ONLINE BRAND TRUST: AN ANTECEDENT-CONSEQUENCE FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

In the present day era of e-commerce, almost all the business firms are making use of electronic platform to not only endorse their brands and products but also to strengthen consumer–brand relationships. In such a scenario, building consumers' brand trust becomes a critical concern. However, though the understanding of the construct and its importance has been well established in the marketing literature, only a few studies have delved into its antecedents and consequences in a comprehensive manner, and even fewer in the context of an online environment. With an objective to bridge this gap and contribute to the existing body of literature, the present paper conducts an exhaustive review of the literature and discusses the antecedent-consequence framework of online brand trust. The synthesis provided through the review provides useful insights that can be used by the firms to formulate appropriate online marketing strategies and develop trustful customer relationships for their brands. The paper also outlines the directions for undertaking future empirical research in the area of online brand trust.

Keywords- Online brand trust, Brand awareness, E-tail brand experiences, Perceived quality, Brand loyalty, Purchase intentions, Brand equity

Introduction

Recent years have placed Internet as an effective tool that is used by firms to promote their brands online. It is in this regard that online branding is now considered to be a competitive marketing instrument that provides numerous opportunities (Barreda et al., 2016) to firms to differentiate their offering. As a dynamic concept involving a

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continuous interaction between the firm and its consumers, online branding has transformed the traditional strategies and structures of marketing by assisting the firms in engaging customers with their brands through social networks, blogs and video sharing sites.

At the same time, the growth in e-commerce and the resultant shift of consumers from offline to online shopping platforms has placed trust at a focal point in firms' dealings and interactions with their customers. E-tailers cite trust as an important factor that affects customers' willingness to purchase the products online (Sebastianelli and Tamimi, 2018).As posited by Fournier and Yao (1997), in a highly competitive and unpredictable markets, creation and sustenance of online brand trust plays a pivotal role in a company's marketing plans. It not only leads to the sense of security and assurance in the minds of consumers, but also strengthens the bond between the customer and the company, thereby making the consumer more receptive to the services of the brand.

In an uncertain environment, 'trust' takes care of consumers' vulnerability and assures consumers' that they can rely on their trusted brand. Moreover, the trust consumers have in a brand not only helps in reducing their worries about the risks, fraud and uncertainties of using the online platform and encourages them to participate (Hoffman et al., 1999), but also helps in generating their commitment and purchase. Realizing the importance of the construct in an online era, researchers in the recent years have focused their attention on developing a deeper understanding of the shoppers' evaluation of website trust worthiness as a crucial parameter for online retailers (Roghanizad and Neufeld, 2015).

Objectives and Methodology

It is in the aforesaid context that the present paper provides a consolidated view of the studies with respect to the central role of brand trust in an online purchase environment. Based on an in-depth review of existing literature in relevant electronic journal databases, academic papers and books, an attempt has been made to synthesize the major antecedents and outcomes of online brand trust. The two-fold objective of the paper is to provide an understanding of the importance of the online brand trust in a rapidly changing and evolving online purchase environment, and the antecedent-consequence framework concerning online brand trust. To address the above objectives,

the extant literature available in electronic journal databases, academic papers and books relevant to study was reviewed. The selection of research papers under review of literature was done on the basis of their relevance to the topic and covered the period from 1985 to 2017.

Online Brand Trust: Concept, Antecedents and Consequences

According to the personality psychologist, Rotter (1967), trust is an essential characteristic, expressed in terms of belief, expectancy, or feeling embedded in individual's personality and as such, is treated as an important element fromthe perspective of an individual's early stage psychological development. Further, social psychologists Lewicki and Bunker (1995) have relatively focused on the basic drivers that either constrain or augment trust in terms of expectation behavior while making transactions. In marketing literature, trust is defined as "a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence" (Moorman et al., 1993).

Prior studies examining trust in relation to varied contexts such as industrial business to business, buyer-seller relationships, bargaining, market research and distribution channels (e.g. Doney and Cannon, 1997) have found it featured with greater complexity in an online environment. The impersonal and anonymous nature of transactions and lack of tangible brand cues make it challenging for consumers to judge the trustworthiness of online firms and require assurances of protected and safe environment. Furthermore, there are risks and uncertaintiesassociated with both human beings as well as electronic systems that pose challenges and result into reduction of consumers' intention to purchase online. For consumers who feel apprehensive in buying things in a virtual environment, trust serves as a mechanism that can be used to clear the obstructions of internet shopping and maintain online commitments (Shek et al., 2003).To respond, firms operating in the modern day electronic commerce have started focusing their attention on cultivating onlinebrand trust.

Defined by Corritore et al. (2003, p. 740) as "an attitude of confident expectation in an online situation of risk that one's vulnerabilities will not be exploited", researchers believe that favourable past experiences of individuals result in the development of e-brand. This further gets strengthened with the repetition of a pleasing experience (Yoon,

2002). In the related literature too, there is a consensus to treat trust as an essential ingredient for enhancing customer relationships in the digital world. Studies undertaken in this direction more specifically suggest thatinitial trust is the most important factor when web merchant make transactions through electronic commerce channel at the very beginning stage of participation(e.g. Kim and Prabhakar, 2000).

On the basis of an extensive review of literature, the paper provides an antecedent-consequence framework (see Figure 1) to discuss the three antecedents (namely brand awareness, e-tail brand experiences and perceived quality) and three consequences (namely, brand equity, brand loyalty and online purchase intention) of online brand trust. A discussion of these constructs is provided in the ensuing section.

Figure 1: Discussion framework concerning Antecedents and Outcomes of Online Brand Trust
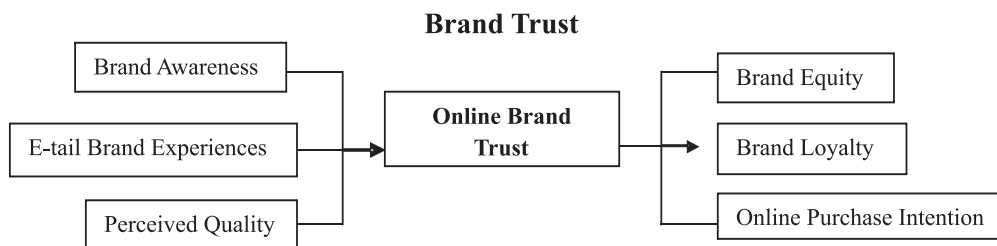
(Source: Literature Review)

Antecedents of Online Brand Trust

Brand Awareness

One of the major factors that have gained the attention of number of researchers relates to brand awareness. Brand awareness is described as a consumer's familiarity with a brand as a member of the product category and the extent to which he/she is able to recall the same while making a purchase choice (Aaker, 1991). According to Keller (1993), irrespective of the market share being large or small, brand awareness is an important metric for new brands.Studies delving deeper into the construct report that it not only provides customers with selection criteria to choose among different brand names, but also provide them with the confidence of selecting a known brand (e.g. Celedon et al., 2013).

In the context of online purchase environment, Keller (1993) has expressed brand awareness as "a degree to which consumers are familiar with distinguished qualities or image of a particular brand of goods or services through online social networks". Brand awareness has been categorized by Kleinrichert et al. (2012)into two dimensions: intensity and extent. While 'intensity' indicates how fluently consumers recall a specific brand through social networking sites, the dimension of 'extent' connotes the possibility of buying and consuming a particular brand's products or services through these social networking sites. In the context of e-retailing services, transactions involve uncertainties and risks, thus placing trust as an important factor in online transactions. Asserting the similar view, Das (2016) specifically stated that higher familiarity with brand may lessen risk perceptions, thereby improving customer's confidence that resultsin trust formation towards the brand.

E-tail Brand Experiences

Amongst the various factors that influence the online brand trust, e-tail brand experience has been recognized as an essential factor that helps an organization to sustain in a competitive digital environment.Researchers have defined it in various ways. For instance, while Ha and Perks (2005) has viewed e-tail brand experience in terms of a consumer's positive navigations and perceptions with a specific website; Brakusetal.(2009, p. 53) adopts a more holistic approach in defining it as "customers'sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments".Another recent and simplistic view is presented by Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013, p. 22) who have defined the e-brand experience as "the individual's internal subjective response to the contact with an online brand".

In addition to establishing the relevance of providing better brand experience to online shoppers, previous studies have also examined the internet purchasing behavior of buyers in relation to online brand trust in diverse contexts. Extending the understanding provided by the social psychology theory that trust develops not only from prior interaction but also from the past experiences, the study by Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán (2001) posited that relevant experiences give confidence to online customers that the brand will deliver its promise. Similarly, Lee and Jeong (2014) found

that brand trust can also be attained through experiences and information search that take place during customers' contact with the brand. Accordingly, this study proposed e-tail brand experience as an important driver of online brand trust.

Perceived Quality

Perceived quality is another significant construct that has been found to influence brand trust in the digital world. Largely understood as 'consumers' judgment inclined with the supremacy or excellence of a brand' (Konecnik, 2006), the concept in the context of retailing has been defined as the "perception of the quality of the retailer as well as the (perception of) quality of products (goods or services) offered by retailers" (Pappu and Quester, 2006, p. 320). Services marketing literature has well established the role and influence of perceived quality in consumer decision-making process. Further, studies have reported that brand image is formed by perceived quality which helps in accelerating the perceived value of the existing brand in consumers' mind and thus have advocated its inclusion as an important factor in the brand equity model (e.g. Netemeyer et al., 2004; Gartner andRuzzier, 2011).

In an online retail context too, improved quality is considered to be a means to profitability and retailer's sustainability. Perceived quality is also found to positively influence consumer brand trust, thus helping the retail firms in nurturing a trusting-worthy relationship with their customers. Further, an optimized online platform not only helps in delivering relevant and quality information to consumers but also provide them with a better experience, which in turn establishes a bond between the consumers and the brand on the website (Das, 2016). More specifically, the findings of the past studies (e.g. Dodds et al., 1991; Choudhury, 2013) reveal that higher level of qualitative information on retailer's website not only enhances consumer's knowledge and awareness but also their perception of the brand, which subsequently affects their level of trust.

The Consequent Outcomes
E-Brand Loyalty

The earlier understanding of the concept of brand loyalty has been provided by Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) who introduced it as "a form of repeat purchasing behavior that reflects a conscious decision to continue buying the same brand".The subsequent definitions provided by studies too have viewed it in terms of a long lasting relationship (Reichheld, 1996) or deep commitment to buy/ patronize a product/service in future (Oliver, 1999).The study by Jacoby and Kyner (1973) positedbrand loyalty as an extent to which people are dedicated to a particular brand. It was stated that either the inner thoughts of people may have a bias towards a particular brand or they exhibit it through their external behavior.

However, as attracting new consumers can be both time-consuming as well as expensive, due focus on developing brand loyalty not only help the firms in gaining competitive advantage but also paves way to cut marketing budgets.Due to its relevance for firms operating in an online environment, the concept has been extended in the electronic platform in the form e-loyalty. As such, e-loyalty has been defined by Cyr (2008)as 'a commitment of a customer to visit a brand's website repeatedly, without switching to other websites'.

Further, studies examining the important linkage between trust and loyalty with respect to an online environment have found e-trust as one of the key drivers of e-loyalty that develops positive attitudes which subsequently improves brand loyalty (e.g. Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). More specifically, the findings of the research by Liu et al. (2005) revealed that while making online transactions, e-trust generates feeling of security which in turn improves the willingness of customers to shop on the same site continuously, subsequently resulting into online brand loyalty.

Online Purchase Intention

Purchase intention can be understood as a consumer's readiness to purchase products or services. In an online context, Kim et al. (2009) defines it as a "consumer's volitional commitment to purchase a product/service from an online vendor". Online purchase intention is one of the major consequences of online trust which is measured through the

strength of a consumer's intention to perform a purchasing behavior in respect to a particular brand with the help of internet. For instance, studies by Yoon (2002) and Yoh et al. (2003) have reported purchase intentions to be strongly affected by an individual's willingness to trust the web sites from which he/ she makes purchases. It has further been suggested that trust in an online retailing not only improves adoption of internet for information search but also enhances word-of-mouth communication and encourages shoppers to make purchases through digital platforms(e.g. Sichtmann, 2007). A few studies have also examined the effect of trust on online purchase intention through satisfaction (Fiore et al., 2005; Wen et al., 2009).

Brand Equity

Various researchers and scholars have defined the concept of brand equity in different ways. The early definition by Aaker (1991) considers brand equity as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers". In contrast, Yoo et al. (2000) defined brand equity in terms of consumer choice-making decision related to product features between a branded product and an un-branded product when both the products are at the same position. A recent conceptualization by Pike (2010) summarizes the notion of brand equity in terms of various resources that help in evaluating a brand's past performance as well as aid in predicting the same for future.

Brand equity is formed when customers tend to perceive the tangible and intangible characteristics of a brand through several available sources, thereby resulting in strengthening the value of the brand (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995). A large body of marketing literature provides the consensus view that brand provides a strong platform to firms to outperform others, introduce new products or services, and face fierce market competition. In an online platform too, studies (e.g. Brown and Muchira, 2004;Pennanen et al., 2007) have considered brand trust as an important component that helps in creating more brand equity and patronage by providing peace of mind to consumers while transacting electronically.

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

The current review paper provides a thoughtful perspective for better understanding of brand trust as an important element in digital environment. Based on the extant review of literature, the paper synthesizes the underlined factors concerning online brand trust in the form of an antecedent-consequent framework. The understanding offered through the discussion of the three antecedents (namely, brand awareness, e-tail brand experiences and perceived quality) and three consequences (namely, brand equity, brand loyalty and online purchase intention) so identified not only re-establish the role of trust as an important ingredient in an online purchase environment but also emphasize on the need for the online marketers to take active initiative in nurturing trustful relationships with their customers. Due to the complexity of online transactions, variation in consumers' response to technology adoption, and the sensitive nature of financial and personal information exchanged between the parties, 'assurance' and subsequent 'trust building' actually becomes a pre-requisite to initiate favourable customer response and purchase behavior. To effectively address the drivers of brand trust identified in the present work, firms should focus on strengthening their ties with third parties (i.e. back end operations, IT support) and indirect customers (such as, banks) in addition to improving their contact and service performance (in terms of quality) with the direct customers. By putting in consistent and active effort in this direction, firms may eventually benefit in terms of eliciting the positive consequences (outcomes) in form of high equity, loyalty and positive purchase intentions in respect of their brands.

The limitations of the present work open up opportunities for future researchers. The theoretical framework provided through the review can be empirically tested. It would be further interesting to explore additional factors and linkages that can be added to make the model more exhaustive for its use in future. An attempt can be made to adopt a dyadic approach and investigate the construct of online brand trust from both firms' as well as customers' perspective. Finally, a comparison of offline and online brand trust may provide additional insights, especially for marketers who have their presence in both the platforms.

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