Emerging Challenges For Brand Management: Anti-consumption And Brand Avoidance

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Abstract:
The negative perception amongst consumers for a brand is the biggest challenge for brand managers. Understanding that there could be multiple reasons for the negative perception towards a brand is very important. Monitoring the various sources of negative perceptions as a construct facilitates brand management. Such a construct is termed as brand avoidance in marketing literature. Brand avoidance is defined as incidents in which consumers deliberately choose to reject a brand. This study discusses various sources/reasons of brand avoidance: experiential avoidance, identity avoidance and moral avoidance. Understanding of sources/reasons brings brand avoidance to the core of brand management. This study aims to discover why consumers place certain brands into their inept sets and anti-choice constellations. An in-depth understanding of brand avoidance facilitates the efforts of brand management as all possible sources of brand avoidance are regularly monitored and necessary corrective measures may be taken by the brand managers.

Keywords: Brand Management, Anti-consumption, Brand Avoidance

Introduction
The negative perception towards a brand has been generally studied in a very fragmented way till recently. However researchers have started focusing on a holistic understanding of reasons/sources of these negative perceptions towards a brand. This research involves extensive literature review on the subject and brings out the various types of brand avoidance and how brand management needs to handle these challenges. It is important to note that brand avoidance discusses only the active rejection of the brands; it does not explore the incidents where consumers have financial or accessibility constraints. It may be noted that brand switching and brand avoidance are different from each-other. Brand switching refers to change from one brand to another; in contrast, brand avoidance focuses more specifically on deliberate rejection of brands. The paper has been divided into three parts. The first part discusses various causal factors leading to different types of brand avoidance. An in-depth understanding of brand avoidance is mandatory for identifying the major factors leading to this phenomenon. The second part of the paper discusses how each type of brand avoidance

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may be overcome to enhance a brand's equity amongst its all stakeholders.

**Literature Review**

Three main categories of brand avoidance emerged from the literature:

**Experiential avoidance: unmet expectations**
The experiential avoidance may be defined as the failure to meet; mythic expectations, the level of service provided, poor performance, store environment as major reasons for experiential avoidance. The poor performances of brands which are not well known, results in avoidance of the retailers who sell them. It may be noted that negative experiences are a salient reason for brand avoidance. Brand consumption experiences that are negatively disconfirmed lead to dissatisfaction and subsequent avoidance of the brand, this concept is reflected in both product and service brands. Although the consumers buy different products for different reasons, the most basic expectation is adequate performance. If a product fails to function/perform as expected, the consumer may reconstruct the associated brand to signify a likelihood of an unmet expectation and may avoid the brand on future occasions.

**Identity avoidance: symbolic incongruence**
The second reason for brand avoidance found is identity avoidance. The main themes found are: dis-identification with brands, negative reference group perceptions, perceptions of in-authenticity of brands and de-individuation. It is observed that consumers choose to dis-identify with those brands which represent their perception of undesired self. Consumers may avoid certain brand because they perceive the types of persons that conspicuously consume that brand are inauthentic. This is an undesirable trait that consumers do not want to incorporate into their self-concept. Consequently consumers avoid being associated with a brand because of negative/ inauthentic identity exhibited by its stereotypical users. Deindividuation avoidance occurs when brand consumption may lead to a loss of identity. Consumers avoid a brand which is perceived to be too commercialized and used by majority of the consumers. Some consumers believe that using such brands subsumes an individual identity.

**Moral avoidance: Ideological incompatibility**
This study finds two main moral avoidance themes: consumer cynicism and country of origin (COO) effects. Consumer cynicism is consumer's general distrust of corporations and the cynical belief that big corporations use manipulative business practices. The consumers see the corporate social responsibility exercises as a manipulative marketing ploy of such big corporations. Although consumers now demand social responsibility, they are also suspicious and cynical that such initiatives are motivated by public relations rather than altruistic objectives. This cynicism is based on the belief that a corporation can not be altruistic without expecting return on investment. Anti-consumption also builds from the associations that consumers have of brand's COO. The basic premise of COO is that knowledge of a brand's origin influences consumer's attitude and behaviour towards that brand. Also related to COO is the sub-theme of financial patriotism. Some consumers prefer local brands over MNC
brands. This is due to consumers' belief that local business contributes more to the domestic economy and local community.

**Brand Management Strategies for Facing Brand Avoidance and Anti-consumption**

The avoidance barriers; lack of alternatives, inertia, influence of others discovered in research are quite intuitive in nature. The marketers need to prepare strategies for each type of brand avoidance. Experiential avoidance (EA) can be managed by understanding the major reasons for it. The researches have shown that poor interaction quality and complaint handling are the main reasons for EA. The firms must train their complaint handling executives to handle the emotional outburst of consumers and ensure that they maintain reasonable interaction quality even during consumer's outburst. Once consumers relieve their emotional reaction to the problem their view of problem becomes more rational. The firms should also develop complaint handling system and encourage consumers to register their complaints whenever they are dissatisfied with the firm. The personal complains are better than written process of complaint handling. Further complaint handling system should be integrated with product and service improvement processes.

Identity avoidance can be managed by understanding the target consumers and how these consumers are changing over a period of time. The firm must regularly audit its brand image to ensure that it is congruent with the desired self concepts of its target consumers. It may be extremely important to consider the impact of major changes in marketing strategies on the image of a brand in the minds of its existing target customers; e.g. if a premium brand targeting higher income consumers is planning a down market stretch to serve the upper income consumers, it must consider the impact of such a move on its existing customers. Whether the brand manager is going to use the same brand name for both the segments and brand extension strategy or two different names for the brands aimed at two different segments of the market.

Moral brand avoidance is a challenge for marketers. Moral avoidance reasons may be results of short-term financial pressures, a lack of familiarity with socio-political issues and the sense that specialist in the public relations and legal department handle these sort of issues. Many forces resulting in moral avoidance find their roots in macro environment. The businesses must proactively scan the sociopolitical environment and they must prepare strategies to handle these issues. The firms must engage in interactions with NGOs, consumer bodies and governmental bodies to have a better insight on the emerging issues.

**Limitations and Future Direction for Research**

This study explores a relatively new area of consumer behaviour, deliberate rejection of brands by consumers. The research uncovers a multitude of reasons for brand avoidance; from unmet expectations, to symbolic incongruity, to ideological incompatibility. It identifies possibility of multi-dimensional nature of brand avoidance wherein more than one reason results in brand avoidance.

The research discovered unmet expectation, poor service levels and poor performance as reasons for experiential avoidance which are quite intuitive in nature. While experiential
avoidance (EA) of retailers when consumers fail to recall the poor performing brand they purchased from it is less intuitive. Future researchers may explore the impact of poor product quality (of brands not own by retailer) on the image of a retailer's image in the mind of consumers. Such a study may bring forth the importance of striking a balance between stocking brands which offer higher margins, presumably with relatively poor quality and detrimental effect of such brands on the image of retailers. However the study could not point towards the major factor which may lead to experiential avoidance in case of services. There could be multitude reasons for EA in context of services; e.g. functional quality, interaction quality and physical environment quality. The past researches have shown that poor interaction quality is the major factor for experiential avoidance of a brand for services where consumers have to be personally present for consumption of services. The future studies may explore EA in context of different types of services.

This study has been able to bring out only one kind of consumer reaction in response to their dissatisfaction with the brand/ firm i.e. avoidance of the brand. However consumers may show different kind of retaliatory behaviour when their expectations are not met; avoidance, consumption prevention and boycott. Consumption prevention is preventing the consumption of a brand by others as well. These consumers seek unlimited amounts of social support using negative word of mouth via internet (NWOM). Consumption prevention is not limited to spreading negative word of mouth; it also includes using ones professional expertise to prevent consumption by others and mixing up products at retailer's shelves etc. In fact consumption prevention could be bigger problem to brand managers because here consumers not only avoid a brand in a passive manner but also seek support from other consumers. The study does not show how personality differences can impact EA behaviour. Past researches have shown that consumers who are low in self esteem avoid complaining and/or feel bad after complaints have been made. There is high probability that such people will simply stop buying. While aggressive complainers (who are assertive, confident and high in self esteem) do not exit relationship more than other consumers, provided their complaints are properly processed. These aggressive complainers, if not properly handled, may actively promote the prevention of consumption of the brand under consumption.

The present research findings capture subtle differences in number of reasons which lead to identity avoidance (IA); negative reference group, lack of authenticity and a loss of individuality. But the findings could not point towards the role of significant others (opinion leaders) in avoidance of a brand. The researches have shown that role of significant others are significant in many product categories like apparel, footwear, cars etc. It does not investigate the impact of situations and circumstances on the avoidance behaviour.

The study found resistance of oppressive/ dominating forces (anti-hegemony) and consumer cynicism leading to moral avoidance. Moral avoidance also finds its roots in associations that consumers have of brand's country of origin (COO). It also discovers of 'financial patriotism' as sub-theme to COO. All the avoidance examples quoted in literature on brand avoidance belong to leading brands in their category (Nike, MacDonald). All of them are American brands which face avoidance. The research has not been able to point whether number two and number three brands are less prone to moral avoidance. The study also could not find out the role of anti-brand activists in influencing these consumers. It has been reported anti brand sites
using parodies and disparaging images/messages about iconic brands may dilute their brand images. The internet sites along with media news have played an important role in this. The future researches may explore these areas.

Conclusion
This research focuses on multidimensional reasons for brand avoidance. It presents a conceptual framework for anti-consumption and brand avoidance reasons. It broadens the understanding of brand management concept. The brand avoidance research is in initial stages of development. However studying negative perceptions and reactions towards a brand in a holistic way may facilitate brand management efforts. The next step would be to operationalize brand avoidance concept and develop testable hypotheses. The subsequent stage may research how brand avoidance differs across: services and products, product categories, countries and cultures, consumer personalities.

References: