

The Effect of Brand-Relationship Quality on Positive Word-of-Mouth Intention

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Abstract

Measurement and management of consumer relationships with brands are critical issue that marketers have focused on for years. The quality of the relationship between the consumer and brand affects behavioral intention in favor of the brand. This research aims to reveal the effect of consumer-brand relationship quality (BRQ) on positive word-of-mouth (WoM) intention. The BRQ components were applied on the sample of private university students in Istanbul, Turkey. The questionnaire form with 5-point Likert scale was distributed and 199 valid surveys were obtained. Cronbach's Alfa was examined to internal consistency of the scales, and exploratory factor analysis was conducted to assess constructive validity. Multiple regression analysis resulted in love/passion, commitment, and self-connection, which are the dimensions of BRQ, have a positive WoM intention. On the other hand, the intimacy factor has no significant effect.

Keywords

Consumer behavior, brand relationship quality, word-of-mouth, factor analysis, regression model.

1. Introduction

The increasing number of businesses today has intensified the competition and increased the number of brands to keep a place in the consumer mind. Increasing competition and the number of brands also increased the marketing mix activities. This situation makes it difficult for brands to gain control over the consumer. The intensely competitive environment in the market has required brands that can establish positive and close relationships with consumers. For this reason, how the consumer-brand relationship can be established is one of the activities that have a strategic role for businesses.

As of 2019, it is estimated that the number of internet users worldwide is 4.5 billion and the internet penetration rate is 58.8% (Internet World Stats, 2019). In a market environment where digitalization is intense, consumers can now access the information they want with a few clicks. It enables positive or negative customer experiences to be transferred from offline to online and leads to millions of people in a short time.

The form of communication that allows consumers to influence other consumers by sharing their purchasing and using experiences around and online, is called the word of mouth (WoM). In offline environments, the fact that consumers recommend businesses, brands or products can positively affect their intention to purchase. There is a positive correlation between WoM communication on the online platform and sales (Rosario et al., 2016). Therefore, WoM is a strategic tool for brands to survive in the long term.

The close or direct relationship established between the consumer and the brand helps consumers to tend to recommend the brand to others on various platforms. Although some studies declared BRQ affects WoM (Tho et al., 2016), studies carried out on young people who are in close relations with brands in developing countries such as Turkey are few. Therefore, it is important to reveal the effect of BRQ on positive WoM intention in that context.

2. Theoretical Background

Brands have an identity, personality, image, and connotations since they appear like a strategic asset for the business, rather than a printed label on the product (Keller, 2012). For businesses, the questions of how to strategically create, manage and develop all these brand extensions have gained significance (Ozteric-Dosen et al., 2018). The brand is an intangible concept that directs consumer behavior beyond a business name or symbol. Consumers recognize products and services through brands. Therefore, brands aim to create some sentimental activities for the feelings of consumers through various communication tools. Companies that can establish relationships between consumers and the brand provide a financial profit in a long period (Kapferer, 2012).

The extended self theory proposed by Belk (1988) can be used to explain the relationship between consumers and the brand. According to the theory, individuals' sense of self is not limited to themselves. It also includes owned and sensed products, people, alive or inorganic objects. Hence, when consumers establish a relationship with a brand, they own the brand and its products by increasing the loyalty level to the brand. Consumers can progress further in this psychological state through anthropomorphism to be able to individualize brands.

The relationship that consumers develop with the brand allows them to display some behavior in favor of the brand such as satisfaction, brand loyalty, brand citizenship, positive word-of-mouth (Nyadzayo et al., 2016). WoM can be defined briefly as a marketing activity that gives brands the customer advice (WOMMA, 2020). It is assumed that a person must have a close relationship with the brand to be able to own a brand enough to recommend it to others.

In studies in which BRQ is examined in the literature, it generally dealt with concepts such as brand loyalty (Giovanis and Athanasopoulou, 2018; Huang et al., 2014; Casaló et al., 2010; Kim, 2005), brand personality (Tho et al., 2016; Choi and Hyun, 2017), brand experience (Xie et al., 2017; Sahin et al., 2012; Francisco-Maffezzolli et al., 2014). However, within our knowledge, few studies investigating the relationship of BRQ with WoM have been found. Therefore, the research aims to reveal how BRQ affects the word-of-mouth communication behavior of consumers.

2.1. Brand-Relationship Quality

The business activities within the scope of the marketing mix include components such as product development, pricing methods, promotion activities, distribution policies. Because each activity can trigger a part of the brand's behavior, the companies naturally establish a kind of relationship with the consumer and gets closer to the consumer (Keller, 2012). The relationship between business and consumer is generally explained by the concepts of trust and commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Customers trust the business with the effect of psychological factors, and then a commitment to the business occurs.

Fournier (1998) conceptually reconsidered the relationship between consumers and the brand and established a conceptual framework to measure the consumer-brand relationship. The concept that he calls BRQ, is a multi-layered phenomenon that explains the strength, depth, and durability of the relational bond established between the consumer and the brand. In some studies, BRQ has been handled in two dimensions as an attitudinal attachment and a sense of community (Huang et al., 2014). When the BRQ is analyzed on dealers in the field of industrial marketing, the BRQ was handled in four dimensions: information sharing, franchisor support, conflict handling, and bonding (Nyadzayo et al., 2016). In the field of the clothing brand, it was considered in three dimensions as trust, satisfaction, and commitment (Pitaloka and Gumanti, 2019).

BRQ can mean similar meanings with brand loyalty and satisfaction. However, BRQ constitutes an alternative structure to brand loyalty. Both concepts represent the strength of the connection between the consumer and the brand. However, BRQ represents a concept with richer ingredients than brand loyalty (Fournier, 1998).

Various researchers investigated BRQ with different components (Hudson et al., 2015). According to Fournier's (1998) study, BRQ declares the relationships of consumer-brand with a structure consisting of six components: affective (love/passion, self-connection), behavioral (interdependence, commitment) and cognitive (intimacy, brand partner quality). She explains these components as follows:

1. Interdependence refers to frequent brand interactions, expanded scope, and heterogeneity of brand-based actions, and emphasized the intensity of individual interaction activities
2. Self-connection presents the strength considering centralization. The level to which the brand delivers on essential personality interests, duties, or ideas reveals a notable perspective of self.
3. Commitment aims to act in a supporting behavior of relationship persistence.
4. Love/Passion means the strength as described by the level of the effect related to the brand philosophy
5. Intimacy states the consumer's feeling of sincere towards the brand and the level of the brand's empathy with the consumer
6. Brand partner quality shows the assessment of the consumers for the brand's performance.

Studies on BRQ have designed a structure with different components. Xie et al. (2017) conceptualized BRQ as a self-connective attachment, satisfaction, behavioral commitment, trust and emotional intimacy in their studies that they examined within the framework of service experience. In this study, BRQ acts as a mediate in the effect of brand experience on customer citizenship behavior. Francisco-Maffezzolli et al. (2014) used BRQ as an intermediary between brand experience and brand loyalty. The authors also stated that BRQ's interaction with brand experience and brand loyalty may differ according to product categories.

2.2. Word-of-Mouth (WoM)

Word-of-mouth can be defined as positive or negative verbal or written statements expressed in online or offline form by potential or actual customers about a particular product, brand or business (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). WoM affects consumer attitudes and purchasing decisions positively or negatively. For this reason, brands should approach strategically WoM (Bone, 1995).

The positive experience of consumers with the brand results in positively in online or offline environments by recommending the brand to others. The positive advice of a brand reduces the risk perception of other consumers and affects their purchasing decisions in favor of the brand. In this way, companies can both increase their sales and have the opportunity to promote free of charge (Buttle, 1998).

When consumers have a negative brand experience, they tend to complain about the brand to their environment. Unsatisfied customers can worsen the brand and make negative comments about the brand in online and offline environments. Negatively affected consumers by WoM can perceive a high risk for the brand, which may reduce the possibility of purchasing (Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011; Charlett and Garland, 1995).

Since BRQ is predicted to affect positive WoM intention, it is not enough for brands to satisfy the consumers in today's competitive environment. Companies need to go beyond satisfaction and establish a close relationship with the consumer, strengthen this relationship and make it sustainable. When brands establish a quality relationship with the consumer, they will be able to increase their positive WoM intention both in offline environments and digital channels (Leventhal et al., 2014; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). The hypothesis which is constituted in line with research objective is below.

H1: BRQ affects positive Word-of-mouth intention.

H1.1: Interdependence affects positive Word-of-mouth intention

H1.2: Self-connection affects positive Word-of-mouth intention

H1.3: Commitment affects positive Word-of-mouth intention

H1.4: Love/passion affects positive Word-of-mouth intention

H1.5: Intimacy affects positive Word-of-mouth intention

H1.6: Brand partner quality affects positive Word-of-mouth intention

3. Methodology

Within the scope of the research, the study of Zeithaml et al. (1996) to measure positive word-of-mouth intention, the studies of Fournier (1994) and Thorbjornsen et al. (2002) to measure brand-relationship quality (2002) were chosen as the basis of this research. In the research, the questionnaire was preferred as the data collection technique. Comments in the survey were measured with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Extremely agree). Table 1 gives the information about the reference studies.

Table 1. Reference studies

Variable	Scale	Number of Items
Brand-Relationship Quality	Fournier (1994); Thorbjornsen et al. (2002); Tho et al., (2016)	20
Word-of-Mouth Intention	Zeithaml et al. (1996), Brügger et al., (2011), Terres et al. (2015)	3

Before proceeding to the application stage in the research, the designed questionnaire was examined by academicians and experts to uncover misspellings and spelling mistakes. As a result of the expert opinions, it was assumed that the face validity was provided after a revision was made in several statements.

Firstly, frequency analysis was carried out on the data obtained. Then, exploratory factor analysis (maximum likelihood with promax rotation) was applied to examine the construct validity of the research. After confirming that structural validity was achieved, the assumptions of multivariate statistical techniques were examined. In this context, it has been confirmed that the variables in the research model show normal distribution. Then, multiple regression analysis was carried out to examine the effect of independent variables on the dependent variable. IBM SPSS 23 software was used to analyze the survey data.

Since the research aims to measure the effect of consumers' BRQ's positive WoM intention, first of all, it was determined how BRQ can be measured. With the assumption that more young people fond of the brand, the research population is limited to young consumers living in Turkey's Istanbul province. Istanbul is Turkey's most populous and cosmopolitan city. Therefore, it is very easy to reach people from every profile. Due to time and cost constraints, the sample of the research was composed of students enrolled in a foundation university in Istanbul. 350 questionnaires were distributed to students from different departments and 250 questionnaires were filled by the participants (response rate 71.43%). When incomplete, inaccurate and incomplete questionnaires were removed, 199 valid questionnaires were included in the analysis.

4. Results

The demographic characteristics of the individuals participating in the research are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics

Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Female	139	69,8
	Male	60	30,2
Working	Yes	37	18,6
	No	162	81,4
Monthly Income (Turkish Lira)	0-750	100	50,7
	751-1500	39	19,6
	1501-2250	23	11,6
	Above 2251	37	18,6
Programme type	Associate degree	147	73,9
	Bachelor's degree	52	26,1

According to Table 2, 69.8% of the participants are female and 30.2% are male. 73.9% of them received 4 years of education, 26.1% of them received 2 years of education. The higher number of female and 4-year students in programs enrolled in the university confirms this finding. 18.6% of the participants work in a workplace. Half of the participants (50.7%) have an income between 0-750 Turkish Liras.

4.1. Assessment of Construct Validity

In order to ensure construct validity, exploratory factor analysis (maximum likelihood with promax rotation) was conducted. Table 3 gives the findings of the analysis.

Table 3. Factor analysis for validity

Item	Loading	Percent of Variance	Cronbahch's Alfa
Love/Passion		39,18	0,838
PQ1	,471		
LP1	,514		
IDP2	,662		
IDP1	,918		
CM2	,621		
CM1	,616		
Commitment		4,3	0,768
LP2	,664		
LP3	,419		
PQ2	,665		
CM3	,808		
Intimacy		3,4	0,822
INT1	,843		
INT2	,902		
Self-Connection		2,9	0,697
SC1	,624		
SC2	,784		
<i>KMO=0,916, Total Variance Explained 0,49, Cronbach's Alfa=0,893</i>			

The dimensions of BRQ were collected in 4 factors as Love/passion, commitment, intimacy, and self-connection. Four factors explain 49% of the variance in total. Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of all factors are over 0.70 and the coefficient of the BRQ scale is 0.893. It can be stated that the reliability level of the scale is high. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Test for sampling adequacy shows that the value is 0.916. It has a sufficient sample number to construct validity.

Table 4 presents the result of the factor analysis conducted for the Positive Word-of-mouth intention scale. Positive Word-of-mouth intention scale was formed in one dimension and 85% of the total variance was explained. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.911 and the KMO value was 0.775.

Table 4. Factor analysis for Positive WoM

Item	Loading	Percent of Variance	Cronbahch's Alfa
P. Word-of-Mouth Intention		84,93	0,911
WOM1	,673		
WOM2	,667		
WOM3	,687		
<i>KMO=0,758</i>			

As a result of the tests carried out, it can be stated that the scales used to measure the variables in the research model are constructed for validity and reliability. To determine the effect of BRQ on the positive word-of-mouth in terms of its sub-dimensions, sub-hypotheses were revised as follows.

H1: Brand-relationship quality has an impact on positive word-of-mouth intention.

H1.1: Love/Passion affects positive word-of-mouth intention.

H1.2: Commitment affects positive word-of-mouth intention.

H1.3: Intimacy affects positive word-of-mouth intention.

H1.4: Self-Connection affects positive word-of-mouth intention.

4.2. Examining the effects of independent variables on the dependent variable

To examine whether variables are normally distributed or not, Table 5 gives the skewness and kurtosis values, the main assumption of multivariate statistical techniques, were examined.

Table 5. Assessment of Normality

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
WOM	199	4,28	0,577	-0,172	-0,645
Love/Passion	199	4,15	0,501	-0,098	-0,396
Commitment	199	3,63	0,694	-0,022	-0,396
Intimacy	199	3,87	0,735	-0,194	-0,432
Self-Connection	199	3,55	0,782	-0,176	0,294

According to Table 5, it is seen that the skewness and kurtosis values of all variables in the research model are between -1.0 and +1.0 (Hair et al, 2014). After confirming that the normal distribution assumption was achieved, the multiple regression model that the details are given in Table 6 was carried out.

Table 6. Model Summary

Model	R	R-Square	Adjusted R-Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	,690 ^a	,475	,465	,42224	1,993
<i>a. Predictors: (Constant), Love/Passion, Commitment, Intimacy, Self-Connection</i>					
<i>b. Dependent Variable: P. WOM Intention</i>					

The R-Square value shows that the multiple regression model can explain 48% of the change in the dependent variable (positive WoM intention) by using the independent variables. There is no autocorrelation problem, one of the multivariate statistical assumptions, because the Durbin-Watson value is 1,993 (Field, 2009). The correlation coefficients among the independent variables included in the analysis were examined. The highest value was found to be 66%. Since this value is below 70%, it can be stated that there isn't any multicollinearity problem (Cinko et al., 2016). Table 7 represents the findings of multiple regression analysis (with Enter mode). Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values are between 1,468 and 2,209. VIF values should be less than 10, thus ensure multicollinearity assumption (Cokluk et al., 2012).

Table 7. Findings of multiple regression

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		t-value	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	1,074	,251	4,274	,000		
Love/Passion	,536	,089	6,023	,000*	,453	2,209
Commitment	,108	,059	1,848	,066**	,542	1,846
Intimacy	,076	,051	1,488	,138	,648	1,544
Self-connection	,084	,047	1,815	,071**	,681	1,468
<i>Dependent Variable: P. WoM Intention, *p<0,05, **p<0,10</i>						

Love/Passion ($p = 0,000 < 0.05$), commitment ($p = 0.066 < 0.10$) and self-connection ($p = 0.071 < 0.10$) have a positive and positive effect on positive WoM intention. Since $p = 0.198 > 0.10$, it is seen that the Intimacy variable has no significant effect. When t-values are analyzed, it is seen that Love/Passion (6,023) dimension has the strongest effect. The regression equation is shown in Equation 1.

$$Y = 1,074 + (\text{love_passion}) \times 0,536 + (\text{commitment}) \times 0,108 + (\text{self_connection}) \times 0,084 \quad (1)$$

Table 8 shows the status of the hypotheses. Accordingly, the hypotheses established that the variables of love/passion, commitment, and self-connection affect the positive Word-of-mouth intention dependent variable significantly and positively. The effect of the intimacy variable was rejected because it was not significant.

Table 8. Hypotheses status

Hypothesis	Status
H1.1: Love/Passion → P. WoM Intention	Accepted
H1.2: Commitment → P. WoM Intention	Accepted
H1.3: Intimacy → P. WoM Intention	Rejected
H1.4: Self-Connection → P. WoM Intention	Accepted

5. Discussion

The research aims to examine the effect of the quality of the relationship between consumers and brands on positive WoM intention. In this context, firstly the structural validity of the dimensions of BRQ, in theory, was examined in the sample of university students. As a result of the analysis, the sub-dimensions of BRQ were shaped differently from the theory. BRQ was defined in 6 dimensions in Fournier's (1998) study. However, in the research, love/passion, commitment, intimacy, and self-connection factors emerged differently. Within the scope of the research, these four dimensions were found sufficient to explain the relationship developed by young consumers with clothing brands. In this regard, similar findings were reached with previous studies in the literature (Ekinci et al., 2005; Huber et al., 2010).

It is anticipated that the basic components of the BRQ may differ according to the country, region, product and service category to which the study will be implemented. Despite this, it can be stated that the consumer-brand relationship quality scale developed by Fournier (1998) provides structural validity and reliability.

When the effect of BRQ on positive WoM intention according to its sub-dimensions is analyzed, a significant and positive effect of love/passion, commitment, and self-connection was found. Intimacy has no significant effect. There are also studies reaching similar findings (Yaprakli et al., 2018). The research also in line with studies that found that the dimensions of love/passion, commitment, and self-connection were among the premises of WoM (Albert et al., 2013).

The rapid spread of information and access to information in digital and offline environments causes young people to easily establish relationships with brands. Because brands are exposed to intense marketing communication, products play an active role in price and distribution channels (Confos and Davis, 2016). This shows that young people are more prone to brand-consumer relations than consumers with other demographic profiles.

Young consumers form a strategic consumer segment that can enter passionately intense emotional relationships with brands, establish a personal bond with the brand, and tend to commit themselves to the brand (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012). For this reason, it is necessary to draw attention to how the brand managers react to the marketing mix activities of the young consumers to create a positive WoM. Besides, it is suggested that messages conveyed to young people in brand communication strategies such as advertisement, website experience, mobile application, packaging design should be more emotional and sincerer.

6. Conclusion and Limitations

Businesses should be market-oriented rather than marketing-oriented to consider consumer demands and needs (Levitt, 1960). Nowadays, as the increasing number of businesses and brands makes it more difficult to gain and retain

customers, it is now necessary to focus on relationships rather than market orientation (Möller and Halinen, 2000). For this reason, brands that can develop close relationships with the consumer can stand out in the competition and maintain their presence in the market by providing a long-term profit.

BRQ, which covers the cognitive, emotional and behavioral relationship that the consumer has established with the brand, affects positive WoM. Brands that can establish sustainable relationships with their real and potential customers will have the opportunity to promote free of charge thanks to WoM communication. Thus, BRQ will play an important role in reducing the perceived risk to the brand.

As with any study, this research also has some limitations. Firstly, the application of the study is only on students studying at the foundation university. The broader and homogeneous demographic profile of the participants will provide access to different research findings. Second, researching the framework of clothing products is another constraint. It is recommended to apply the research model in different product categories or service types. It is possible to access different findings from the literature by including different mediator or moderator variables in the research model. In future studies, the role of different variables such as personality, distribution channels, technology acceptance in the effect of BRQ on behavioral intention can be examined.

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