The potential danger of negative free publicity for the consumer-brand relationship

Tolboom, M.; Bronner, F.; Smit, E.

Citation for published version (APA):

The objective of the European Advertising Academy (EAA) is to provide a professional association to academics and practitioners interested in advertising and its applications that will promote, disseminate and stimulate high quality research in the field.

Martin Eisend • Tobias Langner
Shintaro Okazaki (Eds.)

Advances in Advertising Research (Vol. III)

Current Insights and Future Trends

Springer Gabler

RESEARCH

Editors

Martin Eisend
European University Viadrina
Frankfurt (Oder), Germany

Tobias Langner
Bergische University Wuppertal,
Germany

Shintaro Okazaki
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid,
Spain

The Potential Danger of Negative Free Publicity for the Consumer-Brand Relationship

Maarten Tolboom, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Fred Bronner, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Edith Smit, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

1   Introduction

How can free publicity contribute to building high quality consumer-brand relationships or strong brands? This is an important question because building strong brands is the main objective of brand management. Consumers are more willing to receive communication messages from strong brands (Smit et al., 2007); consumers show a tendency to ignore negative communication more if it is related to strong brands (Oliver, 1999), and strong brands generate higher profits than weak brands (e.g. Bendapudi and Berry, 1997; Bendapudi and Leone, 2002; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Blackston, 2000; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; O'Malley and Tynan, 2001; Reichheld, 1996; Winer, 2001). Hence the aim of brand managers should be to establish high quality consumer-brand relationships.

However, little research has been conducted about the effects of free publicity in relation to the development of high quality consumer-brand relationships. Therefore, the overall objective of this research is to provide insight into how free publicity influences the consumer-brand relationship. We investigated the impact of free publicity on TV and free publicity in print in two different studies. In the first study, we investigate the relationship between negative free publicity on TV and consumer-brand relationship quality (BRQ). In the second study, we investigate the impact of positive and negative free publicity in print on BRQ in two stages of the consumer-brand relationship: the initiation stage and the maintenance stage. We first review the literature to give a perspective on this topic before going into the details of the study.

2   Theoretical background

2.1   Consumer-brand relationships

The fundamental characteristics of interpersonal relationships are used to describe consumer-brand relationships (e.g., Fournier, 1994, 1998). These funda-

mental characteristics are interdependence, temporality and perceived commitment (De Wulf et al., 2001; Hendrick and Hendrick, 2000; Hinde, 1997; Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult and Buunk, 1993; Rusbult et al., 1994).

The concept interdependence refers to the influence the brand has on the consumer and vice versa. Consumers and brands are interdependent because the brand fulfills needs for the consumer and the consumer gives his loyalty in return (buys the brand repeatedly).

The concept commitment refers to the wish to continue the relationship. If the consumer perceives the quality of the relationship as high, the probability that the he will continue the relationship with the brand increases which should result in repurchases of the brand. The brand relationship quality concept is an important concept because several researchers state that the difference between a strong and a weak brand lies in the level of brand relationship quality (Bendapudi and Leone, 2002; Fournier 1994, 1998). The higher the quality of the consumer-brand relationship, the stronger the brand. Fournier (1994, 1998) conceptualizes consumer-brand relationship quality (BRQ) as a construct with seven facets: (1) intimacy, (2) personal commitment, (3) passionate attachment, (4) love, (5) self-concept connection, (6) nostalgic connection and (7) partner quality (see figure 1) and the bond between the consumer and the brand is the strongest if the relationship is characterized with the existence of high levels of all seven facets.

The concept temporality refers to the duration of the relationship because a relationship is not one single moment in time but it stretches itself over time which means that interpersonal and consumer-brand relationships can develop over time (Dwyer et al., 1987; Levinger, 1980). Furthermore, it is believed that it needs time for consumer brand relationships to develop into relationships which are characterized by high levels of brand relationship quality via several stages (Bendapudi and Leone, 2002; De Wulf et al., 2001; Dwyer et al., 1987). These stages are described in the following sequential stages: initiation, growth, maintenance, deterioration, and dissolution. It is assumed that the brand relationship quality or the strength of the bond between two parties is the highest in the maintenance stage of the relationship and the lowest or non-existent in the initiation stage. From there, it grows until it reaches a certain maximum level in the maintenance stage of the relationship.

As remarked before, it is unclear how the quality of the consumer-brand relationship develops over time and how (negative) free publicity influences that development. The current studies give some insights into these questions.

2.2 The impact of negative free publicity on TV

To what extent is negative free publicity on TV harmful for the consumer-brand relationship? In interpersonal relationships, communication is essential for relationship development, every relationship starts with a first good impression of the other party (Hinde, 1997) and for starting interactions between two persons the exchange of information is a necessary condition (Aron et al., 1991).

The content of the message is considered a key element with regard to the impact on relationship quality (Nicholson et al., 2001). Showing that you understand the other party and sending the right messages stimulates the development of the relationship (Barber, 1983; Barnes, 1997) and sending the wrong messages can harm the relationship. Furthermore, if the communication message contains too much information or is negative, the quality of the relationship and as a result the development of the relationship could be harmed (Barber, 1983; Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Other research (Aaker et al., 2004) suggests that transgressions of the consumer-brand relationship can harm the development which implies the possibility that consumers will doubt their next purchase of the brand. We expect the same process to occur in the relationship between consumers and brands. Free publicity communicates a brand message to consumers and influences the quality of the relationship positive or negative, depending on content of the message. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: Free publicity via TV with a negative content has in general a negative impact on the quality of the consumer-brand relationship (BRQ) and will result in a lower future buying intention.

2.3 The impact of negative free publicity in print in different relationship stages

Is the impact of negative free publicity in print different in different relationship stages? Interpersonal theory suggests that negative communication is especially harmful in early stages of the relationship (Barber, 1983; Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Furthermore, individuals develop cognitive filters in interpersonal relationships in the maintenance phase for negative information with the purpose of maintaining the relationship quality in the relationship (Buunk and Van Yperen, 1991). A similar phenomenon seems to occur among consumers (Oliver, 1999). Consumers are less vulnerable to negative information about brands or information from competing brands if their level of loyalty is high and the relationship is more developed. This suggests that negative free publicity has more impact on BRQ in the initiation stage compared to the maintenance stage. Therefore we hypothesize:

H2: Free publicity with a negative content does influence the initiation stage of the consumer-brand relationship more compared to the maintenance stage of the consumer-brand relationship with regard to BRQ.

3   Negative free publicity on TV study

3.1   Research design

In order to evaluate the effect of negative free publicity, we interviewed 527 viewers of a TV program with a negative message about a brand. We asked these viewers if they had seen the item with the negative brand message. In total 187 viewers reported that they did see the item and 340 viewers reported that they did not see the item (table 1). To evaluate the impact of the negative free publicity, we compared the BRQ for the group respondents who did see the item with the group who did not see the item. To evaluate the impact of BRQ on the future buying intention, we compared the BRQ level with the future buying intention.

Table 1: Research design

Screening	Nr. of viewers of the program	Item seen	Item not seen
N=4200	N=527	N=187	N=340

3.2   Data collection

The viewers of the program were detected by means of the screening of TNS NIPObase which is an access panel consisting out of 200,000 potential Dutch respondents. The participants in the access panel are screened using a variety of research instruments, are selected for studies on a rotating basis, which minimizes participant fatigue, and are rewarded for their participation (Bronner et al., 2003). After the screening, viewers of the program received a questionnaire by means of computer assisted web interviewing (CAWI). Fieldwork was carried out by the market research agency TNS NIPO.

3.3   Content of the negative message

The 'experimental' variable was the negative message shown in the TV program. The TV program showed an item about eye tests. In this program, a person was tested by an eye doctor. This person was also tested by an optician from an optician brand. In this test, the measurement by the optician from the optician brand differed in a negative way from the measurement by the eye doctor and the comments in the TV program stated that the optician test was executed poorly.

3.4   Dependent variables

As dependent variable we used brand relationship quality (BRQ). To measure BRQ we used the reduced 8-item BRQ scale of Fournier (1994). In a previous study the scale was translated and combined with the four-item trust scale of Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and used in an online study with ten different brands and a total of 1,972 users of one of the brands (Smit et al., 2004; Tolboom, 2004;). This study reduced the BRQ instrument to a reliable and more practical instrument of 8 items (7-point scale). We applied this reduced BRQ scale to our present study (table 2). To measure future buying intention, we used a future buying intention question (table 3).

Table 2: BRQ measurement

Facets	Items
Passionate attachment	Something would definitely miss in my life when X would not exist anymore
Intimacy	It feels like I know X for a long time
Self connection	X and I have lots in common
Nostalgic connection	X will always reminds me of a certain period in my life
Love	If it is about <category>, X is my most favorite brand
Partner quality	X has always been good to me
Personal commitment	X can always count on me
Trust	I trust X

Table 3: Future buying intention measurement

	Item
Future Buying Intention	To what extent has this item influenced your consideration to visit <brand> for buying spectacles and/or contact lenses?

3.5   Group characteristics respondents 'item seen' versus 'item not seen'

Respondents in both groups did not differ significantly with regard to sex and age. However, respondents who did see the item did wear more often spectacles (76% wears spectacles) compared to the group who did not see the item (67% wears spectacles). To check if spectacle wearers differ from non spectacle wearers with regard to BRQ, we compared the overall mean BRQ score for both

groups. The overall BRQ score is computed as the arithmetic mean of the 8-item BRQ scale. The mean BRQ scores did not differ significantly (mean spectacle wearers = 2,70; mean non spectacle wearers = 2,83; oneway ANOVA; F(1,069); p=.32).

3.6   Results

We expected that free publicity with a negative content has in general a negative impact on the consumer-brand relationship with regard to BRQ and will result in a lower future buying intention (H1). Overall, the results confirm our expectations (table 4). With respect to BRQ, only the relationship facet *nostalgic connection* is not affected by the negative free publicity when compared to viewers who didn't see the item. All other BRQ aspects are significantly affected. Interesting to see is that the absolute difference scores are highest for the relationship dimensions *love, partner quality, self connection* and *trust*. Furthermore, a clear relationship exists between the overall BRQ score and future buying intention (r=.44, p<.01).

Table 4: BRQ differences for item seen or not seen

Relationship facets	Item seen? YES	Item seen? NO	Absolute difference
Passionate attachment	1.98	2.16 *	0.18
Intimacy	2.36	2.75 **	**0.39**
Self connection	2.81	3.13*	0.32
Nostalgic connection	2.75	3.34**	**0.59**
Love	2.24	2.72**	**0.48**
Partner quality	2.35	2.43	0.08
Personal commitment	2.44	2.76*	0.32
Trust	3.20	3.83**	**0.63**

*Mean scores on 7-point scale (1=totally disagree, 7=totally agree); * significant different average mean BRQ score in the same row between viewers who did see the item versus viewers who did not see the item (p<.05); ** significant difference p<.01 based on one way ANOVA.

4   Negative free publicity in print study

4.1   Data collection

The study utilizes interviews with users (customers) (n=617) of an investment firm brand and non-users (prospects) (n=546). Two methods were used to collect the data. For non-users (prospects) computer assisted self interviewing (CASI)

and for users (customers) computer assisted web interviewing (CAWI) was carried out by the market research agency TNS NIPO and the procedure for selection was identical to the previous study. To approach users the investment firm provided a data file with a random selection of email addresses from their own clients. Respondents in both samples shared the same consumer profile and are identical with regard to the demographics age, education, social class, sex and income.

4.2   Research design

We used an experiment which was executed with two different target groups (customers and prospects). Customers were assumed to be in the maintenance stage of the relationship and prospects in the initiation stage (e.g., Bendapudi and Berry, 1997; Dowling, 2002; Dwyer et al., 1987). The experimental variable consisted of one positively rated free publicity message suited for relationship building and one negatively rated free publicity message that was not suited for relationship building by means of an evaluation of three media expert judges. The positive condition contained positive information about the financial product performance of the consumer products. The negative condition contained negative information about the financial product performance of the consumer products. In total we investigated 4 independent samples.

4.3   Dependent variable

As dependent variable we used brand relationship quality (BRQ). To measure BRQ we used the reduced 39-item BRQ scale of Fournier (1994) (see table 1).

4.4   Results

We expected that free publicity with a negative content does influence the initiation stage of the consumer-brand relationship more compared to the maintenance stage of the consumer-brand relationship with regard to BRQ (H2).

The results confirm our expectations. The negative free publicity condition affected the initiation stage of the relationship more compared with the maintenance stage if we compare the absolute differences between BRQ means in the initiation stage versus the maintenance stage (see table 5 and 6).

Table 5: Differences in BRQ for the initiation stage (prospects)

BRQ	Free publicity with positive content	Free publicity with negative content	Absolute difference BRQ means
Passionate attachment	1.98	1.89	.09
Intimacy	2.73	2.42	.31
Self connection	3.33	3.10	.23
Nostalgic connection	4.00	4.00	.00
Love	2.32	2.30	.02
Partner quality	2.52	2.43	.09
Personal commitment	2.95	2.50*	.45
Trust	4.50	4.30	.20

Mean scores on 7-point scale (1=totally disagree, 7=totally agree); * means a significant different average score in the same row between the positive and the negative condition (p<.05) based on ANOVA with post hoc tests (LSD).

Table 6: Differences in BRQ for the maintenance stage (customers)

BRQ	Free publicity with positive content	Free publicity with negative content	Absolute difference BRQ means
Passionate attachment	2.64	2.62	.02
Intimacy	3.89	3.72	.17
Self connection	4.46	4.58	.12
Nostalgic connection	4.47	4.42	.05
Love	3.23	3.33	.10
Partner quality	3.18	3.22	.04
Personal commitment	4.53	4.30	.23
Trust	5.45	5.38	.07

Mean scores on 7-point scale (1=totally disagree, 7=totally agree); * means a significant different average score in the same row between the positive and the negative condition (p<.05) based on ANOVA with post hoc tests (LSD).

5   Discussion

First of all, the results suggest that negative free publicity, both in print and on TV, do harm the consumer-brand relationships. Interesting to see is that the relationship dimensions *love, partner quality, self connection* and *trust* are most affected by the negative free publicity on TV. This suggests that consumers who did see the negative message feel less *love* for the brand. The brand as a partner in the relationship is also more doubted. Furthermore, consumers feel less connected with the brand in the sense that they see less similarities which suggests that consumers are less willing to identify with a brand as a partner of which is badly spoken. And finally, the brand is less trusted which is maybe the most harmful consequence of the negative free publicity because of the importance of trust in the development and continuation of relationships (De Wulf et al., 2001; Hendrick and Hendrick, 2000). Furthermore, the relationship (correlation) BRQ and future buying intentions suggest indeed that the negative free publicity - which we call a negative relationship event - is a major threat for the continuation of the consumer-brand relationship. With regard to the impact of negative free publicity in print in different relationship stages, the results suggest that it is most harmful in the initiation stage of the relationship.

The question is of it is possible for the brand manager to repair the damage by means of countering the arguments given in the TV program and in print. The results suggest that counter argumentation could be a successful strategy because the positive free publicity condition resulted in most cases in higher BRQ scores. Furthermore, earlier research shows that messages with a positive content have a positive influence (Barnes, 1997). Therefore, a possible solution for the brand manager could be to develop communication which stresses the expertise of the brand in various media in order to rebuild the trust in the brand. When the brand manager has to prioritize in marketing activities, it would make sense to start with rebuilding trust because this relationship dimension was most harmed.

To conclude, the effect of free publicity on the quality of the consumer-brand relationship should not be underestimated. The negative free publicity message harms in this research especially the relationship dimensions love, partner quality, self connection and trust which can result in relationship deterioration and can prevent further development. Because brand managers can't control free publicity they should think beforehand about counter communication strategies when a negative free publicity occurs in the media.

One of the limitations of this study is the examination of only one product category and the fact that the effects of the negative free publicity message is not measured in different relationship stage. It would be interesting to see if consumers who have already a strong consumer-brand relationship are less affected

by the negative message which is suggested by earlier research (e.g., Oliver, 1999).

Another limitation of this study is that we had to use a screening to find viewers of the program. This meant that we did not have control over the characteristics of both groups such as background variables sex, age or wearing spectacles or not. Fortunately, both groups were comparable with regard to sex and age. The group respondents who did see the item contained more spectacle wearers compared to the group who did not see the item. However, the mean BRQ scores did not differ significantly between spectacle wearers and non spectacle wearers. This is important because it means that BRQ differences between both groups cannot be caused by the fact that a respondent is wearing a spectacle or not.

The advantage of the study is the use of a real live situation (impact of negative free publicity in a TV program) and the use of 'real consumers' for the research and not students. It comes closer to everyday reality compared to controlled experiments in a laboratory environment which increases the reliability of the results.

Further research is needed to add more different brands to our database, and also to vary more on different media or other marketing strategies with respect to the influence on the several stages in the development of the consumer-brand relationship.

6   References

Aaker, J.; Fournier, S. and S. A. Brasel (2004), "When Good Brands Do Bad," in: *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(1), 1-16.
Aron, A.; Aron, E. N.; Tudor and G. Nelson (1991), "Close Relationships as Including Other in the Self," in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(2), 241-252.
Barber, B. (1983), "The Logic and Limit of Trust," New Brunswick, N.J. Rutgers University Press.
Barnes, J. G. (1997), "Closeness, Strength, and Satisfaction: Examining the Nature of Relationships between Providers of Financial Services and their Retail Customers," in: *Psychology & Marketing*, 14(8), 765-790.
Baumeister, R. F. and M. R. Leary (1995), "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497-529.
Bendapudi, N. and L. L. Berry (1997), "Customers Motivations for Maintaining Relationships With Service Providers," in: *Journal of Retailing*, 73(1), 15-37.
Bendapudi, N. and R. P. Leone, (2002), "Managing Business-to-Business Customer Relationships Following Key Contact Employee Turnover in a Vendor Firm," in: *Journal of Marketing*, 66(2), 83-101.
Blackston, M. (2000), "Building Brand Equity by Managing the Brand's Relationship," in: *Journal of Advertising Research*, 40(6), 101-105.
Bhattacharya, C. B. and S. Sen (2003), "Consumer-Company Identification: A Framework for understanding Consumers Relationships with Companies," in: *Journal of Marketing*, 67(2), 76-88.

Bronner, A. E.; Tchaoussoglou, C. and R. Ross (2003), "The Virtual Interviewer," in: *Worldwide Readership Research Symposium Proceedings*, 11(10), 121-130.
Buunk, B. P. and N. W. van Yperen (1991), "Referential Comparisons, Relational Comparisons, and Exchange Orientation: Their Relation to Marital Satisfaction," in: *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 17(6), 709-717.
Chaudhuri, A. and M. B. Holbrook (2001), "The Chain of Effects from Brand Trust and Brand Affect to Brand Performance: The Role of Brand Loyalty," in: *Journal of Marketing*, 65(2), 81-93.
Desmet, P. M. A. (2002), "Designing Emotions," Dissertation, TU Delft.
Dwyer, R.; Schurr, P. and S. Oh (1987), "Developing Buyer-Seller Relationships," in: *Journal of Marketing*, 51(4), 11-27.
Fournier, S. M. (1994), "A Consumer-Brand Relationship Framework for Strategic Brand Management," in: Doctoral Dissertation, University of Florida.
Fournier, S. M. (1998), "Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research," in: *Journal of Consumer Research*, 24(4), 343-373.
Hendrick, C. and S. S. Hendrick (2000), "Close Relationships: A Sourcebook," in: Thousand Oaks, CA: Saga Publications.
Hinde, R. A. (1997), "Relationships: A Dialectic Perspective," in: Hove, East Sussex: Psychology Press an imprint of Erlbaum (UK) Taylor & Francis Ltd.
Levinger, G. (1980), "Toward the Analysis of Close Relationships," in: *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 16(6), 510-544.
Morgan, R. M. and S. D. Hunt (1994), "The Commitment-trust Theory of Relationship Marketing," in: *Journal of Marketing*, 58(3), 20-38.
Nicholson, C. Y.; Compeau, L. D. and R. Sethi (2001), "The Role of Interpersonal Liking in Building Trust in Long-term Channel Relationships," in: *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 29(1), 3-15.
O'Malley, L. and C. Tynan (2001), "Reframing Relationship Marketing for Consumer Markets," in: *Interactive Marketing*, 2(3), 240-246.
Oliver, R. L. (1999), "Whence Consumer Loyalty?," in: *Journal of Marketing*, 63(4), 33-44.
Petty, R. E. and J. T. Cacioppo (1986), "Communication and Persuasion: Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change," New York: Springer.
Reichheld, F. (1996), "The Loyalty Effect," Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
Rusbult, C. E. and B. P. Buunk (1993), "Commitment Processes in Close Relationships: An Interdependence Analysis. Special Issue: Relational Maintenance," in: *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 10(2), 175-204.
Rusbult, C. E. (1983), "A Longitudinal Test of the Investment Model: The Development (and Deterioration) of Satisfaction and Commitment in Heterosexual Involvements," in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45(1), 101-117.
Rusbult, C. E.; Drigotas, S. M. and J. Verette (1994), "The Investment Model: An Interdependence Analysis of Commitment Processes and Relationship Maintenance Phenomena," in: D.J. Canary, L. Stafford (eds.), *Communication and Relational Maintenance*, San Diego: Academic Press, 115-139.
Smit, E. G.; Tolboom, M. E. and G. Franzen (2004), "Your Brand Loves You, But Do You Love Your Brand?," Third International Conference on Research in Advertising, Oslo, Norway.
Smit, E. G.; Bronner, A. E. and M. E. Tolboom (2007), "Relationship Quality and Its Value for Personal Contact," in: *Journal of Business Research*, 60(6), 627-633.
Sternberg, R. J. (1997), "Construct Validation of a Triangular Love Scale," in: *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 27(3), 313-335.
Tolboom, M. E. (2004) "Een Merk als Vriend? De Relatiemetafoor Toegepast op Consument en Merk," Amsterdam: SWOCC.
Tolboom, M. E.; Smit, E. G. and A. E. Bronner (2008), "Media Influences on the Development of Strong Consumer-Brand Relationships," Seventh International Conference on Research in Advertising, Antwerp, Belgium.

Winer, R. (2001), "A Framework for Customer Relationship Management," in: *California Management Review*, 43(4), 89-105.

Wulf, K. D.; Odekerken-Schröder G. and D. Iacobucci (2001), "Investments in Consumer Relationships: A Cross-country and Cross-industry Exploration," in: *Journal of Marketing*, 65(3), 33-50.