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Shopper marketing moderators of the brand equity – behavioral loyalty relationship

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ABSTRACT

The branding literature assumes that the higher a brand's equity, the greater is its behavioral loyalty. In this research, we develop a conceptual framework that explains the off-diagonal relationship between brand equity and behavioral loyalty (i.e., high equity but poor loyalty and vice versa) by identifying five shopper marketing related factors that potentially moderate this relationship. We adopt a multi-method approach by mailing surveys to collect shoppers' attitudinal data on brand equity and the moderators for ten brands in two product categories, and then merging it with each household's corresponding purchase data from a frequent shopper scanner panel to empirically test our framework. Findings reveal that approximately 40% of consumers exhibit high brand equity but low behavioral loyalty or vice versa. The relationship between brand equity and behavioral loyalty is accentuated by perceived in-store presence and importance of brand choice decision, and attenuated by the brand equity of competitors. Our findings provide several implications for retailers and brand manufacturers.

1. Introduction

Brand managers strive very hard to create high equity for their brands hoping that it will result in high behavioral loyalty. This is because of the benefits of high behavioral loyalty, including reduced search for information (Moore & Lehmann, 1980), positive word-of-mouth (Westbrook, 1987), reduced cost of marketing (Aaker, 1991), and increased market share (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). However, the reality for many brands is that high brand equity does not always translate into the above benefits, making it a frustrating problem for managers because building brand equity is expensive and time consuming.

Prior studies in the branding literature have examined the relationship between specific dimensions of brand equity (e.g., brand trust) and attitudinal or stated measures of behavioral loyalty and have found a strong positive relationship between them. Specifically, Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) examined the effect of brand trust and brand affect on attitudinal loyalty and purchase intentions across > 100 brands. Netemeyer et al. (2004) examined the effects of different consumer-based brand equity dimensions, specifically brand quality, value for money and brand differentiation, on the willingness to pay and subsequently on purchase intentions. Taylor, Celuch, and Goodwin (2004) examined the effect of brand equity on both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty in the context of industrial equipment. Recently, Romaniuk and Nenycz-Thiel (2013) examined the role of brand associations on behavioral loyalty.

As highlighted in Table 1, in contrast to prior studies, we examine the role of brand equity on a revealed measure of behavioral loyalty and the factors that moderate the relationship. Consistent with prior literature that focuses on behavior-based brand loyalty (e.g., Ailawadi, Lehmann, & Neslin, 2003; Srinivasan, Park, & Chang, 2005), we define behavioral loyalty as consistency in revealed brand choice across several purchase occasions. This is different from attitudinal brand loyalty, which includes a degree of dispositional commitment in terms of some unique value associated with the brand (Aaker, 1991; Dick & Basu, 1994).[1] While these prior studies conceptualize (true) brand loyalty to entail both behavioral and attitudinal loyalties, the focus in the current

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[1] Our conceptualization of loyalty is different from Oliver's (1999) according to which consumers sequentially become loyal in cognitive sense (or brand beliefs) first, followed by affective (or liking) loyalty, conative loyalty (or intention to buy), and culminate in action loyalty (or motivated intention is transformed into readiness to act by overcoming any obstacle). We do not assume this sequential progression. Instead, our conceptualization starts with Oliver's first three loyalties which are captured by our key independent variable – brand equity – that we then relate to behavioral loyalty and identify moderators that either strengthen or weaken the brand equity-behavioral loyalty linkage. Our behavioral loyalty corresponds to Oliver's action loyalty but without the motivational and readiness to act elements.

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Table 1
Comparison with prior studies that examine the relationship between different brand attitudinal measures and behavioral outcome measures.

Study	Attitudinal measures	Behavioral outcome measure(s)	Moderating effects	Categories	Number of brands
Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001)	Brand trust and brand affect	Attitudinal and purchase brand loyalty (stated)	None	49 categories	149
Netemeyer et al. (2004)	Brand quality, brand value for the cost and brand uniqueness	Willingness to pay a premium and purchase intention	None	Cola, toothpaste, athletic shoes and jeans	3 brands per category
Taylor et al. (2004)	Satisfaction, value, resistance to change, affect, trust and brand equity	Attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty (stated)	None	Waste management and heavy equipment	11
Horsky et al. (2006)	Liking	Brand choice (revealed)	None	Toothpaste	7
Romaniuk and Nenycz-Thiel (2013)	Brand associations	Behavioral loyalty (buying frequency and share of category requirements)	None	Two categories (hot beverages)	6
This study	Brand equity dimensions • Brand trust • Strength of brand's favorable associations • Brand quality • Value for money • Brand personality	Behavioral loyalty – share of wallet (scanner panel data)	• In-store presence • Price • Brand equity of competitor brands • Importance of brand choice decision • Category differentiation	Toothpaste and tortilla chips	10

research is on understanding the influence of brand equity, which we believe is a richer substitute construct for attitudinal loyalty, on behavioral loyalty and factors that moderate this relationship. Moreover, we adopt Keller's (1993) popular definition of brand equity as *the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of that brand as compared to if the same product or service did not have that name*.

Our research addresses key important gaps in prior research. First, while prior research has merged attitudinal data with revealed data in other contexts (e.g., Ben-Akiva et al., 1994), ours is the first study to merge attitudinal data on brand equity with revealed data on behavioral loyalty. Researchers have long acknowledged the need for empirical studies that investigate the conceptual link between dimensions of brand equity and revealed measures of behavioral loyalty (Ailawadi et al., 2003; Erdem & Swait, 1998), yet there is a surprising paucity of such studies. This absence can be mostly attributed to the fact that the undertaking of such a study faces the challenge of implementing an empirical research design that can merge customer mind-set based measures of brand equity with customers' purchases over a period of time. A key contribution of our research is to successfully address that challenge through a field study that reveals empirical insights into important aspects of the conceptual link between brand equity and behavioral loyalty. Specifically, our study marries consumers' attitudinal brand equity data collected through surveys for multiple brands in two categories to their actual purchases over a time period of two years.

Second, we perform a comprehensive search of prior literature to develop a unidimensional, parsimonious and reliable scale for brand equity. A high variation in the operationalization of brand equity in prior research prompted us to fall back upon the conceptual definition of brand equity (Keller, 1993) and operationalize brand equity using five dimensions viz., brand trust, strength of brand's favorable associations, brand quality, value for money, and brand personality. The scale has strong face validity in that brands such as Crest and Doritos were rated as high equity brands compared to brands such as Aquafresh and Santitas.

Third, before suggesting specific guidelines to brands, it is important to ascertain the factors responsible for consumers straying away from the high equity-high loyalty segment. In other words, unlike prior research (e.g., Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Horsky, Misra, & Nelson, 2006) that only captures the main effect of brand equity on (attitudinal or behavioral) loyalty, we identify individual-level and brand-level moderators that accentuate or attenuate this linkage. Furthermore, we empirically identify which specific dimensions of brand equity mitigate the influence of distinct moderators responsible for consumers straying away from the high equity-high behavioral loyalty segment or accentuate the influence of moderators responsible for consumers to stay in the high equity – high behavioral loyalty segment.

Our choice of moderators recognizes the importance of shopper marketing factors (Shankar, Inman, Mantrala, Kelley, & Rizley, 2011), especially those, both outside and inside the store, that act as trigger points in consumers' shopping cycle influencing their attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, we include perceived *in-store presence* that captures whether consumers can easily find the brand in the store and if they find the brand on the shelf attractive, *price* paid by the consumer that captures the utilitarian cost of purchasing the brand, the perceived *equity of competing brands*, the perceived *importance of brand choice decision* within the category, and the perceived ease with which consumers are able to differentiate the brands within the category (*category differentiation*).

Fourth, unlike prior research that conceptualizes only the main effect of brand equity on behavioral loyalty, we conceptualize and empirically identify four distinct segments of consumers that vary in their perceptions of the brand's equity (low versus high) and their behavioral loyalty (low versus high). Since the percentages of consumers in the four segments vary from one brand to another, brands need guidelines to either focus on improving (lowering) the moderators that accentuate (mitigate) the brand equity – behavioral loyalty relationship or to strengthen the overall level of brand equity across all dimensions to move consumers from other three segments to the high equity-high loyalty segment.

Our research makes the following four theoretical contributions. First, we outline an approach that can be used by brand managers to