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Loyal Consumers and their brands: Does Sacrifice Exist?

Abstract

The sacrificial element of loyalty is missing in brand loyalty theory. In a wider theory of loyalty, relational sacrifice is seen as a key element and a higher and extreme form of loyalty. Where people are willing to make sacrifices, their relationships are more stable and enduring. The literature of social psychology shows that loyal individuals are willing to make sacrifices for their partners or relationships. The aim of this paper is to develop the concept of brand loyalty through the lens of relational sacrifice. The paper concludes that brand loyalty consists of sacrificial behaviour and that relational sacrifice is more likely to be a key element of brand loyalty.

Track: Marketing and retail

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1. Introduction

Developing a strong and longitudinal loyal relationship with consumers is key for brands to drive continued growth and success. The Pareto Principle states that 20% of the firm current consumer base shapes 80% of the future revenue. In the past, loyal consumers used to stick into one brand and purchase consistently from it week after week and month after month. However, consumers now have more options than before and the internet gives them more access to brands all over the world, making switching brand less costly. In 2015, Catalina, a leading digital and consumer loyalty firm, reports that 90% of the top 100 CPG brands have experienced share decline. So in order for a brand to maintain their growth, it needs to build even stronger tie with its loyal consumers that is hard to break and leads to a long-lasting relationship.

Sacrifice is the concept that has a positive impact on the relationship stability. Sacrifice is a key element of loyalty. Aksoy et al. (2015) define loyalty as “the recognition of the specialness of a relationship which results in differential and more favourable treatment towards this relationship, the creation of a bond as the result of this relationship, and the defence and reinforcement of this relationship” (p. 2467). Aksoy et al. (2015) note that loyal individuals have the desire to make a sacrifice to maintain the relationship with the second party. For example, partners in close relationship sacrifice their preferences to ensure that the relationship persists (Impett and Gordon, 2008). Research reveals that willingness to sacrifice leads to greater commitment and satisfaction (Impett et al., 2013), and the greater level of willingness to sacrifice leads to a longer relationship (Van Lange et al., 1997). *Willingness to sacrifice* is defined as “the propensity to forego immediate self-interest to promote the well-being of a partner or relationship” (Van Lange et al., 1997, p. 1374). While customer-brand relationship theorizes a brand as an active partner, relational sacrifice has not received attention in the literature of brand loyalty despite its positive influence on the relationship continuation.

This paper aims to introduce the concept of relational sacrifice, willingness to sacrifice, into brand loyalty by exploring the obstacles of brand loyalty. MacInnis (2011) notes that examining the study of human relationships in sociology and psychology can facilitate the understanding of consumer brand relationship. Given that the brand loyalty theory overlooks the sacrificial element of loyalty, this research seeks to answer the following question: is brand loyalty a unique type of loyalty that does not include any sacrifices?

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 introduces brand loyalty and focuses particular attention on describing and evaluating brand loyalty obstacles. Section 3 introduces the concept of willingness to sacrifice and discuss the willingness of committed consumers to make a sacrifice for their brand. Section 4 presents the conclusion.

2. Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is a relational and multidimensional phenomenon that receives a considerable attention in marketing. Authors usually conceptualise brand loyalty as it consists of two dimensions: attitudinal and behavioural. Behavioural loyalty is consumers’ repurchase behaviour with regard to a particular brand. Attitudinal loyalty refers to consumers’ psychological commitment to repurchase a brand. Assael (1992, p. 87) defines brand loyalty as “a favourable attitude toward a brand resulting in consistent purchase of the brand over time”. Research shows that developing and maintaining loyal relationships with consumers are fundamental to brand sustainability (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2014; Donovan, Priester, MacInnis, and Park, 2012; Hung and Lin, 2015). Despite a large number of studies in brand loyalty, research has not explicitly considered the concept of sacrifice. However, the theory of brand loyalty implicitly contains sacrificial behaviour. This section will highlight and evaluate the brand loyalty obstacles and their relationship to the relational sacrifice.

2.1 Brand Loyalty Obstacles

The literature has identified several obstacles, preventing the formation of a loyal relationship between consumer and brand (Dick and Basu, 1994; Oliver, 1999). First, *situational factors* which are external factors that influence consumers buying behaviour. They include physical factors, such as store locations, layout, lighting, music and scent, and marketing factors, such as product availability, deals, pricing and advertising (Tanner and Raymond, 2010). Competing brands often use these factors as switching incentives to lure consumers from their preferred brands. As a result, consumers may not exhibit a favourite attitude, such as positive emotion toward a specific brand, yet they repurchase it because it is the cheapest brand within a product category, or it is the only option available near their area. However, consumers who are truly loyal to a brand are willing to overcome the obstacles of the situational influences by resisting the alternatives incentives for the sake of the brand. They may even turn down a better offer from other brands (Sinek, 2009) to continue doing business with their preferred brands.

Second, *subjective norms* which reflect the social pressure to perform or not to perform a behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Family, friends and colleagues, as well as group members can be sources of pressure directly influencing consumers buying behaviour. A strong acceptance of subjective norms prevents loyalty to develop between consumers and their preferred brands (Lyong Ha, 1998). So although a consumer's attitude towards a brand may be favourable, peer pressure may strongly discourage them from buying the brand. This happens because not complying with subjective norms place the consumer under large amounts of pressure, and may cause to a cognitive conflict, leading to self-doubt and second thoughts (Oliver, 1999). On the other hand, consumers who demonstrate true brand loyalty are willing to overcome the obstacle of social pressure and give up convenience for the brand.

Evaluation: the conceptualization of brand loyalty obstacles suggests that loyal consumers are more likely to sacrifice time and energy by engaging in effortful search and postponing buying if their favoured brand is not available in stores. They prefer to 'do without', rather than buy another brand (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Indeed, Cunningham (1967) measures loyalty through the behaviour of consumers when the article they frequently purchase is out of stock. He concludes that consumers who tend to rebuy the same brand are considered loyal if they wait or go to another store to obtain their usual brand. Dick and Basu (1994, p. 106) describe the shopping behaviour of a loyal consumer as follows: "if a visited store was out of the preferred brand, the consumer would likely go to another store or wait until the next purchase cycle".

Indeed, several researchers assert that repurchasing behaviour under the condition of convenience is considered to be purchase inertia, not loyalty. McKercher, Denizci-Guillet, and Ng (2012, p. 719) state that "habitual users are driven by pragmatic reasons of convenience, location, safety, necessity or laziness". Day (1969) argues that convenience, along with environmental pressure or habit, leads to spurious loyalty, not true loyalty. This suggests that truly loyal consumers sacrifice convenience for a brand by resisting, for example, a convenient store location or another brand's availability in order to continue acquiring their favourite brands. They may also sacrifice convenience by facing social pressure to maintain their relationship with the brand that is not accepted by their family or friends.

Research proposition 1: loyal consumers are willing to maintain their relationship with a brand even when it requires sacrifice.

Research proposition 2: loyal consumers may sacrifice time, energy and convenience to stay committed to their valued brand

3. Willingness to Sacrifice

Sacrifice is conceived in social psychology as a pro-relationship behaviour that has a vital role in maintaining a long-lasting relationship. In a close relationship, people often have conflicting desires, making it difficult for partners to satisfy their own self-interests.

Sacrificing one's self-interests is one way to resolve this conflict. Willingness to sacrifice is the desire to give up immediate self-interest to promote the well-being of a partner or a relationship (Van Lange, Rusbult et al., 1997). There are two types of sacrifice: active sacrifice, engaging in undesired behaviours, and passive sacrifice, giving up desirable activities (Van Lange, Rusbult et al., 1997). Studies show that the more willing individuals are to sacrifice, the more likely they are to be together for a longer time (Van Lange et al., 1997; Van Lange, Rusbult, et al., 1997). Relying on customer-brand relationship theory (Fournier, 1998), Park, MacInnis, and Priester (2006) introduce the relational construct of willingness to sacrifice into marketing literature.

Several studies show that strong brand attachment leads consumers to make a sacrifice for the sake of a brand. Loureiro (2011) state that committed consumers are willing to sacrifice, for example, family dinner, travelling abroad, and relaxation time for the brand. Cheong (2013) points out that consumers with strong attachment are willing to sacrifice time, energy, and money and go through hardship in order to maintain their relationships with a brand. For example, one consumer reported her willingness to travel abroad in order to search for her valued skin care brand. Another consumer was willing to postpone his holiday because there was not any available room in his favourite resort brand. Cheong (2013) concluded that participants were willing to pay a price premium for their respective brands. In the context of football club brand, the behaviour of missing family birthdays or not going to work to be present in the stadium as well as talking publicly about the club especially in the darker series (Cayolla and Loureiro, 2014) are forms of sacrificing self-image for a brand.

This section suggests that willingness to sacrifice in brand loyalty is the area that has not been explored yet. Most of the research done in brand relationship literature has primarily focused on understanding the relationship between commitment and willingness to sacrifice as well as to explore the various forms of sacrificial behaviours made by committed consumers. These studies cannot be generalised into loyal consumers as brand loyalty is a combination of both commitment (attitudinal loyalty) and repurchase behaviour (behavioural loyalty). The number of purchases within a specific time frame and, as a result, the frequency of sacrifice have not been investigated in previous studies. Willingness to sacrifice may vary among consumers who exhibit a high level of commitment but a different number of purchases within a specific timeframe. Thus, neglecting the behavioural aspect makes the relational sacrifice as an unexplored subject in brand loyalty.

Research Proposition 3: there is a need to examine relational sacrifice in brand loyalty to understand the consumption behaviour of loyal consumers.

3. Conclusion

This paper shows that relational sacrifice is more likely to be a key element of brand loyalty. Some loyal behaviours imply that loyal consumers are willing to make a sacrifice for the sake of a brand. It is based on the review of the current theorization of brand loyalty obstacles and willingness to sacrifice in both social psychology and brand relationship. The review suggests that the element of relational sacrifice is missing in brand loyalty and that empirical studies are needed to explore this area. This will extend the conceptualization of brand loyalty and generate a deeper insight and a better understating of the relationship between consumer and brand. The exploration should uncover how deep and strong is the relationship between loyal consumers and their valued brand.

Future work

This study will be developed by choosing the proper research design and strategy as well as data collection and analysis procedures. It is expected that some data will be collected before the conference time.

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