LITERATURE REVIEW

The economic crisis in 2012 has required new thinking to understand branding (Castells et al., 2012). Whilst the brand landscape has been in open war, so too has this impacted on the long held love affair that consumers have held with brands (Nobre, 2011). The trust that consumers had appears fragile and the once high held models of engagement appear to be crumbling (Fortin and Uncles, 2011) leaving marketers to ask themselves if a new perspective on brand affinity should be engaged (von Hippel, 2005). Wang et al. (2012) and Haig (2011) stated that storytelling and the requirement of building a brand narrative (Smith, 2011) could extend and protract brand lifecycles. Inversely, Ewing et al (2009) suggested that brand demise is inevitable and not necessarily caused by managerial incompetence and is a natural part of a brand's developmental process and changing consumer needs. Strong consensus however, in contrast, seems to exist that managing brands for the long run is both possible and desirable (Doyle, 2012; Keller, 1999). This management model was born out of work from Tellis & Crawford (1981) where they identified that the product life cycle model can provide a metaphor of the cycle of “birth–growth–maturity– death”. More recently the brand flux model of brand management acknowledges the ebb and flow of a brand over time (Williams & Omar, 2014). There’s a need for the brand to be constantly connected (Hooker et al., 2012). A brand is more of an imagination concept (Bastos & Levy, 2012) in the mind of consumers, than them being purely functional, and it appears mismanagement of the brands world contributes to its disintegration, demise and disconnection. This is where real research value and practitioner workable insights can be laid.

It is apparent that we are in a period where brands are facing up to a serious collapse in consumer confidence and this is having an increasingly detrimental effect on the trust that people choose to place in brands and this is leading to an erosion in the depth of emotional connectivity (Basini, 2011). Consumers now appear more skeptical and disconnected (Talton et al., 2011). As Brodie et al (2011) concluded, there is scope for a new perspective on engagement to be researched in order to develop a more fluid model that covers all the behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions of the brand and the potential affinity drivers with consumers. This consumer breakdown had been pre-warned by Jensen (1996). Jensen laid out a case for understanding emotional connectivity and how consumers and brands can be engaged through story and a shared narrative. Hwang (2012) expanded on Jensen’s call by suggesting that, particularly with younger consumers, there are three dimensions to emotional connectivity and loyalty; emotional attachment, self-concept connection and brand love, and all should be mobilised. Finally, Davies & Knight (2007) suggested that consumers are looking for brands that share their passion, and it became increasingly apparent that if emotional connectivity is the platform then a shared narrative might be the conduit to reverse the current trust collapse.

Today’s brand management needs a whole set of different skills than Bernay’s ideals of “manipulation and control” (Danser, 2005). The researchers call for a new emergent paradigm, one that embraces the sensory consumer experience that brands are shifting towards one that appreciates how dialogue now exists (Munro & Richards, 2012). Indeed, the many models on which much of marketing are based were in the main, developed during the nineteenth century (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), and there needs to be greater insight on “interactivity and connectivity and ongoing relationships”. The researchers have suggested that future models should be consumer centric and not the more traditional goods (organisationally) centric and they should be created around and absolutely with consumers (Von Hippel, 2005). The literature illustrates,
that now more than ever, there is real need in creating and developing potentially new and sustaining deep emotional bonds with consumers.

In setting the context for this research it is apparent from the literature that both the consumer brand disconnect and fragility of affinity are grounded in a number of re-occurring themes. These themes provide for both a conduit to ascertaining the gap in the research and for where supporting insights might be uncovered. The literature highlighted the complex web-enhanced worldview of brands that consumers have and how, individually and in communities, they are building brand associations that are (potentially) problematically not in line with brand owner intentions. The literature highlights the need for narrative, the sphere of its influence in the persona of brand, but there has been scant research into what are the foundations for this narrative based relationship – what’s important to consumers and ultimately what pulls and bonds them together with the brand?

A real gap exists in understanding what conditions have to be in place to enable organisations to build consumer engagement and consumer brand affinity through a shared narrative. Understanding is needed in identifying what is important for consumers, why they want to engage and what can drive the dialogue. This is where real academic and practitioner value exists.

METHODOLOGY

The premise of the research undertaken was to analyze what, how and why narrative impacts on the level of emotional engagement consumers have with brands, and aim towards developing a framework that guides practitioners to the optimum application of narrative within brand building.

The research question: How can organisations build consumer engagement and consumer brand affinity through a shared narrative? Sub-questions related to this primary question:

- What are the factors influencing the consumer / brand disconnect
- What are the building blocks of brand authenticity
- Understand what are the emerging drivers of a positive and beneficial shared narrative
- What framework may be applied to assist organisations in building brand affinity

Taking a semi-structured approach to questioning as described by Wengraf (2001), both the focus group and individual depth interviews featured question themes that were borne out of both the literature review and learnings from the initial pilot study. A number of semi-structured, open-ended interview questions were prepared and crafted in order to gain the desired rich understanding. The principle was to guide the individuals through some previously identified themes developed from the literature which had shown value in the brand / consumers affinity debate. The semi-structured open-ended question format really allowed for flexibility for the interviewee to verbally meander or indeed accentuate a point or build further themes (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Kvale, 2007). The researcher conducted every interview and hence because of the intimacy with the methods the researcher could easily amend the flow of the question, dig deeper, probe further or expand more on a question live in session. This was particularly pertinent after the pilot study learnings.
FINDINGS

Firstly, the research uncovered a number of factors that, having been identified in all the cases and illuminated through the “Consumer Brand Affinity Fan” mechanism (fig. 1), all contributed to the consumer brand disconnect revealed in the literature review.

Fig. 1

This collated fan further confirms the depth and range of cross case findings and delivers insights into: 1) Which brand owner characteristics drive perceived authenticity amongst consumers, 2) Which organisational traits allow affinity to flourish amongst consumers, and 3) Motivational factors that drive and stimulate narrative. The research also presented a case for how narrative can flourish and thrive. This centres on the ideals of openness, establishing momentum behind a shared narrative and providing the content for broader consumer-to-consumer dialogue: "when brands have deep emotional connections, the reaction is extraordinary". By way of summarizing this rich breadth of insights uncovered within the research, Fig. 2 visualizes the “Lore of the Brand”.

In this diagram both the internal organisation (blue) and external consumer (yellow) are seen delivering a shared narrative, a dialogue that shapes their personal story over an open communications conduit and on their own terms. This provides consumers with access to the heart of the organisation, the very essence, which it is proposed must have a social dimension at its core. This reflects an assumed willingness of the organisation to listen, share and create with consumers and an acceptance that the fundamental layer has to be truth delivered through
authenticity. For the brand to be owned by both consumers and the organisation there has to be belief and establishing authenticity is therefore paramount.

Fig. 2 The Lore of the Brand

The influencing factors are centred around a breakdown in consumer trust (lack of authenticity cues), the vision and values of the organisation (a lack of corporate openness), the increased power in the hands of consumers (digitally enhanced), an unwillingness shown by the organisation to engage (a lack of dialogue) and ultimately the lack of passion and abilities of those in charge of the brand (not living it). The research clarified the detrimental effect these are having on an ever-fragile consumer affinity and acted as insight signposts for practitioners.

For too long, as the smoke and mirrors have dissipated, consumers have been falling out of love with brands and the “Lore of the Brand” fundamentally stresses that truth and authenticity are paramount. The Lore of the Brand’s premise is that it is evolutionary, it is about constantly working at building and feeding the narrative with consumers, and accepting that as they change then ultimately so will the brand.

Second, it became apparent that the real seeds of this disconnect were grounded in the notion of authenticity and what actually constitutes it. The research again (across the cases) delivered broad insights into how practitioners could start the rebuilding process from creating real
passion internally, to opening the doors of the organisation and being transparent. The driving force centred around the idea of building a shared dialogue with consumers - building a mutual story - and the research delivered insight on a range of drivers that can facilitate this: “understanding your consumers’ world and what role you have a right to play in that world and that’s all about finding and developing the narrative”. This idea of a shared and rich dialogue permeated all cases and sits at the heart of all the key learnings: “people want an open dialogue, to participate in brand ideas, to contribute, co create, magnify or bin them – but if you’re not up for that fully then don’t go there”. In that, the research uncovered a number of fundamental drivers to establish a credo of corporate/consumer engagement.

Third, the research identified drivers, a set of 9 brand owner characteristics, as diverse as delivering a sense of the history and the ideals of the organisation, to building bridges with community and establishing a thriving culture of digital awareness, ability and application amongst all staff. It is a rich tapestry of insights and also accentuates that it is as important to leave gaps, make mistakes and act naturally. The data amplifies the need to let consumers inside the organisation, open all the doors of the company and work at starting and maintaining the conversation. Each of the nine characteristics has the propensity within the case organisations to strengthen authenticity cues in consumers’ minds: (1) Organisational obsession with the product, (2) Organisation immersed in the scene, (3) A staff clan/cult, (4) A passion for the brand, (5) Following an ethos, (6) Being in tune with the Zeitgeist, (7) Putting progress before profit, (8) Love of the community, (9) Sticking to your roots.

Fourth, the process of amalgamating the case fans uncovered five organisational traits (Fig. 4, below), each of which had distinct influence in creating energy for consumer affinity to proliferate: 1. The active organisation, 2. The evolving organisation, 3. The obsessive organisation, 4. The committed organisation, 5. The caring organisation.

Finally, a total of thirteen motivational factors were shown to drive consumer/brand and consumer/consumer dialogue and ultimately assist in deepening affinity with the organisation and its output (Fig 5).
CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

The use of the Consumer Brand Affinity Fan mechanism allowed for a clear understanding of the cross case phenomena that exhibit significant influence in building brand (or organisational/consumer) affinity. These cover brand owner characteristics, organisational traits and motivational factors which encourage dialogue, a narrative and deep affinity to flourish amongst consumers. This collated fan delivers insights into: 1) Which brand owner characteristics drive perceived authenticity amongst consumers, 2) Which organisational traits allow affinity to flourish amongst consumers, and 3) Motivational factors that drive and stimulate narrative. It further confirms the depth and range of cross case finding. These characteristics, traits and factors present practitioners with the vital perceptivity to assist them in shaping their future branding activities. It illuminates behaviours and key narrative hot spots that have shown real impact in building consumer/brand affinity within the researched cases. It is suggested practitioners use this summation as a further aide-mémoire in their branding armoury, and to assist them in developing real brand allure.

FUTURE AREAS OF STUDY

This research has shone a light onto a stream of opportunities emitting from the new brandscape outlined in the study, the themes that it has uncovered and framework it has provided. Undoubtedly, an opinion expressed within the in-depth interviews, that more guidance and insight into deeper understanding consumer/brand affinity would be readily embraced by organisations. It was interesting to ascertain (during the in-depth interviews) that Nike has recently commissioned practitioner research into an associated area.

The new knowledge fills a gap in current branding literature but the insight framework could now be tested in other geographical territories, against brands in different sectors or amongst organisational branding professionals at different levels. The illuminated drivers of authenticity, narrative and dialogue could also be academically probed amongst a broader consumer base, not just core target consumer, to investigate the potential scope and scale of brand influence and provide further guidance to practitioners.
REFERENCES


