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Impacts of retail brand personality and self-congruity on store loyalty: The moderating role of gender



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ABSTRACT

The present study was an effort to investigate the impacts of both retail brand personality and self-congruity, using them together in the same study, on store loyalty. Subsequently, this study explored the moderating role of gender in these relationships of retail brand personality and self-congruity with store loyalty. Questionnaire was used to collect data ($n=355$) using systematic sampling from department store shoppers of age 18 years and above in Kolkata, a metropolitan city of India. Multivariate data analysis techniques like exploratory factor analysis, structural equation modeling were used to analyse the data. Results revealed that both retail brand personality and self-congruity constructs have positive impacts on store loyalty and gender significantly moderates these impacts. Arguably, this paper is the first to examine the three constructs namely, retail brand personality, self-congruity and store loyalty using them together in the same model. Academic and managerial implications are further discussed.

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1. Introduction

With brands emerging as top management's priority (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004), marketing managers and researchers have shifted their interest towards the symbolic meaning consumers attribute to brands (e.g., Das et al., 2012; Willems et al., 2011). The symbolic meanings refer to the signal effect of using brands, which means what the brands say about the consumer to the consumer and to others (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004). The signal effect of brands may be based on the image of a typical user of the brand and/or the personality of the brand itself (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004, p. 206). "Consumers no longer consume products for their material utilities but consume the symbolic meaning of those products as portrayed in their images; products in fact become commodity signs" (Elliott, 1997, p. 286). "The real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions" (Debord, 1977) and "the ad-dict buys images not things" (Taylor and Saarinen, 1994). Being memorable (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000), meaningful (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2004), emotionally powerful (Upshaw, 1995), long term (Temporal, 2001), and consistent (LePla and Parker, 1999), symbolic brand benefits take pivotal role in influencing several important aspects of consumer behavior like loyalty towards brands (Sirgy et al., 1997).

Focusing on symbolic brand benefits, literature reveals two streams of research: brand personality and self-congruity (e.g.,

Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004; Sirgy, 1982). A large body of studies explored brand personality from different perspectives. For examples, Aaker (1997) developed a scale to measure personality of brands. Aaker et al. (2001) investigated how brand personality varies across cultures. A considerable number of researchers also studied self-congruity from several perspectives. For examples, Sirgy et al. (1997) examined the impacts of self-congruity on consumer behavior and functional congruity. They investigated how self-congruity predicts use of products, attitude towards brands etc. Prior studies assumed that the two symbolic brand associations are interchangeable and thus they used either brand personality or self-congruity while investigating the symbolic brand effects (e.g., Aaker, 1997). However, Helgeson and Supphellen (2004) argued that brand personality and self-congruity are two distinct constructs and so they should not be measured or discussed interchangeably.

In recent time, marketing researchers argued that "branding and brand management principle can and should be applied to retail brands" (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004, p. 340). As a result, it is now being applied to retail brands also, bringing in a change from the past when it was only applied to product brands (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004; d'Astous and Levesque, 2003). Here retail brand means *retailers as brands* or *retail stores as brands* (Das et al., 2012; Zentes et al., 2008). In retail branding context, very few studies explored the link between symbolic brand benefits and store loyalty (e.g., Zentes et al., 2008). All of them assumed that retail brand personality and self-congruity are interchangeable and thus they used either retail brand personality or self-congruity in their study. However, given the fact that retail brand personality

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and self-congruity are two distinct constructs each may give unique insights into the symbolic benefits of retail brands (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004). Thus, use of both retail brand personality and self-congruity in the same study results in comprehensive understanding of symbolic brand effects (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004), which enhances profitability and sustainability of a company. However, so far no one used both brand personality and self-congruity in the same study to explore the comprehensive understating of symbolic brand benefits-store loyalty link. This gap motivates us to explore the impacts of both retail brand personality and self-congruity, using them together in the same study, on store loyalty. The use of both retail brand personality and self-congruity constructs in the same study needs to be ensured that they possess discriminant validity in the study context (detailed discussion is in Section 2).

While analyzing consumer differences based on demographics, researchers have found significant variations between the behavior of men and women (Kolyesnikova et al., 2009). Men and women behave differently (Kolyesnikova et al., 2009) and shopping is one framework where these differences often become apparent (e.g., Bakewell and Mitchell, 2004; Dholakia, 1999). For example, women have greater affinity for shopping than men; they move slowly through stores, examining the hangers and shelves, products and values, comparing prices, interacting with staff and other shoppers, asking questions, trying products and finally purchasing (Gąsiorowska, 2003). Studies have also found that perceptions of symbolic brand benefits differ from gender to gender. For example, the brand personality dimensions across males differ from females (Grohmann, 2009). Given the facts that symbolic brand benefits and consumer shopping behavior differ from males to females, we argue here the impacts of retail brand personality and self-congruity on store loyalty differ from males to females. However, no one has investigated this issue earlier. Thus, this study subsequently tries to investigate the moderating role of gender in the symbolic brand benefits-brand loyalty relationships. Investigation of moderating role of gender in the symbolic brand benefits-brand loyalty relationships would help retailers to formulate and implement gender related marketing strategies like segmentation, positioning etc.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. We first provide a theoretical background for the study, followed by hypotheses development and conceptual framework. We then describe the methodology used for testing the hypotheses, discuss results, suggest theoretical and managerial implications of the study, and conclude the paper with its limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Retail brand personality

A retail brand has been conceptualised as “a group of the retailer's outlets which carry a unique name, symbol, logo or combination thereof” (Zentes et al., 2008, p. 167). Ailawadi and Keller (2004) demonstrated that “a retail brand identifies the goods and services of a retailer and differentiates them from those of competitors” (p. 332). Sometime retail brand is confused with store brand. However, literature revealed that retail brand and store brand are two different concepts. While retail brand refers to a retailer as a brand, store brand refers to a brand owned by a retailer (Zentes et al., 2008). For example, *Pantaloons*, an Indian department retail store, can be considered as a retail brand while *UMM Women* is considered as a store brand of *Pantaloons*.

Personality may be served as a viable metaphor to ascribe stable human traits to commercial objects like retail brands (Caprara et al.,

2001). The attribution of human personality traits to a retail brand is a logical proposition to the coining of the term, *retail brand personality* or *store personality* (Willems et al., 2011; d'Astous and Levesque, 2003). Das et al. (2012) defined retail brand personality as “a consumer's perception of the human personality traits attributed to a retail brand” (p. 98).

2.2. Self-congruity

Self-congruity as a symbolic benefit of products, (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004) has been well documented in marketing literature (Dolich, 1969; Sirgy, 1982). Self-congruity is defined as “how much a consumer's self-concept matches the personality of a typical user of a brand” (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004, p. 206). Self-congruity theory proposes that consumer behaviour is partially determined by an individual's comparison of the image of himself and the image of brands, as reflected in a stereotype of a typical user of the brands (Sirgy et al., 1997). High self-congruity happens when a consumer's own self-image matches suitably with the brand image.

2.3. Store loyalty

Store loyalty is defined as “the tendency to be loyal to a focal retailer as demonstrated by the intention to buy from the retailer as a primary choice” (Pappu and Quester, 2006, p. 320). Loyalty creates several benefits and hence is useful in developing and implementing numerous marketing strategies (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978). For example, loyalty generates a stable customer's pool for firms' products and services (Oliver, 1997). Loyal customers participate in repeat purchase, spread positive word of mouth and are willing to pay higher price (Zeithaml et al., 1996). A small change in customer retention rate may have large impact on retail earnings. Thus, the effort to maintain store loyalty is considered as a critical retailer strategy to retain existing customers and thus profitability and sustainability are ensured (Wallace et al., 2004).

2.4. Conceptualisation of gender

Gender difference takes an important role in this present study. So far, two streams of research have been found focusing on gender differences: biological sex (e.g., Chang, 2006; Worth et al., 1992) and gender identity (e.g., Gould and Weil, 1991; Kahle and Homer, 1985). Hence, given the hypothesized moderating role of gender, it is important to clearly conceptualize this variable in present this study. According to the first stream, gender means biological sex which refers to males versus females (Kolyesnikova et al., 2009), whereas the other stream signifies gender as ‘gender identity’ (Gould and Weil, 1991) which refers to psychological sex, which is a two-dimensional phenomenon—feminine personality traits comprise one dimension, and masculine traits comprise the other (Palan, 2001). Studies argued that gender identity can be a predictor of consumer behavior in certain aspects like sometime it influences consumer attitudes (e.g., Worth et al., 1992). However, studies argued that the significant contributions of gender identity in consumer research have been questioned (Kolyesnikova et al., 2009) and significant gender identity findings in consumer research have been very rare (Palan, 2001). While comparing the impacts of biological sex versus gender identity, studies argued that biological sex is far more significant with respect to predicting consumer-brand relationship than gender identity (Allison et al., 1980; Gould and Weil, 1991; Kahle and Homer, 1985). In addition, Palan (2001) advocated that biological sex is a more practical segmentation variable. For these reasons, this present study considers gender as biological sex (i.e., males versus females).

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