Interdisciplinary Journal of Economics and Business Law, 2025, Vol 14, Special Issue, pp. 10-30

Towards a sustainable resistance to brand switching: A social influence theory perspective

Dominic Appiah[1], Alison Watson[2], Sebastian Okafor[3]

Abstract

In the realm of branding and consumer attitudes towards brands, the focus has primarily revolved around the functional utility of products, overlooking the significance of socio-psychological attributes of brands. This study aims to address this gap by delving into the concept of brand loyalty, which encompasses various dimensions such as the intention to repeatedly purchase and repurchase a specific brand, the willingness to pay premium prices, resistance to brand switching, and advocacy of the brand to others. The current study centres on online brand communities (OBCs). OBCs offer companies a unique opportunity to share brand information, gain valuable insights into customer needs, preferences and desires, both current and potential. Employing a social constructivist approach, the study seeks to explore why customers resist brand switching. Qualitative survey data were analysed using thematic analysis to examine customers' engagement in OBCs to understand its distinctive impact on brand loyalty. Additionally, this study incorporates social influence theory to assess its effects on customer loyalty within OBCs. Findings suggest that firstly, OBC members develop attitudinal loyalty, which represents a more long-term and emotional commitment to a brand; secondly, responses relating to social influence show that there were intentional or unintentional communications that produced change(s) in others' attitudes, beliefs, intentions, motivations or

[1] Dominic.Appiah@rhul.ac.uk (corresponding author), School of Business and Management, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, UK
[2] Awatson@arden.ac.uk, School of Leadership and Management, Arden University, UK

[3] Sebastian.Okafor@cumbria.ac.uk, Institute of Business, Industry and Leadership, University of Cumbria, UK

behaviours. Consumers often look to others' opinions in OBCs when making a purchase decision.

Keywords: Brand loyalty; attitudinal loyalty; behavioural loyalty; online brand communities (OBCs); brand switching; social influence theory

Introduction

Much emphasis has been placed on the functional utility of products at the expense of social meanings. The plethora of research on brand switching covers customer motivations to review available alternatives, due to changes in a competitive market, as a means to maximize the functional utility of product attributes (Guadagni & Little, 1983; Seiders & Tigerts, 1997). However, this stream of research fails to acknowledge the impact of socio-psychological attributes on customers desire to switch brands. This study presents an empirical investigation into the brand switching behaviour of consumers in a competitive market, with implications for a sustainable brand switching resistance strategy built from a social influence theory perspective within online brand communities (OBCs; Appiah & Ozuem, 2018).

The assumption is that people are continually involved in social interactions and in interpreting their constantly changing world. This study deviates from the conventional economic perspective of treating brand switching as functional utility maximization (Guadagni & Little, 1983; Seiders & Tigerts, 1997), to treating brand switching as a consequence of social mobility between brand identities among consumers (Lam et al., 2013). We investigate OBC members' interactions and the impact social influence has on members in terms of shared brand values and the exchange of information in an attempt to influence customers' purchasing behaviour and overall loyalty (Adjei et al., 2010).

OBCs have become an important marketing instrument, and this study assesses the managerial implications of customers' loyalty to OBCs. From a social influence theory perspective, it is suggested that customers by nature will identify with certain social groups based on both the positive and negative values associated with these groups (Khare, 2014; Liu et al., 2012).

Therefore, this study utilises social influence theory to underpin discussions on how people develop commitment in relation to social categorization (Tajfel, 1978), which in the long-term drives loyalty in the

form of positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and resistance to negative information.

Literature review and theoretical perspectives

Brand loyalty

Despite the large number of studies on brand loyalty, much of the research over the past three decades investigated consumer loyalty from two broad perspectives: behavioural loyalty and attitudinal loyalty (e.g., Bandyopadhyay & Martell, 2007; Dick & Basu, 1994; Ringberg & Gupta, 2003). The first marketing studies perceived customer loyalty as behaviour involving the repeat purchase of a particular product or service (Nam et al., 2011).

Behavioural loyalty was evaluated based on the sequence in which a product or service was purchased, or as a proportion of purchases, or as an act of recommendation (Hallowell, 1996; Homburg & Giering, 2001). Kuusik and Varblane (2009) identified three reasons for customers to be behaviourally loyal: (i) forced to be loyal (e.g., monopoly or high exit costs); (ii) loyal due to inertia; and (iii) functionally loyal. From a marketing perspective, this view suggests that as long as there are no specific 'triggers' to compel behaviourally loyal customers to change providers, they will remain passively loyal (Roos, 1999). According to Liu et al. (2007), even when presented with more attractive alternatives, consumers who have high inertia will be reluctant to change.

Day (1969) criticized this one-dimensional view of brand loyalty as behaviourally centred and therefore unable to distinguish true loyalty from 'spurious loyalty'; since then many researchers have recognized the need for an attitudinal component to brand loyalty (Berné et al., 2001; Dick & Basu, 1994; Jacoby & Kyner, 1973; Oliver, 1999). Similarly, Uncles and Laurent (1997) emphasized Day's (1969) criticism when they posited that the classification of behavioural observations (e.g., repeat purchases) as a form of loyalty overlooks customers who are emotionally attached to products and services, which can lead to overestimation of a company's loyal customer base and the stability of their portfolio (Crouch et al., 2004). Significantly, Dick and Basu (1994) contended that a favourable attitude and repeat purchase were ideal to

define loyalty; they viewed loyalty as an attitude–behaviour relationship in their framework.

Attitudinal loyalty captures the emotional and cognitive components of brand loyalty (Kumar & Shah, 2004). Oliver (1999) described loyalty as a deeply held commitment to rebuy or regularly patronise preferred products or services consistently in the 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 an organization (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2002; Shankar et al., 2003). Attitudinal loyalty is referred to as 'emotional loyalty' and is regarded as being strong and long lasting (Hofmeyr & Rice, 2000; Ozuem et al., 2016) and has been compared with marriage (Albert & Merunka, 2013).

Drawing from the above, organisations prefer attitudinal loyalty to behavioural loyalty (Day, 1969; Dick & Basu, 1994) for two main reasons. First, behaviourally loyal customers may be spuriously loyal, that is, they will stay with a brand, an organization or a service provider until a better alternative in the marketplace is available (Dick & Basu, 1994). An attitudinally loyal customer, on the other hand, has some attachment or commitment to a brand, organization or service and is not easily swayed by a slightly more attractive alternative. Second, attitudinal loyalty not only indicates higher repurchase intent but also resistance to counter-persuasion, resistance to adverse expert opinion, willingness to pay a price premium and willingness to recommend the service provider or brand to others.

Sociological and technological aspects of OBCs

An OBC is a brand community that takes place in a virtual setting in which the members' interactions are primarily internet-mediated (Füller et al., 2007). Hence, an OBC is a brand community that is specialized, due to its focus on branded goods or services, and non-geographically bound. An OBC is based on a structured set of social relations among consumers of that brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). OBCs differ from traditional communities due to their commercial nature and members' common interest, admiration, sympathy and even love for a brand (Albert et al., 2008).

The fundamental peculiarity of an OBC resides in the ability of its members to interact with each other. In general, consumers involved

in an OBC share their interest for a specific brand by exchanging information and knowledge or simply by expressing their passion; these social interactions influence customers' relationship with the brand (McAlexander et al., 2002).

OBCs arose in a virtual setting, that is, a computer-mediated environment that made available services such as chat rooms, newsgroups and discussion forums where members interact with each other, such as exchanging and sharing information and emotions. However, the advent of the internet, a paradigm essentially rooted in connectivity, facilitated members' participation (Appiah et al., 2023). In this context, technology, such as video sharing, blogging and social networking, exploited and reinforced the social aspect of OBCs through multiple virtual connections among consumers; this development was perceived as a more sustainable way of building relationships through the sharing of content and interests in relation to brand consumption (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

Functionalities such as 'share this' or 'like this' on Facebook, for example, indicate that one billion social media users testify to the social nature of relationships. These features outline a new form of brand community: the embedded brand community that is characterized by ease of applicability and access to unbelievable numbers of consumers. However, it is worth noting that due to consumers engagement in OBCs, the power has shifted from marketers to consumers. Consumer power is a potential risk for organizations because new technologies allow consumers to easily network together and share reviews of a brand (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

Social influence theory

Social influence involves intentional and unintentional efforts to change another person's beliefs, attitudes or behaviour (Kelman, 1961; Li, 2013). Unlike persuasion, which is typically intentional and requires some degree of awareness on the part of the target, social influence may be inadvertent or accidental. Social influence often operates via peripheral processing; hence, the target may be unaware of the influence attempt (Alvarado-Karste & Guzmán, 2020). Not only is social influence a ubiquitous feature of everyday interaction, it is also prevalent in the boardroom, the courtroom, the classroom and many other walks of life.

Social influence is incredibly broad; it covers everything from mere presence effects and mimicry to more direct forms of social persuasion.

Forsyth (2013) conceptualized social influence as interpersonal processes with the potential of changing an individual's feelings, thoughts or behaviours. Social influence may be defined as intentional or unintentional communication that produces change(s) in another's attitudes, beliefs, intentions, motivations or behaviours; it is non-coercive in nature (Pratkanis, 2007).

Commitment, consistency and social proof

Research suggests that individuals conform to social influence from different sources, including peers they do not know and even reference groups (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012; Cohen, 2003; Khare, 2014). People like to think that they are consistent in their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours; it bothers them to say one thing and do another. People also do not want to be perceived by others as hypocritical. The need for consistency is partly a psychological drive and partly a social desire to maintain their self-image (Khare, 2014; Liu et al., 2012).

When a person perceives that their attitudes, statements or actions are in conflict, they are motivated to reduce the perceived incompatibility. The person might go about doing this in a variety of ways, including denial, bolstering, rationalizing, differentiating or other techniques designed to reduce the perceived incompactibility.

Public commitments are more binding than private commitments; hence, wedding rituals, such as engagement rings, wedding announcements and public vows, increase the likelihood that the to-be-wed couple will follow through with the wedding. Commitment contracts and devices, such as New Year's resolutions, chastity rings or swear jars are also ways of increasing an individual's adherence to a particular form of conduct. Cialdini (1984, 2009) noted that once a person commits to a particular course of action they will persist on that path even if the original motivation for doing so no longer exists.

People often exhibit a herd mentality; when people are unsure of how to behave in social situations they often look to others as guides for behaviour (Li, 2013; Zhou, 2011). For example, women in a cafeteria line were much more likely to select a dessert if the person ahead of them did so (Guarino et al., 1994), social proof also operates online. An initial positive or negative review by one user can bias subsequent reviews

(Muchnik et al., 2013). The more ambiguous the situation, the more likely an individual is to rely on social proof. The more credible the model, the more likely others will follow the model's lead. A person is also more likely to follow another's (model's) lead if they perceive that they are similar to, or identify with, the model. Celebrities, peers, groups or individuals may serve as models. Social proof can be informational, that is, based on a desire to be accurate or correct. A person who knew little about fishing, for example, might observe what other anglers were using for bait. Social proof can also be normative, that is, based on a desire to be accepted or fit in. A new employee, for instance, might adapt their clothing style to what other employees are wearing.

Word of mouth, which plays an important role in online marketing, relies on social proof. Consumers often look to others' opinions when deciding what movie to see, where to dine, or what brand of electronics to buy. Online reviews now figure heavily in consumers' decision-making processes. A number of websites depend on such consumer reviews. Liking a post on Facebook, re-tweeting another's tweet, or sharing a photo on Pinterest are all forms of eWOM. Social norms marketing, which is used in public awareness campaigns, also relies on social proof. Social network marketing seeks to correct people's misperceptions of what is normal or typical behaviour, thereby promoting more healthy or safe behaviour. College students, for example, often hold misperceptions about alcohol consumption, such as overestimating the amount of drinking that occurs on campus. Correcting such misperceptions has been shown to reduce binge drinking (Turner et al., 2008).

Brand switching

Brand switching occurs when a customer is motivated to review available alternatives in the marketplace due to a change in competitive activities (Matzler et al., 2015; Seiders & Tigert, 1997). Socially, switching occurs when a customer's belief in a brand is externally influenced within the social setting. The customer's belief then impacts their attitude towards using a specific brand, which leads to changes in their purchase intention. Switching occurs most when customers are exposed to normative influence, a social pressure to accept certain purchase behaviour, irrespective of their beliefs and attitudes towards the behaviour, whereas informational influence 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).

Social influence theory posits that people derive their identity from affiliations with social groups. They value such membership and distinguish themselves from those who do not share such affiliations, hence forming an in-group and an out-group. According to Lam et al. (2013), when a social identity is threatened, in-group members will likely respond by resorting to three basic strategies: social mobility, social creativity and social change. Social mobility refers to a person's attempt to leave or dissociate themself from a group, such as moving from a lower status group to a higher status one (Lam et al., 2013). Social creativity describes a person's attempt to 'seek positive distinctiveness for the in-group by redefining or altering the elements of the comparative situation' (Tajfel & Turner 1986, p. 43). For example, a business school that does not compare favourably with other schools in overall evaluation may seek out specific dimensions of comparison that grant it superiority over these other schools (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). Finally, social change refers to direct competition with the out-group to retrieve higher status. In the marketing context, social change can be initiated either by competitors or by customers who identify with a brand. Market disruptions that are externally caused by competitors (e.g., radically innovative brands) can be viewed as attempts to initiate social change between competitors to vie for favour among customers. From the perspective of social influence theory, we propose that customers may switch to a new brand for self-enhancement purposes to maximize socio-psychological utility (e.g., symbolic benefits) rather than functional utility (e.g., functional benefits). Research into cultural assimilation shows that immigrants swap their cultural identities in consumption as they assimilate into mainstream cultures (Oswald, 1999).

The symbolic values of brands extend deeper than their role as a signalling device; they help consumers to retain a sense of the past and to categorize themselves in society, and they communicate cultural meanings, such as social status and group identity (Belk, 1988).

Methods

The population of interest for this study are members of OBCs who are active on various online platforms. An online survey was adopted for data

collection because it was the most effective technique to reach the population of interest.

For the purpose of this study, a social constructivist approach was adopted using an inductive strategy to draw on 'multiple perspectives' (Baydan & Karadag, 2014; Ozuem et al., 2008). This approach enabled exploration of varied perspectives and meanings attributed to individuals' opinions of their social identities within OBCs and how they impact loyalty to the group and related brands. Social constructivism proposes that meaning is socially constructed and meaningful reality is dependent upon human construction and can be generated through human interactions. It focuses on behavioural patterns that shape social processes as people interact together in groups (Gandomani & Nafchi, 2016; Krush et al., 2015).

A judgemental sampling technique was employed to identify participants based on their engagement and experiences within OBCs and, most importantly, the availability of selected participants to engage in the study. The main objective of the use of judgemental sampling was to gain rich and detailed insights into the complexity of the social phenomena under discussion as well as consideration for participants' willingness to participate in the survey process (Naicker & Van der Merwe, 2018).

Table 1: Participants' socio-demographic information

Demographic factors		Frequency
Gender	Male	43
	Female	31
	Other	3
Age (years)	18–24	9
	25–34	12
	35–44	28
	45–54	23
	55–64	5
	65–74	0
	75–84	0
	Australia	1
	China	1

Country of residence	Ghana	24
	United Kingdom	42
	United States	3
	Other	6

Overall, 77 participants within the age range of 18 to 64 years (see Table 1) contributed to the data collection over a period of four months. Participants comprised 43 men and 31 women while 3 participants opted not to disclose their gender. Respondents were drawn from different OBCs as well as varied social backgrounds in different geographical locations.

Analysis and discussion

The main objective was to explore participants' engagement in OBCs that strengthened their loyalty to the group from a social influence perspective. A thematic analytic tool was used to analyse the data collected, establish patterns of meanings and generate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Torresin et al., 2020). Based on participants' lived experiences in OBCs, we established specific patterns across the data in relation to their opinions and views on how they developed and maintained loyalty to brands through membership of their OBCs as well as their perceptions of the role of any social influence in OBCs.

OBCs and their strategic impact on customers' loyalty

In the loyalty literature, attitudinal loyalty is defined as capturing emotional and cognitive components of brand loyalty (Kumar & Shah, 2004). This description aligns with the view that loyalty is a deeply held commitment to rebuy or regularly patronise preferred products or services consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour.

Responses from participants who were members of various OBCs indicate that they developed this type of loyalty, which represents a more long-term and emotional commitment to a brand (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2002; Shankar et al., 2003).

Participants were asked to indicate the benefit(s) they derived from being part of their respective OBCs. They listed benefits such as shared information, emotional connections with the brand, user-generated content, and efficient and effective customer support.

Impact of social influence on brand loyalty in OBCs

Results from the data indicate that social influence may be conceptualized as interpersonal processes that change people's feelings, thoughts or behaviours (Forsyth, 2013; Khare, 2014). Consumers in OBCs acquire products from certain brands to serve as a signal and medium to express their identity (Liu et al., 2012). As per social influence theory, conforming to the expectations of significant others in a social group enhances self-image. In other words, consumers act in a particular way to earn respect in significant groups, such as OBCs (Khare, 2014; Liu et al., 2012).

Responses show that there were intentional or unintentional communications that produced change(s) in others' attitudes, beliefs, intentions, motivations or behaviours. Below are notable responses when participants were asked: Do influential members, such as celebrities, in the community impact your buying decisions?

Respondent A said: *'Sometimes the people in the OBC influence me on buying decision'.*

Respondent B stated: *'Yes, I think I am influenced a bit, but I do my own research before making the final decision to purchase a product'.*

The above responses indicate that members of a social group tend to think that they are consistent in their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours; therefore, it bothers them to say one thing and do another, and they do not want to be perceived by others in the same group as hypocritical. The need for consistency is partly a psychological drive and partly a social desire (Forsyth, 2013; Pratkanis, 2007).

Effect of social influence on switching in OBCs

Responses from participants indicate that social proof operates in OBCs. Consumers often look to others' opinions in OBCs when making a purchase decision (Guarino et al., 1994).

For example, Respondent C shared:

'Yes, the product reviews shared in the OBC help me to access the brand's reliability and helps me to make the decision to buy the product or not'.

Also, consumers expect others to evaluate their purchase decisions, which might lead them to make choices that differ from the choices they would have made in the absence of public scrutiny (Mourali et al., 2005; Khare, 2014).

Respondent D commented: *'The reputation of some members in OBCs do impact my buying decision'.*

Again, the respondent's feedback above suggests that they occasionally shared product and service information from OBCs with others from different social groups, which is consistent with eWOM (Ibrahim et al., 2017; Appiah et al., 2023). The results emphasize the cognitive and affective elements of social influence in OBCs for consumers (Li, 2013; Zhou, 2011), which are considered to stimulate brand commitment, positive eWOM and, ultimately, resistance to switching behaviour.

Managerial implications and conclusions

Findings from the current study have a number of theoretical and managerial implications which are discussed below. Participants' responses that revolved around brand loyalty and social influence provide an indication that the brand loyalty literature and social influence theory have key variables that play important roles in controlling switching behaviours of users of brands who are members of OBCs.

Empirically, the outcome of the data collected indicates that positive and negative eWOM have a considerable influence on loyalty formation and a critical impact on consumer attitudes. Therefore, steps must be taken to reduce risk perception as it elicits negative eWOM. The development of negative eWOM has a high tendency to worsen consumer attitudes towards brands and it has a negative influence on loyalty (Ibrahim et al., 2017; Appiah et al., 2023). Hence, the use of celebrity endorsers in OBCs is highly recommended as the findings suggest that the use of celebrity endorsers reinforces brand loyalty (Guarino et al., 1994; Li, 2013; Zhou, 2011).

The participants' responses indicated that celebrity recommendations in OBCs to a large extent influence and shape consumers' attitude towards a brand as well as the interpersonal

influences from a social influence perspective. Notwithstanding, it is strongly recommended that brand managers select endorsers who have substantial knowledge of the brand and are perceived by OBC members as trustworthy.

Again, from a managerial standpoint, we stand on the findings to suggest that the role of social influence cannot be neglected; hence, brand managers need to prioritize the social process of interaction (social presence) in OBCs. The exchange of experiences and the possibility of receiving and offering advice (creation of content by users and interpersonal and external influences) differentiate and characterize OBCs. Therefore, OBCs could include a bulletin with news, opinions, offers and new incorporations. Users of this bulletin could provide topics for discussion, improvements, reviews and photographs of actual products. Social presence can also be reinforced by very active management and control of the activity of users by the administrators of the OBCs in the form of quick, accurate responses to specific questions from users.

Finally, an important finding from this study reveals that social influence has the potential to sway people without consciously being aware of it (Guarino et al., 1994; Forsyth, 2013; Khare, 2014; Kelman, 1961; Li, 2013; Alvarado-Karste & Guzmán, 2020). An indication that humans are not that rational after all. Consumers in an OBC can sway and nudge one another into pledging their allegiance to a brand.

Research limitations and future research

The focus of this study was to understand the impact of social influence on brand loyalty in OBCs without the context of a particular brand. Going forward, research of this nature could explore specific product categories. Future studies could use selected brands to minimize individual bias. Brand-specific studies can help in understanding how consumer–brand relationships as well as social influence affect specific product categories.

In addition, further studies could be conducted with the aim of reaching a wider audience from different countries and societies. Potentially, this could produce variable results and help in the generalization of the phenomenon.

Finally, future studies can also explore if the impact of social influence on consumer–brand relationships in OBCs is dependent on the personality types of consumers who are members of these OBCs.

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