BRAND LOVE RELATIONSHIP: A TRUE LOVE OR A MISSING STORY?

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Abstract

This paper looks into the function of human style relationship facets when applied to brands through a brand love relationship.

Methodologically, this investigation defined two groups of respondents (from a questionnaire applied to 224 respondents): those who self-reported a brand love relationship and those who did not. These groups were compared through a Likert questionnaire in order to find evidence of key human relationship facets that run along a brand love relationship, such as the self-ideal and positive psychology. Although, we did not find significant effects of the three key variables, the descriptive statistics showed higher averages where expected.

Keywords: Brand Love, Emotional Commitment, Positive Psychology, Relationship, Self-Ideal Concept

Introduction

In these last years, both markets and consumers have been evolved so much that nowadays customer relationship marketing/management became vital in marketing and branding campaigns. While CRM allows brands to develop long-term relationship with established and new customers, relationship marketing can be seen as a facet of CRM that focuses on customer loyalty and long-term customer engagement rather than shorter-term goals like new customer acquisition and individual sales targets. Thus, relationship marketing (and indeed CRM) intends to create strong, even emotional customer 's connection to a brand that can lead to ongoing business, free word-ofmouth, promotion and information from customers.

Modern marketing must attempt to establish a relationship between brand and the consumer they want to reach. This relationship will depend on the "brand management".

In this context, the intangible elements of brand management are linked to the experience that the consumer has had with the brand. This issue brings us to the concept of the "marketing paradigm shift" (Grönroos, 1994; 1997).

This paradigm shift from traditional to relationship marketing can be understood as the shift of marketing from a brand/product exposure focus, to a brand/product relationship focus.

In this context, several authors argue that a consumer's personality plays an important part in personal and brand relationship (Lin, 2010; Matzler, Bidmon & Grabner-Kräuter, 2006; Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006; Rauschnabel, Ahuvia, Ivens & Leischnig, 2013; Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi & Goldberg, 2007) while others state that brands have personalities attributed to them and are contributing partners in consumer brand relations (Aaker, 1997; Aaker & Fournier, 1995; Fournier, 1998).

Finally, a final group claim that anthropomorphisation process of brands facilitates this (Aaker & Fournier, 1995; Agassi, 1968; Aggarwal

& McGill, 2007, 2012; Caporael, 1986; Epley, Waytz & Cacioppo, 2007; Epley, Akalis, Waytz & Cacioppo, 2008a, 2008b).

These three concepts are central to the purpose and aims of this paper. In this context, the basic aim of the paper is to verify, through the use of a questionnaire, if a brand love relationship may be formed with a certain brand, what are the modern relationships with brands, specifically lifestyle brands.

In specific terms we intent to contribute to answer the following questions: (i) Does consumer brand love relationships appear to mirror traditional human relationships, and is there a significant difference between a group that self-reports to have a brand love relationship and a group that does not; (ii) Is pursuit of the self- ideal a key significant factor?; (iii) Is positive psychology a key significant factor?; (iv) Are these effects significantly stronger over a certain gender, age group or educational level? In this vein, our intention is to start to contribute to give insight on this issue. The remain of this article presents the theoretical background, methodology, findings, as well as conclusions and implications.

Theoretical background

Anthropomorphism in Branding

In order to understand the relationships and commitments between human beings and brands, an absolutely key factor underpinning our whole investigation is brand anthropomorphism. Although the process of brand anthropomorphism was originally born in the area of philosophy, Aaker & Fournier (1995) and Aaker (1997) were the first authors publishing about the theoretical framework of brand ´s anthropomorphism. They described this phenomenon as a process by which consumers permeate brands with human personality traits.

Recently, other areas of anthropomorphism in branding have been covered. Rossolatos (2012) discussed the practical applications of the use of this effect for more effective selling; Brown (2010) looked into the literal applications of twinning the association of this brand with animal anthropomorphics (e.g., Andrex puppies and Coca Cola polar bears) and authors such as Aggarwal and McGill (2012) looked into the literal effect of placing human characteristics on brands and even going as far to interact with them in a human way, and form relationships.

Brand Love

In general terms, a brand must have three important facets: *mystery, sensuality and intimacy,* with a combination of all three of these forming a strong brand love (Roberts, 2005).

It is important to consider other deterministic definitions of brand love from other authors that argue they must achieve consumers' passionate emotional attachment to particular brands (Carrol & Ahuvia, 2006). In the academic research on brand love or related constructs, it has been associated with positive word of mouth, brand loyalty, decreased price sensitivity, and forgiveness of brand failures, among other outcomes (Batra, Ahuvia & Bagozzi, 2012).

Albert & Merunka (2013) discriminated brand love from three important relational constructs: brand trust, brand identification and brand commitment.

However, a vital facet in defining this relationship is to take into account that consumers tend to attribute human emotions and characteristics to a brand they love (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Firestone, Firestone & Catlett, 2006). This "anthropomorphising" of brands is therefore a concept of huge importance as well as the Triangular Theory of Love (Sternberg, 1986, 2007).

This theory states that there are three key factors ruling a love relationship: (i) Intimacy; (ii) Passion and (iii) Commitment. These three concepts, although applied to human relationships, is the basis of human style relationships with a brand ideally resulting in brand love (Aaker, 1997; Kim, Han & Park, 2001).

Emotional Commitment in Brands

Another important issue is the emotional commitment to a brand. Firstly, commitment demands to measure the benefits of a relationship with a partner against the costs of that relationship (Wetzels, 1998). Secondly, emotional commitment is a determinant key of brand loyalty.

Attachment in Branding

Attachment in branding appears as another important issue (Bowlby, 2005). Although brand attachment may be achieved when customers develop a deep emotional "bond" (Grisaffe & Nyugen, 2011), research must go beyond this. Under this context, Patwardhan & Balasubramanian (2011) introduced the concept of "brand romance" claiming that brand romance is a much more reliable, valid and more real construct that explains loyalty significantly better than attitudes.

Positive Psychology

One original contribution of this paper comes with the link between relationship, and "positive psychology" in marketing. Positive psychology, a recent branch of psychology, wants to use scientific understanding to help to achieve a satisfactory common life rather than merely treating mental illness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Thus, this concept may be used in the definition of a complete and strong brand love relationships, as consumers best interact with products that are in line with their self-ideal. This behaviour, described as "Self Actualisation" (Maslow, 1943) was also known as the precursor to "Cognitive Dissonance Theory" (Festinger, 1962) and "Self Discrepancy Theory" (Higgins, 1987); all of which lead to describe the inherent process all consumers use to pursue the ideal way they want to be.

Methodology

This is an exploratory study based on a questionnaire that will allow testing a specific set of variables. The questionnaire has four main groups: (i) group identification; (ii) brand love relationship questions; (iii) self-ideal concept; (iv) positive psychology.

During its application, we will use a "split group" (question-Q5) that will split our sample into two groups, forming our independent variable. These two groups were:(i) respondents that self-report having a brand love relationship and (ii) respondents that do not report having a brand love relationship.

These separated groups will then be the basis of our analysis based on the following question sets, drawing on features of brand love relationships (Q6), ideal self-concept (Q7) and positive psychology (Q8).

We employed a semi-structured interviews conducted through SKYPE. A full group of on 224 participants from different countries agree to participate in this study, during 2015. Regarding the exploratory context, we first use a snowball technique (through a social network) to organize a list of potential participants (300 individuals).

Hypotheses

Our main hypotheses were as follows: H_1 - Respondents who answered "Yes" to Q5 score statistically significantly higher on questions suggesting the operation of a brand love relationship than respondents who answered "No"; H_2 - Respondents who answered "Yes" to Q5 score statistically significantly higher on questions suggesting the operation of ideal self-concept than respondents who answered "No"; H_3 - Respondents who answered "Yes" to Q5 score statistically significantly higher on questions suggesting the function of positive psychology than respondents who answered "No"; H_0 - Respondents who answered "Yes" to Q5 to have no significant differences in score over questions on brand love relationship/ideal self-concept/positive psychology than respondents that answered "No". These hypotheses cover the three main effects we are searching for in this analysis. We have postulated that our self-reported brand love relationship group will score significantly higher across all measures in comparison to our self-reported no brand love relationship group.

We have also postulated statistical differences in the demographic groups that will be statistically tested based on the following hypotheses: Gender Group - H₄- "One gender group will score statistically significantly higher or lower in scores on question 6 (two-tailed); H_e-"One gender group will score statistically significantly higher or lower in scores on question 7" (two-tailed); H_{c} - "One gender group will score statistically significantly higher or lower in scores on question 8" (two-tailed); H_{02} -"There will be no significant difference between scores of different gender groups on the corresponding question set"; Age Group - H₂- "One age group will score statistically significantly higher or lower in scores on question 6 (two-tailed); H₈- "One age group will score statistically significantly higher or lower in scores on question 7" (two-tailed); H_{q} - "One age group will score statistically significantly higher or lower in scores on question 8" (two-tailed); H_{03} - "There will be no significant difference between scores of different gender groups on the corresponding question set"; Education Level Group: H10- "One education level group will score statistically significantly higher or lower in scores on question 6" (two-tailed); H11- "One education level group will score statistically significantly higher or lower in scores on question 7" (two-tailed); H12- "One education level group will score statistically significantly higher or lower in scores on question 8" (two-tailed); H04- "There will be no significant difference between scores of different gender groups on the corresponding question set".

Procedure

Taking into consideration the participants answers to question 5 (yes or no because "Don't Know" responses were excluded) we obtained two distinct groups. This question was designed to determine whether the respondents consider themselves to have a brand-love relationship, which is a key facet in answering our research questions. The answer to this question forms out independent variable. Those R-LEGO - Revista Lusófona de Economia e Gestão das Organizações n.º 4

respondents who answered "No" will have their data integrated in Group 1 while those who answered "Yes" were integrated in Group 2.

This type of grouping was essential in testing one of our key study variables participants who consider themselves to have a brand love relationship (with a lifestyle brand) will score higher on measures testing the participants anthropomorphic relationship with a brand. This means that participants who consider themselves to have a brand love relationship with a lifestyle brand, will score higher across measures testing brand love, emotional commitment, positive psychology and the self-ideal; all facets that make up an organic human relationship. This is the key effect we are looking for in this paper.

Results

Taking into consideration the demographics characteristics from the total 224 respondents, 78 were male (34.8%), 146 were female (65.2%). 40 were German (17.9%), 30 were Swedish (13.4%), 78 were Portuguese (34.8%), 48 were British (21.4%), 4 were Finnish and Norwegian respectively (1.8% and 1.8%) and 2%?? were respectively Mexican, Estonian, Croatian, Italian, Bulgarian, South Korean, Danish, Chinese, French and a US citizen (each 0.9%).

In terms of aging, 132 were between 18-24 years (58.9%), 90 were between 25-35 years (40.2%) and two were between 45-54 years (0.9%). In terms of education level, 8 concluded high school (4.5%), 86 concluded a bachelor's degree (38.4%), 8 completed some postgraduate study (3.6%), 100 concluded a master's degree (44.6%) and 22 completed a Ph.D. degree (8.9%).

Descriptive Statistics

In relation to question 5, 134 respondents answered "Yes" (59.8%) and 90 answered "No" (40.2%). This means our analysis will be grouped the following way: N = 224; (N, GR1 = 90); (N, GR2 = 134).

Likert score averages

From the questionnaire we may present some pre-analysis averages and standard deviations that will statistically analysed in order to determine whether the scores are significant.

Question 1	Group 1		Group 2		
Question 1	Average	SD	Average	SD	
Q 6.1	1.9	0.6	4.3	0.6	
Q 6.2	1.9	0.6	4	0.9	
Q 6.3	2.1	0.8	3.9	0.9	
Q 6.4	2.5	0.7	4.2	0.7	
Q 6.5	2.2	0.9	3.7	0.9	
Q 6.6	2.4	0.7	4.3	0.6	
Question 2	Group 1		Group 2		
	Average	SD	Average	SD	
Q 7.1	2.4	1.2	3.9	0.9	
Q 7.2	2	0.8	3.8	0.8	
Q 7.3	2.2	0.9	4	0.9	
Q 7.4	1.5	0.7	4.1	0.7	
Question 3	Group 1		Group 2		
	Average	SD	Average	SD	
Q 7.1	2	0.7	4	0.6	
Q 7.2	2.3	1	4.1	0.6	
Q 7.3	2.1	0.8	3.8	0.7	
Q 7.4	2.4	1.2	3.8	0.8	

Table 1. Orecetion 1	0.0.0	
Table 1: Question 1,	, 2, 3 - Group 1 and 2	

Source: Author's elaboration

Statistical Analysis

Gender: Set 6 (brand love relationship questions)

Since pvalue (0.3853) was bigger than the significance level (0.05), we can conclude that there is no statistically significant difference between male and female respondents. Furthermore, the median values of Q6, were identical within the sample, indicating that men and women respondents were close in their perception of this variable.

Gender: Set 7 (self-ideal concept questions)

The registed pvalue of 0.7708 was bigger than the significance level (0.05). So, we can conclude that there is no statistically significant difference in Q7 between male and female respondents. Besides, the median values of Q7 for men and women were identical within the sample, indicating that both respondents were close in their perception.

Gender: Set 8 (Positive Psychology questions)

The p-value of 0.2485 was bigger than the significance level (0.05). So, the null hypothesis (H_0) proposing no statistically significant difference in perceived importance of question among men and women cannot be rejected. Hence, there is no statistically significant difference in Q8 between male and female respondents. The median values were identical for men and women (14), showing that these respondents were close in their perception of this variable being of importance.

Age Group: Set 6 (brand love relationship questions)

This p-value (0.231) was bigger than the significance level (0.05). So, the null hypothesis (H_0) proposing the inexistence of statistically significant difference in Brand Love relationship questions between age groups cannot be rejected and we can conclude the inexistence of a statistically significant difference between different age groups. The median values were: 14.5 for 18-24 years, 13 for 25-34 years and 7

for 35-44 years. They were similar within the sample, indicating that respondents of different age groups were close in their perception of the importance of this variable.

Age Group: Set 7 (self-ideal concept questions)

Since the p-value of 0.680 was bigger than the significance level (0.05), we can conclude that there are differences statistically significant between different age groups in what concerns the ideal self-concept questions. The median values were 14 for 18-24 years, 13 for 25-34 years and 10 for 35-44 years. They were similar within the sample, indicating that respondents of different age groups were close in their perception of the importance of this variable.

Age Group: Set 8 (Positive Psychology questions)

In this case, p-value (0.535) was bigger than the significance level (0.05) meaning that the difference in perceived importance of positive psychology questions between age groups cannot be rejected. Hence, there is no statistically significant difference between different age groups. Concerning, the median values, we achieved 15 for 18-24 years, 12 for 25-34 years and 9 for 35-44 years. So, they were similar within the sample, indicating that respondents of different age groups were close in their perception about the importance of this variable.

Kruskal-Wallis (Education Level through Q6, Q7, Q8)

Education Level: Set 6

Since the p-value of 0.009 is smaller than the significance level (0.05), the null hypothesis (H_0) proposing the inexistence of statistically significant difference in the perception of importance in Q6 (brand love relationship test questions) among the six educational level groups can be rejected. So, there may be some statistically significant difference in Q6 between male and female respondents of this sample. The median values for the groups who completed high school (Med 19)

and those respondents who completed Ph.D, Law or Medical degrees (17,5) were the highest among the responding groups.

Education Level: Set 7

The p-value of 0.043 was smaller than the significance level (0.05). So, we can reject the null hypothesis (H_0) proposing no statistically significant difference in support for questions testing ideal self-concept between education levels. There may be some statistically significant difference in Q7 V2 between male and female respondents. The median values of Q7 V1 for the groups who completed high school (Med 19) and those respondents who completed Ph.D, Law or Medical degrees (17.5) were the highest among the responding groups.

Education Level: Set 8

Since the p-value of 0.074 was bigger than the significance level (0,05), the null hypothesis (H_0) proposing no statistically significant difference in perceived importance (positive psychology questions) among the six educational levels cannot be rejected and there is no statistically significant difference in Q8 among the educational level groups. Although the sample indicated no statistically significant difference, as can be seen by the range of reported median values, there appears to be some difference between the perceptions of importance among the sample respondents. These differences provide some evidence of the need for additional study of this variable among the various age groups.

We have to stress that due to the relatively low response levels among those who had completed high school and those who had completed postgraduate work, may have skewed the above results to some amount.

Discussion

As stated before, this article started to analyse whether participants who self-reported having a brand love relationship, had parallel attitudes with those registered in relationships between human beings. This anthropomorphism of a brand is the effect that this study was looking for.

Our questionnaire was built in order to differentiate two major groups through question 5 in order to compare them trying to find the (in)existence of a significant difference between their attitudes towards having (or not) a self-reported brand love relationship. In this context, we defined the following sets of questions aimed to pick out the three ideals of brand love Relationships; Self-Ideal, Positive Psychology.

Brand Love Relationships

The questionnaire was designed in order to establish links between human to human relationships as well as between human relationships with brand, thus supporting our hypothesis that brand love relationships are a result of the anthropomorphism of the brand itself.

In other words, we tried to conclude whether participants who had self-reported having a brand love relationship would reach higher scores in our questions that led onto feelings they would have both about a brand and about a person, if the relationships were similar. On the other side we also expected to see lower scores from participants that specified not having a brand love relationship as the questions tested emotional commitment amongst other human feeling areas, which we would not expect to be observed from a participant who did not have a strong human like relationship with a brand.

From the study, we did not find statistical different results (taken into account a 5% significance level) between the two groups.

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However, when we analysed the raw scores as well as descriptive averages, we found some specific trends showing that the self-reported brand love relationship group scored higher over all questions.

Self-Ideal

As with the function of a brand love relationship, we expected that the self-reported brand love relationship group would reach higher scores (question 7) meaning it was closer to a human relationship. The statistical analysis showed that the differences between the self-reported brand love relationship group and the self-reported no brand love relationship group cannot be considered enough significant to draw conclusions. As with the previous question, even though both descriptive statistics and averages reached consistently higher scores across this set of questions, they were not significant enough to draw conclusions from them.

Positive Psychology

As seen above, positive psychology was an important pillar of this paper as it firstly showed a logical function of the self-ideal and the basic function that human beings strive for. Our questions (8) to test this ideal followed the same logic as the previous two questions sets. It was expected to higher scores across the various questions. As with the previous two sets of questions, we found higher averages across the board for our self-reported brand love relationship ground, however these differences were not significant.

Demographic Findings

In order to look for effects in our data with the gender qualifier we used a Mann-Whitney test over questions 6, 7 and 8. We did not find the existence of significant differences throughout the data in terms of the scores between male and female respondents. Taking into account the descriptive statistics we found that both genders produced exactly the same average (13).

We also used a Mann-Whitney test over questions 6, 7 and 8 in order to test age groups since some authors claimed for a change in social and functional relationships between humans over time. Thus, it was plausible, that a mirrored human relationship with a brand had the potential to differ over the course of a participant's life. There was not enough information from the original literature to form a formal hypothesis on this effect, but differences in age group scores would not have been entirely unexpected.

In this case we did not find significant effects between age groups over any of the question sets. This is not entirely unexpected as the sample was especially constituted by younger age groups.

The Median values of Q6; 14.5 for 18-24 years, 13 for 25-34 years and 7 for 35-44 years were similar within the sample, indicating that respondents of different age groups were close in their perception of this variable being of importance.

Education Level

Another demographic test that was carried out was the Mann-Whitney into the relative scores of different education level groups. There was another pseudo-postulation here as some authors had published a paper on the difference in human relationships over not just life course, but more specifically education and life experience. They postulated that a more educated individual would potentially have psychological access to more advanced and more facedly committed relationships, potentially with a human, and by degree of mirroring, for the purposes of our study, potentially over a brand.

This demographic analysis showed up two significant results, the only ones of this whole analysis. Significant differences were found (to our level of confidence of 5%) in terms of education level over the brand love relationship question set and the idea self-concept question set. Anyway, the significance level of the positive psychology question set, was not significant (although it is worth mentioning, with a level of 0.074 it was close to our accepted significance level).

This is an important finding as it supports the suggestion that education level groups do not score in a uniform fashion across these question sets, and the difference is significant. Further study would be required to confirm these differences and establish directionality to a statistically acceptable level.

There may be some statistically significant difference in Q6 between male and female respondents in the population. The Median values of Q6 for the groups who completed high school (Med 19) and those respondents who completed Ph.D, Law or Medical degrees (17.5) were the highest among the responding groups.

There may be some statistically significant difference in Q7 V2 between male and female respondents. The Median values of Q7 V1 for the groups who completed high school (Med 19) and those respondents who completed Ph.D, Law or Medical degrees of 17.5 were the highest among the responding groups.

Final conclusions

Due to the exploratory and seminal nature of the study, we cannot generalize the findings, but we can give a first glimpse as was our purpose. Therefore, we are can point out that respondents who self-reported to have a brand love relationship, scored on average, higher results over all of the question groups testing for brand love facets, ideal self-concept facets and positive psychology facets. However, this difference is statistically valid to our 5% significance level.

Finally, we can claim that although it was postulated that respondents who self-reported to have a brand love relationship were expected to score higher, in terms of statistics tests, the obtained results were not statistically valid to a 5% significant level.

Despite all the rigorous methodology used to conduct this research, and having achieved the main objective, there are always some limitations that should be highlighted in order to consider as opportunities for future research. The study has an exploratory nature and in future a quantitative approach should be employed to consolidate the findings. Further research should prepare a cross-cultural study capturing the perceptions of a samples representing (panel sample) each county. Finally, future research should compare the findings between age groups.

Despite all the rigorous methodology used to conduct this research, and having achieved the main objective, there are always some limitations that should be highlighted in order to consider them as an opportunity for future research. For a further study, it could be interesting to do the same research in different continents or countries as well as having a broader sample and as said before. As this study was based on the brand love relationship, it would also be interesting to explore the perception of segment of the millennial people in order to know how they prioritize these ideas.

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R-LEGO - Revista Lusófona de Economia e Gestão das Organizações n.º 4

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Classificational				
	1/4		25%	
1. Gender				
O Male.				
O Female.				
O Choose not to ident	tify.			
2. Nationality				
3. Age Range				
🔵 18 to 24 years				
25 to 34 years				
35 to 44 years				
45 to 54 years				
🔘 55 to 64 years				
Age 65 or older				
4. Education Level				
O Completed some hi	gh school			
O High school gradua	te			
O Completed some of	ollege			
O Associate degree				
O Bachelor's degree				
O Completed some po	ostgraduate			
O Master's degree				
O Ph.D., law or medic	al degree			
O Other advanced de	gree beyond a Master's degr	9e		

Appendix 1: Questionnaire-Page 1 (Classification)

Appendix 1: Questionnaire-Page 2 (Brand Love Relationship)

	2/4			50%	
Do you consider yours	elf to have a 'brand-lo	ve relationship	with a lifestyle brand?		
brand-lave relationship	b an emotional and	pacalonate rela	lionship present betwee	n a sadefied co	nxomer and a brans
) Yes.					
) No.					
) Don'i Know					
Please answer the folio	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
would feel upset if this brand was to fail and close down	0	0	Q	0	0
feel I have a personal relationship with this brand	0	0	0	0	0
feel I have an emotional commitment to this brand	0	0	Ő.	0	0
My feelings towards this orand are relatively consistent over time	0	0	0	0	0
feel I have a dialogue with this brand	Ö	0	0	0	0
am a satisfied sustamer of this brand	0	0	0	0	0

Ideal Self Concept 3/4 75% 7. Please answer the following questions The Ideal Self is an idealised version of yoursell created out of what you have learned from your life experiences, the demands of society, and what you admire in your role models* Neither Agree nor Strongly Disagree Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree I consider myself to have an ideal-self concept I feel that lifestyle brands assist me in achieving my ideal self concept I believe this brand is in line with my ideal self concept I would favour this brand over others as it is in line with my ideal self concept Prev

Appendix 1. Questionnaire-Page 3 (Self-Ideal Concept)

	474			100%	
Please answer the folk	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agtee	Strongly Agree
consider myself to be a self-improver	0	0	0	0	0
strive to achieve my deal self concept	0	0	0	0	0
feel this brand assists ne in pursuing my ideal self concept	0	O	ø	0	0
feel it is natural to pursue your ideal self concept	0	0	O	0	0

Appendix 1 : Questionnaire-Page 4 (Positive Psychology)