Store Loyalty: a Relationship Perspective

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Store Loyalty: A Relationship Perspective

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ABSTRACT
Counter to mainstream definitions, findings suggest: not all store loyalty is similar in terms of strength and character; some store relationships not categorised as loyal are especially meaningful for the individual; some store relationships defined as loyal do not possess characteristics of commitment or relationship strength at all.

BACKGROUND
Consumer loyalty research can be traced back to Copeland (1923) and subsequently two groups emerged; the ‘psychological camp’ and the ‘anthropological/sociological camp’ (Fournier and Yao, 1997). The former focuses on cognitive processes for development of brand/store attitude and psychological commitment and the resultant repeat purchase behaviour, whereas the latter emphasises the emotive and relational aspects of consumer loyalty. The extant literature shows that mainstream consumer loyalty has been dominated by the ‘cognitive/psychological’ approach, however the emotive, experiential and relational aspects of loyalty behaviour are attracting increasing attention. For example, ideas such as emotional connections and brand love have been suggested describing consumer loyalty behaviour (e.g., Fullman and Gross, 2004; Berry and Carbon, 2007; Carol and Ahuvia, 2006); emotional connections between employees and customers can generate exceptional service quality and service loyalty (e.g., Reynolds and Arnould, 2000; Sierra and McQuitty, 2005; Moris, et al, 2005); emotional connections between consumers and organizations can feature higher levels of meanings and commitment for consumers (Berry and Carbone, 2007). In addition, interpersonal relationships have been found to be more important than tangible products for the formation of service loyalty (e.g., Macintosh and Lockshin, 1997; Wong and Sohal, 2003; Chao, et al, 2007; Han et al, 2008). Thus, it is argued that it is necessary to focus more on the emotive and relational aspects of loyalty behaviour in order to gain deeper understanding of consumer loyalty.

RESEARCH METHOD (SUMMARY)
In-depth interviews were conducted in the UK based on the existential phenomenological approach to explore women’s lived experience of consumption and grocery shopping. All participants were women employed outside the home. They were invited to share their experiences of shopping in stores to which they felt a sense of loyalty (based on the mainstream store loyalty definition). The data were analysed and interpreted following hermeneutic method.

FINDINGS
The analysis generated three central insights/themes into store loyalty as defined according to traditional hybrid definitions. In terms of theme one, the research revealed the diverse nature of consumer store loyal relationships. Indeed, metaphors from interpersonal relationships can vividly express the features of these consumer store relationships such as ‘committed partnership’, ‘kinship’ and ‘best friends’. These strong relationships have developed from store-self connection formed at the level of life themes. All these loyal relationships are grounded in the predictability of the performance of the store partners and the sense of control consumers can get in their hectic mundane life. This store and life-theme connection proposition (Fournier and Yao, 1997) can further extend our understanding of the factors motivating the formation of store loyalties beyond the store image congruence theories (Sirgy, 1982; Sirgy, et al, 2000).

In terms of theme two, the research also revealed the diverse nature of consumer non-loyal relationships. We have identified two positive non-loyal relationships (‘compartmentalised friendship’, ‘childhood friendship’). These relationships are categorized as ‘non-loyal’ according to the mainstream relationship theory as the theoretical framework. Despite such developments in understanding, measuring and leveraging consumer brand loyalty, in the store loyalty domain, the cognitive approach is still dominant. This research conceptualises store loyalty through the framework of consumer-store relationships and explores why, and in what sense, store loyalty exists.
store loyalty criteria in terms of the frequency they visit the store and amount of money they spend in the store. For the ‘compartmentalized friendship’, it is characterised by highly situation-confined enduring friendship with low intimacy than other type of friendship but with higher socio-emotional rewards and interdependence. Indeed, consumers may shop in stores only on special occasions. But these stores can represent their ideal self and ideal social/presenting self. Thus, there can be high expressive interdependence between consumers and the stores. With regard to ‘childhood friendship’, consumers can engage in the affective relationship, which can be dated back to their childhood and indicative of their early life themes. However, due to the changes of life circumstances, these stores cannot be their main store for their grocery shopping. Thus, they are not ‘loyal’ to these stores, but these shops can have deep and significant connections with them and can be meaningful for their self concept maintenance.

With regard to theme three, the research also revealed that some ‘loyal’ relationships according to the mainstream store loyalty criteria (frequency for visiting and amount of money spent in store), do not entail much meaning for consumers at all. We term this type of relationship as ‘marriage of convenience’. Indeed, on the surface, consumers’ relationship with the store can appear long-term and committed. However, it is due to external constraints rather than deliberate choice. Commitment can be externally driven, i.e., exogenous commitment (commitment to content). It is ‘locked in’ loyalty.

**DISCUSSION**

Store loyalty brings to mind such a wide range of meanings and individual interpretations that ‘loyalty concept’ or even ‘loyal relationships’ cannot capture them (Fournier and Yao, 1997). Strong store-customer bonds also reveal diversity in the character (e.g., committed relationship, best friends, kinship, childhood friendship, etc), depth (connection to the life theme or other aspects of self and identity), and consequences of loyalty. Indeed, these distinctive characteristics of diverse loyalty forms require tailored marketing actions for the development and management over time.

Participant’s store loyalty stories reveal that the culturally-biased assumption of loyalty as exclusive partnership cannot apply to the consumer store loyalty domain. No participant has described having an exclusive store relationship. Participants see grocery shopping not just as a provisioning process but also as fulfilling their life role task and an important element of role identity (Woodruffe-Burton and Wakenshaw, 2011). Even though they may claim that they have a favourite store, they often have to juggle between various stores due to situational and other factors. As long as the preferred store remains a place to support their life role tasks, to give them some other values for them to maintain and construct various aspects of self and identity, they will maintain a regular and meaningful place in participants’ lives. As Fournier and Yao (1997) suggested that expression of loyalty does not need to be associated with exclusivity. What is more important is their emotional attachment and sincerity intention over time.

A consumer-based conception of store loyalty cannot recognise multi-store relationships. Even the strongest of consumer-store bonds seems to align various value constellations (functional, hedonic, symbolic and expressive) with the focus on reconciliation of the various aspects and levels of self and identity that postmodern consumers have to juggle (Firat et al, 1995). With a meaning-based perspective, we are able to address the ‘contextual, temporal and evolutionary aspects’ (Fournier and Yao, 1997, p. 467) of participants’ store choices. Indeed, this perspective can be a meaningful lens through which to explore the lived experiences of consumer store loyalty phenomena and to expand our view of consumer store loyalty from consumers’ loyal store connections to the meaningful relationships consumers form with the stores they shop. The research showed that all the participants have a store constellation for their grocery shopping. The analysis also suggests that the meaningful and the individual-assigned consumer-store relationships can be of interest to retailers and more importantly, how they can manage these relationships according to their different relationship qualities of the consumer-store connection. Indeed, as Fournier and Yao (1997) suggested that a shift is needed from the existing ‘share-based’ to ‘meaning based’ perspective. The store loyalty analysis can really capture the ‘richness, sensitivity and consumer-relevance’ (p.468).

**CONCLUSION**

This study extended Fournier and Yao’s (1997) study from brand domain to retailing/store context. The research shows that the relationship perspective is a useful approach to the conceptualisation and
measurement of store loyalty and may be extended to other domains and contexts. However, this relationship perspective has not been tested against other alternative theoretical frameworks and the predictive validity of the research findings has not been examined. Thus, further research is proposed to validate and generalise the findings in this store loyalty research with appropriate methods.

This study has practical implications for retailers. By moving from share-based exclusive psychological commitment to a broader relationship framework, managers can gain rich insights and information which will enable them to conduct marketing segmentation studies. Managers can further design strategies to develop, enhance and maintain consumer-store relationships. In addition, by viewing the scope of store relationships, managers can pay more attention to the variances of interactions between consumers and stores and the diversities and the heterogeneity of customers and their relationships with stores.

REFERENCES