1990), the number of brands per caput within a household may even increase with age. After correction for different product penetrations during the life cycle (for example, computer games are mostly bought by young consumers, newspapers by older consumers), the role of leading brands in terms of purchase frequencies does not appear

to change (Uncles and Lee, 2006). However, although these statistical data with respect to brand choice are similar for younger and older consumers, there are reasons to assume that brands may have a different meaning during the life course. Older consumers are different in both cognitive and emotional respects. Lambert-Pandraud *et al* (2005) and Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent (2010) show that for the French automotive market and the French perfume market, respectively, the differences lead to a relatively high attachment to long established brands by older consumers. This suggests that strength and content of brand relationships are different for older consumers as compared with younger consumers. In this article, relationship strength throughout the life course is explored and, in particular for consumers over 50, an explanation is sought.

BRAND RELATIONS

Consumers can consider brands to be entities with human properties. They can have a feeling of relationship with a brand. In business to business selling, this often is reality. Buyers know the salespeople of the selling company personally, and can hold them accountable for the quality that was delivered. Because of the Internet, the idea of a brand relationship gets more and more within reach. Many brands have sites on which they actively communicate with their clients (Simmons *et al*, 2010). This is a relatively new phenomenon, of which the long-term importance presently is not yet clear. However, also without the Internet, consumers may experience their connection with a brand as something that could be called a relationship (Fournier, 1998). Your car can be your friend. Food brands may be a link to childhood and generate warm personal feelings. Personal care brands may be an ally to achieve social status with your friends.

The value of the brand relationship metaphor has been recognized in many

studies, for example, Parvatiyar and Sheth (2001), McAlexander *et al* (2002) and Smit *et al* (2007). Is a brand really perceived as a person? In Yoon *et al* (2006), it was demonstrated by fMRI scanning that brands are perceived as objects, rather than persons, let alone friends. Still, the Brand Relationship Quality model by Fournier (1998) is useful tool for Customer Relationship Management. A quantitative measurement tool is described in Tolboom (2004). Here, the seven aspects of Fournier's model were operationalized. Moreover, a new aspect, trust was added. This led to the following list of aspects that make up brand relationship:

- *Interdependence*: The consumer has the feeling that the brand is a necessary part of daily life.
- *Love, passion*: Brands are felt to be irreplaceable, unique and separation would lead to anxiety.
- *Intimacy*: Knowledge structures have developed around a brand with rich layers of personal meaning.
- *Brand partner quality*: The consumer feels the brand to be a good partner that does not let him down.
- *Self-connection*: The perception that the consumer and the brand share identity.
- *Nostalgic connection*: The consumer is reminded of meaningful experiences in the past.
- *Commitment*: Support from the consumer to the brand.
- *Trust*: The feeling that the brand will not let you down in the future.

What relations with age are to be expected? In general, the size of the social network decreases with age (Cornwell *et al*, 2008, 2009). Family plays a central role in the social relations of the elderly. When we take the metaphor of social relations literally, the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory applies, in particular, its prediction that older adults have the tendency to choose more familiar social partners (Fredrickson and Carstensen, 1990; Fung *et al*, 1999, 2001).

These are social partners with which one has a relatively strong relationship. Extending the metaphor to brands, it seems natural that at least for the most favourite brands, brand relationships also become stronger. A similar argument can be derived from the theory of Selection, Optimization with Compensation (Baltes and Baltes, 1990; Baltes and Carstensen, 1996; Baltes, 1997). This theory says that older individuals continue functioning well by selecting less activities, making sure they carry out these activities as effective as possible and compensate for shortcomings, caused by old age, in carrying out these activities. Carrying over this argument to brands, the theory predicts a selection of fewer brands, but a stronger relationship with the chosen brands as age progresses. This leads to the hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The strength of brand relations with the most favourite brands increases with age.

From a different theoretical point of view, an alternative hypothesis may be developed. This is the theory of cognitive-affective development (Labouvie-Vief, 2003). This theory states that during the life course, individuals change on two dimensions. The first dimension is the ability to optimize positive affect or happiness. This ability increases with age. This has empirically been demonstrated in many studies, for example, Carstensen *et al* (2000) and Diehl *et al* (1996). The second dimension is that of cognitive-affective complexity, the ability to tolerate tension and negativity with the goal to keep an objective view of the world. This ability increases during the first 50 years of life, but starts to decrease after 60 years, yielding an inverse U-shaped relation with age. This has been found in cross-sectional research, (Labouvie-Vief *et al*, 1989; Labouvie-Vief *et al*, 1995), but also in a longitudinal setting (Labouvie-Vief *et al*, 2007). As a result of this diminished ability, older adults may rely on more simplified,

schematized thinking and black-and-white thinking about self and others (for example, Blanchard-Fields, 1999). The connection with brand relations lies in the fact that brands may also represent a type of schematized thinking. In the mind of the consumer, emotional brand attributes are added to and may replace product attributes, facilitating the judgment about products and the purchase decision. The fact that cognitive-affective complexity has an inverse U-shaped relationship with age also may be a reason that the relation between the strength of brand relations and age is U-shaped. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The strength of brand relations with the most favourite brands has a U-shaped relation with age.

Strong brand relations then are a form of low cognitive-affective complexity. Both Hypotheses 1 and 2 also seem to contradict Uncles and Ehrenberg (1990) who observe that the number of brands per caput increases with age. This, however, is not necessarily true for the number of brands that is important to the consumer. Lambert-Pandraud *et al* (2005) show that for the automotive branch, the consideration set for a new car decreases with age, adding importance for the brands belonging to this set.

STUDY 1. DETERMINING THE RELATION BETWEEN AGE AND BRAND RELATIONS

Method

The data were collected in the form of an Internet questionnaire. The respondents were selected from a computer access panel run by the market research agency TNS NIPO, which consists of 200 000 members. The interview mode was computer assisted self interviewing. Respondents completed the

questionnaires from their homes via the Internet. Seven different markets were studied: automotive, banking, mobile phones, audio/video, personal care, food and holidays. For each market, a random sample was drawn with sample size of approximately 300, yielding a total sample size of 2147. Ages of the respondents varied from 20 to 69. Response rates were 80–90 per cent for the samples drawn. In each sample, the respondents were asked what was their favourite brand in the corresponding market. The questions about brand relation dealt with this particular brand. The response scales were 1 – totally disagree through 5 – totally agree. Cronbach's α was equal to 0.90.

Results

The analysis is based on regression of age on the mean scale values of the four brand functions. As it was anticipated that relation may be U-shaped, not only age but also age squared was used as a predictor. Four models were distinguished: Model 1, with only age as predictor; Model 2, where age squared was added as predictor; Model 3, where gender (coded male = 1, female = 2) and education served as control variables (the regression coefficient of low education is set to zero); Model 4, where there was also controlled for market (the regression coefficient of audio/video is set to zero).

The results are given numerically in Table 1 and graphically in Figure 1, which show the relation between age and brand relation based on Model 2. The relationship between brand relation and age clearly is non-linear. All regression coefficients of age squared were statistically significant, yielding U-shaped relations between age and brand relationship. A strong brand relation is especially important for consumers below 30 and above 60 years. Hypothesis 1 is disconfirmed, the alternative Hypothesis 2 is confirmed. For consumers over 60, brand relationship is important, but the same is true for consumers under 30. Having a low

Table 1: Standardized regression coefficients for brand relation

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Age	-0.008	-0.752**	-0.778**	-0.832**
Age squared	—	0.767**	0.797**	0.845**
Education middle	—	—	-0.071**	-0.079**
Education high	—	—	-0.034**	-0.044*
Gender (female)	—	—	0.109**	0.100**
Automotive	—	—	—	0.090**
Banking	—	—	—	0.235**
Mobile phone	—	—	—	0.075**
Personal care	—	—	—	0.076**
Food	—	—	—	0.082**
Holiday	—	—	—	0.111**
R	0.008	0.104**	0.171**	0.257**

*: $0.1 > p \geq 0.05$; **: $p < 0.05$.

Figure 1: Brand relation strength (standardized) by age, based on Model 2.

education adds to the importance of brand relationship. It is also more important for women than for men.

The U-shaped relationship between brand relation and age not only was found on the aggregated level of all branches, but also almost for each individual branch. As an example, the predicted values of the brand relation is shown in Figures 2a and b. The results are based on a multilevel model, estimated with the SPSS MIXED procedure. Figure 2a contains those branches for which the relation is approximately symmetric: banking, audio/video and food. Here, the

Figure 2: The relation between strength of brand relation and age within branches, based on Model 2: (a) Symmetric relations; (b) Asymmetric relations.

importance of brand relations is at its lowest at 45 years. Consistent with Table 1, brand relations are most important in the banking market and least important for the audio/video market. Figure 2b shows the asymmetric graphs. The difference between 20-year-olds and 75-year-olds was significant for two out of the four branches: for the mobile phone market brand relationships are more important to young consumers

($t(329) = 2.06; p < 0.05$). For the personal care market, they are more important for older consumers ($t(336) = 1.97; p < 0.05$).

However, for all branches the relationship between age and brand relation behaves in a non-linear fashion.

Discussion

Remarkable is that the relationship between brand relation and age is similar for a very different markets. Apparently, some deep rooted property that depends on age is associated with brand perception. A theoretically intriguing question is if it is the same property that causes both young and old to attach a high value to brands. In terms of the theory of cognitive-affective development by Labouvie-Vief (2003), this property is the simplified cognitive reaction to affective stimuli, which young and old have in common. The most prominent theories of aging may explain the increasing importance of brands for aging consumers, but do not offer an explanation for the similarities to the youngest group. The reason may be that the similarities are an artefact of two different, unrelated processes.

STUDY 2. EXPLAINING BRAND RELATIONS FOR OLDER CONSUMERS

Where the first study was mainly exploratory, the second study aims at finding theoretical explanations based on the measurement of key concepts from theories of aging. As our main concern is the behaviour of mature consumers, in the second study focus is on individuals over 50. The basic question is: which process(es) explain why the strength of brand relations increases with age? The following processes are considered.

Future time perspective. This is the key variable that, according to the SST, causes individuals to change their goals in later life when the future is perceived as limited. A scale is given

by Carstensen and Lang (1996), which measures whether the perceived future is limited or expansive. In Lang and Carstensen (2002), this scale successfully predicted the amount and quality of social relations; possibly it will also predict the quality of brand relations, thus linking the SST with branding.

Innovativeness. Innovative consumer behaviour may be conceptualized as ‘the tendency to buy new products in a particular product category soon after they appear in the market and relatively earlier than most other consumers in the market segment’ (Foxall *et al.*, 1998, p.41). Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent (2010) concluded that decreasing innovativeness with age accounted for preference for long established brands by the elderly in the French perfume market. Scales for different motivations for innovativeness have been developed by Vandecasteele and Geuens (2010). We included (i) functional innovativeness, the tendency to solve practical problems with new products; (ii) hedonic innovativeness, seeking pleasure with new products and (iii) social innovativeness, self expression in social relationships through new products. *Nostalgia.* Longing for the past may induce strong relations with long established brands that are associated with the personal history of the consumer. However, Holbrook (1993) concluded that there was no relation between age and nostalgia proneness. Moreover, Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent (2010) found only a weak connection between nostalgia and preference for perfume brands. The scale from Holbrook (1993) is included in the study.

Cognitive-affective complexity. This concept has the same U-shaped relationship with age as brand relation, suggesting a (causal) connection. Measurement of cognitive-affective complexity involves expert judgement by psychologists (Labouvie-Vief *et al.*, 1995), which is not feasible in a survey context. Therefore, two correlates of this concept were used, namely openness to

Figure 3: Candidate mediating processes between age and brand functions.

experience (McCrae and Costa, 2003) and tolerance of ambiguity (Budner, 1962). *Selection, optimization and compensation.* Scales for these processes, which may lead to the selection of brands, are given in Baltes *et al.* (1999). Selection is distinguished between elective selection and loss bases selection. Freund and Baltes (2002) showed that elective selection had highest endorsement from the oldest age group, the other scales reached their peaks in middle age (43–67 years).

The research question of Study 2 can be summarized in Figure 3: which process mediates the relation between age and brand functions for consumers over 50?

Method

The data were collected in the form of an Internet questionnaire. The respondents were selected from a consumer panel by the marketing agency Booming Experience, which specializes in the 50+ market. The panel consists of 2210 members. The interview mode was computer assisted self interviewing. Respondents completed the questionnaires from their homes via the Internet. Five different markets were studied: automotive, banking, audio/video, personal care and food. For each market, a random sample was drawn with sample size of

Table 2: Factor loadings tolerance of ambiguity (loadings > 0.3 are shown)

	<i>No fixed pattern</i>	<i>Choose what you are used to</i>	<i>Life is complicated</i>
People who fit their lives to a schedule probably miss most of the joy of living	0.67	—	—
There really is no such thing as a problem that cannot be solved	0.62	—	—
I would like to live in a foreign country for a while	0.60	—	—
It is more fun to tackle a complicated problem than to solve a simple one	0.58	—	0.32
What we are used to is always preferable to what is unfamiliar	—	0.74	—
A person who leads an even, regular life in which few surprises or unexpected happenings arise, really has a lot to be grateful for	—	0.73	—
The sooner we all acquire similar values and ideals, the better	—	0.63	—
An expert who does not come up with a definite answer probably does not know very much	—	0.45	—
People who insist on a yes or a no answer just do not know how complicated things are	—	—	0.72
Many of our most important decisions are based upon insufficient information	—	—	0.62
I like parties where I know most of the people more than parties where all or most people are complete strangers	—	0.32	0.55
Often the most interesting and stimulating people are those who do not mind being different and original	0.41	—	0.48

approximately 200, yielding a total sample size of 1000 with an average response rate of 80 per cent. Ages of the respondents varied from 51 to 87.

The scale for brand relation again proved reliable, with a values of Cronbach's α of 0.914. The tolerance of ambiguity scale appeared to consist of three dimensions: 'not living according to a fixed pattern', 'choose what you are used to' and 'life is complicated'. The factor loadings are given in Table 2. These factors are used as separate dimensions to mediate the relation between age and brand functions.

Results

Consistent with the results of Study 1, there was now a significant, albeit weak, positive correlation between age and brand relation of 0.102. The mediating effect of the different processes can be read from Table 3. In the fourth and fifth column, this table contains the partial correlations between

age and the brand functions, given the processes.

When a process completely mediates the relation between age and brand relation, this partial correlation would be zero. The partial correlations are to be compared with the direct correlation of age with the brand relation, 0.102. Clearly, the factor 'choose what you're used to' of ambiguity tolerance most strongly mediates the relations, as the partial correlations is 0.074. As no other candidate mediating variable significantly lowers the relation, brand relation can be interpreted as a way to avoid new situations and keep the world as it is. Figure 4 shows the path coefficients of age, brand relation and the different mediators. The estimations and the significance levels are calculated with an SPSS macro by Hayes, see Preacher and Hayes (2008). The estimates are based on bootstrapping, and for that reason may deviate slightly from those in Table 3. Two processes appear to be suppressors, that is, conditioning on these processes causes the correlations not to decrease but

Table 3: Correlations processes with brand relation and age, partial correlations age and brand relation given processes

	Brand relation	Age	Partial correlation age and brand relation given process
Age	0.102***	—	—
Innovativeness			
Functional	0.177***	0.006	0.103***
Hedonic	0.284***	−0.066*	0.126***
Social	0.214***	−0.010	0.107***
Openness to experience			
Negative items	0.011	0.077**	0.101***
Positive items	−0.019	−0.124***	0.100***
Ambiguity tolerance			
No fixed pattern	0.068*	−0.039	0.105***
Choose what you are used to	0.170***	0.179***	0.074*
Life is complicated	−0.021	0.071**	0.104***
Selection, optimization, compensation			
Elective selection	−0.057	−0.044	0.100***
Loss based selection	0.019	−0.056	0.103***
Optimization	−0.116***	0.086**	0.113***
Compensation	−0.007	0.182***	0.105***
Nostalgia	−0.057	−0.007	0.102***
Future time perspective	0.002	−0.410***	0.113***

*: $0.1 > p \geq 0.05$; **: $0.05 > p \geq 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.01$.

Figure 4: Path coefficients for mediators between age and brand relation.

*: $0.1 > p \geq 0.05$; **: $0.05 > p \geq 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.01$.

to increase (Cohen and Cohen, 1983, pp. 84–91; MacKinnon *et al*, 2000). They are hedonic innovativeness and future time perspective. Figure 4 also shows that when these variables are used to estimate a path model, the path coefficient between age and brand relation increases to 0.150. When ‘choose what you’re used to’ also is included in the model, the path coefficient decreases again to 0.125.

Discussion

Most processes that were taken into do not mediate the relation between age and brand relation. Conditioning on only one aspect of cognitive-affective complexity, to stick to previously formed habits, substantially lowers the relation between age and brand relation. Logically, it follows that the elderly are not a very attractive target group for marketing, as their consumer behaviour is mainly determined by previously formed habits. This conclusion is in line with Lambert-Pandraud *et al* (2005) and Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent (2010) that older consumer have a preference for

long established brands that have had the opportunity to build the habits of buying such brands. Of interest, however, is the role of the two suppressors, hedonic innovativeness and future time perspective. When consumers perceive the future as attractive and full of new possibilities, and new products as fun and exciting, brand relations not only become stronger, but the mediating effect of previously formed habits also diminishes. Both suppressors, more or less by definition, have a negative relation with age: the older you are, the less excited about your future and the less inclined to like innovations. For practitioners, the challenge is to break this relation and to build new brand relations with older consumers despite their age. The question is: can that be done? In academic research, perception of the future has been successfully manipulated (Fung *et al*, 1999; Fung and Carstensen, 2006), yielding psychological consequences as predicted by the SST. This suggests that in marketing, such manipulation is also possible. For hedonic innovativeness, no such examples are documented.

A limitation of this project is the fact that it did not comprise a direct measure for cognitive-affective competence. As a consequence, we have only limited evidence that the level of cognitive-affective competence is the underlying cause of the U-shaped relations

- Study 1: The fact that for low-educated brand, functions are relatively important.
- Study 2: The mediating effect of 'choose what you're used to'.

A simple competing explanation of the results is the high need for innovativeness for the young and the high need for attachment for the old. This cannot be ruled out.

Future research may look deeper into the role of cognitive-affective complexity and consumer behaviour in general, not necessarily restricted to brands but also directed at, for example, decision making in

shops. A second line of interest is the way how both suppressors, hedonic innovativeness and future time perspective can be used in communication to strengthen the bonds between older consumers and brands. More in particular: how can elderly be made to perceive innovations or the future in general to be more attractive?

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APPENDIX

BRAND RELATION SCALE

The scale is adapted from Tolboom (2004). Here, the shortest possible version is used.

If Brand X would no longer exist, something would be missing in my life.

I have feelings for Brand X that I do not have for many other brands.

I have the feeling that I really understand Brand X.

Brand X has always been good to me.

Brand X and I have much in common.

Brand X reminds me of the things that I have done or the places where I have been.

Brand X can always count on me.

I trust Brand X.