"Spreading the good word": Toward an understanding of brand evangelism

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to better understand the phenomenon of brand evangelism and the dimensions that are involved in a consumer becoming a brand evangelist. A brand evangelist is a consumer who communicates positive information, ideas, and feelings concerning a specific brand freely, and often times fervently, to others in a desire to influence consumption behavior. Through the development and testing of a model, this study helps to realize the concepts that are involved in a consumer becoming a brand evangelist. To date, little research has examined the dimensions of brand evangelism. It is proposed here that the attributes leading to brand evangelism include brand satisfaction, brand salience, consumer-brand identification, brand trust, and opinion leadership. The results of the study garnered some mixed results. It was found that consumer-brand identification, brand salience, brand trust, and opinion leadership are all concepts that lead to brand evangelism. However, brand satisfaction does not have a directly related statistically significant relationship with brand evangelism. It must be noted, though, that brand satisfaction does have a mediated relationship with brand evangelism through consumer-brand identification.

Keywords: brands, evangelism, consumer-brand identification, brand relationship

INTRODUCTION

The concept of brand evangelism is communicating positive information, ideas, and feelings concerning a specific brand freely, and often times fervently, to others in a desire to influence consumption behavior. Concepts similar to brand evangelists include champions (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Weiser 1995), inspirational consumers (Roberts 2004), advocates (Christopher, Payne, and Ballantyne 2002; Chung and Darke 2006; Rusticus 2006), brand zealots (Eighmey, Sar, and Anghelcev 2006; Rozanski, Baum, and Wolfsen 1999), volunteer salespeople (McConnell and Huba 2003), and customer apostles (Jones and Sasser 1995). As all of these descriptors have relatively the same connotation, the term "brand evangelism" will be used throughout this study denoting the same construct.

Brand evangelism is an extension of positive word-of-mouth communication. Although word-of-mouth communication is not necessarily founded on a persuasive viewpoint, brand evangelism is a mode of persuasion as the evangelist acts as an unpaid spokesperson on behalf of the brand. The communication by the evangelists may even be considered as "preaching" in an attempt to convert others to consume the brand.

Although there is engagement with other consumers about the brand, brand evangelists will also be proactive in communication with the brand's company (Weiser 1995). These communications may include complaints about the brand and potential solutions to those concerns. True devoted brand consumers and brand evangelists can even continue with the brand long after the brand has been discontinued by the originating company. For example, members of the Apple Newton (a personal electronic digital assistant) brand community continued to give advice and application development for a discontinued product while campaigning for the return of the product (Muniz and Schau 2005). Although unsuccessful in the campaign for the return of the Apple Newton, the sharing of information lasted several years after Apple's cessation of manufacturing and marketing of the product.

To date, little research has examined the attributes of brand evangelism. It is proposed that the constructs leading to brand evangelism include consumer-brand identification, brand satisfaction, brand salience, brand trust, and opinion leadership (See Figure 1). Consumer-brand identification is the consumer's self-defined perception of oneness and identification with a brand (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Kuenzel and Halliday 2008). Brand satisfaction, used here, is the pleasurable fulfillment of a consumer's needs, wants, or desires in reference to the brand (Oliver 1997). Brand salience is the unaided "top-of-mind awareness" that an individual possesses in reference to a product category (Alba and Chattopadhyay 1986; Miller and Berry 1998). Brand trust is the "willingness to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function" (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001, p. 82). Finally, opinion leadership is the degree to which certain individuals have an influence on other people's attitudes and behavior concerning a brand (Baumgarten 1975; Rogers 2003).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

As indicated in Figure 1 (Appendix), the following hypotheses are visualized in the proposed theoretical framework.

Consumer-Brand Identification and Brand Evangelism

Bhattacharya, Rao, and Glynn (1995) discovered that individuals who identified with a museum (consumer-museum identification) visited the museum more frequently than those who did not identify with the museum. This finding was the foundation of later research by Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) who later proposed that consumer-company identification will not only lead to company loyalty, but the consumer may become a "champion" on behalf of the company. A further study found that consumer-company identification has a positive effect on loyalty intentions (Marin, Ruiz, and Rubio 2009). Within the context of sports, Fisher and Wakefield (1998) found that a stronger identification with a sports team led to positive consumer behaviors (e.g., attendance and the purchasing of licensed products). From an organizational standpoint in social identity theory, individuals engage in supportive activities for organizations that are congruent with their identities (Ashforth and Mael 1989). To date, brand evangelism, has not been researched in relation to consumer-brand identification. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H_1: *The stronger the consumer-brand identification, the stronger the brand evangelism.*

Brand Satisfaction and Brand Evangelism

Satisfaction is the self-defined response to the pleasurable fulfillment of a consumer's needs, wants, or desires (Oliver 1997). It has been found that satisfied consumers are considered to be more likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth behavior (see De Matos and Rossi 2008 for review of the numerous studies supporting this relationship). A brand evangelist not only is considered to be emotionally loyal (Eighmey et al. 2006) but this consumer will be supportive of the brand and will have higher brand satisfaction than other consumers (Jones and Sasser 1995). As brand satisfaction influences word-of-mouth communication (Brown, Barry, Dacin, and Gunst 2005; De Matos and Rossi 2008), this gives credence to the hypothesized relationship of brand satisfaction and brand evangelism. Therefore:

H_2: *The stronger the brand satisfaction, the stronger the brand evangelism.*

Brand Salience and Brand Evangelism

An evangelist differs from a devoted customer (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Pimentel and Reynolds 2004). Consumer devotion transcends loyalty that survives brand and company scandals, poor performance, bad publicity, and other perceived reasons for brand switching. But, the devoted consumer does not necessarily proselytize the brand like a brand evangelist. The brand evangelist tends to think of the brand in many diverse scenarios because of brand salience.

Brand salience is not only top-of-mind awareness, but can be viewed as the frequency with which a consumer mentions the brand in a variety of situations (Romaniuk and Sharp 2003). Because of the often voluntary mentioning of a brand, there is support for the hypothesized relationship of brand salience and brand evangelism. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H_3: *The greater the brand salience, the stronger the brand evangelism.*

Brand Trust and Brand Evangelism

Past experiences of satisfaction and reliability with a brand establishes the "roots" of brand trust (Delgado- Ballester and Munuera-Aleman 2005). "The willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function" is the foundation of brand trust (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001, p. 82). Relationships of brand trust include a positive influence with brand love (Albert, Merunka and Vallette-Florence 2010) and with brand passion (Albert et al., 2012). Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H_4: *The stronger the brand trust, the stronger the brand evangelism.*

Opinion Leadership and Brand Evangelism

The foundation of being a brand opinion leader is for the consumer to be a product enthusiast. A product enthusiast is a consumer that demonstrates "high levels of product involvement that persist over time and across situations" (Bloch 1986, p. 51). As the enthusiast is sought out for information and advice, he/she moves into the category of being an opinion leader. Opinion leaders are considered a critical component to the diffusion of innovations (Rogers 2003). As these individuals tend to be innovators and early adopters, they "spread the word" about new product categories, product lines, and specific brands.

From the definition by Eighmey et al. (2006, p. 103), brand zealots are "consumers who frequently engage in brand-related opinion leadership, report high interest in identifying the best brands to buy, and regularly purchase the brand name products they favor." As seen here, equating brand zealots to brand evangelists, opinion leadership is considered a required dimension to being a brand evangelist. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H_5: *The stronger the opinion leadership, the stronger the brand evangelism.*

Brand Satisfaction and Consumer-Brand Identification

For the purposes of this research, the definition of consumer satisfaction is "a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment, including levels of under- or overfulfillment" (Oliver 1997, p. 13). The effect of consumer satisfaction on other constructs has varied concerning repurchase commitments, loyalty, and trust (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman 2001; Ha and Perks 2005; Olsen 2002; Park and Lee 2005). More importantly for this research, brand satisfaction has been shown to strengthen the quality of the consumer-brand relationship (Park and Lee 2005). It was also found that "the more satisfied a person is with an organization's offerings, the greater the identification" (Bhattacharya et al.1995, p. 48). The latter finding was further tested with mixed results. Arnett, German, and Hunt's (2003) study in the not-for-profit sector did not find a significant relationship of satisfaction and identification. However, Kuenzel and Halliday (2008) found that satisfaction significantly impacted the degree to which automobile owners identified with the car brand, and Mael and Ashforth (1992) discovered a relationship of alumni's satisfaction with the university and identification with that university.

For clarification within marketing literature, and to establish a significant relationship, it is hypothesized that:

H_6: *The stronger the brand satisfaction, the stronger the consumer-brand identification.*

Sociability as a Moderator of Opinion Leadership and Brand Evangelism

Sociable individuals like being with others and do not consider themselves as loners (Reynolds and Beatty 1999). There is an inherent characteristic that the individual gravitates to others and desires social interaction. A social person is not generally a passive participant in social interactions but is active in the engagement.

An opinion leader, as discussed previously and hypothesized earlier, has a positive relationship with being a brand evangelist. However, opinion leaders may need prompting to discuss product lines and brands. Sociability may be a moderator for the relationship of opinion leadership and brand evangelism. As discussed by Baron and Kenny (1986, p. 1174), a moderator is a "qualitative or quantitative variable that affects the direction and/or strengthen the relation between an independent and dependent or criterion variable." Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H7: Sociability positively strengthens the relationship between opinion leadership and brand evangelism.

Consumer-Brand Identification as a Mediator

In linking consumer-brand identification with brand evangelism, this study builds upon previous research (e.g., Ahearne, Bhattacharya, and Guen 2005; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) that suggests the more a consumer identifies with a brand, the more the consumer will be an advocate by "spreading the word" about the positive attributes of the brand. It has been previously hypothesized here (Hypothesis 2) that brand satisfaction will have a positive and significant effect on brand evangelism. However, this relationship does not take into account consumer-brand identification as a mediating variable. A mediator is any variable that "accounts for the relation between the predictor and the criterion" (Baron and Kenny 1986, p. 1176). Thus:

H8: Consumer-brand identification positively mediates the relationship between brand satisfaction and brand evangelism.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research method of this study was based on the implementation of self-administered questionnaires. The survey instrument was constructed by the researcher of this study and distributed through a data collection agency. In 2009, pre-screened individuals were chosen on their current consumption of "cult-like" goods or services (Belk and Tumbat 2005). The brands in the screening included Harley-Davidson motorcycles, Apple's iPhone mobile phones, MINI automobiles, and Saab automobiles. These products have been referenced within both marketing journals and the practitioner literature as having passionate, loyal consumers who have the propensity for fitting in the definition of being brand evangelists (Aaker 1992; Brown 2004; Fournier 2001; O'Guinn and Muniz 2004; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). A requirement for an individual to be chosen to participate in the survey was the ownership of one of the brands within the previous six months. There were no other screening requirements leading to a consumer to have a propensity to be an evangelist.

A total of 425 surveys were completed. Between 101 and 111 surveys were completed for each of the brands (110 surveys for Harley-Davidson, 103 for iPhone, 101 for MINI, and 111 for Saab). The overall ages range from 19 to 86 years old with the average age being 48.4

(median age of 49 years). The percentage of females nearly equals the percentage of males at 48% to 52%, respectively. The predominant category for ethnicity is White at 90.8% with other categories being Hispanic/Latino (3.3%), Asian (3.1%), and Black (2.1%). Income levels and education levels are varied with no specific category dominating. The multi-item scales used Likert-type scales anchored from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" on a 5-point continuum. Descriptive characteristics, Chronbach alphas, and correlations are listed in Table 1 (Appendix).

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test and estimate the causal paths of the proposed model. SEM was employed as a confirming modeling strategy utilizing a maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) procedure. The findings for the absolute fit measures include the χ^2 value at 715.992 (df = 253, $p < 0.001$; Chi-squared/d.f. = 2.830), Goodness of Fit (GFI) at 0.884, and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) at 0.066. For the χ^2, the desired outcome is to not reject the null hypothesis by desiring a nonsignificant χ^2. This did not occur here. However, as χ^2 is sensitive to large samples (e.g. greater than 250), this is not necessarily a reliable indicator of fit (Bentler 1990; Meyers et al. 2006). GFI, at 0.884, nearly met the cutoff criteria of 0.90 as set by Bagozzi and Yi (1988) and Hu and Bentler (1999). RMSEA did in fact meet the cutoff criteria, at 0.066, and is deemed an adequate fit since the results are below 0.07 for samples larger than 250 (Hair et al. 2006). The relative fit measures utilized here are Comparative Fit Index (CFI) at 0.958 and Normed Fit Index (NFI) at 0.937. For CFI, a good fit is deemed to be at 0.95 or above (Hu and Bentler 1999) while NFI is considered acceptable at 0.90 and above (Meyers et al. 2006). Thus, both relative fit measures show appropriate fits. The parsimonious fit measures are Parsimonious Normed Fit Index (PNFI) at 0.790 and Parsimonious Comparative Fit Index (PCFI) at 0.808. As both PNFI and PCFI should be greater than 0.50 (Meyers et al. 2006), the model is considered a good fit. In summary, using the standard measures, CFI, NFI, RMSEA, PNFI, and PCFI show that the model is deemed an adequate fit. However, χ^2 shows a poor model fit (yet may be disregarded due to large sample size) and the GFI results show that it is near the borderline of being considered a good fit.

Results of Path Analysis for H_1 to H_6

Consumer-brand identification has a positive effect on brand evangelism and is statistically significant (standardized path coefficient (β) = 0.474, t-value = 14.283, $p < 0.01$), thus supporting H_1. Meanwhile, H_2 is not supported as brand satisfaction does not have a statistically significant impact on brand evangelism (β = -0.079, t-value = -1.198, $p > 0.10$). Brand salience is, however, positive and statistically significant for its effect on brand evangelism supporting H_3 (β = 0.506, t-value = 4.440, $p < 0.01$).

H_4 is also supported as brand trust is statistically significant as a path relationship with brand evangelism (β = 0.204, t-value = 3.020, $p < 0.10$). Opinion leadership, additionally, is shown to have a statistical association with brand evangelism for support of H_5 (β = 0.222, t-value = 5.967, $p < 0.01$). Finally, brand satisfaction has a positive effect on consumer-brand identification (β = 0.668, t-value = 14.283, $p < 0.01$), H_6.

Result of Moderation Testing for H_7

The mean centered process, as suggested by Aiken and West (1991), was used in tandem with a moderated multiple regression analysis to test Hypothesis 7. It was hypothesized that sociability positively strengthens the relationship between opinion leadership and brand

evangelism. In this study, through moderated multiple regression, sociability is a slight moderator in strengthening the relationship between opinion leadership and brand evangelism (t = 1.670, $p < 0.10$) and there is support for H_7.

Result of Mediation Testing for H_8

The testing for Hypothesis 8 employed the following method described by Baron and Kenny (1986)—estimation of regression equations (regressing the mediator on the independent variable, regressing the dependent variable on the independent variable, and regressing the dependent variable on both the independent variable and on the mediator) and the Sobel (1982) test, an approximate significance test. The test statistic for the Sobel test resulted in 11.634 (standard error of 0.032) with a p-value < 0.01. Thus, it is deemed that consumer-brand identification is a mediator for the relationship of brand satisfaction and brand evangelism, and H_8 is supported.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Brand evangelism historically has occurred more when there is a strong product differentiation in the marketplace distinguishing a brand from competitors. For example, an automobile purchase is not just about the functionality of the car but the features and symbolism associated with the particular brand. As discussed by Merz, He, and Vargo (2009), brands moved from just being an identifier of a good to having functional and symbolic value associated with the branded product. The symbolism aspect was clearly stated by Levy (1959, p.118) as "people buy things not only for what they *can do*, but also for what they *mean*." Although some may view an automobile as just a mode of transportation, others have such strong feelings about the automobile that it can be considered an extension of oneself (Belk 1988). A key determinant in understanding brand evangelism is the concept of consumer-brand identification. As previously discussed, consumer-brand identification is the consumer's self-defined perception of oneness and identification with a brand (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Kuenzel and Halliday 2008). It was originally Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) who proposed that consumer-company identification will not only lead to company loyalty, but the consumer may become a "champion" on behalf of the company. It was hypothesized in this study that the stronger the consumer-brand identification, the stronger the brand evangelism. This hypothesis was shown to be supported significantly by the research results. To date, there have been limited studies concerning consumer-brand identification and the understanding of this phenomenon. Utilizing this construct here aids in the strengthening of the consumer-brand identification concept in marketing. Consumer-brand identification is based on the understanding of social identification theory, as well as the acceptance that consumers have relationships with brands.

It was also found here that the stronger the brand satisfaction, the stronger the consumer-brand identification. This supported previous research where "the more satisfied a person is with an organization's offerings, the greater the identification" (Bhattacharya et al. 1995, p. 48). Although there has been mixed findings concerning this relationship in the past, it appears that the utilization of branded products rather than intangible not-for-profit brands may be the delineating factor concerning the mixed results.

Another supported construct leading into brand evangelism is brand salience. Brand salience is not only top-of-mind awareness, but can be viewed as the frequency with which a

consumer mentions the brand in a variety of situations (Alba and Chattopadhyay 1986; Miller and Berry 1998; Romaniuk and Sharp 2003). The supported hypothesis in this study stated that the greater the brand salience, the stronger the brand evangelism. Thus, the more a consumer has top-of-mind awareness, the more apt that consumer is likely to engage in brand evangelism. Looking at this relationship from a different perspective, a brand evangelist is not likely to evangelize the brand if the brand is not at the forefront in the consumer's mind. Because of the brand salience aspect, a brand that lends itself to becoming evangelized is a product that may be utilized on a regular basis. Without the regularity of use, a consumer may not have the brand at the forefront of the mind.

Another hypothesis proposed here was the stronger the satisfaction with a brand, the stronger the brand evangelism. This hypothesis, however, was not supported in this study. Depending on the brand and product class, a consumer may be satisfied with the brand yet not have any actual strong feelings associated beyond the satisfaction. As the definition of satisfaction used in this study was the pleasurable fulfillment of a consumer's needs, wants, or desires in reference to the brand (Oliver 1997), pleasurable fulfillment may not necessarily be enough to be an impetus for a consumer to become a brand evangelist.

An interesting juxtaposition to this unsupported hypothesis, however, is that consumer-brand identification positively mediates the relationship between brand satisfaction and brand evangelism. This means that in fact there is a relationship between brand satisfaction and brand evangelism but the construct of consumer-brand identification is involved. Therefore, without a consumer identifying with a particular brand, brand satisfaction does not have a significant relationship with brand evangelism.

Another interesting finding of this research is that an individual that has trust in a brand leads to that individual becoming a brand evangelist. As there is a reliance (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001) and credibility (Keller and Aaker 1992) associated with trust, this construct gives a foundational support for the consumer building "faith" with the brand, leading into evangelism.

It was found that the stronger the opinion leadership, the stronger the brand evangelism. Opinion leaders are product enthusiasts that are well versed in and have information concerning products within a product category. As brand evangelists "spread the good word" about their brands, it is imperative for the brand evangelist to be respected on their viewpoint and the evangelist is able to understand the characteristics of competing brands. As opinion leaders are knowledgeable on a variety of brands within a product category, so too, is it necessary for a brand evangelist. Without the depth of knowledge of a product category, those individuals listening to a brand evangelist may not be swayed to understand the benefits of the particular brand if the brand evangelist is unable to compare and contrast the evangelized brand from competitors. Finally, the construct of sociability is shown to strengthen the relationship between opinion leadership and brand evangelism. Thus, an opinion leader needs to have sociable characteristics to prompt the "spreading of the good word" to others about a specific brand.

ACADEMIC IMPLICATIONS

Although normative pieces have been written concerning brand evangelism (e.g., Collier 2007; Friedman 2007; Kawasaki 1991; McConnell and Huba 2003; Roberts 2004; Rusticus 2006), to date, little research has viewed brand evangelism beyond propositions and cursory attention. This study furthers the understanding of brand evangelism by analyzing the

dimensions and relationships that lead to the phenomenon. This phenomenon of brand evangelism can be described as the communication of information, ideas, and feelings concerning a specific brand freely, and often times fervently, to others in a desire to influence consumption behavior. The dimensions found to be statistically significant in better understanding brand evangelism are consumer-brand identification, brand salience, brand trust, and opinion leadership. Additionally, this study found that brand satisfaction is a characteristic leading to brand evangelism utilizing consumer-brand identification as a mediator.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Results of this study suggest that managers may want to focus on increasing the consumer-brand identification concept, top-of-mind awareness of the brand, brand trust, and the building of opinion leaders in the marketplace. Additionally, the continuation of brand satisfaction is imperative to maintain consumer-brand identification on behalf of the consumer. The desired effect of these dimensions is to have the consumers acting as "champions" on behalf of the brand and become unpaid spokespeople (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). Brand evangelism goes beyond a repurchase commitment and construed loyalty of a brand. As loyalty is not necessarily reflected in satisfaction (Oliver 1999), brand managers need to know the influence the variables have beyond brand satisfaction.

A key desired outcome for companies is for the consumer to have intent to repurchase while giving referrals and endorsements of the brand (Jones and Sasser 1995). To propagate the brand evangelism of the consumers, brand managers must move past mere satisfaction that a consumer has with the brand but get to the point where the consumer identifies with the brand. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003, p. 86) discussed one particular way to increase consumer identification with a company is through co-creation activities. Different activities, beyond the co-creation of products and advertising, would be including the consumers in organizational decision making, such as the development and restructuring of company policies and personnel recruitment. Bringing consumers into the development of the company itself could instill further identification the consumer has with the organization and the family brand (Ulwick 2002). These activities will additionally build trust by the consumer by instilling credibility with the company and the brand.

While the brand's corporation integrates the consumer into identifying with the organization and brand, it should also educate the consumer of the product class (or classes) associated with the brand. By allowing the consumer to garner more information concerning the product class, the consumer can become an opinion leader. Providing information to the consumer concerning even positive information on competitors' brands can further strengthen evangelism as the consumer has more depth of knowledge of all products in the class. Although a brand manager may be hesitant providing positive information of competitors, this information can allow the potential brand evangelists to be a better opinion leader, in turn, leading to this consumer becoming a brand evangelist.

Finally, brand managers must continue to advertise and promote the brand for top-of-mind awareness. Having a brand be salient on behalf of the consumer is a necessary dimension leading into brand evangelism. Separate promotional activities may be appropriate for existing consumers of the brand, in addition to promotional activities for non-customers. Loyalty programs are successful in customer retention and in motivating customers to increase purchasing (Lewis 2004). Although loyalty programs can aid in repeat purchasing, it may not

have the influencing factor to instill brand evangelism. The loyalty program may be a perk to a brand evangelist, but the utilization of the program as a reminder and recall aid in brand selection can aid in the development of brand evangelism.

A potential problem with having brand evangelists is having former or disgruntled brand evangelist. An individual in this category may be as fervent in his/her evangelism against the brand as before the change in brand consumption. The dislike of this brand may considered to be what Hogg (1998, p. 135) described as "anti choice" or Muniz and Hamer (2001, p. 355) labeled "oppositional brand loyalty." Former brand evangelists may become as passionate for being an anti-brand evangelist as they were while they consumed the particular brand. The remaining brand evangelists however would be resilient to negative information which could continue to offset the disgruntled former consumers (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003).

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

There are several limitations with this study. Firstly, the sampled population resulted in a predominantly White category in the demographics (90.8%). The next three populations were Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and Black at 3.3%, 3.1%, and 2.1% respectively. Here, the category of White is larger than the 2009 estimate of the US at 65.6% (US Census Bureau). Additionally, in the US, the category of Hispanic/Latino is estimated at 15.4%, Black at 12.8%, and Asian at 4.5% (US Census Bureau). It is unclear if the surveyed individuals were a true representation of those who utilize the brands. For example, the consumers of the selected brands may be predominantly White, so the representation may be appropriate. Further research should include brands that may be geared specifically to different ethnicities and races. Ethnic differences in consumption may bring in a slight variance in the dimensions leading into brand evangelism.

Leading into the potential underrepresented ethnic/race groups may also be the result of having four brands utilized in this study. The brands used here are reflected in the marketing literature as having some predisposition to having brand evangelists. Incorporating more brands would broaden the scope of this research stream.

A further extension of this research would include the perceptions of brand evangelism in cultures outside of the United States. For example, as some countries are more collectivist than individualistic (Hofstede 1983), there may be a difference in the understanding and dimensions leading into brand evangelists of another culture's consumer base. Additionally, collectivistic societies may have consumers that learn about brands and develop their understandings of the brands differently than individualistic-based societies.

Another limitation related to the use of the four brands in this study is that the four brands are mainly perceived as goods; there were no services included. Although each brand has supplementary services associated with the organization, no individual brand's core business is a service. As services are different than goods (Berry 1980; Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1985), a separate study including only brands of services could bring more depth to the understanding of brand evangelism.

SUMMARY

Companies have focused on differentiating their brands from competitors. As this continues, companies will diverge within product categories rather than converge. Each company is striving to be unique and irreplaceable (Barney 1991) while building what McKenna (1991, p.

148) describes as a "special relationship" between the consumer and the brand. This relationship is understood when it is seen that the consumers are co-creators of the brand itself (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003; Muniz and O'Ginn 2001). Brand evangelists assist in the co-creation of the overall brand image as they actively engage others in the attributes of the brands. Merz et al. (2009, p. 341) suggested including volunteered consumers in the co-creation process "from the bottom up rather than from the top down" to rethink the brand process. As described by Holt (2004), brands are ever-changing shared cultural property and not just the ownership of the company. Although the brand evangelists, and co-creators, may not necessarily change the overall message, some evangelists have become unpaid designers of actual advertising and promotional activities for their brands.

These unpaid creators are often referred to as vigilante marketers. Muniz and Schau (2007, p. 187) describe vigilante marketing as "unpaid advertising and marketing efforts, including one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many commercially oriented communications, undertaken by brand loyalists on behalf of the brand." It would be considered here that vigilante marketers are an extreme example of brand evangelists as they may actually go beyond standard communication practices of "spreading the good word" of a particular brand.

Brand evangelists are committed customers who have a positive emotional connection to the brand. These consumers have moved beyond just being a consumer of the brand but have a connection of identifying with the brand while having the propensity to share the positive attributes of the brand with others. The direct characteristics of identifying with the brand, having a top-of-mind awareness of the brand, trusting the brand, and being an opinion leader all aid in the development of a consumer becoming a brand evangelist. This research has helped establish the dimensions of what leads into being a brand evangelist. Additionally, these dimensions assist in garnering a better appreciation and understanding to those individuals who communicate information, ideas, and feelings concerning a specific brand freely, and often times fervently, to others in a desire to influence consumption behavior.

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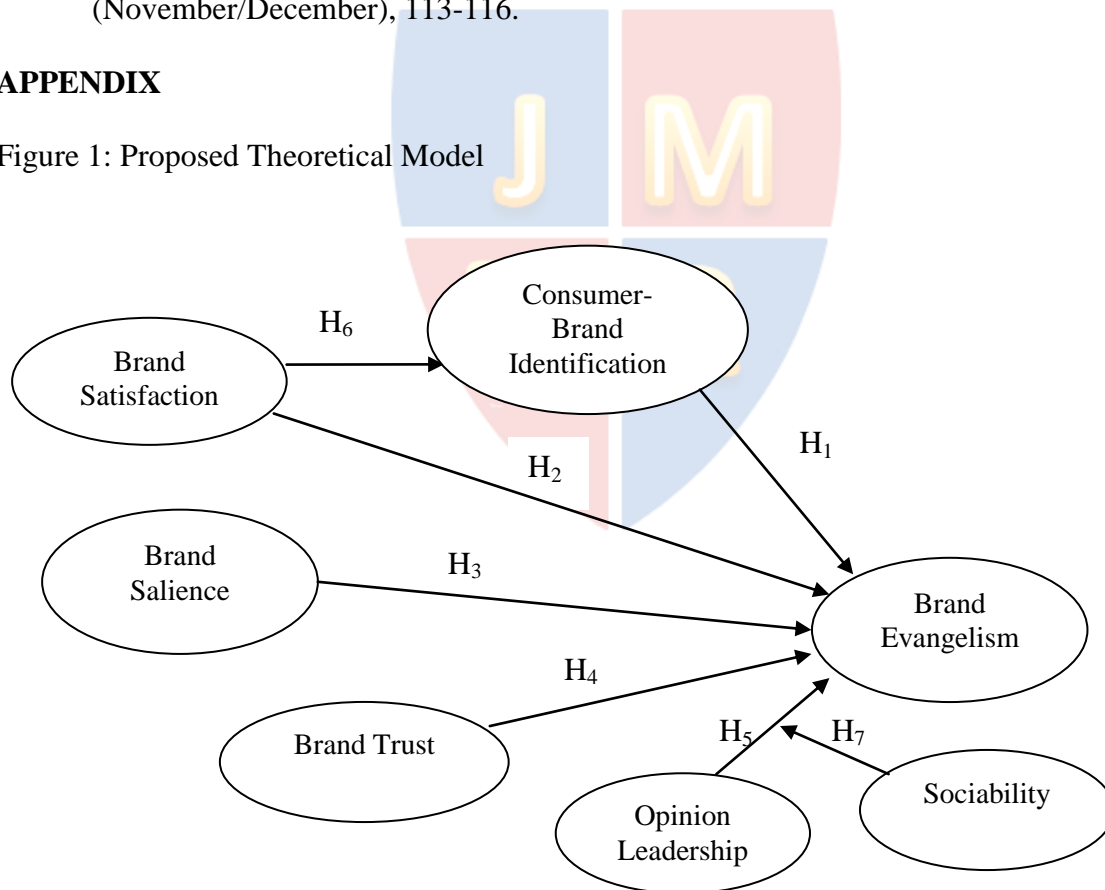**APPENDIX**

Figure 1: Proposed Theoretical Model

Table 1: Reliabilities, Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (n = 425 likert scale of 1 to 5)

Variables	α	Mean	Std. Dev.	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Brand Evangelism	0.912	3.115	0.996						
2. Consumer-Brand Identification	0.895	3.140	0.959	0.785*					
3. Brand Salience	0.736	3.514	0.921	0.736*	0.697*				
4. Brand Satisfaction	0.906	4.110	1.022	0.616*	0.597*	0.722*			
5. Sociability	0.732	3.322	0.864	-0.044	-0.111	-0.058	-0.024		
6. Opinion Leadership	0.778	3.194	0.880	0.633*	0.506*	0.449*	0.340*	0.020	
7. Brand Trust	0.939	3.935	0.938	0.688*	0.665*	0.708*	0.838*	-0.005	0.381*

* $p < 0.01$