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Extending Research on Consumer Brand Relationships:
Importance of contextual factors

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Introduction

In today's highly competitive marketplaces, different brands vie for the attention of the same consumers. Formation and maintenance of long-term relationships with the consumers, therefore becomes critical for the marketers (Monga 2002, Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995). This criticality gets augmented by the fact that the cost of acquiring a new customer is often more than retaining one (Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987). The relationship based marketing strategy is a movement away from the purely transaction based marketing (Tsai 2011). Ever since the publication of the seminal work by Fournier (1998), this field guided by theories of interpersonal relationships has seen a substantial evolution (Fetscherin and Heinrich 2015). Research on Consumer brand relationships (consumer brand relationships) has been conducted across countries and markets. This domain considers the brand as an active partner in the consumer-brand relationship dyad (Fournier 1998). The relationships between the consumers and their brands are very often based on the guidelines which consumers follow in their interpersonal relationships (Aggarwal 2004, Aggarwal 2009, Aggarwal and Law 2005, Aggarwal and Zhang 2006). Human beings tend to provide human characteristics to non-living things like brands (Delbaere et al. 2011) since this makes it easier to ascribe intentions and attribute actions to the brands (Gray et al. 2007). Over the years, research contexts in consumer brand relationships research have seen their focus on the more mature markets of the western hemisphere. Although, studies related to consumer brand relationships have been conducted in emerging markets (e.g. Chang and Chieng 2006, Nguyen and Nguyen 2011, Sreejesh 2014, Heinberg et al. 2019), the number of such studies has been quite limited. Literature (e.g. Sheth 2011, Sheth and Sisodia 1999) has shown that there are variances in the tenets of marketing around localities and economies. As a result of this variance, one might come across contextual differences in the development of a particular marketing concept (Kerin and Sethuraman 1999, Momo 2016). In fact literature shows instances (Dawar and Chattopadhyay 2002, Bijapurkar 2014) where attempts at direct replications of marketing strategies into emerging markets have failed to yield encouraging results. One such contextual development has been a growth in branded consumption in the rural and BOP markets of emerging economies such as India .

World Bank data (WorldBank 2017) suggest that a large number of consumers in Asia and Africa stay in the rural areas. Of late these consumers have been considered as potential target markets (Venugopal and Viswanathan 2015). Consumers in these markets have been traditionally exposed to a brand continuum like unbranded commodities, local and regional brands (Sheth 2011, Ablett et al. 2007) as well as counterfeits (Chaudhry et al. 2011). In the recent past, consumers in rural India; for example have shown a propensity towards aspirational consumption, have had better connections with their urban counterparts and have been more discerning than they were earlier (Accenture 2015). In addition the consumers in rural India have also shown a movement away from commoditised consumption towards more branded consumption (Nielsen 2011), in addition to showing brand consciousness (Gupta and Tandon 2018). These changes have become more pronounced on account of some important factors. One, an increase in the penetration of television in the rural areas of India, (33% according to the 2011 census) (Hawkes 2012), has provided a lot of information about brands to the rural consumers. Second, many consumers from the rural areas migrating to urban areas come face to face with various brands through the course of their daily work or travel and therefore start having an understanding of the urban markets as well (Venugopal 2012). Besides, rises in rural income and agricultural prosperity have led to some basic changes in the consumption patterns of consumers in rural India (Kashyap 2012a, Satyam and Aithal 2017).

Consumers in these markets are however, faced with unique challenges such as extensive geographical spread, inefficient marketing infrastructure (Jha 2012, Dey and Adhikari 1998), low consumer literacy (Venugopal and Viswanathan 2015, Viswanathan and Rosa 2007, Viswanathan et al. 2005) which are often different from those in the urban and mature markets. Additionally, it is not known how the socio-cultural milieu of consumers in these markets might affect the strength of consumer brand relationships. In collectivist societies such as India (Hofstede 1980), reference groups and the immediate socio cultural milieu should play important roles in consumption behaviour in the rural and bottom of pyramid markets (Shankar and Fitchett 2002, Rajagopal 2009, Das 2018).

This points towards a need for investigating contextual factors in consumer brand relationships research and practice and determining their roles in relationship formation and maintenance in rural and bottom of pyramid markets of emerging economies. However, despite the presence of

these and other possible contextual and market specific factors in these markets, consumer brand relationships research in the contextual backdrop of rural and bottom of pyramid markets of emerging economies is scant. Inadequate knowledge of branding paradigm in these markets might lead to incorrect strategy formulation in markets which are seen as profitable markets for the future, based on the high numbers of consumers in these markets (Prahalad 2004).

This paper aims to fill this gap in literature by highlighting the importance of the contextual factors in consumer brand relationship theory and practice. Further it suggests possible variables which can be studied with regard to consumer brand relationships in rural and bottom of pyramid markets. The discussion also provides insights into how the factors leading to consumer brand relationship might get affected on account of the contexts they are being studied in. Finally the paper provides a theoretical framework showing the possible relationships between these contextual variables and their possible direct and indirect roles in formation and maintenance of strong consumer brand relationships. In doing so, it provides possible future research directions for consumer brand relationship research especially in the backdrop of contextual variations. For managers, the arguments and propositions put forth in this paper and their visualisation in the theoretical framework should provide insights into marketing and branding strategy in rural and bottom of pyramid markets.

Methodology

Research on CBR existed before the publication of the research by Fournier (1998). Analogies of relationships between human beings and non-living things were provided by Shimp and Madden (1988) and Fajer and Schouten (1995). Fournier and Yao (1997), had conducted their research within the broader framework of CBR, although the specific focus of their research was on brand loyalty. The theoretical foundations for research in the CBR domain; were provided mainly after the publication of the seminal article by Fournier (1998), which is assumed to have provided major impetus to CBR research (Fetscherin and Heinrich 2015). As a consequence, this review mainly focuses on CBR and BRQ research conducted post 1998. Academic databases like Google Scholar, EBSCO and Proquest were searched using key words pertaining to important concepts in consumer brand relationships. Key words used for the literature search included “consumer-brand relationships”, “brand-consumer relationships”, “brand relationship quality”, “emerging markets” and “emerging economies”, “bottom of pyramid”. In addition books related

to branding, marketing; including rural marketing and brand management were also consulted. The types of publications consulted have been provided in Table 1.

-----Table 1 About Here-----

Review of literature on Consumer brand relationships

The paradigm of relationship marketing in the business to business (B-B) literature has provided substantial focus on the concept of relationship quality, primarily due to its vital role in mediating the relationships between the relationship marketing activities and their outcomes (deWulf et al. 2001, Roberts et al. 2003). Relationship quality in the B-B and services literature has largely been conceptualized on the basis of the dimensions of trust (Crosby et al. 1990, Dwyer and Oh 1987, Kumar et al. 1995, Hennig-Thurau and Klee 1997) satisfaction (Dwyer and Oh 1987, Crosby et al. 1990, Storbacka et al. 1994) and commitment (Kumar et al. 1995, Hennig-Thurau and Klee 1997, Storbacka et al. 1994). The concept of consumer brand relationships in the area of consumer brands and brand management was brought forth by Fournier (1998). Since then; the concept of brand relationship quality has been one of the most studied strength assessors of consumer brand relationships. Brand relationship quality has been defined as an indicator of the strength and the depth of consumer brand relationships (Fournier (1994), cited in Monga 2002).

The earliest conceptualization of brand relationship quality was provided by Fournier (1998). The author provided six dimensions of brand relationship quality namely, love/passion, self-connection, commitment, interdependence, intimacy and brand partner quality. Although brand relationship quality provides a more comprehensive way of looking at consumer brand relationships (Dimitriadis and Papista 2011, Papista and Dimitriadis 2012, Sreejesh 2014) research related to consumer brand relationships has also looked upon many of the individual dimensions of consumer brand relationships (Fetscherin and Heinrich 2015).

Conceptualization of brand relationship quality

There has been considerable debate upon the exact conceptualization of the brand relationship quality construct. While Fournier (1998) had provided six dimensions of brand relationship quality, later researchers have come up with conceptualizations which have been different.

Researchers have used additional dimensions like trust (e.g. Park et al. 2002, Kim et al. 2014, Smit et al. 2007, Dimitriadis and Papista 2010, Dimitriadis and Papista 2011, Papista and Dimitriadis 2012), nostalgic connection (e.g. Smit et al. 2007, Ekinici et al. 2004, Park et al. 2002), attachment (e.g. Chang and Chieng 2006, Huang and Mitchell 2014), brand credibility and brand loyalty (Ghantous 2016) and mutuality and communication (Lee 2016). Conceptualizations which have been completely different from that provided by Fournier (1998) have been provided by Veloutsou (2007) and Huang et al. (2014). While the former conceptualizes brand relationship quality using the dimension of two-way communication between the consumer and the brand, the latter looks at brand relationship quality, in terms of attachment and a sense of community. A conceptually similar but dimensionally quite different conceptualization has been provided by Bruhn et al. (2012), who look upon brand relationship quality as a platform for communications between the various consumers who use the brand as well as between the consumers and the representatives of the brand.

Researchers have also omitted some dimensions of the original conceptualization of brand relationship quality. Fletcher et al. (2000), for example, do not include the interdependence dimension in their conceptualization of brand relationship quality, besides treating passion as a dimension separate from love. Similarly, Monga (2002), considered a separate dimension of attachment, but did not consider the satisfaction component. Aaker et al. (2004) considered the dimension partner quality as an antecedent of brand relationship quality as well as a mediator between brand personality and transgression forgiveness. Chang and Chieng (2006) did not consider the intimacy, satisfaction, interdependence and love dimensions in their conceptualization of the brand relationship quality construct, while Hong and Lee (2012) omitted intimacy, interdependence, love, self-connection and partner quality. Nyffenegger et al. (2014) divided the consideration of brand relationship quality into hot and cold components. According to this conceptualization, the hot component of brand relationship quality refers to the strength of the consumer brand relationships based on the emotions and the cold brand relationship quality refers to that based on purely evaluative and object relevant beliefs.

Analysis of the various conceptualizations of brand relationship quality suggests that there is still considerable amount of equanimity among researchers regarding the conceptualization of the brand relationship quality construct. A probable reason for this can be a marked interdependence

among the dimensions of brand relationship quality. For example, the constructs self-connection and brand identification have been used analogously in literature (e.g. Dimitriadis and Papista 2010, Dimitriadis and Papista 2011, Papista and Dimitriadis 2012). Intimacy, passion and commitment have themselves been looked upon as dimensions of brand love (Sternberg 1986). Similarly, drawing in from the interpersonal relationships paradigm; an intimate relationship may often be characterized by interdependence (Brehm et al. 2002).

Disparity is also found in the treatment of various constructs in the different conceptualizations of brand relationship quality. For example, while brand identification or self-brand connections have been referred to as a dimension (e.g. Fournier 1998, Park et al. 2002), researchers (e.g. Dimitriadis and Papista 2010, Dimitriadis and Papista 2011, Papista and Dimitriadis 2012) have also used the dimension as an antecedent of brand relationship quality. The partner quality construct; though a dimension in the original conceptualization by Fournier (1998); was similarly used as an antecedent of brand relationship quality by Aaker et al. (2004).

Brand relationship quality serves well to bridge the gap between research on relationship marketing in the B-B and services to that in the consumer brands domain (Dimitriadis and Papista 2010). Indeed, there are similarities between the two fields and brand relationship quality has in at least one case (Hess and Story 2005) been conceptualized in a way similar to that of relationship quality in the relationship marketing domain.

Research has shown various antecedents of brand relationship quality such as brand personality (Aaker et al. 2004, Ghantous 2016), brand identification, price, quality and brand availability (Dimitriadis and Papista 2011), brand experiences and brand associations (Cheng et al. 2012), consumer brand congruence (Nyffenegger et al. 2014, Huang and Mitchell 2014), ease of imagination of relationships (Huang and Mitchell 2014). The outcomes of brand relationship quality are brand transgression forgiveness (Aaker et al. 2004, Donovan et al. 2012), willingness to share information (Smit et al. 2007), repurchase likelihood and positive word of mouth (Breivik and Thorbjørnsen 2008, Sarkar 2014, Sarkar et al. 2012, Roy et al. 2013, Garg et al. 2016).

Research (Chang and Chieng 2006, Kushwah et al. 2019) has suggested the need for market or segment specific research in the domain of consumer brand relationships. On that note it is

possible that the various conceptualisations discussed earlier have the possibility of being expressed in different ways in different contexts. This argument finds support in literature (Sheth and Sisodia 1999, Venugopal and Viswanathan 2017) as well as in practice (Dubey and Patel 2004, Singh et al. 2009).

While the broad consequences of strong consumer brand relationships in different contexts might be the same, the factors leading to relationship formation and maintenance might differ according to the contexts. It therefore becomes important that roles of such contextual factors are studied in greater detail by researchers in the domain of consumer brand relationships. The framework in Figure 1 argues for the position and the extension of consumer brand relationship research into the rural and bottom of pyramid markets of emerging markets such as India.

-----Figure 1 About Here-----

Consumer Brand relationship research in Consumer markets in rural India

Consumer Brand relationship research in the context of rural markets has been an under researched area of enquiry. One reason for this apparent disinterest among academics towards the rural Indian market might be because of a general tendency to look upon the rural markets as extensions of the urban markets and not as a separate segment in itself (Dawar and Chattopadhyay 2002, Bijapurkar 2014). This said however, consumer markets in rural India have seen tremendous growth in the past years (Craig and Douglas 2011) riding on increases in non-farm incomes (Kashyap 2012a, Sengar et al. 2020). These markets have spent more than the urban markets in the past (Knowledge@Wharton 2007, Venugopal 2012) and were largely untouched by the global meltdown which had hit the world towards the end of the decade of 2000s (Knowledge@Wharton 2009, Kashyap 2012a). The consumer markets in rural India, therefore present huge opportunities for brand strategy on the basis of the large populations and sheer consumer numbers alone (Prahalad 2004). Rural markets in India have shown differences in the consumption patterns than the urban markets (Dawar and Chattopadhyay 2002, Kashyap 2012a), one strong reason for the need of treating markets in rural India as separate from the urban ones is a difference in consumer psychology (Kashyap 2012a), apart from differences in purchase patterns (Tuli and Mookerjee 2004, Venugopal 2012, Patel et al. 2015, Patel and Shukla 2016).

Some distinctive features of the rural markets of India relate to strong communal ties, a cultural embeddedness in brand symbolism (Kumar et al. 2007, Rajagopal 2009, Rajagopal 2010). In addition, lack of proper marketing infrastructure (Jha 2012, Dey and Adhikari 1998) may pose numerous obstacles in the timely and consistent availability of the brands to the consumers. The markets in rural India, therefore find themselves at a unique juxtaposition where on one hand there is an increased demand for brands and branded consumption while on the other hand, the markets are be saddled with their own systemic deficiencies.

In this backdrop it becomes important to consider such factors in the validation of the earlier research on consumer brand relationships, the focus of which has been largely on the more mature markets in the western hemisphere. Some such unique features of the rural markets in India have been discussed further.

Socio-Cultural Milieu

Culture has been an important factor affecting consumer behaviour (Kacen and Lee 2002, Henry 1976). Meanings provided by the consumers to their brands are often rooted in the cultures of the consumers (McCracken 1986) and so are the notions of the self (Kacen and Lee 2002). Cultural considerations therefore play important roles in connecting the consumers to the brands (Kumar et al. 2007), thereby affecting the relationships between the consumers and their brands.

In collectivist cultures like India, perceived power distances are considered to be higher (Hofstede 1980). The power distance beliefs of superior consumers; should; therefore significantly affect the consumption of others, especially for signalling a superior status, leading to self-expansion through usage of particular brands (Gao et al. 2014, Gao et al. 2016, Gupta and Srivastav 2015b). In India, specifically in the rural areas, caste plays an important role among the populace (Pellissery 2008). The hierarchy of caste and the dominant social order breaks down to an extent due to the market economy, leading to a co-existence of the various hierarchical orders in the same social milieu (Vikas et al. 2015). Therefore with markets having high disparities and limited upward mobility, the brands one uses provides one with a differential status among other consumers (Kinra 2006). The self-expansion of the consumers which occurs as a result of this increased social status, may be governed by the normative assumptions made in the minds of the consumers on the basis of images of typical users (Keller 2003), like city-dwellers or members

of the higher orders of the social hierarchies. The desire for status and the importance of others (Eckhardt and Mahi 2012) and a need for social validation for the choices (Shankar and Fitchett 2002) leads the consumers to make certain choices of brands, symbolic meanings of which are embedded largely into their own social milieu (Rajagopal 2009). There may additionally be social sanctions towards the usage of particular brands (Accenture 2015) or even cultural rootedness in the interpretation of publicity material (Callow and Schiffman 2002, Kumar et al. 2007) and such norms or the methods of interpretations may therefore play important roles in the formation of strong consumer brand relationships. The various correlates of brand relationship quality have been shown to vary among cultures, especially on account of individualism/collectivism or the power distance (Chang and Chieng 2006).

It may be quite enticing to conclude that the entry of brands into the lives of the consumers in the rural areas of emerging economies like India, has instilled western values in them; more so on account of the newer meanings being provided to the brands by the consumers, especially the youth (Mukherjee et al. 2012, Khare 2011, Bhardwaj et al. 2011). But despite the apparent shift towards the western values, the brand meanings among Indian consumers are still determined largely on the basis of family traditions and group values (Khare 2011).

Word-of-mouth communication as antecedent of consumer brand relationships in rural India

Word of mouth plays important roles in the provision of brand information (Gelb and Johnson 1995), brand equity and brand attitude formation (Virvilaite et al. 2015, File and Prince 1992, Ennew et al. 2000) and increasing purchase probability (East et al. 2008). Besides, word-of-mouth communication has also been shown to be positively related to the earnings of the firms (Lam et al. 2009, Trusov et al. 2009, Liu 2006) and has a general positive influence on the buying behaviour of non buyers (Arndt 1967). Consumer brand relationships research has shown word of mouth to be an important consequence of strong consumer brand relationships (e.g. Carroll and Ahuvia 2006, Sarkar et al. 2012). However, there is little evidence of positive word-of-mouth as an antecedent towards the formation of strong relationships between consumers and brands. Positive word-of-mouth as a consequence of strong relationships has been defined mainly in terms of recommending the brand to friends (Becerra and Badrinarayanan 2013, Carroll and Ahuvia 2006) and spreading good words about the brand (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006).

Arndt (1967) has defined word of mouth in terms of communication between persons such that the communication is more of an exchange than an attempt to control the purchasing behaviour of the receiver of the communication. Word-of-mouth communication is an extremely believable source of information since it occurs mainly among the close members of the community (Keller 2007, Lam et al. 2009) which makes it more influential than many other sources of marketing communication (Buttle 1998, Herr et al. 1991).

In emerging markets, reliance on word-of-mouth communication is an important factor in making purchase decisions (Atsmon et al. 2012). In addition in the rural areas on account of the close knit community and familial networks (Gupta and Srivastav 2015a) , the integration of opinion leaders into the community (Kim et al. 2008, Sen 1969) and low literacy levels (Chikweche and Fletcher 2010), word of mouth from the trusted members of the community can serve as an important antecedent in building trust on the brand. Further, rural and bottom of pyramid markets have generally seen a limited reach of traditional sources of media and are consequently classified as media dark (Kashyap 2012b, Kashyap 2012a). Dependence on opinions of friends and relatives, has been shown to be important means of gathering information in media dark regions (Barki and Parente 2010, Berger 2014). word of mouth communications among the members of the in group that is the family, close friends etc generate more trust on the brands (Keller 2007). The collectivist cultural leanings in rural India may also have a role to play in the effect of word of mouth communication on the strength of consumer brand relationships. The importance of the in-group and the community at large, in the lives of collectivists (Hofstede 1980), should lead to preferences for and formation of strong relationships with those brands, which are deemed or perceived to be trustworthy by a larger in-group in the immediate community of the consumers.

Based on the preceding discussion it is posited

P₁: Word of mouth communication is positively correlated with brand trust

P₂: Word of mouth communication is positively correlated with brand relationship quality

Strong consumer brand relationships have been shown to be based on trusted relationships between the consumers and the brands which they use (Sreejesh 2014). Brand trust acts as an important dimension of the strength of consumer brand relationships (Fletcher et al. 2000, Hess

and Story 2005, Lee and Kang 2012) It is also an important antecedent in the maintenance of strong connections between the consumers and their brands (Sreejesh 2014, Hess and Story 2005, Becerra and Badrinarayanan 2013). It has been discussed earlier that word of mouth communication is seen as a highly trusted source of information (Keller 2007). The trustworthiness of the information is rooted in the fact that such communication occurs mainly among the close members of the community of the consumers (Lam et al. 2009). Word of mouth communication from trusted members of the society should therefore also correlate with the strength of consumer brand relationships through trusted relationships with the brands. Therefore it is posited:

P₃: Brand trust mediates the relationship between word of mouth communication and brand relationship quality

The preceding hypotheses relate to the socio-cultural milieu which the consumers in rural India are themselves a part of. The close knit community ties, the importance of the others in the consumption decisions (Shankar and Fitchett 2002) and finally the cultural embeddedness in the meanings provided to brands by the consumers (Rajagopal 2009, Mukherjee et al. 2012) form the basis for these hypotheses. Yet another feature which distinguishes the markets in the rural areas of India from those in the urban areas is that of geographical dispersion and inadequate marketing infrastructure.

Geographic Dispersion and Improper Marketing Infrastructure

Consumers in rural India have been shown to prefer the local shops in the villages for the purchases of their day-to-day items (Tuli and Mookerjee 2004). However, the infrastructural deficiencies like lack of proper road networks and vast geographical spread of the rural populations can prove to be obstacles in the unhindered availability of brands in the rural markets of India (Jha 2012, Dey and Adhikari 1998, Kashyap 2012b, Neuwirth 2014, Sengar et al. 2014). Stock situations of particular brands in the local village shops however depend in a large way on the actual intention of the shopkeepers to stock them, which in turn depend on factors like retail margins and the brand reputation and sales potential of the brands (Shaikh and Gandhi 2016). Such factors may severely limit the set of brands available to the consumers; thus affecting the extent of consumer brand relationships formation and maintenance.

Consistent availability of a brand as antecedent of brand relationship quality in rural India

The infrastructural deficiencies in the distribution system in rural India (e.g. Dey and Adhikari 1998, Jha 2012, Kashyap 2012b, Neuwirth 2014) may create hurdles in the unhindered availability of the brands. Consistent availability of a brand has been shown to be an important factor for relationship marketing at both the relationship formation and the relationship maintenance stages. Both during the relationship formation (Fournier 1998, Fournier 2009) and the relationship maintenance/augmentation stages (Brakus et al. 2009) the affective reactions among the consumers depend on numerous interactions with the brands. Distribution intensity of a brand as an antecedent of brand relationship quality has been proposed in literature earlier (Dimitriadis and Papista 2011). The proposition has been made on the basis of the reduced search costs incurred to the consumers on account of the availability of a particular brand, thereby affecting the value obtained by the consumer from the brand. Increased search costs reduce the brand value for the consumers (Baker et al. 2002), while intensive distribution of a brand reduces the search costs thereby increasing brand value (Dimitriadis and Papista 2010, Dimitriadis and Papista 2011).

Distribution intensity has been defined by Yoo et al. (2000) in terms of the availability of the brand in a larger number of stores as compared to the competing brands. Although unavailability of a brand at the normal shopping outlets may lead to the willingness to increase the search costs on the part of a committed consumer, it is not clear in literature till what extent this willingness stays.

It has been shown that higher levels of satisfaction can overshadow the effects of the investments put into the relationship, by the consumer (Sung and Campbell 2007). However, the satisfaction on the part of the consumer may develop over a series of interactions with the brand (Fournier 1998) for which a consistent availability of the brand becomes important. Therefore it is posited:

P₄: Distribution Intensity of a brand is positively correlated with brand satisfaction

The distribution intensity and consequently the consistent availability of a particular brand plays a spiralling effect in increasing the equity of a brand (Coughlan et al. 2001) and the equity in turn increases the reliance of the consumers on the claims of the brand as also reducing the

information search costs (Erdem and Swait 1998, Dimitriadis and Papista 2010, Dimitriadis and Papista 2011).

A consistently available brand provides a signal of brand reputation and brand quality to the consumers (Aaker 1991). Brand reputation, defined as the consumer perception of others' positive opinions about the reliability of a brand (Lau and Lee 1999), attracts a greater number of loyal consumers (Fombrun and Shanley 1990). Consumers in general may like to develop relationships with brands which enjoy good reputations among other consumers (Garg et al. 2015, Sutherland 2008). An intensively distributed brand may send out this cue to the consumers since a brand having a large base of loyal consumers should have higher sales potential (Erdem and Swait 1998) and therefore should be stocked by a larger number of retailers (Shaikh and Gandhi 2016).

Such perceived positive opinions about a brand by others should lead the consumers to get into relationships with the brands since the identity and self-concept concerns among the consumers in rural India are also based on the opinions of others (Ahuvia 2002). The distribution intensity, may also provide (unobservable) signals about the quality of a brand (Yoo et al. 2000, Erdem and Swait 1998), and therefore affect brand trust positively (Erciş et al. 2012) a positive effect on brand relationship quality (Nguyen and Nguyen 2011).

P₅: Distribution Intensity of a brand is positively correlated with brand trust

Consumers entering into relationships out of their own volitions are more likely to stay in those relationships and evaluate the brand more favourably (Dholakia 2006). Similar findings by Lin et al. (2009) and Zuckerman et al. (1978) have highlighted the importance of choice for consumers and human beings in general, respectively. An intensively distributed brand therefore should provide the consumers a choice of being in a relationship with the brand, out of their own volition, rather than as a consequence of the market forces (Deci and Ryan 2000, Dholakia 2006). This should in turn lead to the empowering the consumer by fulfilling the autonomy needs of the consumers (Vrontis and Thrassou 2007), leading to brand attachment (Thomson 2006). Therefore it is posited:

P₆: Distribution Intensity of a brand is positively related to brand attachment

While on one hand, consistent availability of a brand may signal significant quality related characteristics of a brand, reduction of search costs increases the value for the consumer, thus leading to higher amounts of satisfaction. Both trust (Fletcher et al. 2000, Park et al. 2002, Smit et al. 2007) and satisfaction (Hess and Story 2005, Breivik and Thorbjørnsen 2008, Lee and Kang 2012) have been shown to be positively correlated with brand relationship quality. Attachment as a dimension of a strong consumer-brand relationship has been studied in literature and has been shown to have positive effects on brand relationship quality (e.g. Monga 2002, Chang and Chieng 2006). Therefore, it is posited:

P_{7a}: Brand trust mediates the relationship between distribution intensity and strength of consumer brand relationships

P_{7b}: Brand satisfaction mediates the relationship between distribution intensity and strength of consumer brand relationships

P_{7c}: Brand Attachment mediates the relationship between distribution intensity and strength of consumer brand relationships

The propositions discussed above have been shown in the theoretical framework (Figure 2).

-----Figure 2 About Here-----

Summary and Conclusions

The discipline of marketing is driven by contexts and concepts in the discipline tend to vary according to the economies and populations (Sheth and Sisodia 1999). Taking this proposition forward, this paper introduces the context of rural markets in India and proposes antecedents and consequences of the strength of consumer brand relationships in rural and bottom of pyramid markets in emerging economies such as India.

The concept of brand relationship quality, an indicator of the strength of consumer brand relationships has drawn from that of relationship quality in the B-B and services literature. There has been, in general, a lack of unanimity among later researchers on the dimensional conceptualisation of brand relationship quality. The dimensional conceptualisations and the antecedents have also been shown to be dependent upon the cultures and the markets (e.g. Chang

and Chieng 2006). The consumer markets in rural India have definitive characteristics, which play a role in differentiating them from the urban markets. Consideration of these markets as extensions of the developed urban markets have failed to work in the past (Dawar and Chattopadhyay 2002). In addition to a possible fusion of the immediate socio-cultural milieu with brand symbolism (Rajagopal 2009), consumers in these markets have distinct consumer psychologies and consumption patterns (Kashyap 2012a, Kashyap 2012b) which differentiate them from the urban consumers. This apart, the marketing systems in rural India are faced with peculiar characteristics like geographic dispersion and poor marketing infrastructure (Dey and Adhikari 1998, Jha 2012), which may prove to be obstacles in the unconstrained availability of brands in the rural markets.

Arguing for the need of extending the context of consumer brand relationships into rural and bottom of pyramid markets of emerging economies, this paper proposes possible antecedents of strength of consumer brand relationships in rural India. More specifically, this paper looks at word-of-mouth (word of mouth) communication and consistent availability of a brand as contextual factors which might affect the formation, maintenance and strength of consumer brand relationships. Various propositions, related to the correlations between these constructs and brand relationship quality have been put forward. Finally the paper forwards a theoretical framework, which captures the discussions and the propositions put forward.

Further research is required to test the framework empirically as well as to come up with other constructs having effects on brand relationship quality, so as to have a more generalised proposition for the larger rural ecosystem in emerging economies.

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