An Empirical Analysis of the Antecedents and Consequences of Brand Rituals

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In an increasingly complex world where people find it more and more difficult to generate feelings of security and contentment, brands can help to reduce uncertainty, provide orientation, and establish a sense of reliability as well as stability (Erdem et al. 2006). Against this background, the relatively new phenomenon of brand rituals can be observed in consumer research. In brand rituals, brands are consciously and deliberately associated with actions or activities that create an emotionally pleasant atmosphere. Though the concept of brand ritual is quite new, such associations have clear relevance as a newly developing type of consumer behavior, and are of significant concern in brand management as well (Arnould 2001; Rook 1985).

Primarily because brand rituals are a relatively recent development, the concept has not yet been fully explored in marketing research, or in consumer research. Extensive examination of related literature has revealed no studies investigating the phenomenon of brand rituals, but the potential that brand ritual holds as a marketing technique underscores the importance of pursuing significant consumer research. This study moves the research into an exciting new area, and explores antecedents and consequences of consumer brand rituals. As a foundation for analyzing the application of ritual behavior to consumer behavior, the paper begins with a review of the literature (particularly the social sciences literature) that addresses the general concept of ritual, and that offers suggestions for defining aspects of the term 'rituals'. Social science literature presents several definitions and types of rituals, including everyday rituals (e.g., bedtime rituals), individual rituals (e.g., Arnould 2001; Holak 2008; Ustuner 2000), and rituals marking specific occasions during the year, such as Christmas (McKechnie and Tynan 2006; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). These occasions are often pervasive and significant ritual experiences, which can and do leave a highly emotional imprint on human lives and, consequently, on consumer behavior as well (Ustuner 2000).

Therefore, for the purpose of this research on brand rituals, the concept of rituals can be characterized as regularly occurring acts, proceeding in a largely identical and therefore standardized fashion. As well, rituals use symbolically charged means of expression that are accentuated within the context of the ritual, and that are intended to impart meaning. Rituals are stylized, repetitive, and stereotypical; they occur at specific times at specific locations, and present themselves as an element of a kind of "liturgical order." According to Snoek (2008, p.13), most ritual behavior is "more formally stylized, structured, and standardized than most common behavior."

In brand rituals, brands and/or branded products become the centerpiece of rituals. This may give deeper meaning to the brands or branded products, and could have the potential to fill an emotional niche for consumers (McCracken 1986; Muñiz and Schau 2005). Thereby, a functional definition for the term 'brand rituals' asserts that brand rituals are rituals in which brands are consciously and deliberately associated with actions or activities that create an emotionally pleasant atmosphere. Brand rituals may be personal, but are also often rooted in a group or a society (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001), providing the individual with a feeling of security and orientation, a sense of being part of a greater whole.

Based on this definition, and on the need for specifically directed research, we have introduced research on brand ritual targeted specifically toward brand ritual strength. For this study of what we hope will be a continued area of research, we developed a conceptual framework to identify antecedents and outcomes of brand ritual strength (i.e., the extent to which consumers ritualize a certain brand). Based on analysis of consumer research, we derive the following hypotheses from several theoretical approaches, with respect to the antecedents of brand ritual strength:

H1: The more the consumer is involved with a brand, the higher the brand ritual strength.
H2: Consumers' novelty-seeking has a negative impact on brand ritual strength.
H3: Brand trust positively affects brand ritual strength.
H4: The greater the intrinsic reward of the brand ritual for a consumer, the higher the brand ritual strength.
H5: The greater the consumer's extrinsic reward derived from brand rituals, the higher the brand ritual strength.

From this, we are able to state the hypothesis that brand ritual strength may be assumed to affect consumer loyalty toward the ritualized brand:

H6: Brand ritual strength positively affects consumers' loyalty toward the brand.

In order to identify a brand which has a relatively high ritual tendency, we ran several focus groups. As a result, we were able to identify the German television media brand *Tatort* as a brand with relatively high ritual proneness suitable for our study purposes. In Germany, *Tatort* is a very popular crime scene show that has been airing since 1970. In an exploratory pre-study, we found that some consumers perform very specific rituals around *Tatort*. We therefore chose the media brand *Tatort* as our research object. From an online panel and from a web page for people interested in *Tatort*, we used an online survey that allowed us to query the level of experience with this media brand, in order to identify and eliminate responses from persons with no real knowledge of the series. Of the remaining group, we then randomly selected 602 participants for the questionnaire. The demographic data indicate that of the participants who completed the online questionnaire for the survey, 51.3% were female and 48.7% were male, with ages ranging from 18 to 68 years (M=42, SD=13).

Parameters for the factors affecting brand ritual strength and the influences on consumer behavior were developed and adapted from prior research (e.g., Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Fagan, Neill, and Wooldridge 2009; Fournier 1998; Laurent and Kapferer 1985; Mehrabian and Russell 1974; Oliver 1997, 1999; Zaichkowsky 1985). However, all items needed to be slightly modified to address the specific nature of brand ritual research, and items for measuring brand ritual strength were created in accordance with the established definition of brand rituals.

The data of the main study were examined and controlled with the help of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test, Cronbach's alpha and average variance extracted. Principal axis-factoring was used to analyze the formative factors which are hypothesized to be present in the conceptualized model. Sampling adequacy was acceptable based on the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin criterion. It can be noted that the alpha values of all scales were above the threshold generally

suggested (Nunnally 1978). To control for a potential common method bias, we used an exploratory factor analysis approach to Harman's one-factor test (Korsgaard and Roberson, 1995). As expected, we found ten factors explaining 69.95% of overall variance, which suggests that one general factor did not account for the majority of the covariance among the measures in this study (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Combining these approaches, we conclude that reliability and validity of the constructs in our study are acceptable.

In order to test the hypotheses, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to analyze the impact of the factors (involvement, novelty-seeking, brand trust, intrinsic and extrinsic reward) on brand ritual strength as the dependent variable. In the next step, we tested the impact of brand ritual strength as the independent variable on the dependent variable loyalty.

Overall, we conclude that involvement (H1), brand trust (H3), intrinsic reward (H4), and extrinsic reward (H5) have a significant positive influence on brand ritual strength (R^2=.860). Data analysis shows the following significant, positive influence: involvement (β=.252, p<.001), brand trust (β=.131, p<.001), intrinsic reward (β=.402, p<.001), and extrinsic reward (β=.268, p<.001). In contrast, novelty-seeking (H2) has no significant negative influence on brand ritual strength (β=-.005, p<.772). Moreover, we find that brand ritual strength has a significant, positive influence on the four stages of Oliver's (1997, 1999) conception of loyalty (H6): (a) cognitive loyalty (R^2=0.355, β=.596, p<.001), (b) affective loyalty (R^2=0.460, β=.678, p<.001), (c) conative loyalty (R^2=0.612, β=.783, p<.001), and (d) action loyalty (R^2=0.585, β=.765, p<.001).

The powerful findings of the brand ritual strength model establish the relevancy of the notion of brand rituals in the theoretical as well as in the managerial field. We can conclude that brand rituals have a strong influence on consumer behavior (in fact, they qualify as a new type of behavior in this context) and seem to be an important source of brand equity, particularly consumer brand equity, in today's marketplace (Aaker 1991). Therefore, the phenomenon deserves closer attention from both the marketing and the consumer research community. Moreover, brand managers should notice the possibility of strengthening consumer loyalty by initializing, maintaining, and enhancing consumers' brand ritual strength. Employing brand rituals for the intensification of consumer loyalty could become an efficient means of marketing. For academics, however, as our study on the potential antecedents of brand ritual strength shows, the construct itself is suitable for further studies in the field of consumer research, and may also highlight a very interesting issue in branding theory.

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