Addicted to the Brand?:
Brand Loyalty Theory as a Means of Understanding Academics' Scholarly Communication Practices

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Librarians, acutely aware of the growing problems and pressures with traditional publishing models, have long advocated for open access (OA) options as a means to transform the scholarly publishing landscape. Recent research confirms that many faculty members and graduate student researchers also recognize that current models of scholarly communication are problematic and unsustainable. *Pay It Forward*, a recent large study involving multiple North American universities, confirmed that academics, when questioned about scholarly publishing from a "reader" perspective, are well aware of the problems and contradictions inherent in current practices.[1] These academics have heard and, particularly in the case of younger researchers, agree with the argument that the tax-paying public who fund academic research should have access to the work they have funded. Some academics, "particularly in certain fields" also question the use of journal impact factor as an indicator of the quality of individual articles, feeling "that impact factor does not necessarily equate to quality or visibility within a specific field."[2] Initiatives like the "Cost of Knowledge" campaign[3] also reveal widespread awareness that for-profit publishers are making enormous profits from the current system, profits made through exploitation of the work of academic researchers and reviewers.

Despite this recognition of the shortfalls of the current scholarly publishing system, academics continue to support these journals by advocating for institutional subscriptions, providing free peer review services, and submitting articles for publication. While open access mandates issued by funding agencies have had some impact on OA uptake, research suggests (and librarian experience can attest) that many researchers remain sceptical (or at least ambivalent) about open access publishing, and are reluctant to pursue OA options unless mandated to do so.[4] The literature exploring this reluctance has identified several reasons for this behavior, including: fear of predatory journals/suspicion about OA journals;[5] need to publish in high prestige journals for tenure/promotion;[6] priority assigned to impact factor;[7] preference for known publishers;[8] quality concerns/concerns about quality of peer review;[9] resistance to "pay to play";[10] and lack of understanding of OA.[11]

An approach not yet applied to deepen our understanding of academics' reluctance to publish in open access venues is that of brand loyalty theory. The benefits of brand loyalty are well-documented in the literature; Aaker[12] lists better business performance, lower marketing costs, and more new customers, while Dick and Basu[13] cite positive word-of-mouth exposure and greater resistance to competitors. While a substantial body of research has been conducted on the concept of brand loyalty in the context of tangible goods, there is little work on brand loyalty in relation to other products and services. The few researchers who have applied the brand loyalty construct to untraditional products and services have found that it helps to explicate the choices made by consumers. As early as 1994, Dick and Basu argued that customer loyalty was a valuable construct in understanding loyalty to services and vendors.[14] Since that time, researchers have applied brand loyalty theory

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to service organizations,[15] choice of leisure activity,[16] and newspaper selection.[17] Each of these studies has found that brand loyalty theory reveals new insights into loyalty formation and identifies logical starting points for those wishing to sway or re-direct this loyalty.

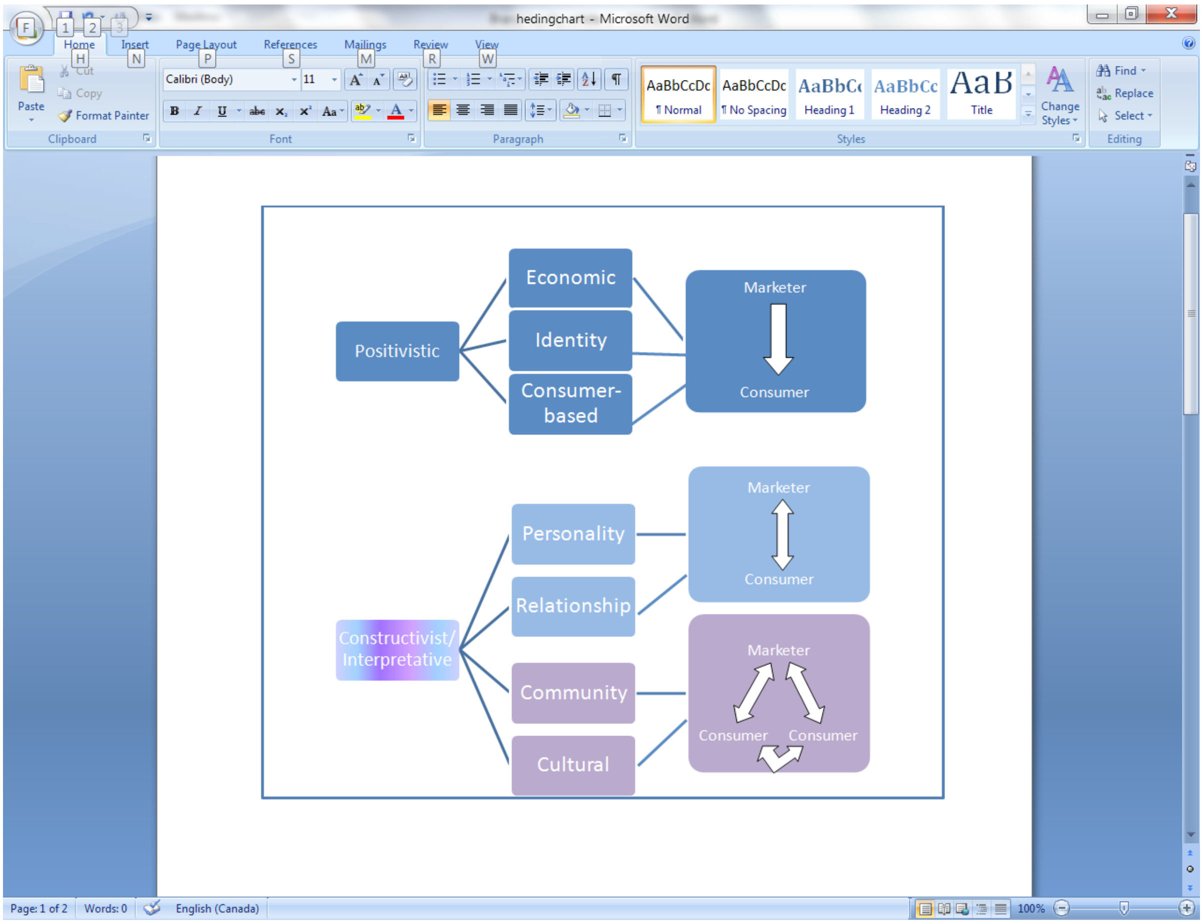
Academic journals have not traditionally been described in terms of "brands," but in many ways the definition fits. The American Marketing Association defines a brand as a "[n]ame, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers."[18] Conceptualizing journals as "brands" existing in a marketplace is even more apt when one considers the current state of scholarly publishing. Larivière, Haustein, and Mongeon clearly illustrate that scholarly publishing has moved far from its origins in scholarly societies and is now dominated by five large corporations.[19] Academic journals, and by extension the large corporations for which they make money, compete for academics' attention and "business"; they need the attention and loyalty of academics in order to have peer reviewers and content to publish. Without this interest and loyalty in their "brand," they do not have content to market; publication in this environment is a transaction in which a publisher/corporation wants a market share to pay attention and to give them something (in this case articles/peer review services), which eventually become money, in the form of revenue dollars from subscriptions. Unlike many retail transactions arising from loyalty to a brand, though, the authors/peer reviewers aren't getting anything tangible in return for their investment. So why do they continue to do participate in this process? This paper applies brand loyalty theory to the scholarly communication practices and preferences of academics for the first time in order to achieve a more nuanced understanding of why academics choose traditional for-profit publishers over open access publications, despite recognizing the shortfalls of the for-profit model.

In their book, *Brand Management: Research, Theory and Practice*, Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre provide a comprehensive overview of academic thought on brands and, by extension, brand loyalty.[20] They conducted an extensive analysis of the academic literature and identified seven approaches to the conceptualization of brands in this body of work (see figure 1). Broadly, they note that early conceptualizations of brands were positivistic, viewing communication and influence as unidirectional and flowing from the marketer to the consumer. Within the positivistic paradigm, they describe economic, identity, and consumer-based approaches. In the economic approach, the consumer "bases consumption decisions on rational considerations and the exchange between the brand and the consumer is assumed to be isolated tangible transactions."[21] The identity approach links the brand to corporate identity and views brands as owned and solely controlled by the marketer/corporation. Similarly, while the consumer-based approach begins to recognize the importance of consumers, they are still viewed as vessels into which the marketer pours content to elicit certain, expected results. Early research on brand loyalty mirrored this simple approach; Sheth and Park describe brand loyalty's beginnings as "technique-oriented" empirical observations about customer re-purchasing behaviour with an emphasis on "well-defined mathematical models."[22] The emphasis was on marketer message and strategies, and the responses that were measured (purchase/re-purchase behavior, profits) were viewed as direct outputs resulting from marketer inputs.

Most work published to date on academics' choice of venues for scholarly publication mirrors this early positivistic research into brands and brand loyalty. Researchers (librarians and others) have looked at behavioral measures (the messages sent from big for-profit publishers to academics, tallied numbers of academics choosing for-profit or open access publication venues), but there has been limited exploration of why these choices are made.

The constructivist paradigm that has more recently emerged in brand/brand loyalty literature to answer questions about the rationale behind consumer choices may also provide a new way to think about academics' scholarly publication decisions. Heding, Knudtzen, and Bjerre describe the shift to a constructivist/interpreta-

FIGURE 1
Brand Management Approaches



tive understanding of brands, in which communication and influence are bidirectional, with both the marketer and the consumer as active participants.[23] They include personality and relational approaches within the constructivist paradigm of brand conceptualization. A clearer understanding of the personality and relational approaches to branding provide food for thought when considering choice of scholarly publication venue by academics, moving us from *if* a brand is consumed to *how* and *why* it is selected.

The personality approach to brands acknowledges that there are certainly functional attributes of brands that make them appealing, but asserts that there is more at play than just these characteristics. With the personality approach, researchers began to realize that consumers attribute human-like personalities to brands and "use these personalities in a dialogue-based exchange of symbolic value for their individual identity construction and expression."[24] Brand loyalty results when consumers favourably regard a brand's personality characteristics and begin to imbue these with symbolic significance in relation to the construction of self. The brand becomes part of the consumers' "construction of identity and self"[25] and "[b]ecause brand personality sets off a process of social identification between the brand and the self of the consumer," the "expression of self [is] one of the strongest basic driving forces that predispose consumers to act on and consume brands."[26]

Theorists in the personality approach to brands view brand consumption not only as contributing to construction of self, but also as key to expression of this self to others. Consumers, in this line of thought, use brands to "define themselves to others, demonstrate group affiliation or to tell the story of who they are and what they stand for…. to play out their personal stories about their lives and identities, positioning themselves in relation to culture, society and other people."[27] Brands become symbolic of the self that the consumer wants to convey to others, whether this self be an actual or ideal one. Both construction and expression of self can arise from either identification with the brand personality itself, and/or with identification with the brand's other (often idealized) consumers.

For theorists in the personality school of thought, brand strength and resulting brand loyalty arise when consumers can effectively use the specific brand for their own construction and expression of identity. Consumers choose the brands that they perceive as best fitting with their own identity construction and expression, and become loyal to these at the expense of others in the same category. Theorists refer to this as "brand-self congruence";[28] essentially, the consumer's behaviour is driven in part by the level of congruence (or lack thereof) between the consumer's perception of self (whether actual or ideal) and the brand personality. Congruence between brand and actual self reinforces and communicates existing self-concept, while congruence between the brand and the ideal self is "an expression of the aspirations and dreams of the consumer that the brand can help them fulfil."[29] Consumers reject brands that are inconsistent with how they see themselves and that fail to align with their ideal self. Thus, brand self-congruence is important to the development of brand loyalty and long-term consumer-brand relationships.

The relational approach to brands is a logical extension of the personality approach, viewing the brand as a "viable relationship partner,"[30] a partner to whom it is possible to develop loyalty. While the personality approach describes a brand personality created by the marketer and then used by the consumer in their identity construction and expression, the relational approach recognizes a "'dyadic' brand-consumer relationship"[31] in which the marketer and consumer contribute equally to brand creation. This approach is strongly influenced by phenomenology, a research approach that values and validates subjective individual experience. In the relational approach, individual "inner reality" and "lived experience"[32] is essential to understanding brand choice, and the relationship between consumer and brand is ever-evolving, much like human relationships. Brand choice and loyalty can only be understood through a deep understanding of the "inner realities" of the person making the decision.

These more nuanced and complex conceptualizations of brands open new avenues to understanding brand loyalty as a multidimensional construct involving multiple psychological processes and external variables. Many academics' responses in earlier studies exploring their scholarly communication preferences[33] can also be understood in light of the personality and relational approaches to brands. While suspicion about OA journals and concern about the quality of peer review in these publications are valid concerns, brand personality theorists would also propose another level of analysis. Particularly in cases of OA journals that have proven to be of high quality, reluctance to publish in them provides insight into the role of scholarly publishing in the academic's construction of self. Much as consumers select a brand that is congruous with the image they hold (or wish to hold) of themselves, so the academic selects a journal that is consistent with their image of their actual or ideal scholarly self. Selection of and engagement with high prestige titles and/or titles with high impact factors reflect a more accomplished image of oneself, despite the fact that academics may, as readers, recognize the problem with equating journal impact factor with individual article quality.[34] And much as brand theorists assert that aspiration for a particular luxury car brand can have an impact on the construction of self, regardless of whether the consumer has yet bought one, graduate students' construction of their ideal self is impacted by the journals in which they aspire to publish.

Choice of scholarly publication venue also contributes to the academic's expression of self to others. By identifying with, publishing in, reviewing for, and advocating for subscriptions to, prestigious journals, academics are also identifying with both the journal and those who have previously published in it. Their relationship with the journal becomes a tool in their efforts to position themselves in their discipline in a particular way in the eyes of other scholars. This provides a new way for understanding the appeal of impact factor and its frequent misuse as a proxy for quality of individual articles. Citing journal impact factor when talking about one's own articles aligns one's own work with the prestige of the journal; in other words, "brands [or journals] with an attractive brand personality are also chosen and consumed due to their outward symbolic signalling value."[35] On the flip side, those who consistently publish in open access journals can be viewed as valuing different personality characteristics in their "brand," communicating a self concerned with equality, access, justice and, in some disciplines, a rogue or counterculture perspective.

Application of brand/brand loyalty theories to academics' choice of scholarly publication venue has implications for advancing open access. It reveals the complexity of the decisions academics make, and suggests that there are more subtle but deeper considerations at play than those currently reflected in the literature on the topic. Academics' choice of scholarly publication venue is closely bound up with their construction and expression of self as a researcher. The personality and relational approaches emphasize the importance of understanding "how the symbolic benefits of the brand personality contribute to consumers' construction and expression of self,"[36] as the basis for developing the brand. These approaches suggest that the most important task for those initiating, editing, publishing, and advocating for open access journals is

> to understand the mechanisms of identity construction that consumers use the brand for and be able to translate them into a brand personality that delivers value and relevance for the consumer. This is why theory in the personality approach focuses on how imbuing a personality into a brand can enhance consumer bonding and the interaction between consumers' self and brand personality. The effectiveness and success of a brand personality hence depends on the extent to which management is able to imbue the brands with a personality that is attractive, relevant and enhances consumers' creation and/or expression of self.[37]

This differs significantly from current approaches by open access journals and advocates, who have traditionally focused on (somewhat surface-level) logical arguments and, in the case of funder mandates, coercion. Further effort to establish a brand/journal personality consistent with academics' construction and expression of self (whether actual or desired) may increase OA uptake. The personality and relational approaches to brands also emphasize the importance of early adopters in the ongoing success of the brand. As Heding, Knudtzen, and Bjerre note, "[t]he brand can hence be reinforced in a cyclical process if the right target group picks it up because it will serve as inspiration for other consumers who identify or aspire to identify with the reference group that this target group represents."[38] Applied to journals, this suggests that direct endorsements or early publications by leading researchers in a discipline can have a significant impact on interest/update of the journal, as it will increase congruence between the personality of the journal and the academics' construction and expression of self.

This paper has introduced the idea that brand/brand loyalty theory can provide additional insight into academics' scholarly communication choices by briefly exploring the applicability of personality and relational approaches. Theoretical approaches in the brand literature are large and growing, and others may also prove valuable in understanding choice of publication venue. The community approach, which focuses on the development of brand communities and the interaction between consumers (rather than solely between the marketer and the consumer) seems particularly applicable. It would be interesting to apply this approach not only to understanding contributors to high-priced subscription journals, but also to better comprehend resistance movements, such as the resignation of the entire editorial board for the Elsevier journal *Lingua.*[39] Similarly, the cultural approach, which explores how brands can interact with mainstream culture to become icons,[40] may yield additional insights.

Another area of brand theory that deserves attention is that of brand architecture, or the relationship between the corporate brand and the product brand. The choice to market a corporate brand (BMW, Wiley, etc.) vs. a product brand (X3, *Journal of Anatomy*) is a purposeful choice made by the marketer, with each approach having pros and cons. Librarians more frequently refer to the corporate brand when discussing scholarly publication issues, whereas academics seem, at least in this author's experience, to reference the product brand (i.e. journal title). It would be valuable to learn whether the corporate vs. product brand distinction has an impact on perceptions and responses to high-priced journals and open access alternatives.

Librarians have lamented academics' reluctance to publish in and review for open access journals, but not thoroughly explored the reasons for this hesitation. There are clearly many factors at play, and many variables contribute academics' choice of publication venue. Brand/brand loyalty theory is one approach that helps to explicate some of the psychological and social dimensions of these decisions, and provides new insights to those hoping to increase interest in (and eventually loyalty to) open access options.

Notes

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26. Ibid., 120.
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30. Ibid., 24.
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33. University of California Libraries, *Pay It Forward;* Hahn and Wyatt, "Business Faculty's Attitudes"; Watkinson, "Changes."
34. University of California Libraries, *Pay It Forward,* 28.
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