

Does attitudinal loyalty influence behavioral loyalty? A theoretical and empirical study

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Abstract

Despite a plethora of studies on brand loyalty spanning over last three decades, the research paradigm is unique in its inability to produce generalizable results. The research suffers from a lack of agreement over the operationalization of the construct of the brand loyalty. Many researchers [e.g., Kahn, B.E., Kalwani, M.U., Morrison, D.G., 1986. Measuring variety seeking and reinforcement behaviors using panel data. *Journal of Marketing Research* 23, 89–100; Ehrenberg, A.S.C., Goodhardt, G.J., Barwise, P.B., 1990. Double jeopardy revisited. *Journal of Marketing* 54, 82–91] have defined brand loyalty only from a behavioral perspective. They assumed that repeat purchasing can capture the loyalty of a consumer towards the brand of interest. Other researchers [e.g., Day, G.S., 1969. A two-dimensional concept of brand loyalty. *Journal of Advertising Research* 9, 29–35; Dick, A.S., Basu, K., 1994. Consumer loyalty: towards an integrated conceptual approach. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 22 (2), 99–113; Baldinger, A.L., Rubinson, J., 1996. Brand loyalty: the link between attitude and behavior. *Journal of Advertising Research* 36 (6), 22–34; Rundle-Thiele, S.R., Bennett, R., 2001. A brand for all seasons: A discussion of loyalty approaches and their applicability for different markets. *Journal of Product and Brand Management* 10 (1), 25–37; Rundle-Thiele, S.R., 2005. Elaborating customer loyalty: exploring loyalty to wine retailers. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 12 (5), 333–344], however, have suggested that attitude should be included along with behavior to define loyalty. In particular, Dick and Basu (1994) were precise in suggesting that a favorable attitude and repeat purchase were required to define loyalty. By viewing loyalty as an attitude–behavior relationship in their framework, Dick and Basu (1994) were able to investigate the concept from a causal perspective thereby permitting the identification of the factors that influence loyalty.

Our research extends the idea proposed by Dick and Basu (1994) in two ways. First, we provide a conceptually clear, and an operationally meaningful way of segmenting the market on the basis of attitudes that govern this behavior. To be specific, we offer a unique way to measure attitudinal loyalty. And we use a unique survey data with a large sample of 1800 respondents that includes both behavioral (purchase) patterns and attitudes of the respondents for all major brands of toothpaste, to demonstrate that behavioral loyalty is influenced by attitudinal loyalty across many brands of the toothpaste category. Finally, we propose that a third behavioral pattern—*non-user*—should be also included along with two known behavioral patterns viz. *single user* and *multiple user*. This is because a non-user has the potential to become a consumer in future.

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Keywords: Brand loyalty; Behavioral loyalty; Attitudinal loyalty; Market segmentation

1. Introduction

In spite of the numerous studies devoted to understanding the phenomenon of brand loyalty over the past three decades, the research paradigm is unique in its inability to produce generalizable results. Previous research in the field has been unable to contribute a clear conceptual

understanding of the loyalty phenomenon. The research also lacks a clear agreement over the operationalization of the construct of the brand loyalty.

Broadly, there are two schools of thought when it comes to define and operationalize brand loyalty. Many researchers (e.g. Ehrenberg et al., 1990; Blattberg and Sen, 1974; Kahn et al., 1986) have defined brand loyalty strictly from a behavioral perspective. A common theme across this stream of work has been the attempt to look for a surrogate behavioral measure to operationalize brand

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loyalty. The major assumption here is that this (repeat) purchasing could capture the loyalty of a consumer towards the brand of interest. Thus, while some researchers have observed purchasing patterns and made conclusions based on the proportion of purchases devoted to a particular brand (Cunningham, 1956; Blattberg and Sen, 1974), others have focused on the purchase sequence (Kahn et al., 1986; McConell, 1968). In fact, many researchers have struggled over the years to (1) to distinguish between repeat purchase and brand loyalty, and (2) to define brand loyalty—a complex multidimensional phenomenon—on a single behavioral dimension (Jacoby and Kyner, 1973).

Dick and Basu (1994) were precise in suggesting that a favorable attitude and repeat purchase were required to define loyalty. By viewing loyalty as an attitude–behavior relationship in their framework, they were thus able to investigate the concept from a causal perspective—thereby permitting the identification of the antecedents of loyalty. Their research, however, offers only a theoretical framework, and did not provide any empirical validation of their theory. In a recent paper, East et al. (2005) empirically tested Dick and Basu's (1994) theory that consumer loyalty is characterized by a favorable attitude and repeat purchase.¹ Using data collected across countries (Britain and New Zealand) and industries (cars and fashion stores), they demonstrate that the combination concept of loyalty (i.e., attitude plus behavior) is of limited value, particularly in predicting phenomena such as recommendation, search and retention. More empirical tests of the model under different contexts (e.g., products, services, and usage occasions) are needed, to thoroughly evaluate Dick and Basu's (1995) model.

Our research extends the work done by Dick and Basu (1994) in two ways. First, we provide a conceptually clear, and an operationally meaningful way of segmenting the market on the basis of attitudes that influence the brand purchase behavior. To be specific, we offer a unique way to measure attitudinal loyalty. And we use a unique survey data with a large sample of 1800 respondents that includes both behavioral (purchase) patterns and attitudes of the respondents for all major brands of tooth paste, to demonstrate that behavioral loyalty is influenced by attitudinal loyalty across many brands of the toothpaste category.

Finally, we extend Dick and Basu's (1994) model by introducing a new segment of non-users. Dick and Basu (1994) contend that the lowest form of loyalty is that of someone with a low attitude and a low repeat purchase pattern, but our position is that the non-users with a weak attitude would be at the bottom of the “loyalty ladder”. It is important that non-users be included because they have the potential to become consumers, especially if it is unknown as to why they are non-users. Dick and Basu

(1994) stated that, “customer loyalty is viewed as the strength of the relationship between an individual's relative attitude and their repeat patronage”. To a point this is true; however we contend that a non-user with a strong attitude towards a product could potentially be a loyal customer, but due to financial reasons or lack of market penetration or some other reasons, her *purchase situation* was affected. We would concede that there is little that can be done with a person who is a non-user and is characterized with a weak attitude, and therefore few resources should be exhausted in an attempt to convince these individuals to switch brands. It is the non-user with a strong attitude that should interest the brand manager. This, in essence, is in consonance with one of the basic functions of marketing: generate new customers who are willing and able to purchase the brand. Our position is supported by Uncles et al. (2003) who stated that “it is possible that a loyalty program could be offered to people who do not buy the target brand (but do buy from the category)”.

Our study thus is an attempt to improve earlier works in the following ways:

- (1) Behaviorally, we give a strict definition to a loyal customer, i.e. a buyer of only one brand. Thus, as defined by us, a loyal customer is one who buys only one brand over the last 1 year. We call these customers “single users”. We also include the “multiple users” (people who buy more than one brand) and “non-users” in our analysis to investigate how attitudinal influences may differ for these three types of consumers.
- (2) We define “favorable attitudes” much more explicitly for the class of product category under consideration. Our focus for this research is on low involvement purchasing, and for such purchase behavior we look at past consumer behavior research to understand how the attitudes could be operationalized. Our definition of strong and weak attitudes is based on the attribute frequency levels. In other words, we argue that the brand attitude will be stronger when consumers associate more number of attributes with the brand. We elaborate on this issue later on in the “Operationalizing Attitudinal Loyalty” section in page 15.
- (3) We propose a conceptually clear, and operationally meaningful way of segmenting the market on the basis of not only the behavior patterns (i.e. single-, multiple-, and non-users), but also on the basis of the strength of antecedent attitudes that govern this behavior.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we briefly review the literature on loyalty. Because the loyalty literature has been thoroughly reviewed by other researchers such as Rundle-Thiele (2005) and Uncles et al. (2003), we will focus mostly on the earlier work done on attitudinal loyalty, and skim the literature on behavioral

¹We thank an anonymous reviewer for letting us know of this new publication.

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