

Dear Brand; This is why I Love or Hate you

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Abstract

Recent research highlights that many brands are polarizing, attracting both passionate supporters and strong detractors. Managers often deliberately cultivate strategies that embrace this diversity, nurturing intense brand passion and involvement, which in turn helps clarify the brand's positioning and strengthen audience engagement. However very little is known about brand polarization. Using qualitative data from 317 informants, this study focuses on brand polarization and seeks to classify the boundary conditions that cause consumers to perceive a brand as polarizing. While there is an extensive list of reasons presented in the data, preliminary findings confirm the existence of brand polarization and demonstrate that identical brand stimuli can elicit opposed responses from different consumers, resulting in the formation of contradictory yet strong feelings toward a brand. They suggest that brand polarization may stem from (a) brand characteristics or features, (b) associations with the brand and related entities, (c) current or past consumer experiences, or (d) critical brand incidents that carry symbolic or emotional significance.

Keywords

Brand polarization, brand love, brand hate, consumer-brand relationships, content analysis

Introduction

Brand love and brand hate are strong, deep, enduring and passionate forms of consumer–brand relationships (Fetscherin et al., 2019). Brand love, while in certain circumstances can turn to hate and cause negative consequences (Tolunay & Veloutsou, 2025), generally makes consumers perceive a brand as irreplaceable (Albert & Merunka, 2013) and leads to various positive managerial outcomes, driving individuals not only to talk positively about a brand (Batra et al., 2012); but also resist to negative information (Ahluwalia et al., 2000), defend the brand to others (Keller, 2009) and be willing to pay more to buy it (Thomson et al., 2005). Brand hate, is associated with negative consequences ranging from negative word-of-mouth and decrease in consumption (Fetscherin, 2019; Zarantonello et al., 2016) to retaliation, revenge (Fetscherin, 2019), or sabotaging (Kähr et al., 2016).

Research so far primarily focuses on strategies to cultivate positive consumer-brand relationships (Veloutsou & Guzmán, 2017) with recent, yet fewer, work appreciating that brands can benefit from brand negativity (Monahan et al., 2017), especially in the case of polarizing brands (Monahan et al., 2023). Brand polarization is “an affective phenomenon where beliefs and emotions of a significant number of people induce a simultaneous move to the extremes involving passionate positive and negative feelings and convictions towards the brand, like-minded consumers and opposite-minded consumers” (Osuna Ramírez et al. 2019, p.8). Polarizing brands carefully use curated strategies that create passionate large groups of lovers and haters (Monahan et al., 2023; Janiszewska & Insch, 2012; Jayasimha & Billore, 2015; Luo et al., 2013; Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019), have to carefully manage these lovers and haters (Luo et al., 2013) and strengthen the links with their audiences by nurturing “passion and involvement” to develop solid bonds (Janiszewska & Insch, 2012) and trust (Monahan et al., 2023) with their target audiences. These brands do not deal with the risk of being perceived indifferent and of disappearing within competition (Fetscherin et al., 2019) and are strong, enjoying high brand awareness, distinct brand image and personality (Luo et al., 2013), whilst facing and accepting negativity and the most extreme reactions from untargeted audiences (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023; Jayasimha & Billore, 2015). Negative reactions from the haters somehow support polarizing brands, in the sense that lovers will develop even stronger and passionate bonds with the brand, because of the ability to more strongly dissociate themselves from the haters (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2021). From this perspective, not only the brand but also its followers benefit from a polarization strategy (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019).

Polarization is an excellent positioning and differentiation strategy that needs to be appreciated and interpreted from different groups of consumers. However, not only there is scarce literature on brand polarization (Osuna Ramirez et al., 2024), but also most research focuses on the phenomenon from the brands’ perspective with respect to its benefits and shortcomings rather than concentrating on how it is perceived and interpreted by the consumers and implies that it is a deliberate phenomenon. Given that the marketing literature extensively documents that the same stimulus may not be perceived in the same or desired way by diverse groups (Aaker et al., 2000) and that each individual interprets the information in his/her own way and drives conclusions accordingly (Chang & Chieng, 2006), understanding the perspective of the consumer becomes very relevant as it will point out the drivers for brand polarization. There is very limited research on the drivers of brand polarization, let alone their effectiveness (Monahan et al., 2023; Osuna Ramírez et al., 2024). Prior consumer knowledge seems to shape consumers’

perceptions (Jayasimha & Billore, 2015), but, in an era that brand managers are losing control over their brands and the brand meaning formation to external audiences (Veloutsou & Delgado-Ballester, 2019), brands aiming to unitizing polarization may not be perceived as polarizing or benefiting from polarization as management desires or might have become polarizing unintentionally. Hence, building on scarce research, the aim of this exploratory study is to elaborate on brand polarization and to classify some boundary conditions that trigger the phenomenon and drive consumers to perceive a brand as polarizing.

Methodology/Approach

This study employed a qualitative research design, collecting data through an online survey with open-ended questions distributed within Turkey. Participants were presented with four questions: they were asked to identify a brand they love that they perceive others to hate, and a brand they hate that they believe others love, along with the reasoning for their choices. Demographic information was also collected. Data were collected from 317 informants ($Age_{\mu}=28.9$ $SD=8.3$ ranging from 18 to 60; 58.7% men). Due to incomplete responses, the final dataset comprised varying numbers of usable answers for each question: 302 responses on why participants love a brand, 182 quotes on why they believe others love a brand, 297 responses on why they hate a brand, and 185 responses on why they believe others hate a brand.

The demographic information is used to label the participants; for example, the quotation (M, 22.2) refers to the second male informant aged 22. The responses were analysed using line-by-line coding and thematic analysis.

Findings

Preliminary findings show that the brands that are loved or thought to be loved the most are also the ones that are highly hated or thought to be hated the most. In addition, most of them are among the strongest in their product categories, which confirms that differentiation using polarization creates opportunities for branding. Overall, there are 207 different brands stated by the informants. The first three among the loved and hated brands are exactly the same with Apple (45) being by far the first followed by LC Waikiki (a Turkish apparel brand) (22) and Samsung (20). McDonald's, Huawei and Zara are also among the ten mostly mentioned brands in both lists. In terms of the product categories apparel brands appeared by far the most (204), followed by FMCG brands (62), technology (29) and online and offline retailer brands (20).

The data analysis reveals that consumers may categorise brands as polarizing because of various characteristics/features of the brand, associations with the brand and with other brand entities, current or past experiences or critical incidents they have with the brand or what the brand can offer them as a symbolic or emotional benefit.

Different characteristics/features seen as important

Different positioning characteristics emphasized by brands are assessed in dissimilar manner from groups of consumers, leading these consumers to either love or hate the brand and thus to brand polarization. For instance, for Apple one informant (M, 22.1) stated "*I love Apple because it is innovative*", whereas (F, 40.1) wrote that "*I hate Apple. It is too posh and expensive; yet not much innovative anymore*". Burberry was also in this category since (F, 21.1) mentioned that "*I love Burberry for its high quality products*", while (M, 31.1) "*I hate Burberry as it signifies a specific class*". In response to brand competition, consumers interpret brand characteristics

differently. While F. 35.4 finds Apple products require too much effort and make life difficult., M. 24.10 hates Samsung as *“Android phones are unnecessarily complicated and cause a lot of freezing and lagging. I used to use a Samsung; it became my curse”*. Further within this category, reasons provided by informants for hating the brand were same or similar in nature to reasons for loving the same brand by others supporting previous research documenting in economics that polarization occurs when individuals react in conflicting ways even though they receive the same information (Baliga et al., 2013). Those reasons include but are not limited to quality, price and price/performance ratio. For instance, (F, 20.4) wrote for LCW (Turkish apparel brand): *“I love this brand because it produces stylish yet affordable pieces with acceptable quality”*, while (F, 19.1) that *“I hate LCW because its products are cheap and that signals poor quality to me”*. In a similar way, while being unique in terms of the features is provided as a reason for loving a brand, others perceive it as a difficulty for adoption. For instance, (M, 21.3) says for Apple: *“I feel special as I got used to using Apple”* but for (F, 36.5) Samsung is better as *“it is very similar to Windows”*. In a similar way Apple is both loved and hated because it offers an ecosystem with all products integrated to each other. F. 36.3 says *“You cannot use Apple products with other devices... This reduces flexibility”*. On the contrary, F. 35.1 responds: *“When I need to buy a tech product, such as a desktop or wearable, I always prioritize looking at Apple's products. This is because all of their devices are integrated with each other, which makes things much easier for me”*. The same controversy happens when brands do not change their main features. While some consumers view this as a symbol of brand consistency and appreciate its preservation of the core identity (F. 32.2: *“Starbucks provides good ambiance and coffee. Anywhere in the world, I know that Starbucks won't surprise me.....When there is a Starbucks store around, I know that I have a safe place to eat and drink good coffee”*); others perceive it as a lack of innovation and a sign of being out of date (M. 23.20: *“I hate Yemeksepeti (a Turkish food retailer) as they are the same for many years. They don't change at all”*).

Marketing strategies perceived differently

The disparity in consumer responses is not solely rooted in the divergent meanings consumers attribute to several features; it happens due to different consumers perceptions towards the same marketing strategy. For instance, some consumers support brands for having an affordable pricing strategy and see this as a reflection of the brand caring about its customers (F. 30.2) : *“LCW cares about their customer satisfaction. Their product price/quality ratio is amazing”*); while others perceive it just as a strategy to attract customers and hate it (M. 48.2: *Low quality products attracting too many people leading to crowded stores, not enough cashiers....”*). Advertising frequency and the way it is executed can also lead to polarization. F. 29.4 says *“I love Arçelik (a Turkish house appliances brand) Their commercials are everywhere (billboards, tv, internet etc.)*. On the other hand, M. 38.2 says for Trendyol (a Turkish online retailer): *“Overly aggressive advertising can be a nuisance. While high visibility may encourage sales, it can also dilute brand identity and lead to consumer antipathy”*. The same advertising can produce controversy among different consumers, leading to polarization. Having a large product portfolio may also generate diverse reactions among the consumers. For instance, M. 31.6 hates Samsung for having too many products, but F. 32.3 loves the brand as she can use all the different Samsung products at home.

Brand associations and/or associations with other entities

Consumers associate brands with other polarizing entities and these associations appear to create or enhance brand polarization. The data provided evidence for issues like brand nationality or

human brands as other entities brands are associated with. For instance, for Coca Cola one respondent (M, 34.2) wrote *"I hate Coca Cola. it is not a Turkish brand. It is an American brand"*, while another informant (F, 36.2) said *"I love Vestel especially Venus as it is domestic."* Further, within this category, (M, 39.1) indicated that *"I hate Coca Cola because of its political orientation"*. Personalities reflected by the owner or spokesperson to be affective in polarization was supported by statements such as *"I hate Nusret because of the owner's personality"* (M, 29, 1), or *"I hate Bambi (a Turkish shoe brand) because of Hülya Avşar (spokesperson). She is like a spoiled child"* (F, 36. 2).

Past experiences/critical incidents with the brand.

Previous experiences may shape consumers' perceptions of the brand and some of these experiences may have been generated in the distant past. Within this category consumers mentioned their positive or negative experiences with the brand and its employees that shaped their overall evaluations with the brand. Those were either related directly with the product/service or with aftersales. As an example (F, 22.4) said that *"My friends complained about Bershka's products. They say it is low quality. But I had no problems with the product or with the customer service. So, I love the brand"*. On the contrary, (M, 31. 1) suggested Turkish Telecom as the brand he hates yet others love since *"I had a very bad experience with the customer representative and will never use the service again"*. Another example comes from Samsung. F. 32.3 loves Samsung because she and her husband got a call and were invited to a movie gala by the brand but she also knows that the brand is hated by others. M. 24.5 is one of the haters and says: *"I think Samsung has not realized its "potential" according to its technologies. I really think they can do better in marketing, they can't do anything. For such a company, their PR is really low and unsuccessful. I get angry when I see this."*

Symbolic benefits-Consumer belonging to a group

Participants use brands to express their belongingness to a group or reflect their lifestyle. One example from the quotes stated that *"I love Fiat. All my friends use this brand"* (F, 40.1). The benefits of brand polarization reside in brand community membership (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) as well as in dissociative reference groups (White & Dahl, 2006) and individuals not only unite but also diverge to avoid an undesired identity (Berger & Heath, 2008). The intragroup identification and intergroup disidentification experienced by the polarising brands' users help them build their social identity around the brand, its lovers and its haters (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2019). So, the same brand is loved by some informants to be associated with a group while others hate it to disassociate themselves from a particular group. While Apple is one of the most controversial brand from this perspective with many consumers using the brand to reflect a social status and an identity it is hated by M. 23.14 as *"Because most people around me use apple brand products only for display. Nobody researches the features of the product. Most people just want that logo to appear while sitting at the table"*. For instance, one informant wrote *"I hate LCW because of the people who use it"* (F, 20.4). Jordan is loved by M. 2315 because it reflects the basketball lifestyle but is hated by others as it supports black basketball players. F. 22.10 reflects the effects of social media by stating that *"I used to dress too much from Mango before, but Most people wear Mango products and you can see the same clothes on others (like twins)"*. She continues *"Since we are in the digital age, many age groups follow people called 'influencers' on the internet. Therefore, many people dress from the Mango brand and recommend the products of that ratio."*

Emotional benefits – Memories

Informants recognised family or childhood memories as their reasons to love a brand others hate. For instance (M, 38. 1) declared that *“I love Ford even though I believe others hate it. It reflects my childhood.”* Similarly M, 55.1 says that he loves Casio *“.... my first watch was a Casio. They say you never forget your firsts. It's also very practical, and I think its price-to-performance ratio is quite high. I was only seven when my dad bought me a Casio, and I wore it and looked at it constantly, maybe every 20 seconds. Even answering this question makes me think of my childhood and brings back memories. I guess the Casio brand is actually etched into my subconscious along with all those memories”*. But he also believes that people hate the brand because *“the brand's prices are reasonable, they (people) can't show off by wearing the watch as a status symbol instead of a functional item; the brand is old; it is not very trendy in recent times.”* Consumer memories are often associated with a diverse array of brand-related stimuli, including advertisements and consumption environments. F. 37.2: *“My company's first ad campaign was with a celebrity who later became associated with "Genç Turkcell," and this made the brand valuable to me. Also, my first phone line was Turkcell (a Turkish cell-line provider), as everyone in my family used it, which was seen as a sign of prestige.”*

Conclusion

While there is extensive research on why consumers love and hate brands, research on the contingency conditions why different people feel so towards the same brand and the same brand stimuli is extensively under-researched. This qualitative study addresses a notable research gap by investigating the strategic effect of polarization used by prominent brands and aims to identify conditions that lead to brand polarization from the consumers' perspective. The findings reveal that consumers' expectations and evaluations in terms of the functional, symbolic, hedonic benefits provided by brands as well as brands' activities to convey their marketing strategies may be interpreted differently and may create polarization among the consumers. The findings of this study underscore the pivotal role of tangible benefits in strategic positioning within a polarizing context. Consumer evaluations of brand features are shaped by a combination of past experiences, brand communication, and the competitive landscape. This subjectivity, in turn, leads to divergent responses to an identical brand positioning. This phenomenon is exemplified by the Apple ecosystem, which is perceived by some consumers as a benefit due to its seamless integration, while others view it as a limiting and restrictive system.

While the function of brands as a tool for consumers to signal identity to like-minded individuals and distance themselves from others has been previously documented (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), this research highlights that such brand-mediated consumer behavior can be leveraged as a viable strategy by successful brands to strengthen their own identity. Furthermore, a key finding suggests that a strong brand heritage can confer a degree of immunity to negative sentiment from certain consumer segments, resulting in a large group of lovers due to associated shared memories in contrast to a similarly large group of haters. In addition, brand-related associations and critical incidents are utilized by consumers to formulate controversial brand evaluations.

This knowledge can help brands to design and foster more effective polarization and communication strategies and manage and nurture both brand lovers and brand haters. The findings can contribute to the overall understanding of consumer-brand relationships by exploring an under-researched area and thus add to theory and practice.

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