Luxury perfume brands: Consumer Brand Relationship and the mature consumer

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Abstract

The heritage of luxury fashion perfume brands dates back to the early twentieth century with the first branded perfume, Rosine, being launched by French couturier Paul Poiret's. Many other perfume brands followed with many establishing a heritage and iconic status such as Chanel No. 5. Glamorous, stylish, fashionable or fun, perfume or scent is the evocative and personal product choice that provokes maximum stimulation of the senses. Floral, oriental, wood or fresh, the chemistry of perfume produces powerful consumer reactions. Perfume has a particular significance for its user and consumer (Cant, Strydom, Jooste, & Du Plessis, 2009). "When a woman buys perfume, she buys much, much more than simply fragrant fluids. The perfume image, its promises, its scent, its name and package, the company that makes it, the stores that sell it – all become a part of the total perfume product". The use of perfume is recognised as a significant part of daily grooming for all women. It has been argued that the basis for consumer decision-making in the area of perfume should be based on olfactory preferences responsive to smell, however the process related to this category of product has been shown to be more complex. However, recent research indicates declining sales for younger consumers but, no such decline for the mature consumer perfume market. Within this market the mature consumer purchase decision making is associated to long standing established fragrance brands. While recognition of this significant market and growing consumer group are in evidence it is recognised that advertising and marketing activity does not match the group's significance. As such, encouraging women of this age group to use fragrance more and by capitalising on brand loyalty (also associated with mature consumers), could be a key area for market development (Libby, 2014). At the

frontline of consumer perfume sales are fragrance consultants. With direct contact to the consumer, it affords these 'brand ambassadors' with invaluable information on consumer attitudes, brand attachment and brand relationship. Hence, this paper investigates CBR (Consumer Brand Relationship) through brand attachment and the subsequent purchase behaviour of mature female consumers (age +44) to perfume from a dual UK stakeholder (industry and consumer) perspective. Additionally in this research, attachment and the related notions of loyalty, nostalgia and self–identity are investigated. Results indicate that important perceptual differences related to consumer brand relationships with perfume exist between industry sales consultants and experts on one hand and consumers on the other. This research promotes a deeper understanding of current sales approach and issues surrounding female mature purchasing behaviour for this product category and complements the growing body of literature related to mature consumer behaviour and consumer brand relationship.

1. Introduction

Literature suggests that the mature consumers' purchasing decision-making is often linked to older or long standing brands (Lambert-Pandraud & Laurent, 2010), especially in the fragrance market. Older women are also most likely to remain loyal to a scent (Libby, 2014). A review of the perfume industry has found that the market has reached a certain level of saturation with approximately 300 new fragrances being launched onto the market on a yearly basis (Richmond, 2012) with an 85% rate of penetration amongst women consumers in the UK who use perfume as part of their grooming regime on a daily basis (Libby, 2014). Women are also responsible for over two-thirds of the total sales of fragrances in the UK and women's fragrances themselves make up 68% of the total offering on the market (Libby, 2014). Concurrently, the UK fragrance market is witnessing declining numbers of the previously profitable 25-34 year old consumers (Libby, 2014) and in addition, recent reports claim that the mature consumer (age range falling into this category is variably reported but for the purposes of this research is considered to be consumers over the age of 44) will account for over 32 per cent of purchasing transactions in 2016 (Verdict, 2014). However, this older age segment is under-represented in terms of advertising and marketing in the fragrance industry (Libby, 2014). In a society which is primarily youth centric, there is a need to focus understanding and address the issues related to targeting a 'new generation' of mature consumers. An opportunity in the market place has arisen with regards to mature women. Libby (2014) suggests that by encouraging women of this age group to use fragrance more and by capitalising on brand loyalty (also associated with this age group), this could be a key area for market development. In addition, the rise of pension age for women in the UK to 67 is creating a consumer group with a higher disposable income who are continuing their beauty routines in order to keep up their professional and personal appearance. Fragrance or perfume is defined by the website oxforddictionaries.com (2015) as a fragrant liquid typically made from essential oils extracted from flowers and spices used to give a pleasant smell to one's body. It has been noted that from the earliest civilisations, perfumers extracted essence from flowers and combined it with natural substances in order to create pleasant smelling essences for the body (Genders, 1972). Perfume has since taken on a particular significance for its user and consumer as portrayed by Cant et al. (2009:192). 3 When a woman buys perfume, she buys much, much more than simply fragrant fluids. The perfume image, its promises, its scent, its name and package, the company that makes it, the stores that sell it – all become a part of the total perfume product. Perfume is a strong symbolic product (Aaker, 1997) which has been shown to enhance selfesteem and lift moods (Edwards, 2015). It is also a product which can transcend different product categories as Rambourg (2015), in his market research on luxury products, places perfume at the base of the pyramid as an affordable luxury.

2. Theoretical background

Consumer Brand Relationship research stems from Fournier's (1998) seminal paper where she introduced the concept of consumers building relationships with brands (in the widest sense, including all particular iterations in terms of products/retailers/corporations or other symbolic entities), as a conduit for self-identity. This marks the starting point for the development of the concept of iterative relationship building between brands and people. Fetscherin & Heinrich (2015) recently published a meta-analysis of research stemming from the brand relationship model starting from Fournier's contribution and spanning many versions of the concept, from brand attachment, brand passion, brand love and brand romance amongst others. With Keller (2014:365) identifying just how important consumer brand relationship (CBR) is "CBR continues to be of critical importance to marketers in all types of industries and markets all over the world" the concept now plays an important part for all brands. Nobre et al. (2010) conceptual model indicates that many different factors; consumer personality, brand personality and partner quality, all come together to create CBR. Neudecker et al. (2013:24) further this thought by suggesting CBR changes the traditional consumer purchase decision-making process, which they suggest is "linear and onedimensional", by posturing that brand relationship is in fact multi-dimensional where variation from the linear approach is likely. As such, they recognised that a range of emotions, on the part of the consumer, comes into play when CBR is being considered. Hence, by quantifying and managing CBR, brands can strengthen consumer relationships by meeting their emotional and rational needs. Granot et al. (2010) also identify that retail consumer decision making is driven by the brand. The study revealed that female consumers use the brand as a fundamental element of the retail decision-making process, with three key themes emerging; emotional (brand), service (retail environment) and experiential (shopping and consumption). Brand attachment is defined as "having positive feelings of affection, passion, and connection for a brand" (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005, p. 78). Qing, Rong and 4 Xiaobing (2015) further propose consumers who become attached to a brand develop a strong loyalty and are willing to pay a premium price for that brand. They also suggest similarities between brand attachment and brand attitude in that both possess psychological constructs. However, Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich and Iacobucci (2010) identify distinct differences between attitude and attachment, with attitude connecting to the consumers' logic or 'head' whereas attachment connects to both logic and emotion or 'head' and 'heart'. As such they suggest the one dimensional aspect of brand attitude does not provide the most compelling predictor of consumer purchase behaviour whereas the two dimensional aspects of brand attachment provides greater predictability particularly in relation to purchase intention and brand loyalty (Park et al., 2010). Holt, 2004, 2005; Thomson, MacInnis and Park (2005) concur indicating strong brand loyalty is evident in consumers who experience emotional attachment to a brand. Further recognition was found in the brands ability to engender emotional satisfaction and loyalty and in particular how this flows back to brand perception and image. Hence, an emotional connection to the brand, on the part of the consumer, is critical to

developing strong and lasting bonds. It is recognised that consumers' emotional connections with brands stimulates purchases, consequently brands develop strategies to develop these emotional triggers, brand love and attachment. Albert & Merunka (2013) examined the feelings of 'love' that consumers can develop for brands. Albert & Merunka (2013:262) identified that love develops when a consumer believes a brand is reliable. It also suggests that two of the three trust dimensions (honesty, & reliability) heighten these feelings towards the brand. It was recognised however, that the third dimension of altruism, "recognised as the brands willingness to take consumers' interests into account" plays no role in altering feelings of 'love' for the brand. As such Albert & Merunka (2013:263) identifies that while consumers do not conform to all aspects of trust, it does however, play an important role in the development and sustainability of brand love. Brand personality, whereby non-physical human characteristics, are attributed to the brand, are used to create emotional bonds and in so doing, loyal consumers (Nobre et al.,2010; Keller, 2014). For consumers, brand personality allows them to form associations, impressions and preferences for brands such as Chanel; evoking glamour, style and upper social class which in turn links to consumer self-expression (Kim, 2000). Malär et al. (2011) recognised that brand attachment is accomplished by matching brand personality to that of the consumer 'self'. In particular cosmetics companies have promoted the concept that the use of their products will make users more appealing and bring them closer to their 'ideal self'. Orth 5 et al. (2010) discovered that brand attachment is influenced by how a consumer interacts with a brand's personality and how, considering Aaker's (1997) brand personalities, this can be a conduit through which consumers demonstrate self-expression. Bowlby (1979) first recognised that the degree of emotional attachment determines the way in which a consumer interacts and forms a relationship with a brand. However, Thomson et al. (2005) identified that, although consumers are exposed to many products and brands throughout their lives, only a small number develop into strong emotional attachments. Additionally, this research highlights the link between emotional attachment to a brand and its ability to predict brand loyalty and increases the consumer's acceptance for paying a premium price for the brand. Mature consumers have been the centre of research in many consumer related research. It is generally agreed that, although the mature consumer segment is generally a lucrative one, it is under-represented in terms of target marketing and attention from brands. It has been suggested in the literature that mature consumers can be innovative (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2001) and should be the prime target (often overlooked) for luxury brands (Gardyn, 2002). Inevitably linked to age, nostalgia, as a significant factor related to consumer decision-making has been researched by Holbrook & Schindler (1991) & Holbrook (1993) amongst others. Nostalgia research investigates the role that the past has on consumer habits and links it to age, where preferences towards brand and products fixed during sensitive or pivotal periods of life, are recalled or continued as brand preferences throughout adulthood (Schindler & Holbrook, 1993). In the context of fragrance choice, a fragrance industry report (Matthews, 2009), suggested that relationships with fragrances were lifelong and switching between brands was not considered a change but rather a parenthesis in the relationship

of the consumer and the perfume. Hence, this paper investigates CBR (Consumer Brand Relationship) through brand attachment of mature female consumers (age +44) in the UK to perfume from a dual stakeholder (industry and consumer) perspective.

3. Methods

Triangulation was used to increase validity and afford corroboration between data sources. As such data was gathered through qualitative interviews with fragrance consultants (hereby referred to as Consultants) (n=10) who were working within a perfume specialist or general beauty related UK retailer who had on-going direct contact with consumers, and industry professionals (n=4) (hereby referred to as Experts) (covering the functions of sales, marketing and general management) within significant companies involved in the UK perfume industry. 6 The purpose of the interviews was to gain an understanding of the industry view related to brand relationships consumers have in this context, with the resultant data being anylysed by way of Grounded Theory analysis to establish themes, patterns and concepts. Quantitative data was gained from consumers themselves in order to present a fuller picture of the characteristics and behaviour of this segment in relation to the purchasing of perfume products. A structured questionnaire was distributed to women at point of sale (aged 44+) (n=100), following the purchase of a perfume product from a specialist retailer within a busy shopping centre located in the centre of Glasgow. Due to the broad age range (+44-100) and in an attempt to create closer more congruent groupings the sample group was divided into three categories, 61% of respondents in the 44-60 age range (matures); 31% in the 61-75 range (older matures) and 8% in the 76+ range (grand matures). The questionnaire was selfadministered and analysed with SPSS by means comparison taking account of the three age categories and cross tabulation (Pearson Chi-Square) tests.

4. Results and discussion

Stakeholder implications related to brand loyalty for fragrances Past research has suggested that brand loyalty in the fragrance market can be low with only 18% of fragrance consumers overall who plan to stick to the same perfume. However, this research found that 53% of respondents have no plans to change their fragrance, illustrated by the response below: You would think it would be beneficial for fragrance companies to encourage brand loyalty, however if you have a mature consumer who only wears the one fragrance and only buys one bottle per year, it is very difficult to gain market share and profit maximisation. The older segment is not where the money is unfortunately (Expert) This research suggests that loyalty is also a more complex notion than for other fashion or luxury products as it intertwines deeply with areas of nostalgia, self–identity and brand attachment. Consultants, when asked why they thought mature women were loyal to particular brands, brought out many of these issues: I think from my experience for a lot of older ladies, the brand has a lot of influence. (Consultant) …comfortable with a fragrance and don't tend to change it. Fragrance is so personal, if

you find one that suits you and lasts on your skin, it would be difficult to move away from it. (Consultant) 7 Smell, one of the strongest human senses, has also been shown to exhibit a strong relationship with nostalgic tendencies which was verified by our results. I wore Miss Dior on my wedding day in 1987. I just adore the fragrance…It reminds me of happy times when I wear it. (Consumer) Recall of first owned fragrances is reported as very strong in this product segment (Matthews, 2009) and this does not diminish with age. In our sample, only 2% of respondents could not recall their first perfume. This result thereby introduces the paradox of this context, as results suggested that the women sampled do not wear their first fragrance and have not remained loyal to it although the attitude to the perfume remains positive. Nostalgic research suggests that brand preferences stay with consumers who have formed links in their pivotal early/late teenage years (Holbrok & Schindler, 1994). The discrepancy in this context is that a lifelong relationship can be built, through the olfactory conduit of the product, without the necessity of any further transaction between the product/brand and the consumer ever taking place. The actual scent is not the unique proposition of the product for consumers. Often, it is when the scent is associated with certain event or person that it creates a reaction and moves into the realms of nostalgia. A consultant mentions that: I would say that they tend to like a certain brand. [It is] very, very hard to get them to change from something they are used to and a lot of the time it reminds them of being younger and more so with your bigger brands like Guerlain and Dior. It reminds them of a certain era and they tend to stick to it. (Consultant) Brand loyalty, nurtured by nostalgic tendencies and attachment, which is encouraged in many other product categories, needs to be appraised differently in the fragrance industry, especially for mature women as it often does not translate into higher consumption or revenue for the brands. Brand Attachment Literature has suggested that brand attachment in this context grows with age (LambertPandraud and Laurent, 2010). We wanted to investigate if this was true within the mature category sub-divisions. A one-way between groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of different age categories on levels of attachment as measured by an adaptation of the attachment scale (Ball and Tasaki, 1992) which included 4 items an example of which is; imagine for a moment someone admiring your perfume. How much would you agree with the statement 'If someone praised my perfume, I would feel somewhat praised myself'. Respondents were divided into the 3 groups as described in the Methods above 8 (matures, older matures and grand matures). There was no statistically significant difference at the $p<.05$ level in attachment scores for the 3 age groups $F(2, 97)= 1.9$, $p=0.15$, However the mean which ranged from matures (M=11.33, SD=2.68) to older matures (M=10.35, SD=1.92) and grand matures (M=10.37, SD=1.68) indicated that all age groups showed a noteworthy attachment to their perfume as all scores were below the average score (=12). Although there is no significant difference in the age groups, mature women displayed strong feelings of self-identification with their perfume. In addition, language conveying emotional intensity was regularly used by interviewees and survey respondents in relation to interactions with fragrances.

Table 1 below presents the words mature consumers and consultants used to describe reactions in the event that a particular brand of perfume had been discontinued.

Consumers	Consultants
Annoyed Sad Upset Devastated Disappointed Panic	Upset Distraught Quite gutted and absolutely gutted Daunted Worried Disheartened Disappointed, very and totally disappointed Sadness devastated

Table 1: language of discontent for discontinued perfume brands

The strength and emotional intensity of the words could recognisably be attached to traumatic or important life events. These word associations are more unusual when related to a brand. This trend is particularly representative of mature consumers' reactions. I always find that they are more upset in comparison to younger people who don't really mind….I had somebody looking for Madame Rochas. She found it abroad and she's hiding it at the bottom of her wardrobe and using a spray a week because she wants to stick with it, she won't use anything else. She is actually keeping it in a box in the dark underneath all her clothes. So they tend to be a lot more upset. (Consultant) This research confirmed that self-identity was supplemented through the perfume choice as consultants also established a high incidence of brand engagement (shown through the purchase of product extensions such as body lotions etc…) in this product category. However, 9 it was more strongly posited by consultants than consumers, that scent is part of the presentation of a person and inputs to the recognition process for others: …it would be like there was something missing if they don't have their fragrance and a lot of the time as well, other people remember them wearing that fragrance and associate the person with the fragrance. If they don't wear their fragrance, they feel a part of them is missing. (Consultant) In contrast, only 46% of consumers responded positively to the statement "Do you have a 'signature perfume'". This discrepancy may be related to issues of trust and association with the brand. Trust is important for this segment of consumers and heritage/luxury brands can fit the image that mature consumers have of themselves, in contrast to some brands which may not be as aspirational. …they see it as themselves. It is more so with your couture brands like Dior and Chanel, like they buy into the lifestyle of it. The same with Hermès, they want to be what they believe the brand represents…they do want something that they are going to link up with. (Consultant) We also found that brand attachment to a fragrance can also extend to the retail outlet and sometimes the salesperson within the retail environment. Interviews with the consultants showed that consumers

often wanted to engage the salesperson and talk about their personal experiences related to the intended purchase and their memories/ representations associated with it. 5. Conclusions and industry recommendations Fragrance consumption is in a product category of its own as it often a symbolic product which involves a high level of involvement from the consumer although it is not always priced as such. Consumers purchase this product based on associative links and self-image or through emotional connections whether for themselves or by association and displacement. There are high levels of loyalty, nostalgia and attachment surrounding this product sector but there are some contrasting perceptions emanating from the industry and consumer view. Mature consumers are definitely a consumer segment apart in this market and should be considered in their own right by the fragrance brands. This creates implications for the industry, whereby the uniqueness, strong brand attachment and strength of this consumer group should be considered. At a brand level, the luxury fashion brands should develop communication strategies based on 'head' and 'heart' to create brand loyal consumers who form a life-long 'love' or attachment to the brand. At the retail level, connection with the sales 10 representative (brand ambassador) or retail outlet was found to generate increased brand attachment, as such the luxury fashion brands should consider the further development of consumer relationships and the development of sales environment conducive to that of the mature consumer.

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