The Influence of Self-Congruity, Brand Personality and Brand Performance on Store Loyalty

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To investigate the influence of symbolic retail brand attributes on retail patronage, a model is developed and tested dealing with the influence of self-congruity, retail brand personality and brand performance on store loyalty. The model was tested with data from an online-survey of consumers with a sample size of 515. The model was mostly supported by the data and the results indicate that the influence of self-congruity might be over-estimated when the direct influence of brand personality and the effect of brand performance are not controlled in the model. Brand performance is still of paramount importance for the store loyalty.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Retail branding has tremendously gained in importance in retail literature (Ailawadi and Keller 2004). However, studies on the antecedents and the consequences of a retail brand are rare.

In consumer research, the interest in understanding and measuring the symbolic meaning consumers attribute to brands has become an important research topic (Austin, Siguaw, and Mattila 2003). Considerable attention has been given to the construct self-congruity, which describes how closely a consumer’s self-concept fits the brand personality. Many studies have examined the effects of self-congruity on consumer behavior (see reviews by Bauer, Mäder, and Wagner 2006). However, self-congruity research in retailing has been limited (Sirgy, Grewal, and Mangleburg 2000). In a related stream of research, a widely accepted brand personality scale has been proposed by Aaker (1997). While the scale has been applied for different products, it has not been analysed yet, whether these brand personality dimensions are applicable to retail brands. Investigating the brand personality concept in retailing has been listed among the top research priorities for future retail research (Ailawadi and Keller 2004).

The primary purpose of this article is to develop and test a model that posits an influence of self-congruity, brand personality and brand performance on store loyalty. In addition, the applicability of Aaker’s brand personality scale in retailing is investigated.

It has long been suggested that symbolic attributes of a brand are important for explaining purchasing behavior (Aaker 1997; Austin et al. 2003). Previous research demonstrated that the greater the congruity between a brand’s personality and the individuals’ actual self, the greater the brand loyalty (e.g. Bauer et al. 2006; Sirgy 1982). Some studies also indicate an effect on retail patronage (e.g. Bellenger et al. 1976). Following Sirgy et al. (2000), we propose:

\[ H1: \] Store loyalty is positively affected by self-congruity.

While an indirect effect of the symbolic attributes of a brand via self-congruity has been studied, a direct effect is rarely examined (Helgeson and Supphellen 2004). Brand personality refers to the human characteristics that can be attributed to a brand. Aaker (1997) has developed a scale to measure brand personality. She proposes 42 traits that are combined into five factors. The brand personality dimensions: competence, sincerity, excitement, sophistication, and ruggedness. While a direct effect on brand loyalty seems likely, no study exists that directly links Aaker’s five dimensions to store loyalty. Prior research, with one exception, included either self-congruity or brand personality in a model. The study by Helgeson and Supphellen (2004) demonstrates, though, that both constructs are distinct constructs and including both constructs as antecedents of store loyalty enhances the predictive power of a model. Thus, we propose:

\[ H2: \] Store loyalty is positively affected by the dimensions of brand personality.

While the functional attributes of a brand might not play an exclusive role in explaining brand loyalty, it is still commonly acknowledged that they have an influence. Keller (2003, 82) refers to these attributes as “brand performance”. Thus, we propose, following a large number of retail researchers (e.g. Sirgy and Samli 1985):

\[ H3: \] Store loyalty is positively affected by the evaluation of the retail brand performance.

To test the hypotheses, data was collected via an online survey with seven retailers in Germany as stimuli, representing different retail sectors. The retailers, namely Aldi, IKEA, amazon.de, Douglas, dm-drogerie markt, H&M, Media-Markt, are leading retailers in Germany in their respective sectors.

Graduate and undergraduate students were addressed by e-mail. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire with respect to a retailer which they could choose from a given list. The final number of usable cases was 515.

After eliminating 4 out of the 42 traits from the original Aaker scale, we demonstrated that the scale is generally applicable for retailers, even though slight deviations from the original factor structure appeared.

This present study integrated three predictors of store loyalty in one model that have not been simultaneously tested before. To test the hypotheses, three models were tested, which included self-congruity only (model 1), self-congruity and the five brand personality dimensions (model 2) and self-congruity, brand personality and brand performance (model 3). All three constructs were shown to influence store loyalty, but it became evident that the effect of self-congruity is getting substantially lower when the other constructs are integrated in the model. In model 3, self-congruity only exerted a weak influence (\(p<.1\)), while brand performance was of paramount importance for store loyalty. Certain brand personality dimensions, in particular sincerity, competence, and excitement, were shown to be influential in consumers’ patronage decisions, regardless of the congruity with the consumers’ self-concept.

It is important that retail managers realise that the symbolic image of the store (which was often neglected by retailers in the past) plays an important role in store patronage and loyalty behavior (Sirgy and Samli 1985, 287). Based on our results we can encourage retail marketing managers to provide their retail brands with a clear brand personality. We also demonstrated that the match of the personality of a store to the self-concept of the target customer is relevant for developing store loyalty. However, this effect should not be over-estimated. The predictive power from self-congruity is lower than that of the specific brand personality dimensions and it turned not significant when the other variables were controlled for. More research on the relation between self-congruity and brand personality is needed. However, our study indicates that it might be useful to strengthen the dimensions “competence”, “sincerity”, and “excitement” regardless of the target group of the retailer.

Our results confirm previous studies in the high importance of functional attributes (Sirgy et al. 1991). In the current study, they play a pivotal role in explaining store loyalty. Thus, one important implication of our study is that a balanced approach, where functional attributes and symbolic attributes of the retail brand are taken into consideration, is to be recommended (Garton 1995).
References
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