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**Transfer of brand knowledge in business-to-business markets by brand
when personified as a human:
A qualitative study**

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Personification of brand in business-to-business markets and transfer of brand knowledge: A qualitative study

Abstract

Aim - This paper presents the approach of a one-to-one relationship for branding in business-to-business markets. With qualitative evidence, the paper clarifies the links between branding, relationship marketing and purchase intention of resellers and discusses the contribution of brand personified as brand representatives to the brand knowledge of resellers. The aim of this paper is to understand how this transfer of knowledge by brand personified as representatives of the brand is reflected in the selection process of brand for resale by resellers.

Design/methodology/approach - The theory is used to develop a testable model. Information from the field was gathered through 12 in-depth interviews of brand managers of international IT brands. These interviews helped to give a deeper insight into the topic and contributed to the categorization of different themes to be developed into constructs. Components that emerged from the interviews were from different disciplines and were useful in making linkages between these disciplines.

Findings – Interviewees associated the role of brand personified (as brand representative) as a conduit between brand and resellers. Given the findings, brand when personified as a human can be used to manage reseller relationships in a business-to-business network. The brand personified with its metaphorical properties enables the resellers not only to clearly understand brand-related information but also to make positive evaluations about the brand. Empirical research would be helpful to establish the indicators of brand personification and to enhance the understanding of the concept.

Practical Implications – The study will be useful for senior managers of brands operating in competitive and complex business-to-business networks. It will enable them to use the categories and components to ensure that their brand is the preferred brand for resellers operating in the network.

Originality/value – The approach will be helpful in linking different functions of the organization to measure the contribution made by employees representing the brand to resellers in competitive markets by imparting knowledge about the brand to resellers.

Key words – Brand knowledge, business-to-business, brand representatives, brand relationships, brand value.

Paper type: A qualitative study.

Introduction

Branding theory for business-to-consumer markets suggests that consumers associate with the brand based on brand attributes, whereas the requirement of association for customers with the brand in business-to-business markets is dependent on many more factors than brand attributes. In business-to-business markets, the customers are organizations and their purchase values in monetary terms are different from consumers. Hence, managing the purchase intention of resellers as customers of business-to-business markets becomes important for companies (Rauyren and Miller, 2007).

A holistic picture that gives a list of factors which influence resellers when they make purchases in highly competitive business-to-business markets can explain the purchase intention of resellers. Brand knowledge is one of those factors (Simonson et al., 1988; Sen, 1999; Keller, 2003). The different dimensions of brand knowledge have a direct relationship with the preference of customers and the generation of brand value

(Keller, 2003). The elements of brand knowledge that enable customers to associate with the brand are different in business-to-business markets compared to business-to-consumer markets. The business-to-business literature proposes that it is important to understand the sources of brand knowledge for manufacturer brands which operate through reseller networks as this influences the purchase behaviour of resellers (Glynn et al., 2007; Brodie et al., 2006; Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007). Based on existing knowledge, this paper is an attempt to develop a brand knowledge transfer model for technology products manufactured by global brands in order to encourage the selection of brand by resellers.

This paper examines the literature that contributes to the understanding of brand and reseller relationships. A significant amount of literature on branding collaborates with literature on relationships by measuring satisfaction (Woodruff et al., 1983; Pacheco, 1989; Fornell, 1992; Haim and Oliver, 1993; Anderson et al., 1994; Mithas et al., 2005; Glynn et al., 2007), trust (Larzelere and Houston, 1980; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Ambler, 1997; Lau and Lee, 1999; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Ball et al., 2004; Delgado-Ballester, 2004; Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman, 2005; Gounaris, 2005), commitment (Lawlor and Yoon, 1993; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004; Gounaris, 2005; Matilla, 2006) and purchase intention of resellers (Webster, 2000; Gupta and Zeithaml, 2006; Schlosser et al., 2006). The issue of brand knowledge when traced in the literature shows that it has not been given much significance in the business-to-business literature from the resellers' context.

Hellier et al. (2003) studied the role of satisfaction and brand preference in developing a model for the purchase intention of consumers of the brand, whereas Glynn et al. (2007) proposed a model that identified satisfaction as an influential factor for resellers of the brand. Bass and Talarzyk (1972) proposed a model for brand preference based on their research studying the relationships between brand knowledge and brand

preference. Rust et al. (2004) endorsed the change in behaviour of brand associations due to the influence of brand knowledge by considering it as a memory node. Various other authors such as Grace and O’Cass (2005) and Da Silva and Alwi (2008) also studied the behaviour of brand associations in the business-to-business context and acknowledged the contributions made by personification in influencing their knowledge about the brand. Keller (2003) explained how companies can leverage brand associations by linking their brands to other entities and use these linkages to transfer brand knowledge. The transfer of brand knowledge to resellers and its use in influencing the behaviour of resellers towards the brand has not been studied in the literature and this paper is an attempt to address this gap.

To support the relationship conceptualized between the variables identified, we used Keller’s model which captures the process of transferring brand knowledge and used the theory of Keller (2003) on transferring brand knowledge in the perspective of a brand-reseller association. Based on the proposal made by Da Silva and Alwi (2007) this paper conceptualizes the linkage between the brand in the personified form, i.e. as a human representative of the brand to the resellers of the brand. This paper views this linkage from the perspective of Keller (2003) and tries to evaluate the benefit of such a linkage on resellers’ knowledge about the brand.

In order to develop a linkage between a brand and its resellers, this paper conceptualizes brand personified by a human representative of the brand as its internal entity and the resellers of the brand as external entities of the brand. This research connects these two entities by elucidating the metaphoric dimension of the construct of brand personification based on the literature (Davies and Chun, 2003; Wesley et al., 2006), for the purpose of exposing them to empirical testing by observing the performance of the result as an association, and understanding its impact on the purchase intention of

resellers. Keller's model (Figure 1) is used to explain and operationalize the outcome of this linkage as a direct one-to-one interaction between resellers and brand representatives.

The approach adopted by the paper for operationalizing enables the authors to test the theoretical and conceptual arguments in an ecologically valid environment (Charness, 1992). In order to examine the importance and validity of the construct dimensions, senior marketing professionals working with international brands were interviewed using in-depth semi-structured interviews. The data thus obtained enabled the authors to provide an operational definition of brand personification. This paper is divided into four parts. The first part deals with the introduction and a review of the existing literature to identify the research issues to be addressed (Churchill, 1979; Melewar, 2001). The second section explains the research methodology adopted for this research. The third section presents the qualitative findings and the fourth section discusses the findings and their managerial implications by linking theory with practice.

“Take in Figure 1”

Literature Review

The role of brand knowledge

The notion of a customer's understanding of brands is dealt both directly and indirectly in the existing literature. The key dimensions of brand information were proposed by Keller (2003) as brand knowledge entailing awareness, attributes, benefits, images, thoughts, feelings, attitudes and experiences. These dimensions deal with the issue of brand knowledge management of customers by linking brands to other entities and this paper proposes to apply this model in business-to-business markets. The reason behind this application is to evoke customers in business-to-business markets by using their knowledge about the brand in order to demonstrate this knowledge as preferences during their purchase activity. Brand preference was studied by Guest (1942) who suggested that

the preference of customers is linked to their level of awareness about the brand, is influenced by their knowledge about the brand and is reflected in the purchases made by them. Grace and O’Cass (2005) explained that the purchase decisions of resellers as customers are influenced by positive beliefs and notions held by them about the brand. Mitchell and Olson (1981) asserted that the beliefs of customers are the sole determinants of customer attitude towards the brand.

Fishbein (1963) supported Campbell’s (1950) assessment of attitude with an argument that attitude is a function of belief. Fishbein (1963) differentiated between belief and attitude by proposing belief from a conceptual dimension and attitude from an evaluative dimension. In an explanation of these dimensions, the rationale that supports the theory of Fishbein (1963) is that positive or negative beliefs of individuals in terms of characteristics, values, etc. are based on their evaluative response to objects and termed this evaluative response as attitude. As for Fishbein’s (1963) explanation, the descriptive belief of an object is the strongest belief held by an individual that defines and describes the object to the individual and has the greatest influence on attitude. The implications of the studies conducted by other authors such as Narayandas and Rangan (2004) also propose that individuals will elicit their evaluative response to objects in their future dealings when engaged in business-to-business reseller markets and will project the attitude of resellers towards the brand as their purchase intentions.

This concept has a longterm approach in brand relationship research from the perspective of linkage between the attitude of resellers towards the brand and their behaviour while making purchase decisions. The proposal of Olson and Dover (1976) that a positive belief about products develops a favourable brand attitude provides support to the attitude dimension of brand knowledge. This paper presents the transfer of brand knowledge by brand representatives in business-to-business markets. Tsai (2005)

proposed that brand personification is one of the inventories of brand representation. Based on the integration of theories from authors such as Fishbein (1963), Olson and Dover (1976), Narayandas and Rangan (2004) and Tsai (2005), this paper conceptualizes that brand when personified as representatives of the brand will have the capability to link these representatives to resellers by transferring brand knowledge. Such a transfer of brand knowledge affects resellers' selection of brand which becomes visible in the purchase behaviour of resellers.

Purchase behaviour of resellers

The purchase behaviour of resellers as customers in business-to-business markets is different from customers in business-to-consumer markets because the rationale of purchases made by resellers is not self usage but to create value for their own set of customers. Although the number of resellers is smaller when compared to consumers, the purchase value of resellers is much bigger than consumers. Hence, it becomes important for companies to ensure that resellers display a favourable purchase intention towards the brand.

The purchases made by resellers are based not only on economic, financial and technical aspects but also on product availability and delivery service support offered by the brand. The networks in which these resellers operate are very compact and word of mouth can have an impact which can be either helpful or harmful to the company. The brands have to ensure a positive purchase and post-purchase brand experience for the resellers. Tsai (2005) identified the role of experience in purchase intention. The explanation of purchase intention proposed by Tsai (2005) is based on the motivational state that generates experience and influences purchase behaviour in customers.

The motivational state of mind is a result of perceived value of the brand by a customer's mind. Customers retain such information in the form of assumptions made on the basis of the combined impact of brand marketing and brand communications. These assumptions can be viewed from the perspective of a reseller's perception of brand for favourable purchase behaviour. Rauyren and Miller (2007) in their study on the purchase intention of customers in business-to-business markets posited it as a behavioural and an attitudinal aspect. Their empirically tested model proposes customer satisfaction and service quality as antecedents to the purchase intention of customers. The model by Rauyren and Miller (2007) also found that a customer can show high behavioural loyalty but low attitudinal loyalty as these customers are more responsive to competitive offers by other brands operating in the market.

The resellers operating in markets are the gatekeepers who are influential in controlling the access of brands to the consumers by sharing their understanding of the brand, its products and services. The resellers become the ambassadors of the brand for minds and create a stronger foundation for a favourable purchase decision by the consumer. The rational presentation of the brand to consumers by the reseller is very important as it is influenced by the reseller's brand confidence at the cognitive stage when resellers communicate to their customers about the brand. Therefore, the company in such cases should ensure that resellers are knowledgeable about its brand. The level of brand knowledge possessed by a reseller enables the reseller to communicate and transfer it further to the consumer and influence the purchase behaviour of consumers.

The role of brand representative

The market for IT brands is very competitive and brands need to be involved at a functional level with resellers to keep them motivated towards the brand. The emphasis

for promoting a brand in reseller networks is laid on relationships with resellers so that it becomes difficult for other competitors to entice the reseller into their own portfolio.

Interaction between resellers and brand personified as a representative on a one-to-one basis develops a competitive edge for the brand as brands can then not only interact but also understand the knowledge level and requirements of resellers for selling. The fulfilment of these requirements by the brand allows resellers to have a favourable purchase intention which influences the smooth flow of products to their customers.

Existing relationship marketing literature presents personified brand as a metaphor for developing an association and fulfilling the knowledge requirements of the customers for a favourable purchase intention. A direct association between brand and reseller is established when they interact directly with each other. Our study proposes the use of brand personified as representatives of the brand in competitive reseller networks for making frequent and direct contacts with resellers of international brands. This interaction nurtures satisfaction in the resellers. The brand representative becomes the source from which resellers obtain and understand brand-related information. As we have discussed in previous paragraphs, the requirements of the resellers are not only emotional but also functional. To fulfil the functional requirements of resellers, this paper conceptualizes the brand personified as a human representative of the brand. These representatives can also understand the dynamics of the market in which the brand and resellers are operating. They enable the resellers to have frequent and direct contacts with a supplier that facilitates the smooth movement of products.

Effects of brand knowledge

The customer-based brand equity model of Keller (2001) is based on the notion of educating customers about the power of the brand. Enhancing the knowledge of

customers about the brand through marketing initiatives helps companies to develop a positive brand attitude in the customer (Rust et al., 2004). The positive attitude towards the brand helps to generate a positive brand response for influencing the purchase activity of the customer (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). Customers generate default values and make inferences about specific attributes of brands based on their memory about general product categories for which information is missing (Mitchell and Olson, 1981). To be competitive in markets where it is difficult to differentiate between brands, it is important for companies to provide brand information to resellers in order to ensure that resellers understand and use the information so that this is reflected positively in the purchase behaviour of resellers (Beverland et al., 2007).

The approach of transferring brand knowledge presented in this study influences the complete understanding of resellers about all the elements of brand knowledge. Reseller knowledge of brand prevents them from making undesired inferences about the brand and behaviourally activates them towards the brand (Day, 1994). This paper proposes transfer of brand knowledge to resellers by linking resellers with the representatives of the brand. The transfer of brand knowledge when mediated by the brand representatives generates greater confidence towards the brand in resellers. This confidence of resellers in the brand is based on satisfaction that affects the strength of association between the brands and resellers (Durme et al., 2003).

The transfer of brand knowledge not only generates satisfaction but also creates a behavioural and attitudinal difference in the relationship by ensuring that resellers have a positive brand experience and are not hesitant about initiating purchase activity with the brand (Zaichkowsky, 1985). The representatives of the brand impact brand-reseller relationships by helping resellers to understand the benefits of working with the brand and also influence their judgments and feelings about the brand by building up a positive

image of the brand in their minds. This paper should be viewed as an attempt to conceptualize the role of brand representatives in transferring brand knowledge to resellers that influences the reseller attitude towards the brand and strengthens the brand-reseller relationships.

Research issues

A review of the literature on brand personification and brand-reseller relationship was conducted together with a review of the literature on reseller satisfaction, reseller confidence and reseller purchase behaviour. It emerged from the reviews that there are multiple studies available on brand-reseller relationships in the business-to-business literature and role of brand personification in the business-to-consumer literature. However, the literature on the role of brand personification has not been discussed in business-to-business markets, although in practice, the role of brand representative has been understood and operationalized to optimize the influence of marketing functions of the organization. After analysing the views of both practitioners and academics, the question that emerged has been developed into a research issue to provide a functional definition to the concern being addressed by the paper.

The framework developed after a review of the literature available on the constructs (Figure 2) is investigated. Theory development based on the extant literature includes the variable brand-reseller relationships as the focal construct that revolves around the purchase intention of resellers, brand knowledge as the antecedent and brand representatives as the influencer of the relationship between the two variables brand knowledge and brand-reseller relationship (Keller, 2003). The theory thus developed from previous research studies and empirical evidence lays out the following research propositions:

Proposition 1: Transferring brand knowledge to resellers positively impacts the purchase intention of resellers.

Given that the focus of the study is the transfer of brand knowledge by brand representatives (Simpson et al. 2001; Gupta et al. 2008), it is also proposed that:

Proposition 2: A brand representative facilitates the development of a direct association between a brand and its resellers.

Proposition 3: A brand representative when linked to resellers enhances a reseller's understanding of the brand and what it offers.

Proposition 4: Direct interaction of resellers with the brand representative develops the resellers' confidence in the brand.

“Take in Figure 2”

Research Methodology

The aim of the study has been to ascertain the beliefs of the respondents and the relationship between the variables depicted in the framework shown in Figure 2. The companies included in the study came from a broad spectrum of the IT industry, of manufacturer brands being sold in international markets and their resellers as SME customers, purchasing the products offered by these brands for further resale. The study was conducted in a business-to-business setting of the IT reseller industry in India.

According to recent research conducted by Société Générale Asset Management, India is

the fastest-moving country in the Asian continent which has high investment potential and, with GDP growing at a rate of 9 per cent, is considered to be the second fastest-growing economy in the world (Weblink 2, 2008).

The participants in the study were the marketing and sales managers of international brands in India, and Indian resellers of the products of these companies (SMEs). The IT market in India is a highly competitive market, in which products with almost similar features are sold by competing independent brands through a multi-layered reseller network. As reported by Gartner Inc., the IT investments made by Indian businesses will drive the market that will provide a significant growth opportunity for IT vendors in the coming years (Weblink 3, 2008).

Most of the resellers in this network sell many international brands and their intentions for purchase activity are based on their understanding of the brand, their confidence in the brand and their relationship with the brand. For investigation of the research questions drawn up for the study, international brands and their Indian resellers were selected. The SMEs as resellers represent the business-to-business customer segment of the international brands. The broad cross-section of companies chosen for the study was useful in analysing how firms perceive the variables being investigated. The sample selected was used to reflect diverse views on the variables from the perspectives of different positions, functional areas and performance objectives by influencing selection of brand by resellers.

The qualitative information was gathered through 12 in-depth interviews (Appendix 1). The respondents of the qualitative field interviews are country heads, brand marketing managers, channel sales managers of international manufacturer brands and the directors and managers of the SMEs who resell these international brands in the Indian IT market. The qualitative data were collected in the form of open-ended interviews with

experts in the field (Churchill, 1979). Multidisciplinary categorization was developed and the initial analysis of the interviews was helpful in identifying the relevance of research questions (Melewar, 2001).

During the qualitative data collection process, two data sets were collected. The first data set came from the country managers, marketing and channel sales managers of international brands operating in the IT reseller market who are termed brand representatives and the second data set was collected from the resellers of these international brands in the IT reseller market. The data were used to understand the effect of brand knowledge transferred to resellers by brand representatives to influence their selection of brand for resale.

Qualitative Findings

This study investigates the use of brand representation by a human for branding benefits in the business-to-business markets by educating and updating resellers about brand-related information. A set of interviewees from manufacturer brand firms believed that brand representatives are an important element in the reseller markets as they are able to develop a direct association with resellers by communicating on a one-to-one basis. The resellers as participants of the research, had a strong consensus that brand representative was an accessible and important medium in understanding brand-related information

Purchasing behaviour of resellers

During interviews, the role of brand representatives in the resellers' selection of brand for resale was projected as that of a direct influence using relationships to influence the favourable purchase intention of resellers towards brands. Respondents suggested that such an influence is possible by having a one-to-one relationship. The usefulness of such

a relationship for brands to develop a competitive edge by creating differentiation in the minds of resellers became apparent during the interviews. One of the brand managers from category 'C' explained the importance of relationships in reseller networks by stating:

“If there are two brands, brand ‘a’ and brand ‘b’, and if a partner has been selling brand ‘a’, even if ‘a’ and ‘b’ are both almost equal, he will prefer selling ‘a’ because he has a certain relationship with that vendor ‘a’. The partner feels comfortable with brand ‘a’, he knows its processes, he knows its sales methodology, so he is comfortable selling on its behalf and he will continue doing that despite any benefits offered by ‘b’ and despite the products being almost the same.”

Another brand manager from category 'B' expressed the importance of relationship between reseller and brand representative in managing the brand experience of resellers as an important function of purchasing intention of resellers by narrating:

*“Let us describe a scenario where a reseller has become attached to a brand but has had some bad experiences in terms of product quality or in terms of product support and feels that the product is not very good. Resellers at such a stage think that either the product is not up to the mark or that *the company’s service or commitments* are not as satisfactory as they should be, because the reseller has already experienced better. Now here again, it is a matter of relationship and, if the brand representative has a relationship with the reseller, the representative can give confidence and commitment to the reseller by communicating that if the reseller gets into any kind of problem, the representative will always stand by the reseller. So, if the representative gives that kind of confidence and commitment to*

the reseller, the reseller again thinks OK, this *brand's* representative has given me this commitment, let me keep going with the brand.”

The category ‘B’ brand manager of one of the companies suggested that relationships can help to create differentiation in the minds of the customers, by expressing his opinion in the following words:

“*What* is really important from a sales perspective or a personal perspective is the person who approaches the reseller and says ‘My products are from Neil Armstrong, who went to the moon and he spoke from the moon using my head-sets.’ *So, then what happens is that that customer* starts associating the machine with the moon, then the customer associates the products there, so the quality perception just shoots up. For example, when you say ‘head set’, it is not a rocket science product – anybody can make it – but then it comes with a legacy, and people feel that the product which I use is a very good product. When you put that into perspective, your brand value just shoots up. So, the role of person is very critical from a company perspective to enhance value and also the product.”

Role of brand representative

According to research on the brand purchasing of resellers, different purchasing situations for the same product cause differences in search and evaluation (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Purchases made by resellers are not for personal consumption, but are for resale. Hence, the purchasing situations of resellers drive them to look at their brand association from a different perspective to consumers. One of the brand managers belonging to category ‘A’ when explaining this, stated:

“For the end-customer it doesn’t matter, but, if you are getting into a reseller channel, it definitely does. In my experience relationship plays a very important role. I guess that in any of the business environments, not only in Asia but other markets also I have seen that relationship plays a very vital role in terms of promoting your brand into the channel. But it is different in the case of consumers because consumers will always look for a good brand, a good product with good pricing and good support. In a channel, relationship matters more than all these factors.”

Another respondent from category ‘C’ reflected on the role of brand representatives as:

“They inform their resellers about the company products, product features, competition products, why there is a need to launch this product, what the benefits are of selling the product offered by their brand, its key features, and why it is important in a new era.”

Role of brand knowledge

Most of the interviewees believed that brand knowledge played an important role in a favourable purchase intention of resellers. The respondents presented different perspectives of the role of brand knowledge in reseller networks. One of the marketing directors of an IT brand (category A) explained brand knowledge as:

“.....Understanding of brand, what it stands for, the brand values, the brand characteristics, everything that you want your partner to understand it as...”

Another interviewee from category ‘B’ reflected on the importance of transferring brand knowledge to resellers and explained it in the following words:

“Again, the partner is the guy who is facing the customer directly. He has more interaction with the customer than the guy sitting in the IBM office has. So, he has to be knowledgeable enough to tell the customer what he is selling or what he is buying. Or suggest to the customer what he should buy.”

One of the country managers of a leading IT brand (Category B) when speaking about the type of brand knowledge required in reseller networks, explained:

*“It is brand knowledge but more skewed towards products, not skewed towards brand as an identity overall, but skewed towards products that are representing your brand. At a reseller level both are interchangeable, you know the brand is the product and the *product is the brand.*”*

The role of brand representative in transferring brand knowledge

Brand knowledge is perceived by many academics and practitioners as being the most important element of brand value in terms of differentiation (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006), as it involves information about the competitiveness of the brand in the eyes of the customers (Meenaghan, 1995). Most of the interviewees concurred with this view. An interviewee from category ‘B’, while explaining the role of brand representative in ensuring the reseller understands the brand-related information from the perspective of the brand, stated:

*“No, on the contrary he helps you in understanding the things from IBM’s perspective. A few things may be designed which you are not able to understand, so this guy plays a role in making you understand what it exactly means or translates it in terms which are *easier for you to understand.*”*

When a country manager of one of the international brands (Category B) was asked about the role of brand representative in communicating brand-related information to resellers, he expressed it as:

“Yes of course, as I told you, he is a representative, he is an agent, he is a messenger, he is a communicator of the brand, his role is very vital because he meets 7 or 10 customers physically in a day and he talks to 20 or 25 resellers on the telephone, so every time he has been speaking, he has been speaking about the brand, he has been speaking about our product, our pricing, our support. It is like everyday he has been talking to 20 or 25 different customers, he is a bigger messenger of the brand.”

Another manager of an international brand from respondent category ‘C’ when asked to explain if the brand representative has any role to play in building up brand confidence in resellers by communicating brand information stated it as follows:

“As I said, the IT resellers are good in numbers, competition is very cut-throat, it becomes very difficult for organizations to touch base with all the partners in one go, through one media. Here is where the role of the representative or head of that region comes in, depending on how deeply or how clearly it has been explained to the partners. As I said the market is competitive, nobody has enough time to go through one source of media; if it is explained or if an individual tries to at least make it clear to the main set of partners who are actually reference points for them, then it helps for a brand to deliver the message down the line. In this case the cascading is proper and the checkpoint has to be identified by the brand. These representatives contribute to confidence building, as I said.”

Another senior channel manager (category C) from a multinational IT company explained the need for brand knowledge and disagreed with the usage of the term brand knowledge and stated the role of brand representative in this context as:

“I would actually like to expand this term. Brand knowledge in the case of an industrial product is not enough. It has to be brand recognition which has to become brand preference. Knowledge is like I know this product but I don’t know what I am buying. Brand value is definitely a better term.”

This respondent explained his views further by stating:

“A brand representative or a channel representative goes and meets a new partner, says that he is from this OEM and that he wants him to do business for him and the partner says he doesn’t know the product, and asks him to take him through it. Hence, the knowledge comes through and that is transferring brand knowledge. He is transferring knowledge.”

There was a wide range of opinions concerning the role of brand representative.

From the perspective of transferring brand knowledge, interviewees from the reseller firms felt that a brand representative plays an influential role in transferring brand knowledge to create brand value in reseller networks which becomes a competitive advantage.

The statements of various interviewees suggest that the functioning of brand representatives in reseller networks is an existing way of operation and is a common procedure in the marketplace. The responses reveal that the reseller companies viewed brand representative as an important link to the brand and brand owners viewed them as a conduit between reseller and the organization. Therefore, the definition of brand representative as brand personified is generated within the borders of relationship

management theory. This construction of the definition enables the authors to explain the functioning of brand representatives as brand personified in an ecologically valid environment.

Discussion

This research was motivated by the conceptualization of the role of brand personified as brand representatives in transferring brand knowledge for a favourable purchase intention of resellers. This paper has demonstrated that brand knowledge when transferred by brand representatives satisfies the resellers. The approach of this research is towards nurturing relationships with resellers by demonstrating commitment of the brand towards its resellers. Such a demonstration can be helpful to companies in enabling them to create a competitive edge in highly competitive and complex reseller networks. As the approach of relationship in managing business-to-business markets has been empirically proved in the existing literature, this research extends the previous research and clearly identifies the role of relationship in transferring brand knowledge to resellers by brand when personified as a representative.

This paper has specifically highlighted the role of branding in reseller networks by way of personifying the brand as a human representative. It contributes to the literature on branding and relationship marketing by suggesting that brands be personified for managing relationships with resellers of brands. According to the existing literature, the term 'brand personification' encompasses two dimensions, namely a metaphor (Wesley et al., 2006), a projective technique (Hofstede et al., 2007) as an inventory of the representation of the brand (Tsai, 2005). This paper suggests that brand personified as a human representative can be influential in developing one-to-one relationships with resellers, influencing their purchase intentions favourably for the brand.

The framework developed may be helpful to other researchers in exploring the usefulness of other dimensions of the construct of brand personification in reseller networks. This research can act as a guiding point for other marketing researchers by directing them towards further investigation about the other contributions by brand personified apart from transferring brand knowledge. However, the nature of brand knowledge will differ from one market segment to another. The resellers selling to large organizations or corporate houses will require a different type of brand knowledge compared to resellers who are selling directly to end users through a retail outlet. The transfer of brand knowledge by brand personified educates and updates resellers about brand-related information so as to influence their selection of brand for resale.

As presented in the qualitative findings, every respondent had a unique opinion about the role of brand representative. Most respondents claimed that a brand representative has a very contributive role to play in the management of reseller relationships. The participants also expressed a considerable range of views about other components. However, there was no unanimous agreement as to whether or not a brand representative contributes to the other components of the brand-reseller relationship like profitability, trust and commitment. Overall, as regards the purchase intention of resellers, we find that components other than brand knowledge, like trust, commitment and profitability are intertwined with each other. Hence, it is difficult to set functional boundaries for this research. The theory of brand personification by representation for managing reseller networks is developed by integrating the two functions of brand personification from the perspective of one-to-one communications. This approach provides measurable terms and will need further empirical research.

Conclusion and limitations

This study presents a conceptual relationship between the constructs of brand personification, brand knowledge and brand selection by resellers. It proposes the relationship between constructs of brand knowledge and brand selection by resellers to be moderated by linking brands to its representatives in reseller markets. The paper lays special emphasis on the effective transfer of brand knowledge to the reseller in relationship with the brand by representatives of the brand. The framework is presented as a conceptual model and needs empirical testing and validation after data collection which will make it robust. The model proposed has limitations as it has been developed for a specific industry in an identified market and cannot be generalized to any brand-reseller relationship of any other population. To test it in other settings, the model will need fresh integration of concepts, theories and constructs.

Implications and future directions

This article reviews the literature for providing a theoretical foundation to the conceptual role played by metaphoric personification of brand for managing reseller relationships. The relationships in reseller markets are based on the purchasing behaviour of resellers. The responses given by brand managers and resellers enabled the authors to have an overview of the components included in theory from the definition perspective and allowed them to relate to these components in practice from the organizational perspective. The model depicts the role of brand personification (as brand representative) as a moderator of the purchasing intention of resellers. The purchasing intention of resellers has been identified as the selection of brand by resellers for resale. The study highlights the competitiveness in the reseller markets and offers brand personification (as brand representatives) as a source for creating differentiation for competitiveness in the eyes of resellers as customers of the brand.

The categorization made facilitated the systematic analysis of the components associated with the selection of brand by resellers for resale (Anderson, 1987). The categories developed and components identified will be useful when developing a research instrument for empirical testing of the model at a later stage (Cronbach and Meehl, 1955). The interviews can be used to establish internal reliability and external validity of the relationships developed (Jick, 1979; Melewar, 2001). The research instrument once developed will undergo a pilot test for refinement of the items (Churchill, 1979).

Note: This study is a part of a larger study carried out by the first author as her PhD research at Brunel University.

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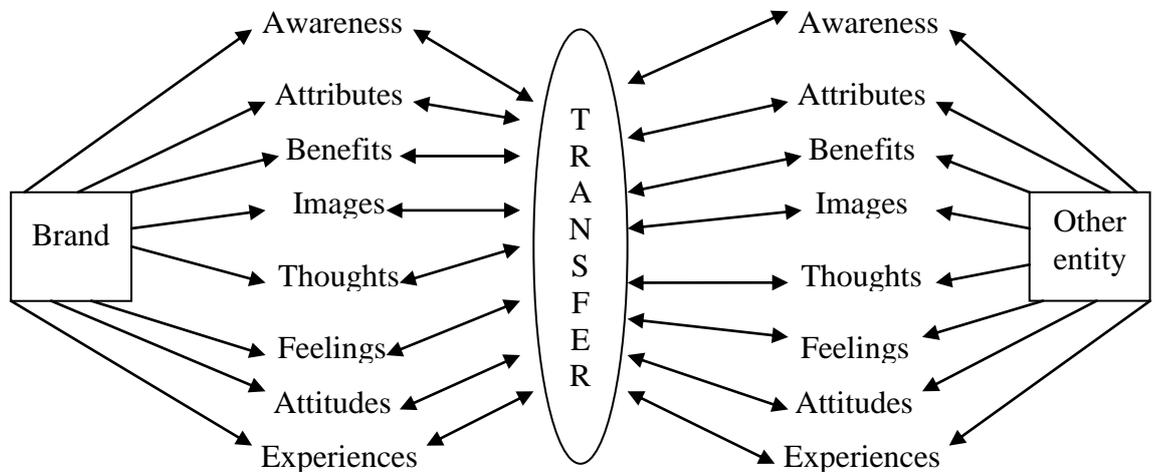


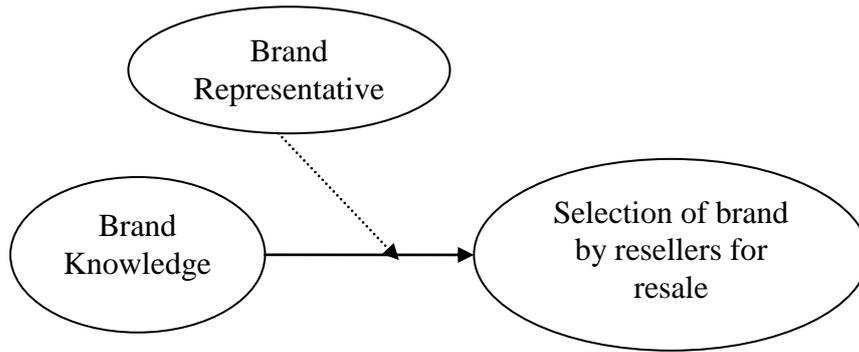
Figure 1: Understanding transfer of brand knowledge

Source: Keller (2003)

Appendix 1

Table 1 – Respondent’s profiles

Respondent type	Position held	Category	Number	Years of experience in dealing with international brands
Brand Manager	Director – Channels India	A	1	15+ years
	Country Manager (India & SAARC)	B	3	10+ years
	Regional Managers	C	8	10+ years



Note: Dotted line represents moderating relationship.

Source: Developed based on the research gap identified by the study

Figure 2: A theoretical model of transfer of brand knowledge to resellers moderated by brand representative