

BRAND TRUST AS A SOURCE OF BRAND EQUITY

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Abstract: The theoretical and empirical lack of support for including brand trust in the model of brand equity and the brand-customer relationship paradigm require further investigation of the links between the two terms. For the purposes of the current research, six proposals for operationalisation of brand trust are discussed. A novel classification of its dimensions, namely: consistency, honesty, and concern, and a hypothetical model of brand equity including brand are proposed.

Key words: brand trust, brand equity, brand consistency, brand honesty, brand concern.

JEL: M31.

In the branding literature trust has been considered a cornerstone in the relationship between brands and customers. The role of trust derives from the human characteristics of brands and their ability to create long-lasting relationships with customers. The concept of trust has been under investigation of different researchers and has provoked the author's motivation for its inclusion in the model of brand equity. As the common model of brand equity proposed by Aaker (1991, p. 17) includes only loyalty as a relationship construct, our aim is to understand the meaning of brand trust to the consumer and find its place as a source of brand equity.

The setting of the research on brand equity and the existing operationalisations that we find in the literature do not correspond to the conceptual definitions and general understanding of the problem. This research gap requires further research on the topic of brand equity drivers by including relationship constructs that reflect the consumer-brand bond. The *research area* of the current paper is brand trust, while its structure and integration into the model of brand equity are its *research problem*. Our *objective* is to propose a conceptual model of brand equity which encompasses brand trust as being a driver of the construct. To meet the research objective, we set several *tasks*:

- a) Review the literature on brand trust in the context of brand equity;
- b) Analyse the existing operationalisation of brand trust and define its dimensionality;
- c) Define the interrelationships between the common drivers of brand equity and brand trust;
- d) Propose a conceptual model of brand equity which includes brand trust as a relationship construct.

This paper focuses on the gap of knowledge that arises from the dimensionality of brand trust in the context of brand-consumer relationship and how consumers perceive brand trust. An analysis of the existing research which

provides operationalisation of the construct is performed. It assumes brand trust as a three-dimensional construct based on thematic systematisation by the researcher. A hypothetical model of brand equity which encompasses brand trust is also proposed, which extends the literature on brand equity.

1. Overview of the problem

Brand equity has provoked immense attention in the literature on branding. The ability of brands to generate various outcomes for the companies such as preference, goodwill, market share, etc. prompts the scholars into the focus of what really is brand equity. The researchers find different ways of defining and measuring brand equity: from the point of view of the consumer, the organisation, the market, the personnel. In this paper brand equity is considered as a consumer-based construct which is in line with the understanding of Keller (1993, p. 2) and the common operationalisation of the construct (Herrero-Crespo, G., & Garcia-Salmones, 2016, p. 700; Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2005, p. 147; Yoo & Donthu, 2001, p.3¹). There is controversy about the proposed model by Aaker² as it captures only brand loyalty as a component of the brand-consumer relationship. The ability of brand trust to create greater consumer engagement and loyalty and at the same time its dependence on the perceived quality and associations linked to the brand require further analysis of the terms and the integration of brand trust into the domain of brand equity.

1.1. Brand trust as a driver of brand-consumer relationship

The relationship between brands and consumers derives from the role of brands in people's lives. In order to understand that role, Fournier (1998) bases her research on idiographic analysis and concludes that the brand partner quality, as an element of brand relationship quality, relies on brand trust (p. 365). She defines trust and comfort with the brand as elements of brand partner quality. Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 23) also stress on the action implied in the understanding of trust. If an organisation is not willing to fulfill its promises the trust in it is expected to be limited or missing. Another definition of trust is provided by Lassar, Mittal and Sharma (1995, p. 13) which suggests that it is "the confidence a consumer places in the firm and the firm's communications, and as to whether the firm's actions would be in the consumer's interest" which is close to the definition of Keller (2001, p. 14). This definition also suggests the action as being the expected outcome of their interaction with the brand. The actions are characterised as fulfilling an expected state or goal and the

¹ The authors fail to discriminate brand awareness from brand associations in their final model. However, they base their research on the constructs proposed by Aaker (1991, p 16) namely: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.

² David Aaker (1991, p. 17) proposes a model of brand equity that is composed of four dimensions: brand (name) awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.

behaviour of the company needs to be consistent with the consumer interests. If the organisation does not keep its promise there is going to be a breach of trust which will harm the relationship of the two parties and hence erode the brand equity. See table 1 for an overview of the definitions:

Table 1
Definitions of brand trust

Author (Year)	Definition
Keller & Aaker, (1992, p. 37)	<i>"the extent to which consumers believe that a company can deliver products and services that satisfy consumer needs and wants"</i>
Morgan & Hunt (1994, p. 23)	<i>"the willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence"</i>
Lassar, Mittal & Sharma (1995, p. 13)	<i>"the confidence a consumer places in the firm and the firm's communications, and as to whether the firm's actions would be in the consumer's interest"</i>
Fournier (1998, p. 365)	<i>"the brand will deliver what is desired versus that which is feared"</i>
Delgado-Ballester & Manuera-Aleman (2000, p. 1242)	<i>"trust is a feeling of security held by the consumer that the brand will meet his/her consumption expectations"</i>
Keller (2001, p. 14)	<i>"dependable and sensitive to the interests of customers"</i>

Another understanding of the phenomenon of brand trust in extant literature does not deal with the actions that the organisation is expected to undertake but is presented as a separate aspect of brand trust. This dimension is explained by Delgado-Ballester and Manuera-Aleman (2000). In their research they acknowledge brand trust to be connected with the feelings of security based on the good intentions the brand has towards the consumer and his/her welfare. This is in line with the definition of Lassar, Mittal and Sharma (1995) where they express the belief that the organisation is not going to harm those interests. The consumer decision depends on the associated level of perceived risk and needs strong credible evidence to be made.

The terms credibility and trust find common usage in the research literature as they are defined as the believability that a brand will keep its promises. This insists on reviewing the literature on brand credibility in order to understand if they are the same or not. Keller and Aaker (1992, p. 37) define "company credibility as the extent to which consumers believe that a company can deliver products and services that satisfy consumer needs and wants" which overlaps with the proposed definitions of brand trust above. Research in the area of brand management proposes that brand credibility is broader than brand trust. For instance, Erdem and Swait (2004, p. 192; 2002, p. 3) analyse brand credibility as being a two dimensional construct which expresses "the ability (brand expertise) and the willingness (brand trustworthiness) to deliver what has been promised". In a similar vein, Keller (2013, p. 80) includes credibility as a component of brand judgements in the brand building block pyramid (brand resonance). It is even broader than in the concept provided by Erdem and Swait as it is three dimensional and adds brand competence and liking to the equation

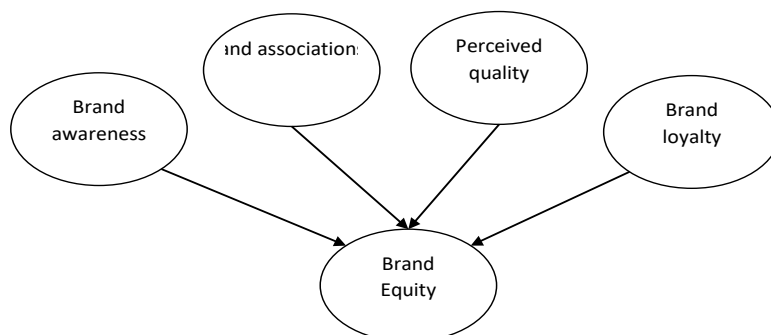
(op. cit, p. 89). The central element of the discussion though is brand trust, not brand credibility. That is why it is important to focus on the notion that trust adds to the model of brand equity. All these concepts describe brand trust from a historical point of view not as a mere image of the brand, but as an expectation that the brand is believed to act in a certain way and keep its promises. That is why in this paper we analyse research that operationalises credibility to the extent to which it refers to trust.

The brands need to be consistent, actionable, and fair in order to gain customer's trust. As brands are perceived as having human characteristics, this feature of human relationships is vital for the understanding of brand equity. The parsimonious application of brand trust as a structural component of the brand equity drivers signals a gap in the knowledge and opens doors for future advances in the field.

1.2. Demand for specifying the place of brand trust in the model of brand equity

As different theoretical and business models of brand equity exist, we focus on the rationale for including brand trust as a source of brand equity. This comes from the understanding that strong brands possess high levels of commitment with their customers, which is reliant on mutual trust. A brand could have very high awareness and perceived quality, but could fail in capturing the beliefs that it is able to deliver what it promises and takes responsibility for not harming the wellbeing and interests of its consumers. It is of great importance especially in the service sector as the product cannot be assessed beforehand and needs to be credible enough to the consumer in order to be purchased.

The existing literature on brand equity utilises the general model proposed by Aaker (1991) as being the most recognised. It includes the following assets: awareness, associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty (Fig. 1).



Source: Aaker, D. A., 1991, p. 17

Figure. 1. Aaker's Brand Equity Model³

³ The fifth element of the model – other proprietary brand assets is omitted as it represents patents, trademarks and channel relationships which don't deal with the consumer mindset but are attributable to the brand company (ibid, p. 21).

Despite the model of Aaker, brand loyalty has been recognised as an organisational, marketing outcome rather than a source of brand equity (Raggio & Leone, 2007, p. 390; Lassar, Mittal, & Sharma, 1995, p. 12; Keller, 2003, p. 9). It gives a competitive advantage in regards of premium prices, attracting new customers, reduced marketing costs, and creating trade leverage (Aaker, 1991, p. 47). In this notion, brand loyalty is an output of brand equity and the created strenght on the market but not being a source of it. In this regard, behavioral loyalty is not included in the framework dealing with the drivers of brand equity. The lack of theoretical and practical application of the brand trust scale in the research insists on including the construct together with the other brand equity drivers.

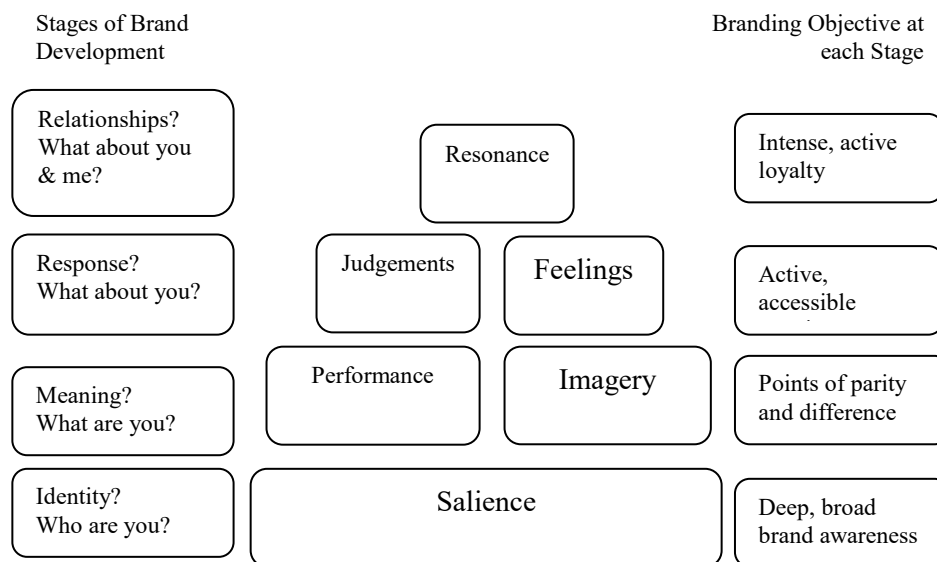
To integrate this variable into the model of brand equity, we need to review the existing research on brand equity and analyse the structure and place of brand trust in the general model. Evidence from empirical research is analysed and discussed below in order to digest the sense of the construct.

2. Analysis of the research on brand trust in the context of brand equity

Brand equity, defined as “the degree to which a brand’s name alone contributes value to the offering” (Leuthesser, Kohli, & Harich, 1995, p. 57) has attracted immense interest in the branding literature for the last three decades. The brand as a signal has to provoke positive responses in the consumers by eliciting high levels of trust. And yet branding practise has parsimonious number of examples which illustrate the inclusion of brand trust in the model of brand equity. There is no common model of the construct brand trust, as it is for brand equity. The latent nature of the psychological constructs has led to different interpretations of the structure, content and interrelationships between the elements of brand equity. In order to understand brand trust, several models of brand equity are reviewed.

Lassar, Mittal, and Sharma (1995) base their model on previous research and present brand equity as being five dimensional: performance, social image, value, trustworthiness, and attachment. Their findings show that the five dimensions influence each other. This, usually addressed in the litareture as a halo effect, means that if one of them is positively assessed, the others will receive a positive evaluation too. The thread arises from the fact that if one of them is considered as poor in performance, the others will be downgraded as well (p. 17). The valuable here is that the authors integrate not only cognitive but also relationship constructs (trustworthiness and attachment) into their model which develops the literature and practice in the field and is a stepping stone in the development of the conceptualisation of brand equity. Delgado-Ballester and Manuera-Aleman (2005, p. 188) depict brand trust as a construct based on prior interaction

and experience. The construct has two dimensions: reliability and intentions, which serve as mediators of satisfaction to brand loyalty and hence – brand equity. The multifaceted structure of trust is becoming more prominent and salient in this research. Trust is presented as complex construct which requires time and interaction between the brand and the consumer. As Simpson (2007, p. 265) notes, trust activates the feelings of vulnerability and expectancy of the partner’s behavior. In this sense, brands need to reduce the feelings of insecurity, release fear and serve as credible sources of information. According to Shafaei, Nejati, and Maadad (2019, p. 126), academic’s brand equity depends on the credibility of the human brand. Brand equity is enhanced through competence, trust in the quality, brand likability and commitment which is similar to the brand resonance model of Keller. Keller (2001, p. 13) integrates brand trustworthiness as an element of the credibility construct which represents the brand judgements as a broader and more complex construct (fig. 2). It depicts brand equity as being “significant” only when a brand is in the position to reach the pinnacle of the pyramid.



Source: Keller, K. L., 2009, p. 144

Figure. 2. Keller’s Brand Resonance Model⁴

⁴ The fifth element of the model – other proprietary brand assets is not included in the dimensions as it represents patents, trademarks and channel relationships which don’t deal with the consumer mindset but are attributable to the brand company (ibid, p. 21).

One of the stages that the relationship between the consumer and the brand goes through is the response to the brand. In his complex and multi-level model, Keller captures brand trustworthiness as an element of the brand credibility (part of the brand judgement construct). Even as a tiny element of the whole model, trust exists and affects brand liking, loyalty, attachment, engagement, and commitment.

The presented models find different ways of measuring brand trust as a source of brand equity which confirms the need to be adopted. While awareness and associations, proposed by Aaker, carry the basis brand equity and represent the identity of the brand, brand trust emerges as a result throughout time and different contacts between the brand and the consumer. It indicates the willingness of the brand to act in a favourable for the consumer way and meet his/her expectations. As a result, the consumer would be able to develop feelings towards the brand and reach the highest level of consumer-brand relationship – affiliation with the brand, commitment and engagement.

2.1 Analysis of the existing attributes of brand trust

The need for specifying brand trust is far from new. It is evident from the research in the field of psychology and sociology that trust is multifaceted construct which has complex meaning to consumers (Simpson, 2007). That is why we are now focused on the notion that this term brings in terms of operationalisation. Our attempt to analyse the construct is based on six studies that present different measures of trust. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 2:

Table 2
Existing construct items for operationalisation of brand trust

Author (year)	Construct name	Construct reliability	Construct items
Morgan & Hunt (1994)	Trust	0.95 (Composite reliability)	In our relationship, my major supplier cannot be trusted at times
			In our relationship, my major supplier can be counted on to do what is right
			In our relationship, my major supplier has high integrity
Lassar, Mittal, & Sharma (1995)	Trustworthiness	0.79 (Cronbach's alpha)	I consider the company and people who stand behind these products to be very trustworthy
			In regard to consumer interests, this company seems to be very caring
			I believe that this company does not take advantage of consumers

Delgado-Ballester & Manuera-Aleman (2000)	Trust	0.92 (Cronbach's alpha)	Brand X will offer me a product with a constant quality level
			Brand X will help me to solve any problem I could have with the product
			Brand X will offer me new products I may need
			Brand X will be interested in my satisfaction
			Brand X will value me as a consumer of its products
			Brand X will offer me a recommendations and advices on how to make the most of its product
Manuera-Aleman, Delgado-Ballester, & Yague-Guillen (2003)	Trust (fiability)	0.86 (Composite reliability)	With X brand name I obtain what I look for in a (product)
			Brand X is always at my consumption expectation levels
			Brand X gives me confidence and certainty in the consumption of a product
			Brand X never disappoints me
	Trust (intentionality)	0.86 (Composite reliability)	Brand X would be honest and sincere in its explanations
			I could rely on brand X
			Brand X would make any effort to make me satisfied
			Brand X would repay me in some way for the problem with the product
Erdem & Swait (2004)	Trustworthiness	0.89 (Cronbach's alpha)	This brand delivers what it promises
			This brand's product claims are believable
			Over time, my experiences with this brand have led me to expect it to keep its promises, no more and no less
Delgado-Ballester & Manuera-Aleman (2005)	Trust (reliability)	0.88 (Cronbach's alpha)	X is a brand name that meets my expectations
			I feel confidence in X brand name
			X is a brand name that never disappoints me
			X brand name guarantees satisfaction
	Trust (intentionality)	0.83 (Cronbach's alpha)	X brand name would be honest and sincere in addressing my concerns
			I could rely on X brand name to solve any problem with the product
			X brand name would make any effort to satisfy me in case of a problem
			X brand name would compensate me in some way for the problem with the product

The constructs above reveal very substantial understanding of trust regarding its breadth and depth. It deals with different aspects of the relationships between brands and consumers which characterise it as complex, interpersonal construct. Not only the believability to keep its promises is integral to the construct, but trust in the actions of the brand related to the customer's wellbeing and care for his satisfaction are also included in the items. In contrast to the existing models of the construct as being two-dimensional (Delgado-Ballester & Manuera-Aleman, 2005; Manuera-Aleman, Delgado-Ballester, & Yague-Guillen, 2003), we find three distinct themes from the provided items above. Similar to the operationalisation of Erdem and Swait (1998), the first dimension that we observe in the list of indicators is *consistency*. The second one is derived from the believability of the claims that the brand makes over time and is called *honesty*. The discussed operationalisations do not include such dimension. However, it is a meaningful characteristic according to the statements that are proved as significant measures of trust and exists as a dimension of trust proposed in other studies (Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Kumar, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 1995). The third and the last one is *concern*. It is close in understanding to the intentionality dimension provided by (Manuera-Aleman, Delgado-Ballester, and Yague-Guillen (2003) but focuses on the superiority of the relationship between the brand and the consumer and the pure intentions that the organisation has in order to serve its consumers as a valued partner. The three dimensions are described below and the relevant items are listed as follows:

1) Consistency – as it is broadly discussed in the literature, trust is based on the meanings of the brand signals. This feature of trust is embedded in the model provided by Erdem & Swait (1998) and suggests relevance and stability of brand attributes over time. They need to keep low variation in order not to dilute the brand meaning. Regarded as a signal, the brand is expected to keep its promises and be consistent in terms of its marketing mix. The attributes used to characterize this dimension are:

- *In our relationship, my major supplier cannot be trusted at times;*
- *Brand X will offer me a product with a constant quality level;*
- *Brand X is always at my consumption expectation levels;*
- *Brand X never disappoints me;*
- *This brand delivers what it promises;*
- *Over time, my experiences with this brand have led me to expect it to keep its promises, no more and no less.*

If the brand is perceived as being consistent, it means that it is always at customer's disposal, sharing the same attributes and values, caring for his interests and keeping its promises. This dimension of trust is complementary to the others and cannot support the trust by itself. Even though, it is fundamental

for nurturing the brand-consumer relationship and represents the brand trust strength.

2) Honesty – This dimension of brand trust characterises the social relationship between the two parties. If brands want to be close to their customers, they are expected to be sincere with them and build a certain level of frankness. The need from this dimension of trust arises from the problem of believability of the claims that the brands make over time. The attributes, that fit into this group, are:

- *In our relationship, my major supplier has high integrity;*
- *Brand X would be honest and sincere in its explanations in addressing my concerns;*
- *This brand's product claims are believable;*
- *I believe that this company does not take advantage of consumers.*

The brand is perceived as a friend who does not have secrets - there is no information asymmetry between the brand and the consumer and no fear respectively. This is the ideal state of the relationship when the customer knows everything about the brand. It is also important the claims that the brand makes to be realistic and not to contradict to the common facts and realities. If they do not correspond to the reality, the customers are not going to support trust and at the same time believe that the brand values them as a friend/partner. This dimension represents the transparency of the relationships, which could be defined as the health of the relationship.

3) Concern: The final aspect of brand trust represents the organisation which not only is a friend, but also takes care of the consumer. If we could systemise the dimensions in ascending order, concern is perceived as the highest level of brand trust which provides the most humanistic characteristic to the relationship. The brand actively enhances the feeling of security by being concerned about the customer's needs, wants, satisfaction, and wellbeing. The relevant items that fall to this dimension are:

- *In regard to consumer interests, this company seems to be very caring;*
- *Brand X would make any effort to make me satisfied;*
- *Brand X will value me as a consumer of its products;*
- *Brand X will offer me recommendations and advices on how to make the most of its product;*
- *I could rely on X brand name to solve any problem with the product;*
- *X brand name would compensate me in some way for the problem with the product;*
- *X brand name would make any effort to satisfy me in case of a problem.*

In this sense, the trust can lead to brand commitment and create strong brand loyalty (Delgado-Ballester & Manuera-Aleman, 2000).

The remaining items in the table could be characterized as more broad in meaning. They could serve to measure overall brand trust which expresses the general idea of the construct. The items here are:

- *I consider the company and people who stand behind these televisions to be very trustworthy;*
- *I feel confidence in X brand name;*
- *I could rely on brand X.*

They could be utilized in research which aims to track if trust exists or not. But if one needs to understand how customers see themselves and the brands as exchange partners, the three dimensions would be more useful and lead to managerial insights.

As a result of the proposed classification, a new complex model of brand trust emerges which includes three dimensions and one second-order construct. Figure 3 depicts the explained relationships:

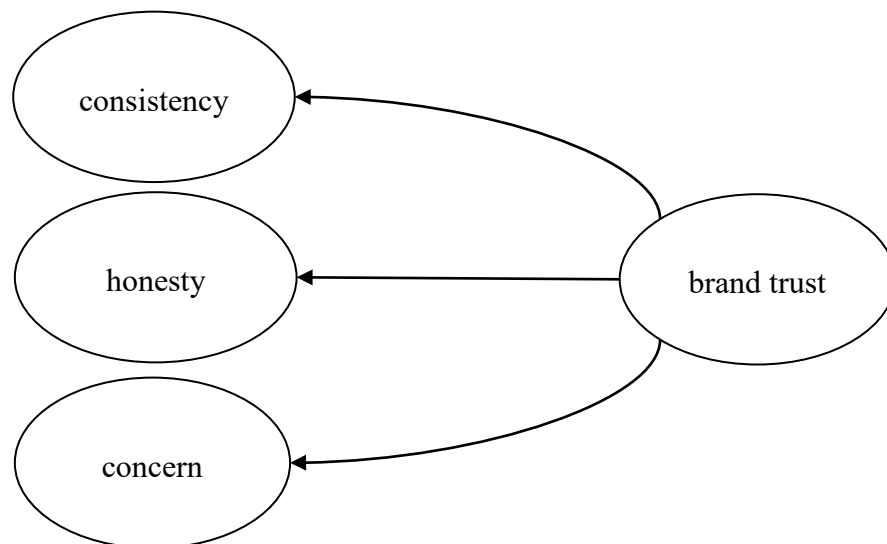


Figure 3: Hypothetical brand trust model

By building brand consistency, honesty, and concern, the brand is able to capture customers' assurance that it is credible, supports permanent quality, is sincere, it is not going to harm their interest, and oversees their needs and wants in order to improve their satisfaction. In comparison to brand imagery and brand performance, brand trust describes the attitude of the consumer towards the brand and its role in his/her life – if it is considered as a credible source of information and a substantial basis for affiliation with the brand.

The overall brand trust construct could be useful in situations where it is important to detect if there is a breach of trust in the brand, while the

dimensions are useful in tracking the strength, health and depth of trust. As the relationships are characterised in a temporal dimension, trust must be monitored regularly in order to effectively manage brand equity.

2.2 Incorporating brand trust in the model of brand equity

Denoting brand trust as a powerful source of brand equity which depends on prior interaction with the brand, the model of brand equity must include the construct as an intermediary variable (mediator). This suggestion is in line with the brand resonance pyramid and some of the existing research (Shafaei, Nejati, & Maadad, 2019; Delgado-Ballester & Manuera-Aleman, 2005; Keller & Aaker, 1992). The first level is associated with deep and broad awareness of the brand which serves as linking diverse nodes in memory that store brand information. When consumers are aware of brands and their qualities, they are in the state where they could judge their ability and willingness to provide what is promised and secure their customer's interests and wellbeing. In this sense, the following conceptual model is proposed:

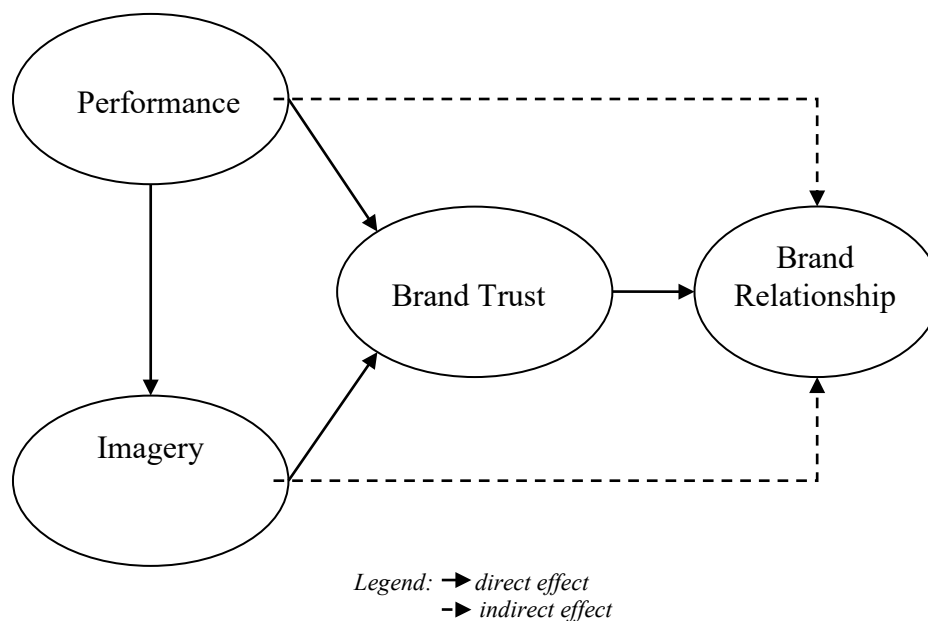


Figure 4: Hypothetical model of brand equity

The presented model in Figure 4 serves to designate the complex relationships in the model of brand equity, on the one hand, and the yet unclear constructs that remain represented by brand relationship (attitudinal loyalty, attachment, engagement, and commitment with the brand according to the brand resonance model of Keller (2001)). The importance of brand trust in the

model arises with its role as a human characteristic of brand-consumer relationships. The lack of empirical evidence demands for future research on the topic and validation of the proposed model.

3. Discussion

In the present research, brand trust is considered as the willingness of the brand to fulfil its promises by being consistent, honest to the customer and sensitive to his wellbeing. As a result of the current analysis, we assume that brand trust is a complex variable in the model of brand equity, represented by three dimensions: *consistency*, *honesty*, and *concern*, which defines the strength of the relationship between brands and consumers. The three-dimensional structure is novel and requires further elucidation and validation. A model of brand equity including brand trust is proposed in order to denote its place and causalities with the other constructs.

The literature that includes brand trust as an element of brand equity is scarce and reveals different approaches for its integration. This paper is limited to the discussed research outputs. Another constrain of the analysis is the lack of empirical validation of the results which could be a research problem of future research. The validation and specification of the construct in the domain of brand equity as an element of the brand judgments and the brand resonance pyramid as well as on the relationships in the model of brand equity (full or partial mediation) have yet to be addressed.

Conclusion

The research purpose is to analyse the literature on brand trust and its application as a driver of brand equity as a consumer-based construct. The inclusion of brand trust derives from the brand-consumer relationship concept and according to the brand resonance model it is one of the determinants of brand equity. Six operationalisations of brand trust are presented, analysed and grouped into three main dimensions: *consistency*, *honesty*, and *concern*. The provided novel classification demands for further validation and practical implementation in the brand equity research. As brand trust represents an important part in the creation of brand equity, it is considered as its driver, which mediates the effects of brand performance and brand imagery to the brand relationship constructs.

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СТОПАНСКА АКАДЕМИЯ „Д. А. ЦЕНОВ“ - СВИЦОВ

ГОДИШЕН

АЛМАНАХ
НАУЧНИ ИЗСЛЕДВАНИЯ
НА ДОКТОРАНТИ

НАУЧНИ ИЗСЛЕДВАНИЯ
НА ДОКТОРАНТИ

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Книга 15

Том XII, 2019 г.
Книга 15

Академично издателство
„ЦЕНОВ“ - Свищов

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ISSN 1313-6542

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НАУЧНИ ИЗСЛЕДВАНИЯ НА ДОКТОРАНТИ
Студии и статии
Том XII – 2019, книга 15

Даден за печат на 28.05.2020 г., излязъл от печат 02.06.2020 г.
Поръчка № 18464; формат 16/70/100; тираж 50

ISSN 1313-6542

Издателство и печат: Академично издателство „Ценов“
Свищов, ул. Градево № 24