

THE EFFECT OF BRAND AWARENESS ON BRAND LOYALTY: MEDIATING ROLE OF BRAND COMMITMENT

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Abstract

Academic literature in customer behavior and branding is still debatable, with respect to brand loyalty in particular. This study empirically attempts to discuss this particular issue by examining the relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty. Also, it seeks to investigate the mediation role of brand commitment in initial relationship to tackle the mixed results in the prior attempts. The data were collected from customers of Islamic bank brand in Mafraq Governorate in Jordan. PLS-SEM techniques were applied to a sample of 90 customers to test hypothesized relationships. The results revealed that brand awareness and brand commitment have a significant and positive relationship with brand loyalty. In addition, brand commitment was found to be a mediator in the relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty. This paper has discussed the results and an implication compared with prior versions as well as introducing some of recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Brand loyalty, Brand awareness, Brand commitment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The service sector is considered to be the most prominent amongst economic sectors in Jordan, comprising 67% of the GDP (The Jordan Times, 2016). Of late, there is a rapid change in this sector especially the increased competition among companies which has increased the importance of services brand management (Al-Dmour, Zu'bi & Kakeesh, 2013). However, service brands in banking sector are facing many challenges in term of sustaining a strong relationship with customers (Al-Qeed, ALsadi & Al-Azzam, 2017; Alwan & Al-Zubi, 2016). Historically, brands are the valuable asset for business' organizations (Ahmed & Mort, 2016) such as Apple's valued at \$ 178,119 million (Interbrand, 2017). Brand is a successful marketing tool in building a long-term relationship with audience (Steenkamp, 2014). Strong brand is increasingly seen as critical to build positioning against competitors; the recognition among target audiences would translate into success (Kylander & Stone, 2012). Scammell (2007) and Smith and French (2009) stated that brands offer sociological, psychological, and rational advantages for customers. Brand in commercial sector is spending large amounts of money to increase the market share (Parker, 2012) as well as influencing customers' decisions and loyalty (Yan & Cruces, 2012). In brief, in the modern media environment, brand is one of the most important modes of communication (Woodward & Denton, 2013).

Mohammad (2017) pointed out that "one of the most important themes of branding theory is the relationship between a customer and a brand, a relationship that results in brand loyalty" (p.58). Earlier studies revealed that brand loyalty considered a very main concept in marketing (Iqbal et al., 2013; Li & Green, 2011) as obtaining a large base of loyal customer that is valuable in creating several competitive benefits and lower marketing efforts (Reichheld & Schefter, 2000; Dick & Basu 1994). It is important to note that brand loyalty determines the advancement of the organizations (Huang et al., 2014; Lee & Hsieh, 2011;

Sharma et al., 2013). Hence, the link between the customer and the brand is needed from theoretical and a practical viewpoint especially in Arab countries (Al-Dmour et al. 2013; Mohammad, 2017).

Several variables according to customer-based brand equity (CBBE) possibly play a role in brand loyalty, whereas the factors that have received little attention are the brand awareness and commitment (Al-Dmour et al., 2013; Amani, 2015). Thus, it seems that the customer's awareness level is vital (Al-Dmour et al., 2013). Commitment is also effective in constituting loyalty (Hameed, 2013; Noor, 2013), the positive relationship between commitment with loyalty, and motivate the frequent buying behavior (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Nevertheless, it has not been clarified yet whether this relationship might work appropriately in the branding aspect with the purpose of identifying the customer.

In former studies, the researchers measured two-dimension of relationships, such as awareness with loyalty (Ramaseshan, Rabbanee & Hui, 2013), awareness with commitment (Diaz, 2013), and commitment with loyalty (Amani, 2015). However, the relationship between brand awareness with loyalty through commitment was not yet tested simultaneously. Even if any, the two-dimension relationships pointed out inconsistent findings though some research reported significant results (Hsu, Oh & Assaf, 2011, Tsang, Lee, & Li, 2011) and others indicated insignificant findings (Hyun & Kim, 2011; Liu et al., 2013; Subhani & Osman, 2011). Such inconsistent findings suggest that more research is needed to establish the relationship between brand awareness and brand commitment, with loyalty, as well as evaluating the role of brand commitment as a mediator in initial relationship. In brief, there is a noticeable lake of revisions conducted to investigate the influence of these factors on brand loyalty, particularly in Jordan (Mohammad, 2017). Consequently, this study came to close these gaps.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Brand loyalty

Li and Green (2011) stated that in case of a strong competition, loyalty to specific brand, is significant for the success of the organizations. In particular, loyalty to a brand produces some practical advantages through saving marketing cost by means of spreading word-of-mouth (Keller, 1993).

Saili et al. (2012) noted that loyalty have two wings (behavioral and attitudinal). The attitudinal loyalty is the tendency to be loyal to a focal brand as demonstrated by the intention to buy it as a primary choice (Oliver, 1997). On the other hand, according to Rundle-Thiele and Mackay (2001), behavioral loyalty includes procurement procedure, and continues in this behavior. Fournier (1998) noted that loyalty towards a specific brand is the outcome of a range of powerful emotions (psychological attachment) between both the customer and the brand. As stated by Nam et al. (2011) brand loyalty is behavioral construction relating to intentions towards repeat purchase; hence the loyalty is one of the consequences of brand equity rather than its component. Consequently, in this research, brand loyalty is combined of two dimensions: to repeat purchase for the same brand, and recommend others (Zeithaml et al., 1996; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Furthermore, the loyalty is vital since it increases the future market share of brands. Eakuru and Mat (2008) noted that loyalty leads to the success the organizations. The loyalty is the result of a successful marketing strategy in competitive markets that creates value for brands (Ramaseshan et al., 2013). As stated by Rechinheld and Sasser (1990), loyal customers are

willing to (A) re-buy brands, although there are competitive alternatives attractive to the cause of the shift, (B) further recommend the organization's services to others, (C) further spend a lot of effort to experience brands, and (D) give sincere feedback for an organization to serve their needs and expectations.

Briefly, there are many types of loyal customers. Each group needs different techniques to create loyalty, for instance, by creating brand awareness and building a strong brand image through advertisements and other ways of grabbing attention. However, a number of researches have been performed in conventional marketing settings concerning of brand loyalty (Sabet et al., 2014; Boohene & Agyapong, 2010; Chang & Wang, 2011; Cheng & Rashid, 2013; Omar et al., 2013; Pi & Huang, 2011; Saeed et al., 2014; Choi et al., 2011; Sharma et al., 2013; Chinomona & Dubihlela, 2014; Hsu et al., 2011; Lee & Hsieh, 2011). Therefore, the results were mixed and few previous studies have been conducted in Arab context.

2.2 Brand awareness

To build a strong brand, brand awareness is necessary for such strength (Buil et al., 2013). Brand awareness differentiates the brand from competitors and leads to brand choice (Valavi, 2014). Balaji (2011) mentioned that brand awareness influences the strength of brand relationships in the customer's mind. Aaker (1991) considered that brand awareness provides a customer adequate reason to consider the brand in his consideration set. Brand awareness has been examined in customer' behavior studies (Hsu et al., 2011; Huang & Cai, 2015; Bianchi & Pike, 2010). Most models of customer' behavior argued that awareness is a first and necessary step for choosing the brand. Precisely, brand awareness considered a central element of brand equity (Azad et al., 2013).

Brand awareness is a successful factor for competition that improves competition among brands (Jakeli & Tchumburidze, 2012). Brand awareness comprises of two components: recognition, and recall (Keller, 1993). Hence, the operational definition of brand awareness is the ability of customers to recall or recognize that a brand is a member of certain product's category under different conditions. Mishra and Mishra (2014) noted that brand awareness refers to the strength of a brand's presence in the customer's mind. The brand awareness affects in the customers' attitudes toward brand loyalty. Additionally, the breadth of brand awareness expresses the range of purchase motives in which the brand name may come to mind (Keller, 1998). Usually, brand awareness indicates the ability of customers to recall the brand without any signal (Aaker, 1996). Thus, brand awareness is a vital component for developing the image of a brand (Aaker, 1991).

Additionally, brand awareness plays an essential role in building a brand in the customers' mind for the reason that customers make purchasing decisions based on knowledge, awareness, or experience of a specific brand. As a result, customers may purchase repeatedly as they are assured of its quality. Thus, brand awareness is related to brand loyalty in making decisions as it relates to customers' thoughts. Also, the degree of brand loyalty becomes stronger and firmer when customers are more aware of brand. Therefore, this study aims to highlight the role of brand awareness in the context of the customers' decision-making process as an important tool for selection amongst customers without enormous previous experience. From this point, marketers can create brand awareness among customers through repetitive publicity and advertising to build a brand loyalty in the long-term (Keller, 2003).

Eventually, brand awareness influences brand commitment and brand loyalty directly though

there is not enough understanding about its impact on the customer loyalty process. It is interesting to note that some researches revealed a significant relationship (Tsang et al., 2011; Valavi, 2014). Others found an insignificant relationship (Esch et al., 2006; Ramaseshan et al., 2013; Hyun & Kim, 2011; Liu et al., 2013). However, due to mixed results, this study hypothesized that:

H1: There is a significant relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty.

H2: There is a significant relationship between brand awareness and brand commitment.

2.3 Brand commitment

Commitment is a vital element to build a long term relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Commitment relationship is an important issue in formation customer loyalty (Moorman et al., 1993; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Story & Hess, 2006; Cwalina et al., 2010; Christopher et al., 2013). In commercial context, commitment reduces the customer turnover (Sartori et al., 2012; Wallenburg et al., 2011; Richard & Zhang, 2012), whereas this concept seems to be neglected in brand context (Amani, 2015). Hence, the aim of this paper is to address this shortcoming in the brands setting.

There are three types of brand commitment namely affective, continuance and normative commitment (Porter et al., 1974; Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1982; Allen & Meyer, 1990). For this study, "affective commitment" is related; affective commitment reflects a customer's psychological attachment to a brand (Lai, 2014; Eisenberger et al., 2001). Affective commitment indicates a long-term desire to maintain valued relationships between buyers and sellers (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2009; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Affective commitment fits the customers setting, all about a sense of liking, identification, and emotional attachment to the brand (Gullupunar & Gulluoglu, 2013). Therefore, the only affective commitment is used as a single mediating variable in this study. The final purpose of marketing is to preserve customers and build relationships in order to create loyalty. Commitment can provide a trustworthy communication between customers and brand (Gullupunar & Gulluoglu, 2013). Commitment is just an intermediate method to attract new customers (Pi & Huang, 2011). The research's results also support the roles of commitment that influences positively on the perceptions, and loyalty especially in the western countries (Dwivedi & Johnson, 2013; Herm, 2013; Phelps & Campbell, 2012; Rojas-Mendez et al., 2009; Hosseini & Nahad, 2012; Ibrahim & Najjar, 2008; Velnampy & Sivesan, 2012; Shani & Chalasani, 1992).

Previous studies tested the role of commitment with brand knowledge, awareness, image, service quality, perceived value, and satisfaction in context of services and products (Hasnizam, Salniza, & Zolkafli, 2012; Finlay, 2011; Ito et al., 2013; Nguyen et al., 2013; Hulpia et al., 2011; Knudsen et al., 2013; Odrowska & Massar, 2014; Bodet, 2012; Hilgeman, 2013; Amin et al., 2013; Chang, 2013), whereas few studies have focused on the effect of commitment in a brand context (Amani, 2015). Lately, scholars pointed that commitment as a new mediator needs to be considered (Amani, 2015; Hasnizam et al., 2012). Ramaseshan et al. (2013) highlighted that future studies could focus on examining the effect of commitment on the link between equity and loyalty. Xu, Li and Zhou (2015) suggested that future researches should further explore other possible variables as mediators to have a better knowledge of the range of role of brand awareness. Hence, this study aims to exam brand commitment as a new mediator, as very limited conceptual studies have investigated the effect of this variable as mediating in this area.

Other previous studies in the mediating role of commitment revealed inconsistent results

(e.g. Saeed, et al., 2014; Sultan & Wong, 2013; Hasnizam et al., 2012; Gumpil, 2012). As a result, this conclusion indicates that the mediating role of commitment needs to be reinvestigated. Hence, this study is one of the first attempts that depart from the existing literatures that treat commitment just through trust as mediators, and tries to confirm the validity of the brand awareness model with commitment as a main mediator with regard to customer loyalty to brand. All in all, based on the preceding discussion, it is important to examine whether or not commitment mediates the relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty, to build long term relationship between customers and brand. As such, according to Baron and Kenny (1986), the mediation (commitment) is to "explain" why a relationship between an exogenous (brand awareness) and endogenous (brand loyalty) construct exists; this goes in line with Hair et al. (2013). Hair et al. (2013) stated that "A significant mediator variable may to some extent absorb a cause-effect relationship. Furthermore, "examining mediating variables enables researchers to better understand the relationships between dependent and predictor constructs"(p. 206). Therefore, this study hypothesized that:

H3: There is a significant relationship between brand commitment and brand loyalty.

H4: Brand commitment mediates the relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Earlier discussion showed the theoretical linkages between brand awareness, brand commitment, and brand loyalty. To make it clearer, the researcher designed a model in order to interpret and understand the impact of input variables on the output variables:

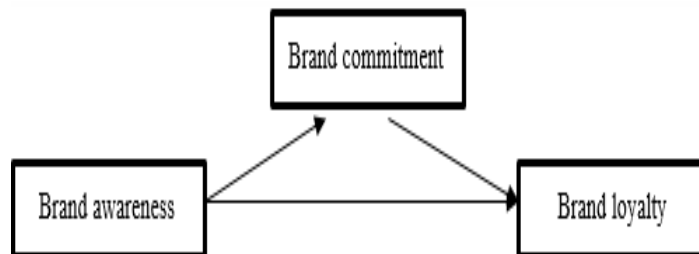


Figure 1: Proposed model. BA=brand awareness, BC= brand commitment, BL= brand loyalty.

Based on the theoretical framework, the customers who have a good awareness about brand would likely to have a high level of loyalty. As well, it is assumed that the higher the customers' brand commitment, the lower the effect of brand awareness on brand loyalty. However, the prior research found mixed results (Hsu et al., 2011; Ramaseshan et al., 2013; Subhani & Osman, 2011; Diaz, 2013).

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The systematic random sampling was employed. The samples used in the study were 90 customers of Islamic bank brand in Mafraq Governorate in Jordan. The questionnaire was a tool of research with 17 items, including 7 questions of brand awareness (Netemeyer et al., 2004; Yoo & Donthu, 2000, 2001), 5 questions of brand commitment (Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2009, 2010; Lai, 2014), and 5 questions of brand loyalty (Boo et al., 2009; Zeithaml et al., 1996; Cater & Cater, 2010). Five-point Likert scale was utilized.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

5.1 Measurement Model

Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to analyze the data. Reliability and the validity are two criteria which used for testing the outer model (Hair et al., 2014). The results of convergent validity are shown in table 1, and the results of discriminate validity are shown in table 2.

Table 1: Convergent validity

Construct	Items	Loading	AVE	Alpha	CR
Brand Awareness	BA 1	0.783	0.583	0.880	0.907
	BA 2	0.766			
	BA 3	0.808			
	BA 4	0.826			
	BA 5	0.715			
	BA6	0.721			
	BA7	0.718			
Brand Commitment	BC 1	0.727	0.648	0.863	0.902
	BC 2	0.844			
	BC 3	0.810			
	BC 4	0.831			
	BC 5	0.809			
Brand Loyalty	BL 1	0.789	0.669	0.876	0.910
	BL 2	0.813			
	BL 3	0.745			
	BL 4	0.856			
	BL 5	0.879			

Note: AVE= variance accounted for, CR= Composite reliability,

Table 2: Discriminant Validity

	BA	BL	BC
BA	0.764		
BL	0.627	0.818	
BC	0.650	0.785	0.805

In short, both of convergent and discriminate validity were achieved (Hair et al., 2014; Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

5.2 Structural Model

The next step after examined the reliability and their validity is to assess the inner model. The results of analysis showed that coefficient of determination (R^2) for BC (0.422) and BL (0.640) is substantial according to Cohen (1988). Table 3 and Table 4 show the bootstrapping and the path coefficient results of hypothesized relationships.

Table 3: Path coefficient of Hypotheses

H	R	Std. Beta	SE	t-Value	D	P-value
H1	BA -> BL	0.202	0.059	3.40	S***	0.000
H2	BA -BC	0.650	0.040	16.19	S***	0.000
H3	BC - BL	0.654	0.052	12.61	S***	0.000

Note	t-values > 1.65*	(p < 0.10); t-values > 2.58***	(p < 0.01)/R=	Relationship,	SE= Stander error,
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D=Decision, S=Supported, NS= Not supported.

Table 4: Path coefficient of Mediation Hypothesis based on formula of Kock (2014)

H4	
Relationship	BA -> BC -> BL
Path <i>a</i>	0.650
Path <i>b</i>	0.654
Indirect Effect	0.425
Stander Error	0.056
t-value	7.533***
p-value	0.000
VAF	$(a \times b) / (a \times b) + c^2 = 0.678$ (Hair et al., 2013)
Result	Partially mediation

Note: t-values > 2.58*** (p < 0.01)

From Table 3 and Table 4, the results showed the hypotheses H1, H2 and H3 are supported with statistically positive significant ($\beta = 0.202$, $t = 3.40$; $\beta = 0.650$, $t = 16.19$ and $\beta = 0.654$, $t = 12.61$ respectively), whereas for all hypotheses, the p-value represents $p < .01$. Overall, all the hypotheses were supported besides the variance accounted for (VAF) (67% => 20%) indicated partially mediating (Hair et al., 2013).

6. DISCUSSION

This study has tested the relationships between three constructs. The findings revealed that brand awareness has a positive relationship on brand loyalty; this finding is similar to prior revisions (e.g. Tsang et al., 2011) besides brand awareness has a positive direct relationship on brand commitment. The finding is supported by former study (e.g. Valentine & Barnett, 2003) which found the same result. Briefly, to explain brand commitment, brand awareness seems to be a vital construct ($R^2 = 0.422$). Similarly, brand commitment had a positive effect on brand loyalty. This outcome is supported by prior studies (Richard & Zhang, 2012) which found positive relationship. Also, brand commitment mediates the relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty. This result supports the study of Saeed et al. (2014) which revealed that commitment acted as a mediator.

The above analysis showed the role of brand awareness and brand commitment in creating and maintaining brand loyalty. Thus, there is a debate in the literature about the significant relationship between brand awareness and brand commitment on brand loyalty. According to the literature review, there is limited research that has examined this issue in the Arab context especially exploring the Jordanian customers. In sum, the results highlighted the importance of the long and short term relationship elements. Hence, this empirical value can be exploited for developing marketing plan and planning the long-term relationship with customers. Briefly, the success of marketing programs is key factor which determines the competition among brands. It is expected, through results, to develop the brands in the Arab area in general and in Jordan in particular.

Theoretically, this study has expanded social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) in branding context particularly in developing countries. This study also expands the concept of brand loyalty and expands brand awareness and brand commitment concepts and linkages between

them with relation to brand loyalty. Moreover, the mediation role of commitment in the loyalty model has been ignored (Amani, 2015). Consequently, this study assists in bridging this gap.

7. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has numerous limitations, in term of sample size and context. This research opened the door for future empirical studies by adding other elements such as brand equity dimensions and relationship marketing in and out of the study context.

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