Antecedents/Effects of Loyalty on Food Retailers toward Sustainability

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Contributor: Yating Tian

Loyalty is one of the most important assets of a corporate brand. The growth of customer-centric marketing has occurred in the product-, market-, and customer-oriented phases.

brand loyalty   food retailing   sustainability   organic marketing   values

1. Introduction

Brand loyalty has prospered due to the strong marketing inputs, but existing research studies have only explored this concept using sole dimensional measures, for example, in terms of a behavioral dimension for an earlier time period. Therefore, consumer loyalty deserves recognition as a multi-dimensional construct [1]. In the food market, consumers are increasingly concerned about the environment and the realization of a sustainable society. Their interest is aroused by organic, pro-environmental, and sustainable products. Therefore, the sustainability-oriented marketing notion has increasingly proliferated in food retailing and academic research [2][3]. A challenge for food retail corporations is implementing effective brand-focused marketing strategies over the long term to consolidate consumer loyalty. Furthermore, corporate executives evaluate the essential performance of their marketing strategies to better understand what antecedents are important for ensuring consumer loyalty in food marketing and how to measure it.

The current specifications of predictors to consumer loyalty to food retailers have a disputable theoretical background. Based on the extant literature about antecedents and constructs of loyalty, combined with the contemporary research background of integrating sustainability in marketing and the practical sustainable business, the current theoretical background, and new challenges are visualized in **Figure 1**.
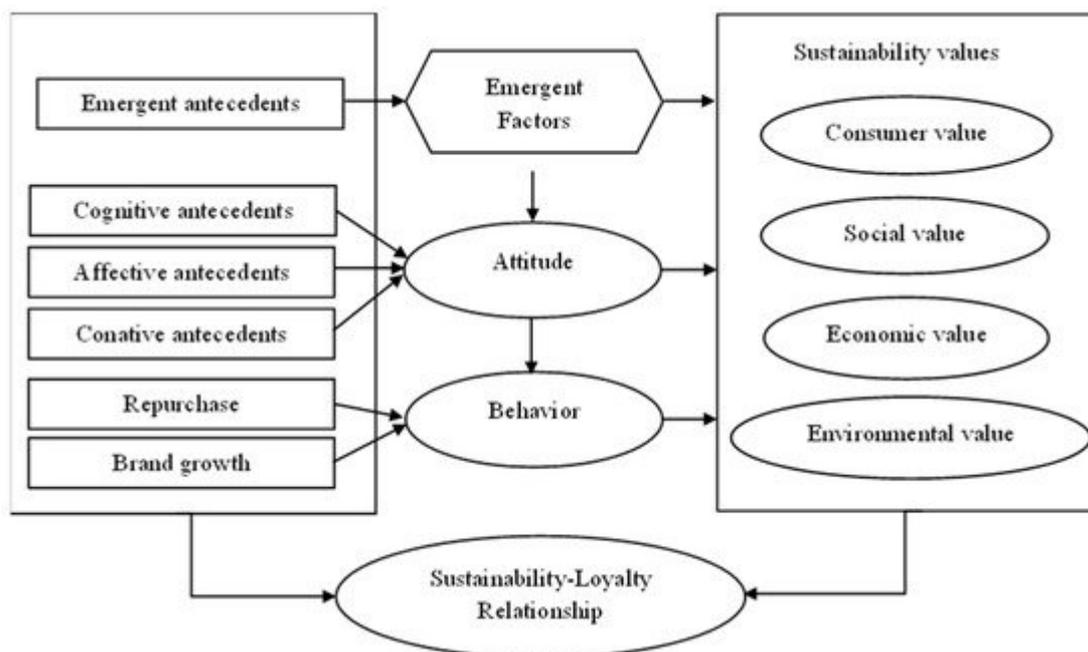
Figure 1. Theoretical Background and New Challenges.

The term "brand loyalty" is primarily used when describing product-oriented brands. There are a variety of definitions in the consumer loyalty literature, such as the earlier mainstream concept using the following six criteria: (1) the biased (2) behavioral response (3) expressed over time (4) by some decision-making unit (5) with respect to one or more alternative brands (6) which is a function of psychological processes [4][5][6]. This approach to defining brand loyalty has been deemed inadequate for explaining the heterogeneity of consumers' characteristics. Moreover, measurements of the behavioral response "purchase or repurchase" may be individual for reasons other than brand switching behavior [7][8][9][10].

Subsequently, the definition expanded to service loyalty, which has been typically derived from service organizations and developed in the market orientation phase. This concept has extended loyalty to the brands of organizations that provide intangible products [11]. The dimensions involve the following composite constructs: (1) behavioral loyalty, for example, typical purchase response [12]; (2) attitudinal loyalty, for example, consciousness and intentions [13]; and (3) cognitive loyalty, for example, brand preference underlying psychological commitment [14]. This theory is consistent with Dick and Basu's [15] combination model of relative attitude and repeat patronage.

The three central constructs of brand relationships pertaining to customer brand loyalty are attachment, trust, and identification, as demonstrated by Diallo et al. [16]. These constructs influence the relationships between brand image dimensions and the dimensions of loyalty that incorporate cognitive, affective, and normative aspects. These dimensions can be categorized into attitudinal and socio-psychological attributes.

However, consumers' purchase intentions and their perception of retailer brands may be related to some emergent factors, for example, whether the brand is dedicated to values of sustainability and food safety, and public food policy as well. The core values of sustainability are economic, environmental, and social values [17][18][19]. Retailers

have incorporated this practice into organic, healthy, and functional food marketing. This approach differs from other established tactics and induces new dimensional loyalty toward retailer corporations attitudinally, which may apply not only to tangible products but also to intangible brand assets.

2. Identifying the Antecedents and Dimensions of Sustainable Food Marketing

Promoting consumer loyalty to retailers relies on dynamic long-term marketing inputs. To effectively achieve consumer-oriented brand loyalty, the identification of the antecedents and dimensions of sustainable food marketing is necessary.

2.1. Theoretical Contributions

(1) The dimensional research gap in relation to consumers' cognitive concerns is represented by the lack of product/service life cycle in consumption practice. For example, in predicting loyalty, the behavioral measure fails to forecast the pre-purchase decision-making process, as a pure attitudinal measure may not capture actual purchases [20][21]. Furthermore, mixed measures at different construct levels may not reflect the direction of the actual causal relationships. Consequently, there is a lack of integrated dimensions to effectively predict brand loyalty.

(2) The measures of brand loyalty are suggested to be improving according to the industrial and marketing focus. The dimensions of satisfaction, brand value, and trust were measured in some studies as exogenous constructs, while these dimensions served as mediators in others. Product brand measures should not be used to predict service brands. Food retailers sell goods, while also providing services. Their sustainable branding activities evoke consumers' cognition and increase their value. Therefore, consistent, transcending, and dynamic factors should be developed based on consumers' perceptions.

(3) Regarding the data, sample, and research phase, qualitative and quantitative methods lend themselves to three research directions. Qualitative research aims to stimulate new theory development beyond the existing dimensions of the loyalty framework [22]. Quantitative research tests the reliability, validity, and significance of relationships among the antecedents of loyalty. Finally, field and consumption practice research can more directly observe consumers' actual behaviors in association with their loyalty across the product/service cycle.

(4) Further research on retailer brand loyalty can be extended to study the relationship among service-dominant loyalty, environmental consequences, and social well-being. In this case, a mixed qualitative-quantitative approach may be appropriate to find the emergent factors in relation to sustainability and identify the complex correlations, thus producing enlightening results.

(5) The conceptualization of consumer loyalty for retailers may integrate constructs involving emergent factors and elements of sustainability value, sustainable marketing elements, and loyalty. Organic marketing, innovativeness of

store formats, and improvement of healthy and nutritional food products and services stimulate organic and retailer brand growth [23][24]. The value created by this growth can contribute to loyalty construction in coordination with economic, environmental, consumer, and social values. Previous research studies concur that consumer attitude toward sustainability is related to consumer loyalty if brands make strategic decisions that have positive impacts on the environment [25][26].

2.2. Managerial Implications

As loyalty is often regarded as a multi-dimensional construct, consumers can switch quickly to competitors and content can be changed dramatically because of the dynamic social and environmental influences. It is suggested that retail corporate managers should identify both loyal consumers in terms of their purchase behavior and unexplored consumer groups that attitudinally and cognitively lean toward retailers' sustainable marketing development. They can also strengthen loyalty by emphasizing positive organic business growth and organic knowledge diffusion and by further guiding the specialized organic marketing efforts toward sustainability. Using a simpler but strategic value measure may sustain loyalty in the long term.

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