Brand Switching and Consumer Identification with Brands in the Smartphones Industry

by

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Abstract

Brand loyalty literature has mainly focused on how brands perform under normal market conditions. As the business environment grows more complex, globalised and innovative, market disruptions become more prevalent. Taking a cognition-based approach, this paper proposes that customers identify with brands to satisfy self-definitional needs. A social constructivist perspective, using an inductive and case study strategy was used. Data generation was based on purposeful sampling, and participants were chosen based on their 'lived' experience with the use of Smartphones.

Four major themes were identified in the purchase of Smartphones: identity, satisfaction, brand loyalty and brand switching. Participants' views suggested that this provides them with a sense of purpose and meaning, defining who they are, as well as why they behave in specified ways in society, which increases their self-esteem. Brand switching occurs when customers are motivated to review available alternatives in the marketplace due to a change in competitive activities. Socially, switching occurs when a customer's belief in a brand is externally influenced within the social setting. When the boundary between the 'in-group' and the 'out-group' is impermeable and changing, group membership is not realistic; social mobility is not a viable strategy to cope with identity threats.

Key words

Introduction and Rationale

Marketing research based on identity theory focuses on how individual consumers behave in agreement with the most salient identity (i.e. the highest in the hierarchy) because it provides the most meaning for the self (Farhana, 2014). This also frames the customer–brand relationship in the light of what is 'me' and what is 'not me' (Kleine et al., 1995). Drawing on Bhattacharya et al.'s (1995) research, this study posits that customers who identify with a brand are likely to be loyal to the brand, but all brand-loyal customers need not identify with the brand. This view necessitates a detailed analysis of two main aspects of brand loyalty literature to ascertain which perspective is preferred in a competitive market in order to establish and consolidate consumer loyalty.

This paper examines two major limitations of brand loyalty. The first is that sustainability of brand loyalty predictors refer to resisting both time and market disruptions (Lam et al., 2010). However, brand loyalty literature has mainly focused on how brands perform under normal market conditions (Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Ozuem et al., 2016). Yet as the business environment grows more complex, globalised and innovative, market disruptions become more prevalent.

The second limitation in brand loyalty is that the perceived value of a brand is conceptualised and operationalised as a functional utilitarian value. As is prevalent in brand loyalty literature, this does not capture other non-utilitarian factors, such as socio-psychological benefits, that might motivate customers to continue buying what they buy (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001; Hsu and Liou, 2017). Taking a cognition-based approach, this paper proposes that customers identify with brands to satisfy one or more self-definitional needs (Lam et al., 2013; Ahearne et al., 2005).

Specifically, the Smartphone industry was chosen as the product category for this study because it represents a context in which brand switching is most likely to occur due to

multiple alternatives and short inter-purchase frequencies (Campo et al., 2000; Goldsmith, 2000). Notably, the market for Smartphones is probably the most dynamic of any, considering the degree and rate of change in technology (Azize et al., 2013; Cecere et al., 2015).

Smartphones Market Structure

The Smartphone market has experienced strong growth in recent years mainly due to technological advancement in the industry. A MarketLine (2017) report confirmed a volume of 1,349.6 million sales of Smartphone units in 2016, which according to the report represents 92.7 per cent of the market's overall volume in the mobile phone industry as compared to ordinary mobile devices with a sales volume of 106.3 million units, which constituted 7.3 per cent of the market total in the same year.

The current global Smartphone market continues to be dominated by a small number of large technology firms such as Apple, Samsung and Huawei. Apple's Smartphone market share continues to grow across the globe, after consumers increasingly turn their backs on competing Android devices. It realised $215,639 million in revenue in 2016. Samsung particularly has seen its market share dropping across the world, retaining revenues of $172,840 million in the year 2015, a decrease of 2.7 per cent compared to 2014. Huawei's consumer business segment develops, manufactures and sells a range of Smartphone devices, with the company recording $59,453 million revenue in 2015 (MarketLine, 2017).

Despite significant growth in the industry, the Smartphone market is changing with severe threats facing the industry (Felix, 2015). Manufacturers in high demand leverage their competitive advantage to enable them to maintain their position in the market and a positive brand image, to explore new revenue streams and most importantly achieve a sustainable product differentiation to drive sales (Gartner, 2016).

Theoretical Foundations

Switching occurs when a customer is motivated to review available alternatives due to a change in competitive activity in the marketplace (Seiders and Tigert, 1997; Appiah et al., 2017). Similarly, Hogan and Armstrong (2001) posited that brand switching is about replacing an incumbent resource with a more valuable one to achieve competitive advantage. Sathish et al. (2011) indicate that brand switching reflects that the behaviour of consumers varies, based on their satisfaction levels with providers or companies. Thus, brand switching can be defined as the process of being loyal to one product or service, and switching to another, due to dissatisfaction or any other problems. They further argue that even if a consumer is loyal to a brand, if the brand does not satisfy his/her needs the consumer may switch to a competing brand. Therefore, management needs to constantly evaluate and redirect its resources and capabilities to maintain a strong position relative to competitors (Itami and Roehl, 1987).

Product characteristics are likely to affect exploratory tendencies such as brand switching proponents and innovation in product contexts with a large number of available alternatives and a short inter-purchase frequency (Hoyer and Ridgway, 1984). These characteristics include product involvement, perceived risk, brand loyalty, perceived brand differentiation/similarity, hedonism (or pleasure) and strength of preference (Van Trijp et al., 1996). When individuals are highly involved with a product and loyal to a brand, their propensity to switch is likely to be lower.

Individuals who are involved with a product have 'a narrow latitude acceptance' (Sherif and Sherif, 1967); thus, they are unlikely to be persuaded to switch. Similarly, according to Sloot et al. (2005), loyal consumers are less likely to switch to another brand. Persuasion to switch may be manifested in the form of sales promotions such as offers and

discounts, which have been found to encourage switching across various product contexts (Kahn and Louie, 1990).

Further, high perceived risk indicates that individuals are concerned with losses resulting from their purchases, which leads to avoidance tendencies and behaviours (e.g. commitment to a brand, repeat purchase behaviour) as consumers are 'more often motivated to avoid mistakes than to maximise utility in purchasing' (Mitchell, 1999, p. 163). Further, perceived similarity between brands within a product class indicates that individuals are likely to exhibit switching tendencies, such as alternating among familiar brands within a product class (Hoyer and Ridgway, 1984).

Hedonism may also encourage switching within specific categories of products (Van Trijp et al., 1996). Hedonism is associated with enjoyment or pleasure that an individual derives from specific products (Griffin et al., 2000). Consumers are more intrinsically motivated with products that are associated with affective (hedonic) sensations (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). Thus, repeated consumption of such products is likely to elicit switching tendencies (Van Trijp et al., 1996).

Market disruptions are the major cause of brand switching. These are major events occurring in a market that threaten customer–brand relationships (Fournier, 1998; Stern, Thompson, and Arnould, 1998; Appiah et al., 2016). Disruption is defined as a situation where markets cease to function in a regular manner, typically characterised by rapid and large market declines. For instance, disruptions in the financial markets are caused by a glut of sellers willing to trade at any price, combined with the near or total absence of buyers at a specific time. In these circumstances, prices can decline precipitously.

In the financial market, disruptions can result from both physical threats to the stock exchange or unusual trading. According to a report by Shapiro (2010), concerns over the financial situation in Greece and uncertainty concerning elections in the United Kingdom,

among other things, constrained the financial market of that time with implications for trading.

This research paper focuses on disruptions that occur within product markets. As noted by McGrath (2011), the concept of 'market disruption' that occurs in a product market immediately harkens to research in two areas that have enjoyed significant development over the years: technology and innovation. Disruptions literally uproot and change how we think, behave, do business, learn and go about our day-to-day activities. According to Christensen (1997), disruptions displace existing markets, industries and technology and can produce something new, more efficient and more worthwhile.

Social Influence theory and Brand switching

Brand switching occurs when a customer is motivated to review available alternatives in the marketplace due to a change in competitive activities (Seiders and Tigerts, 1997; Matzler et al., 2015). Socially, switching occurs when a customer's belief in a brand is externally influenced within the social setting. The customer's belief then impacts his or her attitude towards using a specific brand, which leads to changes in the purchase intention.

For the purposes of this study, social influence is explained as the extent to which customers in a social environment may be influenced by the behaviour of other users to conform to certain behaviour patterns (Karikari et al., 2017; Osei-Frimpong and McLean, 2018). Drawing on the above definition of social influence, Deutsch and Gerard (1955) identify and provide clarity on informational and normative social influence as two main forms of social influence. They share the view that informational social influence is impacted to accept information acquired within a social setting from another customer's experience, whereas normative social influence denotes the impact on a customer to adapt to other customers' preferences and expectations in a similar social environment. In the Smartphone industry, normative social influence occurs within in-groups due to the desire of

users of specific brands to identify with, or maintain, self-congruency with positive positions considered favourable by group members (Kaplan and Miller, 1987). The symbolic values of brands extend deeper than their role as a signalling device in that they help consumers to retain a sense of the past, to categorise themselves in society, and to communicate cultural meanings such as social status and group identity (Belk, 1988). Noteworthy is the symbolic interactionism perspective study of brand personality which proffers that brand personality is negotiated not only within the individual environment, but also in the social environment (Badgaiyan et al., 2017).

Switching occurs most when customers are exposed to normative influence, which causes them to be exposed to some sort of greater social pressure to accept certain purchase behaviour, irrespective of their beliefs and attitudes towards the behaviour, compared to informational influence which causes customers in a particular group to re-evaluate their decisions to switch when other forms of information relevant to the decision are discussed in the same group (Lee, 2009).

Methodology and Data Collection

This study adopted a social constructivist perspective, using an inductive and case study strategy. Key principles of a social constructivist approach are 'multiple perspectives' (Baydan and Karadag, 2014; Ozuem, et al., 2008). The social constructivist approach is a qualitative methodology, capable of exploring facts and meanings attributed to social situations (Portelli and Eldred, 2017; Lawlor and Kirakowski, 2017). Advocates of social constructivism believe that meaning is socially constructed and negotiated, and meaningful reality is contingent upon human construction, and can be elicited and refined only through interactions between and among the investigator and participants. There is focus on behavioural patterns that shape social processes as people interact together in groups (Krush et al., 2015; Gandomani and Nafchi, 2016).

Data generation was based on purposeful sampling, and the participants were carefully chosen based on their lived experience with the use of Smartphones. In purposeful sampling, the decision is made prior to commencement of the research (Naicker and Van de Merwe, 2018). For constructivists the objective is to gain rich and detailed insights into the complexity of social phenomena. Their suitability as participants in the research population was based on their willingness to participate in the interview process. Forty participants took part in in-depth semi-structured interviews that were conducted across the UK. The in-depth semi-structured interviews were particularly useful in allowing other questions to be added to further probe for answers and explanations. Probing was relevant to obtain a fuller response. Most importantly, the semi-structured interview process provided an open approach to questioning to see if participants might happen upon issues that had not yet been discussed in the literature.

Participants were asked to confirm that they were users of Smartphones before completing the interview; eighteen were males and twenty-two were females and their ages ranged from 18 to 65 years. As the research gathered respondents from diverse career backgrounds and positions across various industries including health, education, banking, insurance and information technology, this provided a level platform to generate unbiased views of consumer experiences with the phenomenon of brand switching in relation to disruptions caused by technological innovations. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Semi-Structured Interview Participants

	Age range	Gender	Occupation	Position
1	35-44	M	Procurement specialist	Manager
2	55-65	M	Security officer	Other
3	35-44	M	Courier owner	Manager
4	35-44	M	Healthcare assistant	Junior staff
5	35-44	M	Teacher	Other
6	25-34	M	Accountant	Manager
7	25-34	M	Lecturer	Other
8	18-24	F	Student	Other

9	35-44	M	Finance executive	Executive
10	55-64	M	Security officer	Other
11	25-34	F	Pharmacist	Manager
12	35-44	M	Warrant officer	Junior staff
13	35-44	F	Nursery nurse	Junior Staff
14	18-24	M	Student	Other
15	18-24	M	Student	Other
16	18-24	F	Student	Other
17	25-34	F	Student	Other
18	18-24	F	Student	Other
19	18-24	F	Nursery nurse	Manager
20	35-44	F	Health worker	Other
21	25-34	F	IT consultant	Executive
22	35-44	F	Accountant	Manager
23	18-24	F	Teacher	Other
24	35-44	F	Health worker	Manager
25	25-34	F	Army officer	Other
26	25-34	M	Pharmacist	Other
27	35-44	F	Procurement specialist	Executive
28	18-24	F	Healthcare assistant	Other
29	25-34	F	Lecturer	Other
30	55-64	F	Courier owner	Executive
31	45-54	M	Teacher	Manager
32	25-34	F	Healthcare assistant	Other
33	45-54	F	Security officer	Manager
34	45-54	M	Librarian	Manager
35	45-54	F	Insurance underwriter	Executive
36	35-44	M	Accountant	Manager
37	35-44	M	Accountant	Manager
38	18-24	F	Healthcare assistant	Other
39	18-24	M	Teacher	Other
40	55-64	F	IT consultant	Manager

Thematic Analysis and Findings

The emerged data was analysed using the thematic analysis method. Patterns of meanings and themes were developed around the topic. We identified patterns within and across data in relations to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives on brand switching and their use of smartphones. The aim was to explore what the participants think, feel and do in the phenomena of interest. As Braun and Clarke (2006) noted, 'the keyness of a theme is not

necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures – but in terms of whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question' (p. 10). In their ecological study on the perceived benefits of consumers' participation in computer-mediated marketing environments (CMMEs), Ozuem et al. (2017) articulated that thematic analysis provides a higher order and meaningful procedure for analysing qualitative data through its identification of themes and codes. Qualitative analysis led to the identification of the themes, after which data was broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Jonsson and Tolstoy, 2013).

We began our analysis by identifying relevant concepts and segmenting them into themes and codes, seeking respondents' comments that justified themes. This process exposes data and uncovers thoughts, ideas and meanings expressed by respondents. Concepts emerged as interviews were completed and these were recorded using conjectural memoranda which provided a snapshot of ideas at hand, with implications for noting relationships between codes. Emerging codes were examined for theoretical relevance, and only concepts that showed persistent occurrence in the collected data formed themes. These were identified through analysis of interview questions and simultaneously compared until no new concepts emerged. The analysis resulted in the emergence of four major themes:

- *Identity*

- *Satisfaction*

- *Brand loyalty*

- *Brand switching*

Each theme was discussed in terms of sub-themes as these related to data on brand loyalty and switching behaviour from an identity theory perspective. Table 2 summarises the themes and sub-themes generated:

<u>**Table 2: Summary of Major Themes, Key issues and Sub-themes**</u>

Major Themes	Key issues	Sub-themes
Identity	An identity is a collection of meanings that defines a person as an occupant of a certain role in a social setting, affiliated to a group, or with certain acceptable features identifying a person as unique.	Self-concept, self-esteem belongingness, prestige sameness, oneness, congruity, congruence, likeness, uniformity, similarity, alignment, parallelism.
Satisfaction	Refers to the summary of psychological states resulting when emotion surrounding disconfirmed expectations is coupled with consumers' prior feelings about the consumption experience. Customer satisfaction is recognised as a key influence in the formation of future purchase intentions, thereby building resistance to brand switching.	Perceived value, relishing brand distinctiveness, uniqueness, content, pleasure, gratification, fulfilment, happiness.
Brand Loyalty	Deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronise a product or service, despite situational influence and marketing efforts.	Attitudinal loyalty, behavioural loyalty, brand commitment, allegiance and patriotism.
Brand Switching	When customers review available alternatives in a marketplace with aims to change due to variations in competitive activity, dissatisfaction with incumbent products or other problems.	Change, revert, shift, convert, redirect, divert, reverse.

Brand Switching

Hogan and Armstrong (2001) posit that brand switching is about replacing an incumbent resource with a more valuable one to achieve competitive advantage. Sathish et al. (2011) indicate that it is consumer behaviour where the behaviour of consumers differs based on the

satisfaction level of consumers with providers. Hence, brand switching can be described as the process of being loyal to one product or service and switching due to dissatisfaction or other problems.

Through application of the paradigm model, the causal condition of market disruptions has led to a phenomenon that represents the issue of the possibility of brand switching, which was the basis of the emerging theory. Indeed, the phenomenon of brand switching includes properties of commitment, behavioural loyalty and attitudinal loyalty and these properties reflect views of users of Smartphones.

In line with recent developments in choice modelling, identity theory suggests that brand switching also serves socio-psychological purposes besides functional utility maximisation (Rao et al., 2000). When asked if they would try other brands of Smartphones, even though they are satisfied with what they have, most participants answered that their circle of friends were users of certain brands which made it somewhat difficult to switch. Some responses from participants are noted:

> *"No, I won't switch; I will not use any other phone as my circle of friends are users of iPhone" (IT consultant).*

> *"In terms of recognition, I would say 'yes'. It gives me a sense of pride as I feel part of an elite group. Also, Apple phones are of high quality and that represents my personality as I pay much attention to detail" (Security officer).*

> *"I'm a socially oriented person; I'm close to my friends and that's what the FaceTime app seeks to promote. I grew up in a very tight-knitted community; we're very close" (Student).*

> *"Yes, all my friends in my social network are on FaceTime and I feel that*
> *sense of belongingness when I connect with friends on FaceTime"*
> *(International Courier owner).*

Drawing from these responses, there is an indication that users of a specific brand derive their identity from affiliations with social groups. Most participants said they would stick with their current Smartphone because they have used other brands of Smartphones before, and they believe theirs is unique. They are not motivated to switch, which is evidence that they value such membership and distinguish themselves from those who do not share such affiliations, forming the 'in-group' and the 'out-group'.

Brand Loyalty

Context denotes the specific set of patterns of conditions at a time and place that interact dimensionally to create circumstances or problems to which individuals respond through a blend of action/interaction (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 132). The contextual conditions further answer the 'why' of the phenomenon. To provide the contextual framework for the actions and interactions, questions were:

> 1. *"Would you buy this brand even if new Smartphones were launched*
> *by competitors?"*
> 2. *"Would you continue to buy this brand of Smartphone irrespective of*
> *price?"*

Contextual conditions are: attitudinal loyalty, behavioural loyalty and commitment. These contextual conditions affect the developed strategies through properties of the open category of brand loyalty. Brand loyalty is a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronise a preferred product or service consistently in the future, causing repetitive same-brand or same-brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour (Oliver, 1999, p. 34). Indeed, participants

interviewed agreed that they did not intend to switch and would prefer to stick with their current Smartphone because they were used to it in terms of manoeuvrability and accessibility. Responses included:

> *"I will stick to iPhone, because I used an Android phone before iPhone, and I realised that in terms of manoeuvrability and accessibility of the functions of the phone, iPhone is unique" (Healthcare assistant).*

> *"You know, I have a sense of loyalty with iPhone, I have been a user of this Smartphone for five years now. I have no plans to change" (Procurement specialist).*

> *"I am simply loyal; I would say the brand and its unique applications work for me and it is all I need for my blended learning course" (Student).*

Customer loyalty, in a behavioural way, measures the concept as behaviour involving repeat purchase of a product or service, evaluated by the sequence in which it is purchased, as a proportion of purchases, as an act of recommendation and as the scale of the relationship (Homburg and Giering, 2001). Most participants admitted they were loyal to their incumbent brand provider.

Attitudinal loyalty is about capturing the emotional and cognitive components of brand loyalty (Kumar and Shah, 2004). Oliver (1999) aligns his description with this belief by defining loyalty as a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronise preferred products or services consistently in future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour. This type of loyalty represents a more long-term and emotional commitment to a brand, which is why attitudinal loyalty is referred to as 'emotional loyalty' and is regarded as being much stronger and longer lasting (Hofmeyr and Rice, 2000) and has been compared with marriage (Albert and Merunka, 2013). A respondent commented:

> *"I am loyal, but more than that, I am engaged. I would say that I'm in love*
> *with the Samsung brand" (Social worker).*

This response represents attitudinal loyalty, which indicates not only higher repurchase intention, but also resistance to counter-persuasion to switch to a new offering. It indicates resistance to adverse expert opinion, a willingness to pay a price premium, and a willingness to recommend the service provider or brand to others. Participants displayed this attribute by insisting they would not switch to any other phone.

Satisfaction

These are conditions that mitigate or otherwise alter the impact of causal conditions on the phenomena (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 131). These contextual conditions influence strategies. In this study, intervening conditions were present and manifested in different situations for the phenomenon. Some intervening conditions occurred because of unexpected events which caused the individual to respond to the situation in a new way through forms of actions and interactions.

Customer satisfaction concerns were key intervening conditions, and included properties such as functional utility, brand uniqueness, perceived value and quality. The identification of the intervening conditions led to posing questions:

1. *"How distinct is your Smartphone from other Smartphones?"*
2. *"How satisfied were you with iPhone in terms of quality and functions?"*

Interviews conducted with users revealed they were satisfied with the quality and durability as well as the functionalities of their products. Functional benefits of brands are often product-oriented and satisfy immediate and practical needs. Such benefits are often associated with problem solution or avoidance (Keller, 2008). Interview responses suggested

that participants believe their current Smartphone gives them satisfaction in terms of quality and functions. Responses included:

> *"Yes, I will buy. I feel some commitment to the brand. It's very durable"*
> *(Courier owner).*

> *"Very satisfied. Built to handle my needs" (Lecturer).*

> *"Satisfied with quality of iPhone. Functions are easy to use, and it has*
> *many features which other brands don't have" (Healthcare assistant).*

> *"Satisfied apart from its short battery life" (Nursery nurse).*

> *"Very satisfied with the quality and durability. It has lots of functionalities*
> *and gives me a level of freedom which allows me to do my work efficiently"*
> *(Lecturer).*

These responses explain why organisations that focus on quality through innovation and technology are likely to disrupt the product market with new and sophisticated products. Functional benefits, particularly those based on attributes, link directly to consumer decisions, but are not without their limitations, since they fail to differentiate, and moreover are easily replicated (Aaker, 1996).

Identity

This is an action that connotes the stream of actual causal interventions that people use to resolve situations or issues they encounter. Interactions are mutual and comprise reciprocal action or influence. Strategic actions/interactions are purposeful, intended to resolve a problem or respond to the unexpected. Routines are actions/interactions taken in response to everyday life, which include rules, protocols, and ways of acting that maintain social order. Indeed, actions that occur in response to changes in the context may be strategic when they

are taken in response to problematic situations, or routine when they are carried out without much thought (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 165). Actions/interactions play a significant role in establishing the dynamics between individuals, groups and organisations. The extent to which a study focuses on individuals or groups depends on the extent to which there is action/interaction directed at managing, handling, carrying out or responding to a phenomenon as it exists in context or under a specific set of perceived conditions (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 104).

This study discusses switching behaviours and organisational responses to contexts affecting strategic actions and interactions. These comprise the input of the concept of self-congruence. This refers to how much a consumer's self-concept is congruent with the personality of a typical user of the brand. Brand personality is the set of human characteristics associated with a brand. Consumers tend towards those brands with similar personality traits to themselves. Individuals are driven by a need to feel good about themselves. They try to maintain and enhance their own self-esteem (Malär et al., 2011). Consumers evaluate the symbolism of the brand and determine whether it is appropriate for their 'selves' (Belk, 1988).

Participants were asked if the brand symbol gives them recognition and reflects their personality. This notion was evident from feedback from respondents as data from most users suggested that the brand is not just about making money, but about making a difference. This drives their connection with the brand, and it makes it vital to them. Some responses were:

> *"Being an iPhone user, I derive recognition and self-esteem from it. My company is an IT firm and we understand the need to have a top of the range Smartphone which has the ability and functions to support our work"*
> *(IT consultant).*

> *"Apple is not just about making money; they are about making a difference, so I think that's what drives my connection with the brand and it is vital"* *(Dentist).*

> *"Yes, the iPhone brand provides recognition as it's prestigious in terms of style. I affirm that the brand improves my self-esteem and reflects my young personality" (Insurance Underwriter).*

> *"It makes me feel proud to be part of the Samsung family, which offers the utmost service for its users, one which is really very sophisticated in what it does" (Accountant).*

Identity is considered an action/interaction strategy, including its properties of self-concept, self-esteem, belongingness and prestige. Identity, as an action/interaction strategy in response to the phenomenon of brand switching, provides a strong basis for organisations to capture repurchase intentions of consumers. Identity theory is closely related to the self-concept, and both examine the connection between the self and social entities (Belk, 1988). Participant views above suggest that identities provide them with a sense of purpose and meaning, defining who they are, as well as why they behave in specified ways in society; hence, identities increase their self-esteem.

Managerial Implications and conclusion

This study has made a number of contributions which lie within its theoretical and practical context. Theoretically, as indicated in the rationale, this study identified gaps in knowledge in the brand loyalty literature. First, the brand loyalty literature focuses only on how brands perform under normal market conditions. However, this study provided consideration for prevalent market disruptions in a competitive market, in the context of the Smartphone industry, and this was validated by empirical data collected from Smartphones users in the

UK. Secondly, empirical data from the current study confirms that the literature does not capture other non-utilitarian factors such as socio-psychological benefits. Empirical data from Smartphone users confirmed in this study that underlining factors motivate consumers to continue buying the brands they buy. Consistent with the above empirical evidence, the branding literature however reveals that brands can provide self-definitional benefits beyond utilitarian benefits (e.g. Aaker, 1995, 1996; Fournier, 1998; Keller, 2008; Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Appiah et al., 2019), establishing that the sustainability of brand loyalty could be accomplished from an identity theory perspective.

Managerially, this study provides pointers for organisations, especially brand and customer relationship managers in terms of how to devise customer relationship strategies to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. Consumers form strong relationships with those brands which they perceive to have values and personality associations that are congruent with their self-concept (Sirgy, 1982; Appiah and Ozuem, 2019). Consumers appear to use brand associations to assess congruence between their 'selves' and the brand.

Drawing on the above this study suggests that the consequences of implementing these identity strategies would enable brand managers or organisations to withstand disruptions in competitive markets, and lead to high brand advocacy among consumers through positive brand image and word-of-mouth. This further mitigates brand switching during market disruptions in competitive markets.

In the marketing context, the narrative analysis by Stern et al. (1998) of marketing relationships implies that customers may switch to a brand they used to dislike by revising their view of the brand's identity and reference group. Research into cultural assimilation also reports that immigrants swap their cultural identities in consumption as they assimilate into the mainstream culture (Oswald, 1999). Similarly, Chaplin and Roedder (2005) suggest that

as children mature into adolescents, their self-concept becomes more sophisticated and so do their connections with brands.

When the boundary between the 'in-group' and the 'out-group' is impermeable and changing group membership is not realistic, social mobility is not a viable strategy to cope with identity threats. For example, people rarely change their political affiliation, as social identity theory suggests that under such circumstances people will engage in social creativity. Tajfel and Turner (1979, p. 43) posit that social creativity can take multiple forms, such as comparing the 'in-group' with the 'out-group' based on some new dimensions, and changing values assigned to the attributes of the group such that previously negative comparisons are now cast in a positive light, and avoiding using the high-status 'out-group' as a comparative frame of reference. In other words, social creativity is a form of identity-based comparison that is based on 'in-group' biases and defined as a strong belief in the superiority of the group with which a person identifies. It is a form of prejudice against the non-identified group. Brewer (1979) posits that such 'in-group' biases are both cognitive and motivational because these biases motivate 'in-group' members (e.g. brand identifiers) to attend only to elements that the 'in-group' will evaluate more positively than 'out-groups'.

Future Research Direction and Understanding

The sample size for the research was limited to forty respondents, considering the time constraint and lack of financial resources to conduct such research extensively. The time window for this study was very short and the budget available for it was very limited as no external funds were allocated for the study.

Although collecting data from forty participants is a fair representation of Smartphone users for purpose of this study, the data collection process could have benefited from a wider participation from different markets to provide a complete picture of consumers' purchase intentions in those markets with varied economic and social conditions. The limitations of

this study point towards areas to be addressed in the future. The study provides a framework for future research in the Smartphone the industry, to include a more diverse population from other markets to broaden understanding of the phenomenon.

Again, another opportunity for further research revolves round the fact that the theoretical underpinnings were successful in explaining the influence of disruptions on brand loyalty from a marketing perspective, and it is expected that this theory could be used in other disciplines, such as politics, to examine voter loyalty to specific political parties.

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