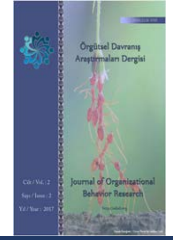




2528-9705

Örgütsel Davranış Araştırmaları Dergisi
Journal Of Organizational Behavior Research
Cilt / Vol.: 3, Sayı / Is.: S2, Yıl/Year: 2018, Kod/ID: 81S2390



DESIGNING A BRAND LOYALTY AND IDENTITY MODEL WITH AN EMPHASIS ON BRAND IDENTIFICATION

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ABSTRACT

Brand is the most valuable asset of every organization that, if managed appropriately, can lead to a larger share of market and profitability in every industry. Loyalty is considered as one of the most important marketing strategies and the key to business success. The purpose of the present study is investigating the effect of social identity, personal identity and brand identification on the brand loyalty. The research data have been collected using a 492-individual group of home appliances users, sampled within the format of simple clustering method, in Tehran. The research instrument was a questionnaire and the extracted data were analyzed using structural equations modeling in LISREL. The research findings indicated that the social identity influences the personal identity and brand identification but it does not exert a direct effect on the brand loyalty. Also, the findings showed that brand identification has an effect on the brand loyalty but personal identity was not found directly influencing the brand loyalty.

Keywords: Brand Loyalty, Social Identity, Personal Identity, Brand Identification

INTRODUCTION

Brand loyalty as a primary element of marketing tactics has become twice as much important with the increase in risk and reduction in product differentiation in highly competitive markets. Besides creating competitive advantage, customer loyalty enhances levels of productivity, employee motivation and entity profitability. Brand loyalty is accompanied by other advantages such as prevention of competitors' entry, better responding to the competitive threats, higher sales and incomes and lower sensitivity of the customers to the rivals' marketing efforts. Thus, loyalty sources and processes of creating it are amongst the main concerns in the marketing studies (Kurt et al., 2008). Brands allow the consumers satisfy the identity pertinent to such goals as self-expression and projection (Thorbjornsen et al., 2007; Kermani, 2009). Batra et al. (2003) state that the customers are inclined towards using products indicating their wealth and/or power and they purchase products with authentic brands and that the selection of a brand is closely interrelated with one's perception of one's own self and social image. In fact, the social individuals value how they are considered by the people and they are more likely to make authentic brand purchases (Batra et al., 2003).

According to the fact that the products that a certain customer buys bear personal and social meanings and corroborate the consumers' way of thinking about it and that, on the other hand, brands, as social signs, can be envisioned as key motivational factors contributing to the consumers' selection via being in compliance with the their selves, the brand success, nowadays, entails the creation of a robust bond with the customers by creating interesting concepts that are powerful and unique in their minds. Trademark has become so much important in the today's market and strong bond to the customer (brand loyalty) is known to be followed by profitability and more ponderable results for the company. Consumption and the symbolic project of the self by Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) deals with the internal relationships between the identities and brands that are imagined as symbolic sources applied in identity projections. Purchase experiences and brand uses and other experiences moderating the brands' effects (brand advertising and other marketing communication uses) all play a part in the symbolic project of the self. Although there are various studies performed so far regarding brand loyalty, including the researches by Kamran-Disfania et al. (2017), "the investigation of the effect of store shape", Vera and Trujillo (2017), "variables influencing the brand loyalty measurement", Atulkar and Kesari (2017), "investigation of the role of hedonistic purchase value", Nikhashemi et al. (2016), "the effect of the value of the customers' perceptions of the retailer stores", and Krystallis and Krysochou (2014), "the effect of service brand aspects", not many studies have dealt with the effect of social identity, personal identity and brand identification on brand loyalty while it is well-known that the brand loyalty is of a great importance.

The present study deals with how the social identity, personal identity and brand identification influence the customers' loyalty? To answer this question, it has been endeavored to assess the effects of each of these variables on loyalty and subsequently offer solutions for creating and enhancing such an important subject matter. Therefore, the present study aims at investigating and determining the role of social identity in brand loyalty with an emphasis on the personal identity and brand identification.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Model:

Social Identity and Brand Identification:

The recent perspectives and researches speak of better realization of the consumer-company interrelationships through social identity theories (Ahearne et al., 2005; He et al., 2012). On the other hand, Scalas and Bettman (2009) determined and expressed bond-based identities in vaster social concepts. The consumers associate with brands pertaining to identities that are in accordance with the ideal reference groups and famous subjects. Madhavaram et al. (2005) stated that social identity perspective realizes the brand identity as an essential index of brand identification. Sweeney and Soutar (2001) explain social value as an interest set on the product ability for increasing social self-conceptualization. Therefore, the social value links the service and product users to a social group that includes some perspectives, such as social image, personality, social self-conceptualization, personality explication and group membership follow-up. Therefore, social value is correlated with social confirmation and enhancement of self-image (Bearden and Netemeyer, 1999). According to the abovementioned studies, the following hypothesis is posited:

H1: social identity influences the brand identification.

Social Identity and Personal Identity:



Social identity theory expresses that the individuals tend to justify themselves beyond their personal identities and they speak about social identity (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Turner et al, 1987).

Wang (2017) investigated the role of social identity in consumers' behaviors and stated that the social identity and its aspects, including cognitive, affective and appraisal identities, not only influence the consumer's behavior but also cause an increase in marketing effectiveness, as well. In fact, it can be stated that it is the cultural convergence that navigates the consumers' behaviors. Local and global cultural forces are constantly influencing the consumption behaviors in the course of time (Sobol et al., 2017).

An individual's own self is constructed socially; we perceive ourselves in relationship to the others by our similarities or differences (Mead, 1934). Interaction with the society provides opportunities for a more diverse expression of the self. Individuals participate in activities and interactions with the others in the society and these social experiences along with identity development and reconstruction are necessary; thus, as opined by Mead (1934), the self-image is not fixed. The idea of individual identity change in the course of time, as revealed in the dramatic panorama of Goffman (1959-2006), implies that different social identities provide an opportunity for accepting roles and identities for the individuals/players that are in proportion to the conditions and associated with the saliency of a certain social identity. Based on the studies and evidences cited above, the following hypothesis is posited:

H2: social identity influences the personal identity.

Social Identity and Brand Loyalty:

Wu and Lin (2016) know social identity as being influential on the social appraisal hence loyalty. In the results of their work, they state that the stronger the complicity of the social identity for the consumers, the more investment is needed to be made on the marketing advertisement to elevate the trademark loyalty in the long run. He and Li Harris (2012) offer a social identity approach towards customer-brand relationships and state that brand identity and perceived value, trust and satisfaction are predictors of brand loyalty. Researchers believe that the individuals make brand choices based on their own social identities and they tend to select a brand that reflects their identities (Alam et al., 2012). The customers' behaviors are most often a lot different from the thing forecasted by the marketing studies because the social groups with which the customers are recognized upon encountering a product or brand influence their reactions. Recently, social identity has been intensively attended to in the area of customer loyalty (Ahearne et al., 2005; Mukherjee and He, 2008). Wu and Lin (2016) state in their studies that improvement of social factors (complex social identity and the need for being socially confirmed) as well as the individual behavioral factors are ways of augmenting the perceived value and brand loyalty. Therefore, the present study posits the following hypothesis.

H3: social identity influences brand loyalty.

Brand Identification and Brand Loyalty:

Based on such concepts as social identity (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1986 and Turner et al., 1987), organizational identity (He and Balmer, 2007; He and Baruch, 2010) and organization identification theories (Ashforth et al., 2008; Ashforth and Mael, 1989), brand identification features a special structure facilitating the effect of brand identity on the brand trust, customer satisfaction and brand loyalty.



It is presumed by the researchers that the customers' process of brand identification exerts a specific influence on such behaviors as purchase decision (Ahearne et al., 2005), brand preference (Tildesley and Coote, 2009), loyalty (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Kim et al, 2008), satisfaction and higher repurchase likelihood (Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008) and customers' willingness to pay higher prices.

It has been shown in several studies that brand identification leads to affective attachment to brand and sets the ground for the creation of trust (Dunn and Schweitzer, 2005; Jones and George, 1998; Lewicki et al, 1998; Williams, 2001). According to the aforesaid studies, the following hypothesis is offered:

H4: brand identification influences brand loyalty.

Personal Identity and Brand Loyalty:

As believed by Scalas and Bettman (2003), to achieve their specific identity goals, individuals use products and brands to create and showcase their images and offer them to themselves and others the result of which is the formation of a link between the brand and the self of the individuals. Also, since the individuals' behavioral motivations originate from constant justification of their images, Aaker (1996) and Berger and Heath (2007) state that the customers use brands to express their own identities and grant credibility thereto. Firm loyalty is introduced as one of the preliminary outcomes of a customer's identification therewith. That is because such a type of identification results in a commitment based on being recognized and creates longer term financial and emotional results. Researchers are of the belief that a solid and loyalty-based relationship between the customers and companies comes about when the individuals, seeking to satisfy one of their needs, i.e. self-aggrandizement, find their identities connected and identified with the identity of the company offering certain goods (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Brands, as well, are capable of imagining, informing and announcing the individuals' favorable identity. Researchers believe that the individuals make their choices of the brands based on their own social identity and they select a brand that best reflects their identities (Alam et al., 2012). Lam et al. (2001) believe that customers' brand identification prevents them from brand shifts when making a purchase. Personal identity contributes to the creation of brand personality and enhancement of loyalty and this is usually done with attentions paid to the reliable and credible merits of the products (Cha and Bagozzi, 2015). Therefore, the next hypothesis is presented as below:

H5: personal identity influences brand loyalty.

The research conceptual model has been illustrated in figure (1) based on the abovementioned hypotheses.

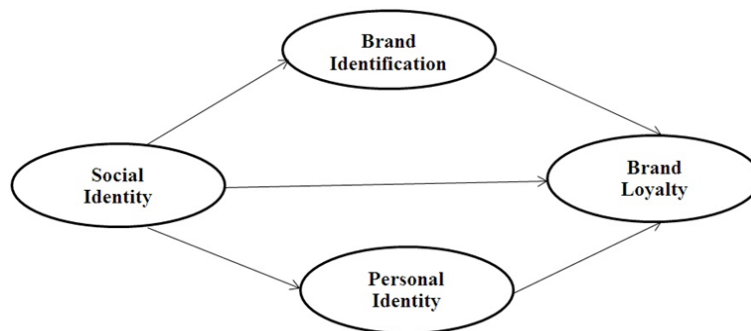


Figure 1: research conceptual model

METHODOLOGY:

The present study has been conducted on a 492-individual group of home appliance users in Tehran. The research sample volume was selected based on simple clustering method in such a way that the metropolitan Tehran was divided into five clusters, namely north, south, east, west and center, each of which was subjected to stochastic clustering. According to Morgan's table, at least 384 subjects in a sample is required so that the results could be better generalized and also to acquire an acceptable goodness of fit. The sample volume was administered with 525 questionnaires and 492 of them were completed and returned. The research instrument was a questionnaire scored based on Likert's five-point scale (completely agree, agree, neutral, disagree and completely disagree). To determine the reliability, there was made use of Cronbach's alpha and combined reliability (CR) methods and to determine the validity, convergent, divergent as well as management, psychology and sociology experts and specialists' ideas were utilized. The results were analyzed using structural equations modeling technique in LISREL. First and second order factor analysis was undertaken to examine the construct validity. The items with factor loads below 0.5 were eliminated and excluded from the structural model investigation.

Table 1: variables and sources used for the questions

	Variable	Source
Social identity	National identity	Gelisli, and Beisenbayeva, (2015)
	Religious identity	Bell, (2009)
	Ethnic identity	Lee and et al, (2010)
	Familial identity	Chi Cong and et al, (2013)
	Gender identity	Shiffman, (2013)
Personal identity		MICHELLE and et al, (2004)
Brand identification		Lin and et al, (2017)
Brand loyalty		Lin and et al, (2017)



RESEARCH FINDINGS:

Research Hypotheses Test:

The objective of this section is performing a structural test and investigation between the research variables. There is a model offered below indicating the confirmation or rejection of the relationships between the variables according to the significance values (T-values).

Standard Estimation Model:

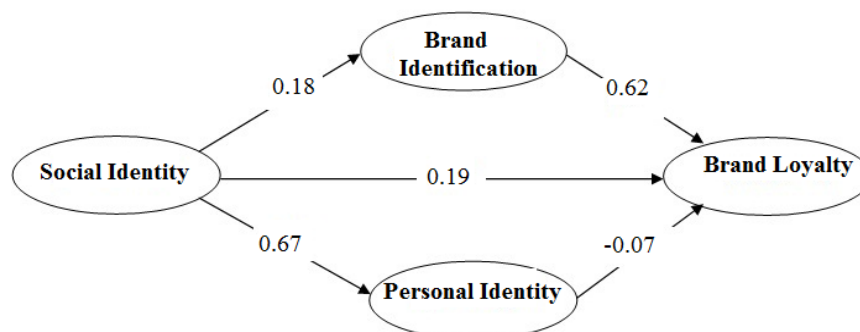


Figure 2: research structural model in standard estimation state

As it is demonstrated above, social identity exerts effects equal to 0.67, 0.18 and 0.19, respectively on the personal identity, brand identification and brand loyalty. Furthermore, such variables as brand identification and personal identity exert effects equal to 0.61 and -0.07, respectively, on brand loyalty. Next, it will be investigated that whether these effects or coefficients of these paths are significant or not! In other words, the significance of these coefficients is verified.

Significance Values Model:

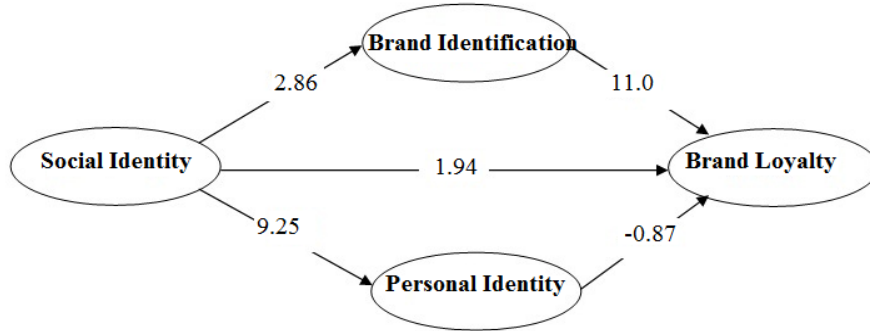


Figure 3: research structural model in significance state

As it is shown in figure (3), the significance values of some relationships are larger than the set 1.96 modulus and this is indicative of the significance of the relationships between the variables. In other words, social identity has a positive and significance effect on the personal identity and brand identification but the effect of social identity on loyalty was not found significant because the significance value related to this relationship is smaller than the set 1.96 modulus. In addition, it was found out that brand identity significantly influences brand loyalty but no such an effect was evidenced for personal identity on loyalty. The results of the research hypotheses test can be seen in table (2).

Table 2: hypotheses test

Row	Path	Standard coefficient (β)	Significance value (t-value)	Result
1	Social identity→brand identification	0.18	2.86	Confirmed
2	Social identity→personal identity	0.67	9.25	Confirmed
3	Social identity→Brand loyalty	0.19	1.94	Rejected
4	Brand identification→Brand loyalty	0.61	11.00	Confirmed
5	Personal identity→ Brand loyalty	-0.07	-0.87	Rejected

Next, the model estimation indices pertaining to the structural model of the study is presented and it is suggestive of the model's appropriate fit because the indices are larger than the specified scales. The fit indices can be seen in table (3).

Table 3: model's fit estimation indices

Indices	GFI	RFI	IFI	CFI	NFI	NNFI	RMSEA	$\frac{\chi^2}{df}$
Scale	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	<0.8	1-3
Observed	0.93	0.92	0.95	0.95	0.93	0.94	0.062	2.94

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS:

Creation of successful brands is one of the important methods for the companies to attain competitive advantage. Moreover, retaining current customers and instigation of brand loyalty in them is one important indicator of creation of sustainable advantage. Nowadays, brand loyalty is of a great importance and its assessment has drawn the attentions of researchers and marketers. Wining of the customers' loyalty is enumerated as a necessary aspect in line with company's success. In fact, instigation of loyalty is the goal pursued by the managers. The present research investigated the effect of social identity on brand loyalty with an emphasis on personal identity and brand identification. It was claimed herein that the social identity influences the personal identity and it was found affirmed. This finding is consistent with the results of the studies by Madhavaram *et al.* (2005). They expressed that the social identity perspective makes the brand identity be a radical index in brand identification. The foresaid finding also conforms to the results of the studies by Scalas and Bettman (2009). They stated that the consumers' bonds to brands pertain to the identities concordant with the ideal and famous reference groups.

The effect of social identity on personal identity was examined in another hypothesis and it was also confirmed. This finding is in accordance with the results of the studied by Tajfel (1978); Tajfel and Turner (1986) and Turner *et al.* (1987). They stated that the social identity theory posits that individuals tend to justify themselves beyond their personal identities and they speak of social identity. This finding is in compliance with the results of the study by Mead (1934) who stated that the self is constructed socially; we perceive ourselves in relation to our companions for our similarities and differences with them and with others. Another hypothesis in the current research paper demonstrated that the social identity does not have a significant effect on brand loyalty. This finding is not consistent with the results obtained by Ahearne *et al.* (2005), Mukherjee and He (2008), He and Li (2011) and Marian *et al.* (2009). The reason can be related to the weakness of foreign brands advertisement in Iran, consumers' lack of awareness of the advantages and services of brands, weakness in the marketing knowledge of the agents selling foreign brands, negative attitudes towards some domestic and foreign brands and high dogmatism regarding some brands. Another result of the present study is the effect of brand identification on the brand loyalty. This result is consistent with what has been found by Tajfel (1978), Tajfel and Turner (1986), Turner *et al.* (1987), He and Balmer (2007), He and Baruch (2010), Ashforth *et al.* (2008) and Ashforth and Mael (1989) who showed that the brand identification features a special structure easing the effects of brand identity on brand trust, customer satisfaction and brand loyalty.

The investigation of the fifth hypothesis indicated that personal identity is not effective on customer loyalty and this finding is not consistent with what has been found by Lam *et al.* (2012) and Bhattacharya and Sen (2003). The reason can be diversities in culture and ethnicity and the youngness and, in the meantime, changeable moods, the existence of bans and biases towards some brands, sensitivities towards some countries and their products as well as the mismatch between some products and the country's culture and cultural issues. According to the significant effect of social identity on the brand identification, the marketers should strengthen psychological and social aspects of brand to enhance their brand identity and subsequently customers' loyalty in such a way that the consumers can be instigated with a group attachment feeling or the very social identity upon buying a certain brand and feel



satisfied of their purchase and become behaviorally and attitudinally loyal to the intended brand. Knowing that the social identity (national, religious, ethnic, familial and gender identity) has a significant effect on brand identification, the marketers should take into account all the aspects of social identity to be able to carve a brand identity in the customers' minds thereby to create loyalty and enhance it via rendering social identity and brand identity concordant and consistent. Home appliance firms should pay a greater deal of attention to brand identity and make greater investments thereon. The brand loyalty is primarily rooted in brand identity. Brand identity is shaped by the company possessing the brand and it is expanded by the customers thereof. It is suggested that more precise examination of brand identity aspects should be conducted to codify a more coherent program for the development of customer loyalty. The domestic producers should be sensitive to the creation of home appliance identity and make efforts parallel to its corroboration via psychological and social factors. Marketing managers should attend to the important role of brand identification in customers' loyalty so as to take the aspects of brand identification into consideration and add up to the brand loyalty in the customers. In the end, it has to be pointed out that the present study was carried out on those home appliances that are considered as sustainable consumer products. The researchers are recommended to perform studies regarding non-sustainable consumer products. The researchers can expand the model in their future studies and test the other psychological and social and marketing variables, as well.

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