An Examination of the Four Factors of Brand Resonance and their Theoretical Application to Video Games

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to explore the literature about the four factors of Keller’s brand resonance theory: behavioural loyalty, attitudinal attachment, a sense of community and active engagement, and theoretically apply them to video games, a growth industry.

Method: Searches were conducted in multi-discipline peer reviewed journals to review the literature on brand resonance. Peer reviewed journal articles, news articles, comments in forums and blogs and consumer created content were examined to theoretically apply the theory to the video game industry.

Findings: Whilst this paper is not empirical in nature, it seeks to show that the four factors of brand resonance are worthwhile exploring and can be theoretically applied to diverse brands such as video games.

Originality: This paper presents the first detailed examination of the literature on the four factors of Keller’s brand resonance theory and their theoretical application to the video game industry.

Keywords: Brand resonance; behavioural loyalty; attitudinal attachment; brand community; engagement; video games

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Introduction

The theory of brand resonance as proposed by Keller is based on four main influencing factors: behavioural loyalty, attitudinal attachment, a sense of community and active engagement (Keller, 2009). Brand resonance is how ‘in sync’ consumers feel they are with a brand and describes the nature of the relationship between the consumer and the brand (Keller, 2009). Brand resonance represents the highest level of customer based brand equity (CBBE), the value added to a product (whether a good or a service) because of its association with a particular brand (Keller, 1993; Keller, 2009). The exact same product marketed under a brand with high CBBE would be expected to be more profitable than if it was marketed under a low CBBE brand (Keller, 1993). When a consumer is exhibiting all four brand resonance factors, they have the strongest relationship with the brand and provide even greater worth (Keller, 2009). Apple and Harley-Davidson are two examples Keller gives; both have high levels of consumer interest and attachment which can turn their consumers into brand ambassadors (Keller, 2001). Consumers may also have strong attachments to service based brands such as video games.

Creating and maintaining a high brand resonance and CBBE is obviously very important for brands, however, brand resonance has received less attention than other marketing concepts. Sometimes the theory is only mentioned in an article’s introduction or literature review and is not used in empirical testing or analysis (e.g. Morrison & Eastburn, 2006; Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schroder, 2008).

Brand resonance has been applied to products and industries such as Malaysian banks (Aziz & Yasin, 2010), the Indian consumer durables sector (Kakati & Choudhury, 2013), business-to-business trade waste management in Australia (Kuhn et al., 2008) and Taiwanese sports’ retailers such as Nike and Adidas (Huang et al., 2013). Brand resonance has not been applied to video games, a rapidly growing industry. The annual spend on video games in Australia in 2012 was AU$1.5 billion, and it is estimated to rise to over AU$3 billion in 2017, while revenue from the global video game industry in 2012 was US$67 billion (Brand et al., 2013; Marchand & Henning-Thuraru, 2013). A single video game can have a production budget of over several hundred million AUD and so this is an important and growing industry (Alpert, 2007).

This paper provides an examination of the literature for the four factors of brand resonance based on Keller’s theory and uses this to suggest a theoretical model (2009). News articles, social media and peer reviewed journal articles were then used to theoretically apply the theory to the video game industry.

Literature Review

The four factors that comprise Keller’s brand resonance theory (2009) are behavioural loyalty, attitudinal attachment, a sense of community and active engagement. The following sections provide elaboration on these four constructs from the literature.

Behavioural Loyalty

The first factor of brand resonance, consumer loyalty to a brand, was defined by Oliver (1999, 34) as a ‘deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronise a preferred product or service consistently in the future despite situational influences and marketing efforts’. There has been a struggle to separate between consumers’ repeat purchases and the concept of brand loyalty (Uncles et al., 2003; Bandyopadhyay & Martell, 2007). A difference conceptualised by Oliver (1999) was that brand loyalty is a multi-layered psychological process, whereas behavioural loyalty occurs when consumers repeatedly purchase and use the same brand (Mascarenhas et al., 2006; Keller, 2013). A measure of behavioural loyalty is the use and purchasing of the loyalty brand when compared to the consumer’s purchasing and use of competing brands (Mascarenhas et al., 2006).
Oliver (1999, 35) proposed a framework of four stages of loyalty: cognitive, affective, conative and action loyalty. Cognitive loyalty centres on the consumer’s judgement of the brand’s performance, affective on the brand’s likeability and conative on the consumer’s desire to re-buy the brand (Oliver, 1999). Action loyalty, somewhat analogous to behavioural loyalty, is the ‘commitment to the action of re-buying’ the brand that occurs as a result of the previous three stages (Oliver, 1999, 36).

Behavioural loyalty is critical for businesses due to its effects on long term sales and market share (Mascarenhas et al., 2006). Loyalty can lead to advantages such as reduced marketing costs, repeat purchases and higher profitability (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). It should also be noted though that a consumer may be behaviourally loyal to a brand simply because of habitual behaviour, or a lack of alternative brand offerings (Oliver, 1999; Uncles et al., 2003). Even satisfaction is not enough to maintain behavioural loyalty (Oliver, 1999). This is why behavioural loyalty is only the first of the four categories of the brand resonance theory, and the other three are required as well for high brand resonance.

**Attitudinal Attachment**

Keller (2013, p. 120) used the term ‘attitudinal attachment’ for the second factor of his brand resonance theory which he also called ‘personal attachment’. He defined this as the consumer viewing the brand as something ‘special’. Attitudes are formed from both cognitive assessments and affective emotions, while attachments are concerned with the importance of an object to the consumer (Lavine et al., 1998; Whan Park et al., 2010). Attachment is an emotion-laden, target specific bond between a person and a target (Bowlby, 1979). Attachments are strong relationships that are usually experienced in childhood towards parents and which later in life may develop with other targets (Bowlby, 1979; Thomson, 2006). A person involved in such a relationship will normally perceive the relationship partner as being irreplaceable and unique (Thomson, 2006).

Attachment is an independent concept, but is correlated with trust, satisfaction and commitment (Thomson, 2006; Mugge et al., 2010). An attachment to an object is defined as the extent to which an object is owned, expected to be owned or previously owned by an individual and is used by that individual to maintain his or her self-concept (Ball & Tasaki, 1992). A person’s self-concept is the collection of characteristics, traits and memberships that represent that individual (Whan Park et al., 2006). Attachment targets or objects that are socially visible, expensive and reflect a person’s experiences, achievements, relationships or roles and can be personalised by them, are more likely to reflect their self-concept (Ball & Tasaki, 1992). The emotional significance of an attachment target is their sum total of positive and negative associations (Ball & Tasaki, 1992). An attachment’s emotional significance should increase as the length of the ownership increases (Ball & Tasaki, 1992).

Keller (2013) has suggested that brand love is as an intense form of attachment and Fetscherin and Conway Dato-on (2012) describe it as a ‘deeply emotional relationship’. Whan Park et al. (2006) stated that love is an emotion that characterises the attachment bond, rather than the bond itself. Carroll and Ahuvia’s (2006, 81) definition of brand love characterises it as ‘the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade love’ and it includes passion, attachment and declarations of love for the brand, and positive evaluations and emotions in response to the brand. This definition has been used in other research (Albert et al., 2008; Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2011; Albert & Merunka, 2013). It is thought that a consumer’s love for a brand is different to interpersonal love (Albert et al., 2008; Heinrich et al., 2012). Yoon et al. (2006) found that consumers process relationships with their brands in a different part of the brain, compared to interpersonal relationships. Brand love has been compared to the love felt for celebrities who do not interact with, or return the love felt, by fans and audiences, with the implication that the brand or business does not either (Fetscherin & Conway Dato-on, 2012). However,
this does not take into account brand communities or consumer engagement, which are discussed below.

People can become attached to celebrities (Thomson, 2006), leader figures (Davidovitz et al., 2007), pets, objects (Ball & Tasaki, 1992), places of residence (Hill & Stamey, 1990), and brands (Thomson et al., 2005) and video games (Coulson et al., 2012). Brands that help consumers achieve goals become more significant to them (Whan Park et al., 2006). Consumers become attached to brands that are dependable and consistent (Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2011). Brand attachment is the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the consumer’s self-concept (Whan Park et al., 2010). There are two factors that encompass brand attachment: brand self-connection and brand prominence. Brand self-connection is the cognitive and emotional connection between a brand and the consumer (Whan Park et al., 2010). This evolves over time and comes from memories and experiences with the brand (Whan Park et al., 2006). Personalised experiences with the brand can create particularly strong connections (Whan Park et al., 2006). Brand prominence is the extent to which positive feelings and memories about the brand come to the top of the consumer’s mind (Whan Park et al., 2010).

Intense attachments may stop customer defections, increase customer forgiveness, (Thomson, 2006) and increase a desire to repurchase the brand (Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2011). They may also prompt consumers to publicly defend or promote the brand, and possibly lead to hoarding to avoid a risk that the brand will be unavailable (Whan Park et al., 2006). Increased brand loyalty, a willingness to pay a premium price for the brand, and engage in word of mouth advertising for the brand are also possible outcomes of an intense emotional attachment which brand love is (Albert & Merunka, 2013). Consumers with intense emotional attachments to a brand may go to greater lengths to preserve their products by handling them carefully and repairing them when they break, rather than throwing them out (Mugge et al., 2010). Consumers will also spend more cognitive resources thinking about a brand when intensely attached and participate in brand communities (Whan Park et al., 2006).

The attachment will weaken if a brand loses its ability to gratify, enrich and enable the attachment between the brand and the consumer, especially if there are alternative brands available (Whan Park et al., 2006). Although a consumer may remain loyal to the brand even if an attachment weakens, if better brand options become available, they will probably terminate the relationship (Whan Park et al., 2006). People who are strongly attached to another person are likely to be committed to, invest in, and make sacrifices for that person (Thomson et al., 2005). This translates in attachment to a brand with loyalty, a willingness to make financial and other sacrifices, for example paying a higher price, risking a loss of reputation for using the brand or going to great lengths to obtain the brand (Thomson et al., 2005; Whan Park et al., 2006; Whan Park et al., 2010).

A Sense of Community

The third factor of brand resonance, a sense of community, comes from a community which is made up of members who have relationships with each other, a sense of belonging, and a common interest that draws them together (McAlexander et al., 2002). The community can be deemed a ‘brand community’ when this common interest is a brand they patronise. Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001, 412) definition of a brand community as a ‘specialised, non-geographically bound community that is based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand’ has been accepted by many other researchers (e.g. McAlexander et al., 2002; Algesheimer et al., 2005; Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schroder, 2008; Gummerus et al., 2012). Businesses should promote communication and group cohesion in the brand community to foster consumer participation, encourage interaction, satisfy member needs and so guarantee the sustainability of the community. This will promote trust between consumers and the virtual community, and make it easier to turn
visitors into members, and members into contributors (Casaló et al., 2008). Brand communities develop their own vocabulary, hierarchy and myths (Cova & Pace, 2006) which reinforces their shared consciousness, communal values and feelings of being part of the community (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Consumers are believed to join brand communities because they are loyal consumers of a brand, and for the entertainment derived from being a member (Gummerus et al., 2012). Participation and commitment is crucial to a community’s survival (Casaló et al., 2008).

The internet makes it much easier for people with common interests to overcome geographic boundaries and find each other and has contributed to the rise of the virtual brand community (Casaló et al., 2008; Jae Wook et al., 2008). A virtual brand community is one that exists only online and so differs from a more general brand community which encompasses everyone that feels connected to the brand, regardless of their geographic location or means of communication (McAlexander et al., 2002; Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schroder 2008; Gummerus et al., 2012). Virtual brand community members may have a great deal of information about each other such as gender, age and personal history, or may only know each other by usernames (McAlexander et al., 2002). Online communities provide important opportunities for companies to learn about what their consumers like, dislike, need, desire, are concerned about and what behaviours they are exhibiting (Casaló et al., 2008). Members of online brand communities can communicate using channels such as email, chat rooms, and social media and are thought to have stronger social ties and beneficial relationships than the members of traditional brand communities (Jae Wook et al., 2008). Anecdotal evidence has suggested that online brand communities can help businesses build brand loyalty, increase market penetration and revenue and generate positive word of mouth (Jae Wook et al., 2008).

Casaló et al. (2008) in their research into several virtual brand communities found a positive effect on consumer’s participation in a virtual community, and on their affective commitment to the brand and even to brand resonance. Increased commitment can lead to repeat purchases, positive word of mouth, greater consumer involvement and increased participation (Jae Wook et al., 2008). This is relevant for businesses because new consumers cost more to acquire than keeping existing ones, so brand communities are a way for businesses to strengthen ties between them and their consumers (Casaló et al., 2008). Furthermore, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) agree that brand community members have an opposition to competing brands. Hedonic engagement behaviours and practices develop and evolve over time in brand communities and members gain more value from these, for example by creating more and more elaborate costumes to wear at fan conventions for entertainment brands (Schau et al., 2009). Therefore, there are greater exit barriers for consumers when they leave a brand community with which they have hedonic experiences. This can make brand community members more forgiving of lapses in product quality, less apt to switch brands even when offered a superior product, and so are a potential market for product extensions. However, a strong brand community can be a threat to businesses if the community collectively rejects any brand changes and then uses their communal communication channels to disseminate their rejection to other consumers (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Interaction in brand communities can strengthen weak ties of attachment to the brand, while strong ties can develop additional points of attachment (McAlexander et al., 2002). By participating in brand communities, members start exhibiting engagement behaviours which means they are interacting and participating with a brand beyond purchasing or consumption.

**Active Engagement**

Active engagement is the fourth factor of brand resonance. Since 2005 the concept of ‘engagement’ has appeared increasingly in marketing literature, but despite this interest, there is still limited agreement regarding its conceptualisation (Brodie et al., 2011). Several definitions within marketing literature such as ‘customer engagement behaviours’ (van
Doorn et al., 2010), ‘customer engagement’ (Hollebeek, 2011) and ‘consumer engagement’ (Brodie et al., 2013) have appeared. Vivek et al. (2012) define customer engagement as the intensity of a customer’s participation and connection with an organisation’s offerings and activities which can be initiated by either the customer or the organisation. Hollebeek’s (2011, 565) research characterising customer brand engagement defines it as ‘the level of a customer’s cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment in specific brand interactions’. Brodie et al. (2011) define customer engagement as being a psychological state that takes place during a co-creative, interactive customer experience with an agent or object. van Doorn et al. (2010) proposed that customer engagement behaviours are those that go beyond transactions and define the concept as customer behaviour that has a brand or business focus, other than purchase.

Brodie et al. (2013, 107) define customer engagement, within a virtual setting, as involving ‘specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other members of the community’. Mollen and Wilson (2010, 923) define ‘brand engagement’ also within a virtual setting as the consumer’s ‘cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value’. They further state that engagement has an interactive, experiential element which distinguishes it from involvement.

These definitions all include a psychological element and interactions or participation with a brand beyond consumption or purchase. There is still disagreement over the exact term to be used when discussing engagement in the marketing area, most notably by the same two sets of authors, Brodie et al. (2011) and Brodie et al. (2013), who use both customer and consumer in two respective definitions. van Doorn et al. (2010) also switches between customer and consumer in their research. This research will use the term consumer engagement.

Brands benefit from engaged consumers who may also be members of brand communities (van Doorn et al., 2010). Benefits include repeat purchases, word of mouth and other referral behaviours (van Doorn et al., 2010), customer loyalty and retention (Verhoef et al., 2010), superior corporate performance, competitive advantage and general profitability (Brodie et al., 2011). Just as the rise of the internet has helped grow brand communities, it has also helped grow the level of engagement (Brodie et al., 2013). Some examples of active engagement within the internet environment include discussions in forums, bulletin boards, chat rooms, the comments section of online newspapers, emails, blogs and personal websites and social media and network websites (Brodie et al., 2013). One of the most frequent examples of active consumer engagement is interaction with the brand using social media (Gummerus et al., 2012). However, engagement may not be interactive, but may be lurking; reading social media content without contributing. Shang et al. (2006) found that lurking enhances customer loyalty more than commenting.

Engagement is believed to be directly and positively related to higher satisfaction, trust, affective commitment and loyalty towards a brand (Gummerus et al., 2012). In general, consumers with stronger brand commitment and attachment are more likely to participate in brand communities (van Doorn et al., 2010).

**Conceptual Model**

There is strong evidence, as a result of the literature review, to support the following four suggested propositions, even though these have not been empirically tested.

1. Behavioural loyalty influences brand resonance.
2. Attitudinal attachment influences brand resonance.
3. A sense of community influences brand resonance.
4. Active engagement influences brand resonance.
The following figure depicts a theoretical model developed from Keller’s brand resonance theory (2009) showing how all four factors are required for brand resonance.

**Figure 1: Brand Resonance Conceptual Framework**

![Brand Resonance Conceptual Framework](image)

Source: adapted from Keller, 2009:145

**Method**

Searches in multi-disciplinary databases such as Google Scholar, Emerald, Business Source Premier and Proquest Business were performed to locate peer reviewed journal articles for the literature. Searches were also performed in specific marketing journals including the *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing* and the *Journal of Product and Brand Management*. Publications by Keller were also specifically examined.

In order to explore the relationship of Keller’s four proposed factors of brand resonance: behavioural loyalty, attitudinal attachment, a sense of community and active engagement to brand resonance in the video game industry, specific secondary data was collected. News articles, consumer and company run forums and blogs and databases of consumer created content were accessed as well as peer reviewed journal articles from the previously outlined searches to theoretically apply the four factors of brand resonance theory to the video game industry.

**Theoretical Application**

**Behavioural Loyalty in Video Games**

Behavioural loyalty can be seen most clearly in the video game industry by the significance attributed to sequels. In 2011, eighteen of the twenty best-selling video games were sequels (Marchand & Henning-Thuraru, 2013). Generally, few video game consumers know or care about the companies that release games, but sequels represent significant brand leverage (Alpert, 2007). Video game sequels routinely outsell the original game, and
long running franchises are a staple goal for the industry (Fritz, 2007). Final Fantasy XV, the next game in the very successful Final Fantasy series, will launch in the next few years; the series has also had multiple spin-off games from its main, numbered series (Ashcraft, 2013). The Assassin’s Creed series has released six main games with several spin-offs, and another two will be released in late 2014 (Davis, 2013). On the 17th of September Grand Theft Auto 5, with an estimated budget of US$265 million, was released to positive critical reviews and in three days had grossed over US$1 billion becoming the fastest selling entertainment property of all time (Bleeker, 2013). The Kingdom Hearts series has seven games with an eighth on the way (Schreier, 2012). The players of all these series must be behaviourally loyal to the brands for these sequels to continue to sell well and for businesses to risk the investment required to produce more games.

Attitudinal Attachment in Video Games

A study by Coulson et al. (2012) found that people can form authentic emotional attachments to video game characters, genuinely liking and even loving them. This is backed up by forum comments and blog posts by players of the Mass Effect games. One consumer posted in the Gamefaqs forum that, regarding the character of Commander Shepard, “I’ve come to love Shepard more than any person in my real life, except for my parents.” (Doofe_12, 2012). In a comment posted to the Pixlibit website another consumer wrote that ‘...as far as the emotional attachment goes, it’s already been said. It’s the characters. Not just the people in your party, but your crew and the people you meet along the way.’ (Titus, 2012). A consumer on Mass Effect’s publisher’s website wrote a 2,500 word blog entry on the love and attachment players felt for the characters. This prompted another consumer to declare that the character of Tali ‘...fictional or not, she’s got a piece of my heart. (The Lightspeaker, 2012).

This would support Rigby & Ryan’s (2011) comments that players can be drawn emotionally into the fictional world to the point where thinking of it in fictional terms feels inadequate; they feel present in them and emotionally experience the game play as though it was really happening to them. This is called immersion and is believed to be enhanced by the multi-modal nature of games: visual, sound and physical interactivity (Rigby & Ryan, 2011). Juul (2011) has also stated that game players feel emotionally attached to the outcome of video games. An example of this is a player in a study who reported feeling sad and vengeful due to one nation invading the one they were controlling in the game Civilization and that these emotions were not directed at the game itself, but the fictional, pixelated leader of the invading nation (Rigby & Ryan, 2011).

A Sense of Community and Active Engagement in Video Games

There are many versions of brand communities for video game players found on the internet. Several game developers have forums in which players can discuss their games. For example Bioware has the Bioware Forums with different forums devoted to their various games (EA International, 2014) and Ubisoft has a similar set-up with forums for each of their game series (Ubisoft forums, 2014). There are also various wikis devoted to gaming series such as the Mass Effect Wiki, Assassin’s Creed Wiki and Halo Nation (Assassin’s Creed Wiki, 2014; Halo Nation, 2014; Mass Effect Wiki, 2014). Social media websites such as Livejournal and Tumblr also allow for communities and pages devoted to game series and parts of those game series.

These communities allow people to take part in engagement behaviours such as discussions about the games and their playing experiences. In addition, video game players take part in fan created works such as stories, songs and art about the games they play and create costumes based on the characters they encounter. A search of the internet art website DeviantART on August 17 2014 found over 450, 000 matches for the term ‘video game’, over 132,000 matches for the term ‘Assassin’s Creed’ and over 156,000 matches for the term
‘Mass Effect’ (DeviantART, 2014). The fanfiction website AO3’s five most popular video game categories had over 32,000 stories combined on August 17, 2014, while Fanfiction.net had over 250,000 stories based on numerous video games published on its website (AO3, 2014; Fanfiction, 2014). In addition to participating in fan works and brand communities, video games offer multiple extra products for consumers to engage with and purchase. Both the *Assassins Creed* and *Halo* game series have tie-in products including action figures, books and soundtracks of their music. Over one million copies of the books based on the *Halo* series have sold, while the entire franchise, including games and other products, represented US$1.7 billion in sales in 2010 (Parker, 2010).

**Conclusion and Future Research**

This paper provides an examination of the literature on the four factors of brand resonance based on Keller’s theory (2009). Each factor generates positive worth for brands such as increased purchases and repurchases, stronger loyalty to products and brands, positive word of mouth, affective commitment towards the brand and profitability. Therefore when a consumer is exhibiting all four factors, they will generate greater worth. Despite the lack of attention of Keller’s brand resonance theory in the literature, this literature review indicates that the theory is of value and merits further use and research. This is further supported by the theoretical application of the factors of brand resonance to video games, a growth industry which warrants further analysis and empirical testing.

Whilst this article has provided a literature review and theoretical application to the video game industry of each factor of Keller’s brand resonance theory, further empirical research could provide additional quantitative data to support these findings. Future research could also identify other categories of brands where this theory can be applied and used to investigate reasons for changes in a brand’s resonance with consumers.

**References**


