

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG THE ANTECEDENTS OF BRAND LOYALTY: A RESEARCH ON AN APPAREL BRAND

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Abstract

There is a severe competition in apparel industry both in the world and Turkey. With the consumers' increasing needs and wants and the change of their needs from functional to symbolic benefits, clothing style has become an important way of expressing personal identity. Thus, companies which are operating in the apparel industry are being forced to imply efficient marketing strategies and to increase the loyalty of their customers for their brands. Brand loyalty generates numerous benefits like erecting barriers to competitors, generating greater sales and revenues, reducing customer acquisition costs, and inhibiting customers' susceptibility to marketing efforts of competitors. Because of these reasons, it has been used by companies as a strategic tool to obtain sustainable competitive advantages in markets. It is also argued in the extant literature that a critical issue for the continued success of a firm is its capability to retain its current customers and make them loyal to its brands. Understanding how those factors affect brand loyalty will help companies in gaining competitive advantages.

The aim of this study is to explore the relationships among the antecedents of brand loyalty on an apparel brand that is very popular among university students. Brand communication, brand image, brand trust are taken as the antecedents of brand loyalty in the research model. Main sample of the research consists of university students in Bursa. Hypotheses are tested with the help of structural equation modelling. This study is expected to make academic and practical contributions to the existing branding literature and the companies in apparel industry, Turkey in particular.

Keywords: Brand Loyalty, Apparel Brand, Brand Communication, Brand Image, Brand Trust, Structural Equation Modelling, Bursa.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's consumer-oriented markets, companies need sustainable marketing strategies in order to gain competitive advantages. Companies in apparel industry should give more importance to consumers because the reason of brand purchase decisions has shifted from functional to symbolic benefits. This reality leads to a more severe competition in the sector. The key marketing strategy to struggle with competition is creating

brand loyalty. Brand loyalty generates numerous benefits like erecting barriers to competitors, generating greater sales and revenues, reducing customer acquisition costs, and inhibiting customers' susceptibility to marketing efforts of competitors. Thus, having information about the antecedents of brand loyalty will help companies to imply more efficient marketing strategies.

Companies in apparel industries also give importance to university students because they often use branded apparel products and tend to share their experiences about brands. That's why, university students generates an important market segment. The aim of this study is to explore the relationships among the antecedents of brand loyalty on an apparel brand that is very popular among university students. Brand communication, brand image, brand trust are taken as the antecedents of the brand loyalty in the research model. Main sample of the research consists of university students in Bursa. Hypotheses are tested with the help of structural equation modelling. This study is expected to make academic and practical contributions to the existing branding literature and the companies in apparel industry, Turkey in particular.

2.1. Antecedents of Brand Loyalty

2.1.1. Brand Communication

Brand communication which was found to have an important role in building positive brand attitudes (Anisimova and Sultan, 2014, pp.514) is the main integrative component in managing brand relationships with customers (Şahin et al., 2012, pp.1362). Brand communication also curtails the process of customer's brand decision making and makes a habit of that choice (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2014, pp.36). The audience is exposed to a brand in brand communication, thereby customer response is affected. When searching to satisfy customers and creating positive brand attitude, in the long run, the effect of brand communications must be examined closely (Grace and O'Cass, 2005, pp.107). Its effect can be determined by analyzing brand recall and brand awareness alongside strength, uniqueness and favorability of brand associations in consumer memory. Brand communication can also be one-way and two-way direction (Zehir et al., 2011, pp. 1219; Şahin et al., 2012, pp.1362).

2.1.2. Brand Image

Brand image is crucial in an organization in terms of ability to form attitudes of consumers toward the brand, product and service and to influence their behavioral components towards the organization (Michaelidou et al., 2015, pp. 1657). Notwithstanding, there is less agreement of conceptualization of brand image, it can be defined as "perceptions about the brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (Keller, 2003, pp.3). Brand associations are the linkages between the brand and brand beliefs or perceptions in consumer's memory and embody the trusts about a brand's attributes and benefit from utilizing it (Sang et al., 2015, pp.391). High brand image indicates that consumer has a perception in a certain level of product quality, thus brand image plays an important role in purchasing decision-making (Wu, 2015, pp. 238).

2.1.3. Brand Trust

Brand trust is defined as "feeling of security held by the consumer in his/her interaction with the brand, that it is based on the perceptions that the brand is reliable and responsible for the interests and welfare of the consumer". In this definition, brand trust includes willingness to put oneself at risk, feelings of confidence and security, common anticipation and to make reliable to the brand. (Elena et al., 2003, pp. 11). According to Chaudhuri and Holdbrook (2001), brand trust is defined as "the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function", while in paper of Xingyuan et al. (2010), "brand trust is a consumer's disposition toward a brand characterized by positive expectations and willingness to rely on the brand". Brand trust contains knowledge or cognition based components and emotional or affect based components (Srivastava et al., 2015, pp. 330).

2.1.4. Brand Loyalty

The concept of brand loyalty is defined as the individual's positive attitude that is repeated over a period towards the product of a brand (Baig et al., 2015, pp.01). Brand loyalty has been considered as both behavioral and attitudinal dimension in its conceptual development process. Behavioral dimension refers to outcome of repeat purchase behavior and attitudinal dimension refers to consequence of multi-dimensional cognitive attitudes towards a specific brand. (Audi et al., 2015, pp. 279; Baig et al., 2015, pp. 03; Zhang et al., 2015, pp. 15). The origins of brand loyalty are one of the main concerns for brand management due to it enhances long term financial performance of firms and shows the long term relationship between consumers and brands (Brexendorf et al, 2009, pp. 1148; Jones and Sasser, 1995, pp. 11; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001, pp. 82).

2.2. Literature Review

In creating of the customer's brand loyalty, the organization must give importance to brand image (Momen et al., 2015, pp.36). Rahi (2015) stated that brand image is an important key for brand loyalty in banking sector. In that paper, the study covered brand image as a moderator between customer loyalty and internet banking. Fatema et al. (2013) show that there is a relation between brand image and brand loyalty. In their paper of Seric et al. (2014), it is demonstrated that brand image has a strong effect on the development of brand loyalty in hospitality industry. In He and Lai's paper (2014), the relationship between brand image and brand loyalty is considered with two categories of brand image: symbolic and functional images. Findings of the study show that brand image has a mediating role between brand loyalty and corporate social responsibility (He and Lai, 2014, pp. 260). Nazari et al. (2015) show that green brand image influences indirectly and positively the loyalty to the green brand. In Alhaddad (2015)'s study, a brand loyalty model is developed. The findings of the study show that brand image which is a dimension of brand loyalty has a significant positive effect on brand loyalty. In another paper which investigated the relationship between brand image and brand loyalty (Nyadzayo and Khajehzadeh, 2016, pp.268), it is implied that when the brand image is favorable, the firm's efforts to managing service quality, customer satisfaction, customer value, as well as CRM practices have higher congruence with customer loyalty. In Chung et al. (2016)'s study, the findings show that brand image is a very important factor in enhancing customer loyalty of low-price cosmetic brands.

Brand trust builds a highly valued lasting relationship between the brand and the consumer, and is one of the important determinants of brand loyalty (Bianchi et al., 2014, pp.95; Morgan and Hunt, 1994, pp.20-38). In Laroche et al. (2012)'s study, the relationship between brand trust and brand loyalty is investigated in the context of enhanced relationships in brand community. The findings show that brand trust has a fully mediating role in converting the effects of relevant relationships (Laroche et al., 2012, pp.76). In Erciş et al., (2012)'s study, it is suggested that enterprises should attach more importance to creating trust in consumer loyalty. In So et al. (2014)'s paper, it is showed that customer engagement has an effect on brand trust and hence brand loyalty in hospitality sector. In that paper, it is stated that brand trust is a significant predictor of service brand loyalty. In Nikhashemi et al., (2015)'s study, brand trust is considered to identify the significance of customer brand identification towards building customer brand loyalty as a mediator. In their study, it is found that brand trust fully mediates that relationship (Nikhashemi et al., 2015, pp.182). In Lee et al. (2015)'s study, the effects of usability in brand loyalty is covered indirectly through the mediators of brand satisfaction and brand trust. In Chung et al., (2015)'s study, the importance of subdimensions of perceived value and brand loyalty is investigated. The findings of the study support that there is a positive linkage between brand trust and brand loyalty (Chung et al., 2015, pp. 10). In Veloutsou's (2015) study, brand trust is found to be an antecedent of brand loyalty in an indirect manner. In Liao's study (2015), the mediating effect of brand trust on brand loyalty and brand equity is examined. In the study, three antecedents which are cognitive and experiential factors are evaluated to identify effects. The results of the study show that brand trust has a mediator role in bridging the influences of these antecedents on brand loyalty and brand equity (Liao, 2015, pp. 603). In Bilgihan (2016)'s paper, the effect of brand trust on brand loyalty is investigated in e-commerce. The findings of the study show that trust is a crucial element for long-term business relationship in online context (Bilgihan, 2016, pp. 110).

Marketers seek to create and maintain positive attitudes towards brands. These positive attitudes such as brand trust and loyalty are crucial for long-term success. Marketers use tools for maintaining brand loyalty. Brand loyalty can be enhanced with the marketing communication which is one of the relevant tools. (Hoek et al., 2000, pp.415; Orzam et al., 2016, pp.142). In the extant literature, Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014) investigated the effect of firm-created and user-generated brand communication on brand loyalty. The findings of their study show that user generated social media brand communication has a positive effect on brand loyalty (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015, pp.31). In Cai et al. (2014)'s study, the effects of intergenerational (IG) communication on brand equity are investigated. The findings show that there is linkage indirectly between IG perceived quality and IG brand loyalty. In Virvilaite et al. (2015)'s study, the correlation between word of mouth which is examined by academic researchers in the topic of brand communication (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2015, pp.34) and brand loyalty is found as positive (Virvilaite et al., 2015, pp.645). In another study which analyzes the correlation between word of mouth communication and brand loyalty (Nikhashemi et al., 2015), brand loyalty is considered as an outcome in generating word of mouth communication. In Orzan et al. (2016)'s study, research's starting point is that social media communication influences customer's trust, effect and loyalty towards brand. The findings of the study point out that social media marketing communications are related to brand trust and brand effect which are determinants of brand loyalty.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Conceptual Model and Research Hypotheses

In this section, the conceptual model that examines the antecedents of brand loyalty on apparel brand is presented. Brand communication, brand image and brand trust were selected as possible determinants of the brand loyalty for the research. The conceptual model of the study is shown in Figure 1. In this conceptual model; “Communic”, “Image”, “Trust” and “Loyalty” variables represent brand communication, brand image, brand trust and brand loyalty respectively.

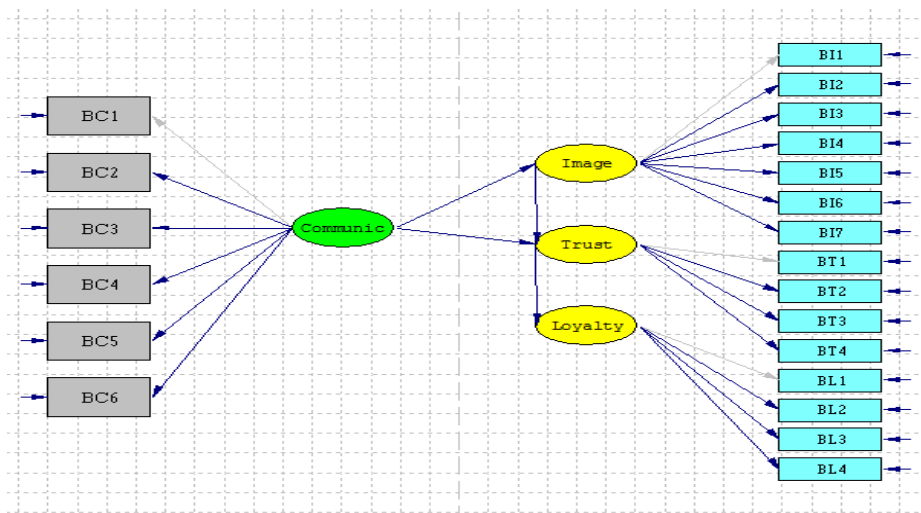


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

As seen from Figure 1, research hypotheses are:

- H₁: Brand communication has a positive effect on brand image.
- H₂: Brand communication has a positive effect on brand trust.
- H₃: Brand image has a positive effect on brand trust.
- H₄: Brand trust has a positive effect on brand loyalty.

A structured questionnaire was used in the research. Main sample of the research consists of university students in Bursa. After collecting data, the reliability of the scale was measured by Cronbach’s Alpha. Then, an exploratory factor analysis has been executed. After providing the necessary conditions, structural equation modeling has been applied to test the conceptual model of the research.

The scales used in the research are shown with their references in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Scales Used in the Research

Variables	References
Brand Communication	Grace and O’Case, 2005; Zehir et al., 2011; Chinomona, 2016.
Brand Image	Salinas and Pérez, 2009;
Brand Trust	Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Hsteh and Hiang 2004; Dixon et al. 2005; Zehir et al., 2011; Chinomona, 2016.
Brand Loyalty	Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Algesheimer, Uptal and Herrmann, 2005; Hohenstein, et al. 2007

3.2. Findings

3.2.1 Reliability Analysis

A scale used in social sciences is generally tested by Cronbach’s Alpha. The data gathered has been transferred into the IBM SPSS 22 program. Cronbach’s Alpha values are; 0,87, 0,88, 0,88, 0,79 and 0,93 for brand communication, brand image, brand trust, brand loyalty and the whole scale respectively.

3.2.2 Exploratory Factor Analysis

In Table 2, results of KMO and Bartlett's tests can be seen. Rotated component matrix results indicate that four factors are formed as in the conceptual model.

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		,867
Approx. Chi-Square		1568,058
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	df	210
	Sig.	,000

Table 3: Rotated Component Matrix^a

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
BC1			,689	
BC2			,722	
BC3			,846	
BC4			,740	
BC5			,786	
BC6			,694	
BI1		,576		
BI2		,519		
BI3		,639		
BI4		,457		
BI5		,793		
BI6		,546		
BI7		,521		
BT1	,702			
BT2	,640			
BT3	,852			
BT4	,706			
BL1				,489
BL2				,551
BL3				,779
BL4				,834

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 11 iterations.

3.2.3 Hypothesis Testing and Structural Model

In this section, the results of the structural model are given. The reliability of the structural model can be measured by various statistics. These are called goodness of fit statistics generally. Common used fit statistics are shown in Table 4. Goodness of fit statistics indicates that the structural model is valid.

Table 4: Goodness of Fit Statistics

The Goodness of Fit Statistics	Value
Chi Square/Degrees of Freedom	2,20
GFI	0,89
AGFI	0,87
NFI	0,90
CFI	0,94
IFI	0,94
RMSEA	0,10
RMR	0,06
Standardized RMR	0,09

The GFI, AGFI, NFI, CFI and IFI are widely used statistical tests and provide evidence for goodness of fit and hypothesized model. They are 0,89, 0,87, 0,90, 0,94 and 0,94 respectively. These values show that the structural model has good values. The RMSEA, RMR and SRMR values also show that the model has a good fit.

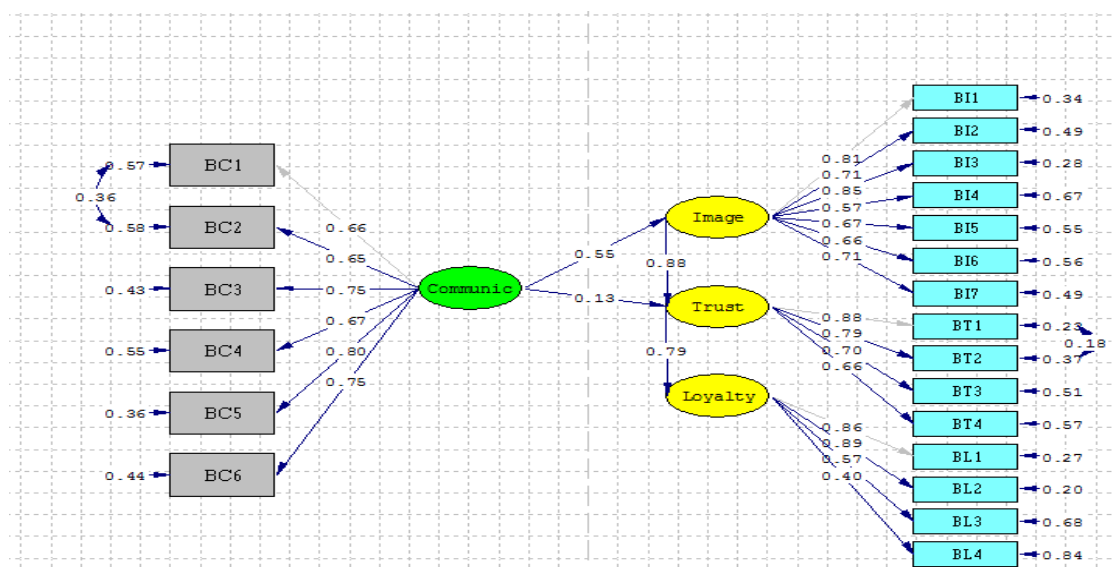


Figure 2. Structural Model and Standardized Path Coefficients

The structural model with the standardized path coefficients is shown in Figure 2. As can be seen in Figure 2 brand trust has a direct and positive effect on brand loyalty. Brand image has a positive and direct effect on brand trust and brand communication has a positive and direct effect on brand image while the effect of brand communication on brand trust was found to be statistically insignificant. The results of hypothesis, the paths of the model and the path coefficients are given in the Table 5.

Table 5: Results of Structural Equation Model Analysis

Paths	Hypothesis	Path Coefficients	Result
Brand Communication- Brand Image	H1	0,55	Accepted
Brand Communication-Brand Trust	H2	0,13	Rejected
Brand Image-Brand Trust	H3	0,88	Accepted
Brand Trust- Brand Loyalty	H4	0,79	Accepted

The path coefficients between “brand communication” and “brand image”, “brand image” and “brand trust” and “brand trust” and “brand loyalty” are 0,55, 0,88 and 0,79 respectively. It shows that brand communication

and brand image have effects on the brand loyalty with the mediating affect of brand trust and brand trust has a positive and direct effect on brand loyalty.

4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research contributes to literature by exploring the relationships between brand communication, brand image, brand trust and brand loyalty for an apparel brand which is popular among university students. According to many researchers (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester and Luis Munuera-Alemán, 2001) brand trust is a key determinant of brand loyalty. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) emphasized that brand trust is positively related to two different types of brand loyalty -purchase and attitudinal loyalty. In apparel sector there are several brands and these brands try to increase brand loyalty through their brand. Because of this competitive environment consumers have too many choices to buy apparel product. If apparel brands want to be purchased by consumers, marketing managers have to develop strategies to enhance consumers' trust to their brand. Lau and Lee (1999) confirmed that if one side trusts other side, consumer trust in a brand will lead to consumer loyalty to that brand.

Orzan et al. (2016) investigated the relationships between brand trust, brand affect and brand loyalty. In their study they found that brand trust has a direct effect on brand loyalty and influences brand loyalty with the brand affect's mediating role. Harris and Goode (2004) tested Oliver's four-dimension scale of loyalty - trust, satisfaction, value and service quality. The results of that study show that trust is significantly linked to loyalty and is a key driver of customer loyalty. Kim, Chung and Lee (2011) found that brand trust plays a key role as an antecedent of customer loyalty in online shopping for tourism products and services.

Similar to previous findings, brand trust was found to have an effect on brand loyalty directly in this study. These results show that consumers want to reduce their risk through trusted brands. There are many products and brands in apparel industry. Consumers want to be pleased with their choices. Thus they tend to buy brands which they trust.

There are few studies about investigating the effect of brand communication on brand image. Kavaratzis (2004) who developed place brand communication model (Braun, Eshuis and Klijs, 2014, p. 65) says that image includes three type of communication, namely primary, secondary and tertiary (Kavaratzis, 2004, p. 67). In Braun, Eshuis and Klijs's (2014) study they hypothesized traditional place brand communication, WOM place brand communication and physical place brand communication have positive impacts on place brand image. In the result of their study they found that WOM place brand communication and physical place brand communication have significant effects on place brand image but traditional place brand communication has no effect. According to the findings of the current study, brand communication has a positive effect on brand image like Braun, Eshuis and Klijs's study. More researches should be done in order to validate these results.

According to previous studies (Ball, Simões Coelho, and Machás, 2004; Zehir et al., 2011), researchers found that brand communication has a positive effect on brand trust. In this study, the impact of brand communication on brand trust was not found. Brand communication helps consumers to create an attitude to the brand. This attitude can be positive or negative, and influence young consumers' purchase intention. Kim et al. (2009)'s study suggested that purchase intention of young consumers is related with brand's perceived value, prestigious image and consumers' emotional value.

Hoq, Sultana and Amin (2010) aim to analyze the role of consumer trust, satisfaction and image's effects on Malaysian Islamic bank consumers' loyalty. The results of their study demonstrate that the relationship between brand image and brand trust is positive and brand trust has a mediator role between brand image and brand loyalty. Nazari, Ghasemi and Saeidi (2015) revised and developed a model tested by Chen (2010). According to their results brand image is directly related with brand trust and influences brand loyalty with mediating effect of brand trust. Similar results have been found by Schlesinger, Cervera and Pérez-Cabañero (2016). They explored the roles of four variables -brand image, trust, satisfaction, and shared values, direct and indirect description of alumni loyalty. Their results show that brand image has a positive effect on brand trust and affects brand loyalty by brand trust's mediating role. Similar to these studies Ball, Simões Coelho, and Machás, (2004) and Alhaddad (2015) found direct effect of brand image on brand trust. But they also found direct and indirect effect of brand image on brand loyalty.

In this study, brand image is found to have an effect on brand loyalty through the brand trust. As mentioned above, in some studies brand image has indirect effect but in other studies it has both direct and indirect effects. These results show that brand image is an important antecedent of both brand trust and brand loyalty.

According to the modelling results, brand image and brand trust have been found to be vital antecedents in forming brand loyalty. Thus, companies should focus on marketing strategies that most lead to positive brand image and powerful brand trust. Another important result is that brand communication antecedent has a direct and strong impact on brand image. So, apparel firms should generate efficient marketing communication strategies.

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